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Emojis in Parties' Online Communication During the 2019 European Election Campaign: Toward a Typology of Political Emoji Use

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Emojis have become ubiquitous in digital communication, but we know relatively little about how they are used in political and campaigning contexts. To address this deficit, we analyze the use of emojis in the Facebook communication of parties in 11 European countries during the 2019 European election campaign. Results indicate that the use of emojis by political parties differs significantly from general online communication. Political parties more often use neutral and representational (such as flags) emojis than emotional and facial emojis to draw users' attention while maintaining a serious appearance of their content. Based on our empirical results, we develop a typology to characterize the mixture of generic and unique functions of emojis used in political communication, outlining how they are used for (1) attracting attention, (2) visual structuring, (3) mobilizing, (4) promoting, (5), referring to political levels, (6) emphasizing policies/values, and (7) displaying affect/emotion.

Keywords: emoji, social media, campaign communication, European election, Facebook

Originally invented in the 1990s in Japan, emojis have spread worldwide in recent years and have become omnipresent in online communication across platforms and devices (Ai et al., 2017; Shoeb & de Melo, 2020). Even political actors use emojis in their public communication on social media, like former European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker, who introduced his announcement of a successful

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Brexit deal on Twitter with the emojis "🇪🇺🤝🇬🇧"[2] (Juncker, 2019). Emojis are used in multifaceted ways in digital communication, especially to convey emotion and add paraverbal cues to written text (Escouflaire, 2021; Shoeb & de Melo, 2020). While there is a growing literature on the uses, functions, and effects of emojis in computer-mediated communication, their relevance to political communication has remained largely unexplored. However, examining emoji use by political parties can provide insight into how parties adapt to new media environments such as social media and how they strategically use online-specific forms of communication to reach citizens.

Based on the concept of social media logic (Jost, 2023; Klinger & Svensson, 2015), we argue that by using emojis, political parties align their communication style to social media, where their political posts coexist with entertainment features, advertisements, and private content, and strategies to capture audience attention are crucial. Emojis enable political actors to enrich their social media texts with visual elements, and as low-threshold, informal pictographs, emojis can make political texts more accessible and appealing to users. On the other hand, excessive use of emojis also elicits the danger of trivializing political issues by adding tiny colorful pictographs to political texts. Therefore, political actors must weigh the use of emojis sensibly.

The empirical analysis of our study is based on a data set of a larger research project comparing the Facebook communication of parties from different European countries during the 2019 European Parliament (EP) election campaign (Haßler, Magin, Russmann, & Fenoll, 2021). This provides a good opportunity to observe the political emoji use in a broader European cross-national context. Since research on emojis in political communication is scarce, our explorative study aims to give an initial overview of the emojis used in parties' campaign communication. We first analyze the amount and types of emojis used in the parties' Facebook posts. Given that one of the main functions of emojis is to convey emotion, we explore the use of emojis in emotionalized political messages, and based on initial findings about the prominent use of flag emojis in political online communication (Kariryaa, Rundé, Heuer, Jungherr, & Schöning, 2022), we investigate the flag emojis depending on the political level mentioned in the message. Following the exploratory approach, we find some evidence of essential differences between the use of emojis by political actors and the use of emojis in general online communication. To systemize the specific functions that emojis serve particularly in political online communication, we develop a new typology of emojis in political communication based on our findings. This typology can inform future research on political social media messages.

Conceptual Framework

Emojis in Social Media Communication

From the 1980s onward, so-called emoticons such as ☺ combined from keyboard characters became popular (Bai, Dan, Mu, & Yang, 2019). The word "emoticon" is an English portmanteau of "emotion"

[2] The appearance of emojis depends on the respective display system. While flag emojis are displayed as colored icons on Facebook pages, they appear as country abbreviations in Microsoft Word.

and "icon," revealing the primary function of emoticons to iconically represent facial expressions and add emotional valence to written text. Emojis, which can be considered successors of emoticons, are pictographs originally invented in Japan (Djenar & Ewing, 2020). Although similar to the word "emoticon," the word "emoji" has its origin in the Japanese words for "picture" and "character" (Shoeb & de Melo, 2020). Besides faces, emojis include a wide range of pictographs that represent various objects and activities. In recent years, emojis have spread around the world, been implemented in multiple digital platforms, and become part of the Unicode standard (Ai et al., 2017). This standard relates only to their encoding in Unicode codes, while the actual display of each emoji depends on the particular platform and operating system (Djenar & Ewing, 2020). New emojis are regularly added to the standard, and the creation of emoji variants that differ in skin color and gender further increases their variety.

Empirical studies in the fields of computer science, applied linguistics, and computer-mediated communication analyze the use of emojis, their emotional and linguistic functions, as well as their effects on users' perception and understanding of messages. Emojis represent the idea of a universal language (Ai et al., 2017) as they are pictographs that can function independently of any language. However, since the use and interpretation of emojis is influenced by various factors, such as the users' individual character traits, their demographic, cultural, and linguistic background, as well as the communication platform and communication context, emojis can indicate different interpretations simultaneously (Bai et al., 2019). Therefore, emojis exhibit a certain contextuality, just like words.

The wide range of various emoji types conditions the use of emojis for different sociolinguistic functions like the expressive, interpretative, referential, structural, or involving functions (Escouflaire, 2021; Logi & Zappavigna, 2021). The primary feature of emojis is their ability to convey affect and add emotional evaluation to the text (Logi & Zappavigna, 2021; Shoeb & de Melo, 2020) by mimicking paraverbal cues (Escouflaire, 2021). Especially in ironic and sarcastic messages, emojis can facilitate interpretation and indicate that the intended meaning differs from the verbal content (Escouflaire, 2021). Therefore, emojis can help the recipient to better interpret the emotional level and the meaning of a message (Ai et al., 2017). However, since emojis not only include expressive faces but also iconic representations of real-world entities and activities, emojis can have a referential function (Logi & Zappavigna, 2021). Emojis can also be used to visually structure the text, for example, by introducing the message or substituting the punctuation marks (Escouflaire, 2021). The involving function applies specifically to emojis that are used as emblems of particular communities like the 🏳️‍🌈 of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and others (LGBTQ+) community (Logi & Zappavigna, 2021).

Concerning the effects of emojis, empirical studies have demonstrated the influence of emojis on the perception of the message and its sender. If the emotional valence of the text is incongruent with the emoji/s used, this leads to difficulties in interpreting the message's meaning, whereas emojis congruent with the text increase emotional perception and improve comprehension of the message (Boutet, LeBlanc, Chamberland, & Collin, 2021). Concerning the message's sender, negative emojis lead to a negative assessment of the sender's emotional state, while positive emojis positively impact its perception (Boutet et al., 2021). However, these effects only apply to a limited extent in the professional context, where positive emoticons do not lead to positive perceptions of the sender but negatively influence the perception of the sender's competence (Glikson, Cheshin, & van Kleef, 2018). Similarly, the use of emojis in distant settings

is considered more inadequate compared with close communication scenarios (Cavalheiro, Prada, Rodrigues, Lopes, & Garrido, 2022). These findings have important implications for the investigation of emojis in political communication. By using positive emojis, parties might have an interest in promoting their positive perception, however, this also could appear unprofessional and inadequate.

Social Media Logic and Emoji Use of Political Parties

Based on the concepts of mediatization and media logic, we argue that by using emojis, political parties adapt their communication style to the social media environment. Mediatization describes the increasing influence of the media on the political and other societal systems (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). Due to this influence, the media's coverage of politics is mainly shaped by the media's own logic. Media logic can be defined as

> the process through which media present and transmit information. Elements of this form include the various media and the formats used by these media. Format consists, in part, of how material is organized, the style in which it is presented, the focus or emphasis on particular characteristics of behavior, and the grammar of media communication. (Altheide & Snow, 1979, p. 10)

Following the definition of Altheide and Snow (1979), Mazzoleni (2008) emphasized that media logic "captures the whole of such processes that eventually shape and frame media content" (p. 2931). In this sense, media logic defines how to construct messages within a particular medium and sets the "codes" for defining, presenting, and recognizing media content (Altheide, 2004, p. 4). With the media having become the most important source of information in democracies, politics has undergone mediatization, and political actors adapt to media logics by aligning their behavior to media requirements to obtain media coverage and public reach (Jost, 2023; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). As a consequence of television's preeminence, for example, visual logics give more importance to the appearance and behavior of politicians and favor short sound bites in political communication (Klinger & Svensson, 2015; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014).

Digital communication, and social media in particular, have increased the complexity of the media landscape and created new environments for political communication with logics that differ from those of traditional mass media (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). This new media logic coined as network media logic (Klinger & Svensson, 2015) or social media logic (Jost, 2023) interacts with the old media logics in a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017) and places new demands on effective political communication. On social media, individual user content converges with professionally produced content of political, commercial, and traditional media organizations on users' time lines (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). Hence, adapting to the social media context means that political actors must adapt to this specific communication environment and apply a more personal communication style "native" to social media platforms (Kreiss, Lawrence, & McGregor, 2018, p. 21). This may include the increasing use of selfies by politicians (Baishya, 2015), the mix of personal and political personas (Graham, Jackson, & Broersma, 2018), or the use of emojis (Kreiss et al., 2018).

Although political parties are part of public and institutional communication, and therefore emojis are hardly expected in official documents such as party manifestos, early evidence suggests that political actors use them regularly on their official social media pages (Kariryaa et al., 2022; Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). But these studies show that political actors only partially adopt a personal communication style by favoring flag emojis rather than facial emojis (Kariryaa et al., 2022). To further our understanding of emojis in political communication, we investigate their use in political parties' online campaign communication. Although political parties are experiencing diminishing relevance in Western democracies, they are still the central organizing institutions of politics. Investigating their communication in a changing media system is crucial to evaluate their behavior in modern democracies. Furthermore, parties are much more important in EP election campaigns than individual politicians as the European elections use a proportional representation system in most countries. Given that parties present a collective, institutionalized public face, we might expect a more conservative use of emojis in comparison with individual politicians. On the other hand, in the commercial context, research tells us that this is not an impediment to companies and brands cultivating playful and exuberant personalities online, using many of the genres and affordances native to social media platforms (McShane, Pancer, Poole, & Deng, 2021). To explore the parties' emoji use, we ask the following research questions regarding the emoji use in the Facebook posts of political parties across Europe during the 2019 European election campaign:

RQ1: How frequently did political parties use emojis in their Facebook posts?

RQ2: Which types of emojis were predominantly used by the parties?

Emojis for Emotional Expression

The primary function of emojis to convey emotions is thoroughly investigated in the research literature on general online communication, especially in relation to the textual context (e.g., Boutet et al., 2021; Kralj Novak, Smailović, Sluban, & Mozetič, 2015; Shoeb & de Melo, 2020). Studies on the emotional expression of emojis often classify them according to their emotional valence in positive, neutral, and negative terms (Boutet et al., 2021; Kralj Novak et al., 2015). Studies show that emojis seem to have a positivity bias since they are mostly associated with positive emotions, and users tend to use more emojis in positive messages than in negative ones (Bai et al., 2019; Kralj Novak et al., 2015). Such findings suggest that emoji use is usually context-dependent, with emojis being used significantly more often in an emotional context and the valence of emojis usually matching the valence of their context (Ai et al., 2017). While the choice of emojis depends on their context, emojis have, in turn, the ability to influence the perception of the context's valence (Boutet et al., 2021), suggesting that emojis and context influence and depend on each other.

In research on political communication, emotions have played an essential role not only since the advent of social media (Eberl, Tolochko, Jost, Heidenreich, & Boomgaarden, 2020). In election campaigns, for example, emotions facilitate the processing of complex political topics, and recipients become more involved, stimulated, and motivated through emotional content (Eberl et al., 2020; Kühne & Schemer, 2015). Especially in the context of social media, where content creators are constantly competing for users' attention, emotionality plays an important role, as (high-arousal) emotional content has a higher chance to

go viral (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). When communicating on social media, political actors adapt their communication to the perceived expectations of the users to generate interaction with their posts (Jost, 2023). To create social media content that gains attention, communicators must consider not only whether to emphasize emotion but also what valence of emotion—positive or negative—to apply in their posts. From earlier studies, which indicate that users share more positive than negative posts, Klinger and Svensson (2015) conclude that political actors should adapt their communication strategies to publish positive emotional content—in contrast to traditional mass media, where negativity has a crucial news value. However, this implication seems to apply to non-news content but not to news and political communication on social media (Hansen, Arvidsson, Nielsen, Colleoni, & Etter, 2011), where negativity leads to more user reactions (Bene, 2017; Heiss, Schmuck, & Matthes, 2019).

Since conveying emotions is a central function of emojis in general online communication, parties could consider using emojis when defining the emotionalization strategy of their social media campaign. By using emojis, they could express emotions in a direct way and simultaneously use visual stimuli to generate attention. Overall, three broad emoji strategies are conceivable. First, parties could use emojis to convey negativity as users are more likely to engage with negative posts from political actors than with neutral or positive ones (Bene, 2017; Heiss et al., 2019). As a second strategy, parties could rely on more positive emojis to reflect the positivity bias of emojis and adapt their communication to personal communication, which is more positive on social media (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). Perceiving the parties' communication style as more personal could reduce the sense of social distance between the party and its followers (Bene, 2017). Third, political actors could seek to retain their seriousness and respectability (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019) by avoiding emotional emojis. Due to the wide range of emojis, parties can integrate less expressive and more neutral emojis and apply emoji functions like the referential, structural, or involving functions (Escouflaire, 2021; Logi & Zappavigna, 2021). Given these three potentially competing hypotheses, we ask the following research questions:

RQ3: Do parties use rather positive, neutral, or negative emojis in their Facebook posts?

RQ4: To what extent does the use of emojis reflect the valence of the posts?

Flag Emojis

Of the many emojis available, flags are likely to play a particularly significant role in political communication. Flags are important symbols representing national or shared identity and have unique semiotic power in appealing to large sections of the electorate (Kariryaa et al., 2022) Therefore, flags are regularly invoked by politicians and are particularly relevant in election campaigns (Kalmoe & Gross, 2016). Flag emojis allow the use of these important national symbols in social media messages. Early studies that consider emojis in political communication indicate that flag emojis are used comparably often by political actors (Kariryaa et al., 2022; Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). Given this initial empirical evidence of politically specific emoji use, we extend the study of emojis in political communication by considering a European cross-country context. Especially in European elections, which are also about national and European identity, the use of flag emojis can reveal important insights into a more pro-national or pro-European orientation of the parties' online messages. If a post is more about national

topics, it can be assumed that the national flag emoji is more likely to be used. If, on the other hand, a post deals with overarching European topics, the political actors might rather use the European flag emoji. In this sense, the use of flag emojis could serve as an indicator of how intensely parties campaign at the European level or whether they instead focus on national issues. Therefore, we formulate the following research question regarding the parties' use of flag emojis:

RQ5: To what extent do the national and European flag emojis reflect the political level addressed in the Facebook posts?

Method

Data Collection

To investigate the use of emojis[3] in the campaign communication of parties across Europe we used a sample of a larger research project that analyzed the Facebook communications of parties from European countries and European party groups (European parties and parliamentary groups) during the 2019 European election campaign (Haßler et al., 2021). The countries included in our data set are Austria, Germany, Spain, France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Romania, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, which allows us to investigate the emoji use of political parties in a larger country context.

We collected the Facebook posts published in the last four weeks before the election date (United Kingdom: April 25–May 23, 2019; Ireland: April 26–May 24, 2019; all other countries: April 28–May 26, 2019) using the Facepager tool (Jünger & Keyling, 2019). Only the posts of the Romanian parties as well as the Italian party Lega had to be collected afterward using the CrowdTangle API due to technical issues. In total, we stored N = 15,346 posts from political parties that entered the current EP (2019–2024).

Emoji Extraction and Classification

We only considered posts whose text was not empty (n = 14,088 posts) and extracted the emojis using the Python package SoMaJo (Proisl & Uhrig, 2016). SoMaJo distinguishes emojis with and without the variation selector[4] as separate emojis so that a separate lexicon entry is created for each of these variants. To reduce the number of emoji variants, we grouped all variants with or without the variation selector as well as emojis that differ only in skin tone into one base form. Next, we created the emoji lexicon of all occurring emoji instances in our sample, containing 585 different emojis. For this lexicon, we first categorized each emoji by assigning one of the predefined Emojipedia (https://emojipedia.org/) categories: "Smileys & People," "Animals & Nature," "Food & Drink," "Activity," "Travel & Places," "Objects," "Symbols," and "Flags." Additionally, we defined the category "Emoticons" for all emoticons. Second, we classified the emojis according to their valence

[3] We also considered emoticons, like :-), which are the historical predecessors of emojis. But since they play a minor role, we only use the term "emoji" for both types of pictographs for better readability. Only if explicit emoticons are concerned, the corresponding term "emoticon" is used.

[4] The (optional) variation selector extension U+FE0F is added to the base form of an emoji to tell the system that it should present the preceding code sequence as image instead of text.

by having two coders assign the emojis to the valence classes "positive," "negative," and "neutral." As shown by the reliability values (Holsti's coder reliability = 0.88) between the codings of the two coders, there is a high agreement in the categorizations of the emojis' emotional valence. This valence categorization was evaluated with classifications from the literature. Shoeb and de Melo (2020) asked coders to manually annotate 150 popular emojis with specific emotions (i.e., anger, anticipation, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, surprise, and trust). Since we only consider negative, neutral, and positive emojis in our study, we calculated the difference between the values for the positive emotions anticipation, joy, and trust and the values for the negative emotions anger, disgust, fear, and sadness. The emotion surprise was assumed to be neutral and hence not included in the difference. This calculation provided values on a scale for which we chose the following boundaries of quantiles to categorize an emoji as negative, neutral, or positive, respectively: The lower 20% were assumed to be negative, the next 30% neutral, and the top 50% positive. We did not apply a simple division into one-third of the scale for each valence category because the distribution of emojis is generally skewed toward having more positive emojis than negative ones (Kralj Novak et al., 2015).

When comparing the valence evaluation of the two coders with the literature, only smaller subsets—for Kralj Novak and colleagues (2015) 330 of their 969 classified emojis and for Shoeb and de Melo (2020) 99 of 150 emojis—could be considered. The agreement between the two coders and the classification of Shoeb and de Melo (2020) was good (Holsti's coder reliability = 0.81). However, the agreement with the classification of Kralj Novak and colleagues (2015), turned out to be lower (Holsti's coder reliability = 0.65). This could be due to the fact that the measurement procedure of Kralj Novak and associates (2015) used the emojis' context instead of the emojis themselves. The final valence categorization of the emojis was created by an informed decision of the authors based on the evaluation results.

Manual Coding of Post Valence and Addressed Political Level

For the manual coding of the posts, different country samples were drawn due to different coding capacities in the respective countries. For most countries, it was possible to code a full sample (except for deleted posts); for France (56%), Poland (20%), Sweden (50%), and the United Kingdom (45%) random samples were generated. The emotional valence and political level categories were coded for the entire post, including text, pictures, and videos (first minute), applying binary subcategories, that is, for each individual subcategory it was coded whether the subcategory occurs or not. For the emotional valence, it was coded whether positive or negative statements were present in the post or not. Positive posts include for example affirmative, laudatory, or encouraging statements. Negative posts include statements that are refusing, hostile, or accusing. Based on the coded valence of the statements in the posts, we defined the following groups: (1) positive posts contain only positive statements, (2) negative posts contain only negative statements, (3) balanced posts contain both positive and negative statements, and (4) neutral posts contain neither positive nor negative statements. For the political level, the levels (1) local/regional, (2) national, (3) European Union (EU), (4) global, and (5) other (e.g., bilateral relations) were distinguished. Due to the binary coding, more than one level could be coded for one post. Overall, 29 coders (1–5 coders per country) were involved, whose intercoder reliability was determined based on 48 posts from European party groups with reliability values for each category of Holsti's coder reliability ≥ 0.7.

Results

Frequency and Types of Emojis in Political Parties' Posts

To investigate to what extent political parties use emojis in their Facebook communication during the European election campaign (RQ1), we first related the number of emojis to the published posts (Table 1). Parties in Italy published the highest number of posts,[5] while European party groups and parties in Ireland were least active. In total, we identified 12,390 emojis[6] in the data set. Spanish parties (66%), Polish parties (56%), as well as European party groups (56%) published the most posts with at least one emoji. In contrast to their high activity, Italian parties used the fewest emojis in their posts (17%). The mean value of 37% of posts with at least one emoji shows that parties in Europe regularly used emojis in their campaign communication on Facebook.

Overall, the European flag was the most frequently used emoji by the parties in their Facebook posts (RQ2). This result reflects the fact that most parties had focused their Facebook activities on the upcoming European elections. Whereas parties in four (Austria, Germany, France, Romania) of 11 countries and the European parties used the European flag emoji most frequently, in Hungary, Italy, and Poland, the emojis of their respective national flags were used most often. In other countries, the check mark (✅ in Ireland and Sweden), the TV set (📺 in Spain), and the ballot box (🗳️ in the United Kingdom) were the most commonly used emojis.

Table 1. Published Posts and Emojis of Each Country.

Country[7]	# of Posts	# of Parties	# of Emojis	Posts With at Least One Emoji	Five Most Frequent Emojis				
					1	2	3	4	5
AT	754	5	643	46%	EU	AT	📺	☞	➡
DE	1,125	14	1,085	34%	EU	➡	💪	🚀	🫀
ES	1,675	11	2,689	66%	📺	📹	☞	▶️	ES
FR	1,091	9	1,023	49%	EU	↪	➡	●	☞
HU	1,061	6	1,353	46%	HU	EU	➡	!	☞
IE	292	4	163	23%	✅	👇	🫀	🗳️	📺
IT	4,286	5	1,307	17%	IT	🏐	📣	☞	👇
PL	714	5	1,167	56%	PL	EU	✌️	📌	!
RO	887	6	428	24%	EU	HU	☞	📷	SOON
SE	809	8	686	34%	✅	👍	🌹	✓	🍀
UK	776	8	806	50%	🗳️	👇	EU	🏴[a]	🌳

[5] This result is clearly influenced by the Italian party Lega, which published a particularly large number (3,069) of posts in the four-week campaign period.

[6] Emoticons are also included, but they play only a minor role.

[7] The abbreviated country names stand for: Austria (AT), Germany (DE), Spain (ES), France (FR), Hungary (HU), Ireland (IE), Italy (IT), Poland (PL), Romania (RO), Sweden (SE), United Kindem (UK), European party groups (EU).

EU	618	16	1,040	56%	EU	👉	👇	📦	✊
Total	14,088	97	12,390	37%	EU	👉	➞	HU	👇

Note. [a] Scottish flag.

Table 2. Shares of Emojipedia Categories.

		Five Most Frequent Emojis per Category				
Emojipedia Category	Share	1	2	3	4	5
Symbols	30%	➞	✅	●	!	💓
Flags[a]	23%	EU	HU	IT	PL	ES
People	23%	👉	👇	💪	👍	✊
Objects	15%	📺	📦	📹	📌	🎙
Nature	6%	🌹	🌍	🌲	⭐	🌎

Note. [a] In the Emojipedia flag category, two more flags are considered that do not refer to a political context: 🏁🚩.

Regarding the Emojipedia categories (Table 2), symbol emojis were the most often used emoji type (30% of all emojis) in the parties' Facebook posts. Also, flag emojis (23%) and emojis of the people category (23%) were often used, but instead of facial emojis, which only rarely appeared in the posts, emojis depicting hands or arms were most notably integrated from the people category. Both symbols, such as arrows (➞) or checkmarks (✅), and "pointing" hands (👉, 👇) were used to structure posts' texts by providing visual orientation for readers and pointing to hyperlinked content like in the following post: "We support the Social Market Economy which foresees: ➞ equal access to jobs ➞ fair working conditions ➞ social protection of workers ➞ work-life balance More info 👇 https://epp.group/2vsYPzq" (EPP Group, 2019). The red dot symbol emoji ● was regularly used by parties to initially draw attention to the post's content, for example, to indicate an upcoming event: "● SOON LIVE: starting from 8.30am" (ALDE Party, 2019).

The flexed biceps (💪) and the thumbs-up emoji (👍) often symbolized motivation to encourage political mobilization of followers: "Potrzebujemy Twojego wsparcia! 💪" [We need your support! 💪] (KUKIZ15, 2019). While hardly any facial emojis that could convey emotions were used, the purple heart (💜), which could be associated with positive emotions, occurred relatively frequently in the parties' Facebook posts. Considering the posts' contexts, it can be seen that the purple hearts were used either to visually support feminist and LGBTQ+-related issues—like in "My body, my gender! 💪💜" (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, 2019)—or to reflect the related party color (e.g., of the party Volt Germany or the Spanish party Podemos). Object emojis accounted for 15% of all emojis, with the TV set (📺) and the ballot box (📦) the two most frequently used emojis in this category. While the TV set hinted at the hybridity of the campaigns with parties promoting their appearances in traditional media outlets, the ballot box was used to visualize the upcoming act of voting and mobilize followers: "Vote Conservative on Thursday 📦" (Conservatives, 2019). To a lesser extent, emojis from the nature category (6%) were used by the parties. The red rose (🌹) represented a symbol of Social Democrats: "Join the Labour Party today. 🌹" (The Labour Party, 2019). Other emojis referred to the environment and nature (e.g.,

🌍, 🌳) and thus presumably to issues of climate change. The other Emojipedia categories of travel & places (3%), activity (1%), food & drink (1%), as well as emoticons (1%) were hardly used by the parties in their Facebook posts.

Emojis in Emotional Context

Regarding the emotional valence of the total 12,390 emojis in our data set (RQ3), 73% were neutral emojis, 25% were positive, and only 2% were negative emojis. In the following, we relate the emojis to their post context and therefore consider only the coded posts (11,078 posts with 8,885 occurring emojis). Regarding the posts' valence, 56% of the parties' Facebook posts were neutral, while 22% of the posts were positive, 16% were negative, and balanced posts accounted for 6% of the posts. Considering the use of emojis in these different groups of post valence, it appears that the parties tended to use more emojis in positive (43%) and balanced posts (45%) than in negative (32%) and neutral ones (30%; Table 3).

To assess whether emojis are selected depending on their emotional context (RQ4), we investigated the distribution of the emojis' valence dependent on the valence of their post context (Figure 1). Parties predominantly used neutral emojis in all valence groups. In positive posts, the share of positive emojis was the highest (32%) compared with the other valence groups. In positive contexts, for example, the endorsement by party supporters was celebrated: "Incredibile folla! 😍"[Incredible crowd! 😍] (Lega—Salvini Premier, 2019). The share of negative emojis was the highest in the negative valence group—although at a considerably low level of 6%. So negative emojis are rarely used, for example, for negative campaigning: "Labour leadership are working with May to deliver Brexit 😩 Lib Dems signed off on Tory austerity for half a decade 😯" (Green Party of England and Wales, 2019).

Overall, the results regarding the use of emojis in emotional contexts suggest that parties tend to choose appropriate emotional emojis depending on the context, but overall the use of neutral emojis predominates.

Table 3. Positive, Negative, Balanced, or Neutral Posts With at Least One Emoji or Without Emojis.

	Emoji	No Emoji
Positive	43%	57%
Negative	32%	68%
Balanced	45%	55%
Neutral	30%	70%
Total	34%	66%

Note. n = 11,078 coded posts. $X^2(3) = 155.95$, $p < .001$, $V = .12$.

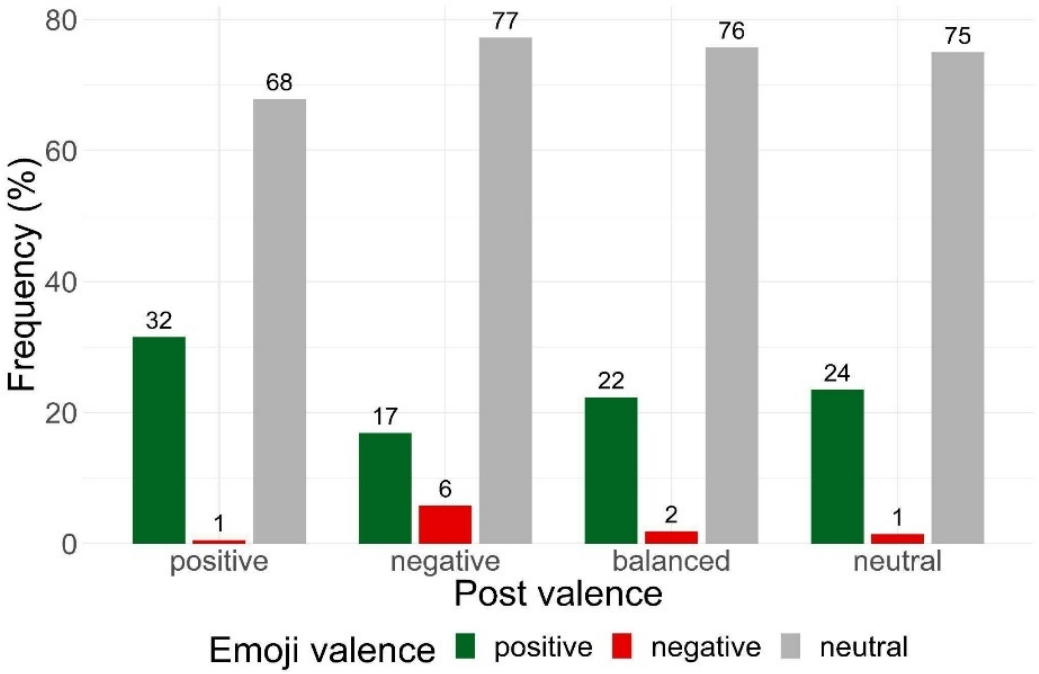

Figure 1. Distribution of emotional emojis in posts of different valence.
Note. n = 8,885 emojis. $X^2(6) = 227.23$, $p < .001$, $V = .11$.

Political Level and Flag Emojis

In general, parties can address different political levels (national, European, or others: global, regional, or bilateral) in their posts. Especially in view of the European election, they can decide whether to put European or national issues in the foreground of their campaign. Overall, 41% of the parties' posts addressed the national level, while 33% addressed the European level and 12% both the national and European levels; 12% of the posts referred to other levels and 2% to no level. Regarding the flag emojis applied in contexts of different political levels addressed in the posts (RQ5), the use of flag emojis was relatively consistent with the political level of the posts (Figure 2). The share of European flag emojis was the highest in posts addressing the European level (17%) and posts addressing both the European and national levels (19%). In posts addressing the national level, emojis of the national flag appeared most frequently (12%). However, European flags were also used to a considerable amount in national posts and vice versa. In this respect, both flags, the national and the European, were often combined to symbolize the country's affiliation with the EU.

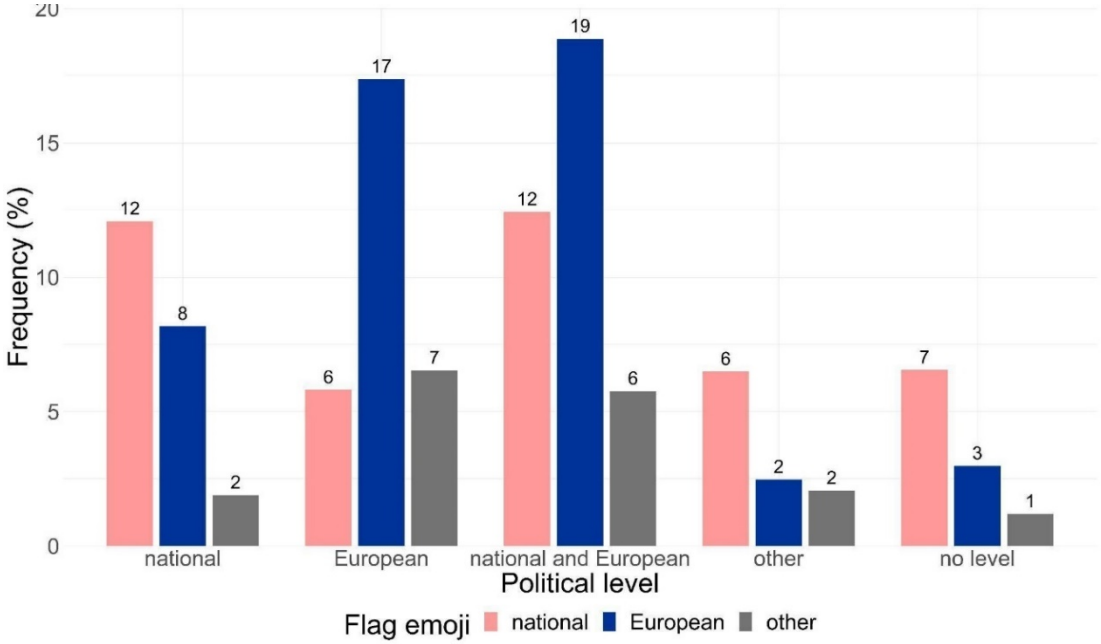

Figure 2. Distribution of flag emojis in posts of different political levels.

Note. n = 8,885 emojis. The difference with 100% is non-flag emojis. $X^2(12) = 506.43$, $p < .001$, $V = .14$.

Discussion

Our results show that emojis appear in about one-third of all Facebook posts, demonstrating that they are regularly used by parties across different European countries. This, we argue, is evidence of the parties' alignment of their communication style to the logics of the social media environment. However, emoji use in public political communication differs from how emojis are used in general online communication. While face emojis, gestures, and heart symbols are most common in large-scale, cross-country data sets representing the online communications of millions of users (e.g., Kejriwal, Wang, Li, & Wang, 2021; Li, Chng, Chong, & See, 2019), parties primarily used neutral emojis depicting symbols, gestures, objects, and flags in their online campaign communication. In contrast, facial emojis, which are best suited to convey various emotions, rarely appeared in our analysis. This, we suggest, represents a rather cautious experimentation with emojis that is reminiscent of the conservative approach most political parties took toward Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 (e.g., Lilleker & Jackson, 2010). It may also reflect politicians' concerns with maintaining a serious appearance on their official social media pages (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). Whether such behavior is appealing to voters is another question though, especially given the normalization of emojis for conveying emotions. Further experimental studies could analyze to what extent the use of emojis is rewarded by the audience as a form of authentic digital communication style and whether there is a tipping point at which a political message is viewed as unserious because the use of emojis contradicts the professionality of political communication.

Beyond the overall number of emojis used in election communication, our findings also imply different functions of political messages on social media. Based on this, we propose a new typology whose uniqueness derives from the fact that it categorizes the different functions of emojis specifically in political online communication (Table 4). To develop this typology, we applied an inductive approach. Based on various post examples of different parties from our data, we categorized the functions by thematic grouping informed by the emojis' shape and context.

Table 4. Typology of Emojis in Political Online Communication.

Function	Description	Typical Emojis
Attracting attention	Initially attract users' attention	❗⚫🔴
Visual structuring	Organize a post and guide users through a line of reasoning or provide an enumeration/list	✅➡️👇👉
Mobilizing	Signify acts of political mobilization	💪✊🗳️
Promoting	Promote related online and/or offline content	💻🎙️📹
Referring to political levels (typically flags)	Depict the political level that the party addresses	EU IT HU
Emphasizing policies/values	Emphasize a policy issue or party values	🌍🌲🌾🫀
Displaying affection/emotion	Convey positive or negative affect or emotions	☺️😊❤️

For politicians and parties, communication on social media is about getting attention for their messages from users. Here, emojis can play a key function in an attention economy. While emojis, in general, can serve as visual stimuli in written text, some specific symbol emojis (e.g., ❗, ⚫) are particularly suited as visual signals to initially attract the attention of audiences. Other symbol emojis as well as "pointing" hands (e.g., 👉) from the people category are frequently used to visually structure the posts' texts, typically guiding users through a line of reasoning, providing an enumeration (e.g., ✅, ➡️) and pointing them toward subsequent hyperlinked content.

Another feature emerges in the people category that is arguably more distinctive of the political communication context: Mobilization. Here, motivational symbols such as 💪 and ✊ can build momentum behind the party and mobilize supporters. In addition, specific object emojis symbolized the encouragement to vote (e.g., 🗳️). Furthermore, we identify a distinct promotional function of other object emojis (e.g., 💻, 🎙️). In line with the hybridized nature of social media platforms, where old and new media intersect (Chadwick, 2017), parties used emojis to promote online and/or offline content; typically such content relates to media appearances, promotional videos, or statements.

Worldwide, the overall least used category of emojis is flags, and the least popular subcategory within that is national flags (Daniel, 2021). Yet in political communication, we confirm the findings of previous research that flag emojis were widely used for signaling the political level that a post was appealing to (e.g., Kariryaa et al., 2022; Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). This, of course, is of particular significance in political communication given the symbolic associations of flags, and their appeals to national, ethnic, or European identities (Kariryaa et al., 2022). While the EP elections can still be classified as second-order elections due to various factors such as comparatively low media attention (Magin, Russmann, Fenoll, &

Haßler, 2021), the frequent use of EU flag emojis in some countries shows that parties—at least symbolically—regularly refer to the EU level in their election campaigns.

Since emojis can represent a whole range of objects, activities, and ideas, they could theoretically also be used to represent political issues. However, while an analysis of posts across our sample shows a prominent focus on policy—almost half of the posts addressed at least one policy issue (Magin et al., 2021)—the use of emojis to denote policy positions or a party's values was mostly limited to those signifying LGBTQ+ topics (✊🏾) or the environment and nature (e.g., 🌍, 🌲) besides being the symbol of Social Democrats (🌹). Normatively, it may be considered promising that policy is one area where political communication cannot easily be reduced to an emoji.

We also drew attention to the emotional valence of emoji use. However, emotional and affective emojis were rarely used by the parties. Mainly heart symbols (✊🏾, ❤️) that are able to convey positive emotions of sympathy, were used in the parties' campaign communication for positive emotionalization. Face emojis, in contrast, occurred only rarely.

The preceding descriptions of emoji functions in the context of political communication show that the emojis from one Emojipedia category can serve different functions. Thus, the existing categorization of Emojipedia—which is based on general online communication—is not congruent with the identified functions in the political context that we categorized in our typology of emojis in political online communication containing the seven items (1) attracting attention, (2) visual structuring, (3) mobilizing, (4) promoting, (5), referring to political levels, (6) emphasizing policies/values, and (7) displaying affection/emotion. We recognize that further functions are likely to emerge in different contexts, which will require empirical examination across a range of electoral, non-electoral, and international settings.

Overall, we found very little use of negative emojis in posts. From a political communication perspective, this may seem counterintuitive, given that (1) political parties are not averse to going negative toward their opponents, including on social media (Auter & Fine, 2016), (2) we know that going negative can elicit more user interactions (Bene, 2017; Heiss et al., 2019) in social media environments, and (3) citizens themselves often express negative and critical positions on the platform in relation to politics (Bene, 2017; Hansen et al., 2011). From an emoji perspective, the widespread use of neutral and positive emojis may be predetermined by the nature and general use of emojis, which offers a far greater choice of positive and neutral over negative emojis. In their critique of emojis, Stark and Crawford (2015) argue that "emoji are an exuberant form of social expression but they are also just another means to lure consumers to a platform, to extract data from them more efficiently, and to express a normative, consumerist, and predominantly cheery world-view" (p. 8). Similar to analyses of emoji use by commercial organizations on social media (e.g., McShane et al., 2021), we find that political parties show little appetite to disrupt this status quo. The difference, of course, is that this finding comes in the context where political parties, unlike marketers, are quite prepared to go negative on social media. They seem just less likely to do it with emojis. In this context, further research is needed to determine whether the absence of negative emojis in our data set derives from the context of European elections or whether the positive emoji bias can be generalized to other contexts like national election campaigns.

Conclusion

Based on a content analysis of emojis in the Facebook posts published during the 2019 European election campaign across 11 countries, we investigated the peculiarities of the emoji use of political parties in their campaign communication on social media. By focusing on Facebook, our study is limited by the fact that we only analyzed posts on a single platform. Other platforms such as Twitter and Instagram could be considered for analysis to gain insights into different affordances and their impact on emoji use. Furthermore, analyzing emojis at the party level in addition to the country level could provide insights into whether certain parties strategically use individual emojis repeatedly in their social media campaigns to achieve a recognition effect. As already indicated, the context of the European elections can also be limiting for our study since European elections are often viewed as second-order elections, with parties investing less strategic resources compared with national elections. On the other hand, the international context allows us to include a variety of campaigning traditions and styles from different European countries.

Despite the limitations, our exploratory study provides overarching insights into political parties' emoji use and shows that emojis are not too extensively used to substitute words or convey emotions. When parties use emojis, it is rarely to emotionalize but to structure their content and to direct the audience's attention. Thus, parties do not visually inflate their social media content with emojis, but they also do not ignore them completely, using emojis as stylistic elements and selecting those with neutral meanings. These results indicate differences between what we know about emoji use in general online messaging contexts and emoji use by political actors.

We developed a typology to systematize the variety of emojis used specifically in political contexts and to aid analytical specificity in future research. However, this initial mapping of emojis to specific functions in political communication can only serve as a starting point for further empirical research to test its coherence and applicability. The typology should be validated and refined in complementary studies that incorporate the textual context to a greater extent. The typology then could serve as a new category in future content analyses of political communication on social media. In future research, due to their specific features of containing rich figurative meaning, being largely language-independent, and the set of all emojis—unlike the words of a language—being of a relatively fixed and manageable size, emojis could be used as proxies for concepts from political communication research like emotionalization or national identity cues.

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