

Abstract

My project explores how emotions can become hidden or simplified in digital spaces, especially on social media, where people are often expected to present themselves in clear and acceptable ways. My enquiry is: how can an interactive digital interface reveal emotions that may remain hidden behind a readable online appearance?

At the beginning of this project, I was interested in using digital technology to identify and visualise different emotions, such as anger, fear and tiredness. However, as my research developed, I began to question whether digital systems can really understand complex feelings through a person's visible expression. A smile, for example, does not always mean happiness. It can also cover discomfort, tiredness, pressure, or anger that is not shown directly.

For my final outcome, I used Codex to help me build an interactive webpage. The page includes a camera-based interaction where the viewer is invited to smile at the screen. When a smile is detected, the visual environment gradually changes: flame-like graphic elements begin to appear, representing anger hidden behind the smile. The interaction does not claim to reveal the viewer's real emotion. Instead, it uses the act of smiling as a trigger to question how digital interfaces often read facial expressions too quickly and too simply.

The project is relevant to graphic communication design because digital interfaces, emojis, filters and reaction systems all shape the way emotion is visually communicated online. It is also relevant to people who use social media, where feelings are often edited, covered or made easier to read for others. Through this webpage, I want the audience to experience the tension between what is shown on the surface and what may remain hidden underneath.

Context

My project is based on the everyday experience of communicating through digital interfaces. These platforms allow people to respond quickly and express their feelings, but they also encourage emotions to be shown in simple and easily understood ways. A smile is easily read as happiness, while a calm face is often understood as neutral. I became interested in what these interfaces leave out: emotions that are there, but are not directly shown, especially anger hidden behind a smile.

At the beginning of the project, I experimented with facial recognition technology to identify emotions such as anger, fear and tiredness. My original aim was to turn emotions into visual signals on a screen. However, I gradually realised that this approach was too similar to the systems I wanted to question.

If I asked a digital interface to decide how someone feels simply from their facial expression, I would be repeating the idea that emotions are clear, visible and easy to recognise. Because of this, my project moved away from trying to accurately detect emotion. Instead, I began to use interaction to explore the gap between what someone shows on the outside and what they may actually feel inside.

An important reference for this change was *Designing Friction: A Call for Friction in Digital Culture* by Luna Maurer, Roel Wouters and Alexandra Barancová. The text discusses how digital technology often tries to remove friction and create smooth, seamless experiences. Different physical actions and forms of interaction are increasingly reduced to the same gestures, such as clicking, tapping and swiping. This made me start thinking about friction emotionally, rather than only physically. Feelings such as hesitation, discomfort and suppressed anger are not smooth or immediate. They involve pauses, contradictions and resistance. I began to understand that these qualities matter in themselves, rather than being problems that technology should solve.

Stark and Crawford's article *The Conservatism of Emoji: Work, Affect, and Communication* also influenced my project. Their discussion of emoji helped me understand that digital emotional language is not neutral. Emoji may make communication quicker and more expressive, but they also organise emotions into signs that are easy to recognise and select. This made me wonder: what happens to a feeling that cannot be expressed through one clear image? Suppressed anger became especially important to me, because someone can smile or appear calm while still feeling angry inside. This kind of anger cannot be represented simply through one obvious outward expression.

Byung-Chul Han's *The Transparency Society* developed this idea further. Han discusses how digital culture encourages people to make themselves visible, readable and easy to share. This helped me realise that hidden emotions are not only caused by a lack of visibility. A person can be online and visible all the time, while still only showing a carefully controlled version of themselves. Being seen through a screen does not necessarily mean being emotionally understood. This connects directly to my use of a webcam, where the viewer is placed inside an interface and invited to show a smile.

For my final outcome, I used Codex to build an interactive webpage. The viewer sees themselves through the camera and is invited to smile. I am not claiming that the system can discover the viewer's real emotion. Instead, I use this interaction to create a contradiction: the smile is clear, readable and socially acceptable, while anger appears as a hidden visual layer.

The webpage is both the medium of the work and part of what the work is questioning. It allows the viewer to experience how an interface asks for a clear and readable expression, while the visual response suggests a more unstable feeling underneath. Through this project, I explore how graphic communication design can give visual form to emotions that digital systems often simplify, misread or hide.

Projected Contribution

Through this project, I want to explore how graphic communication design can give visual form to emotions that are difficult to notice or express directly. My final interactive webpage focuses on feelings that can easily become hidden or blurred in digital spaces: anger behind a smile, awkwardness and the urge to hide in social interaction, and tiredness that is difficult to put into words. Through interaction, I invite the audience to enter these emotional situations and experience how digital systems can make complex feelings appear smoother, quieter or less visible.

I think this is meaningful to graphic communication design because the work does not use facial recognition technology to decide what the audience is really feeling. Instead, it questions how digital systems often make quick assumptions based on visible expressions or actions.

Instructions within the webpage ask the viewer to perform certain behaviours, such as smiling or appearing in front of the camera, while the visual changes suggest that another feeling may still exist behind this clear and readable surface. The audience may not immediately identify one particular emotion while interacting with the work, but this uncertainty is part of what I want to communicate. When digital systems remove friction and prioritise smooth, instant responses, more complicated, hesitant or uncomfortable feelings can become harder to notice and express.

This project has also helped me move beyond static visual outcomes and develop my practice through interactive web design. Using Codex to build the webpage allowed me to bring camera interaction, moving visual elements and audience participation into my visual language. In the future, I want to continue exploring digital interfaces as spaces for experiencing hidden, unclear or uncomfortable emotions, rather than simply turning feelings into clear labels. My work does not aim to make digital communication look smoother. Instead, it tries to reveal the real emotions that may remain hidden beneath simple and readable surfaces.

Han, B.-C. (2015) The Transparency Society. Translated by E. Butler. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Maurer, L., Wouters, R. and Barancová, A. (n.d.) Designing Friction: A Call for Friction in Digital Culture. Available at: designingfriction.com (Accessed: 26 May 2026).

Stark, L. and Crawford, K. (2015) 'The conservatism of emoji: Work, affect, and communication', Social Media + Society, 1(2), pp. 1–11. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115604853> (Accessed: 26 May 2026).