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).

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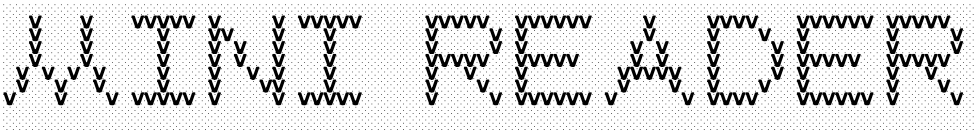
Projection2



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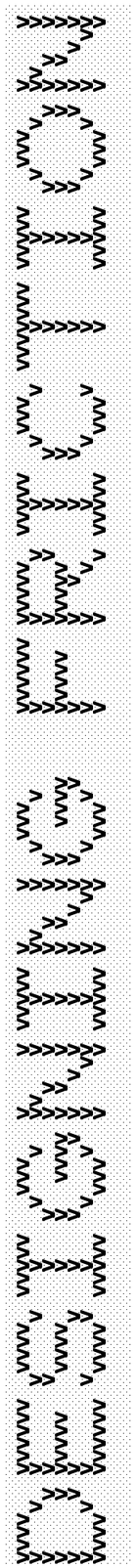
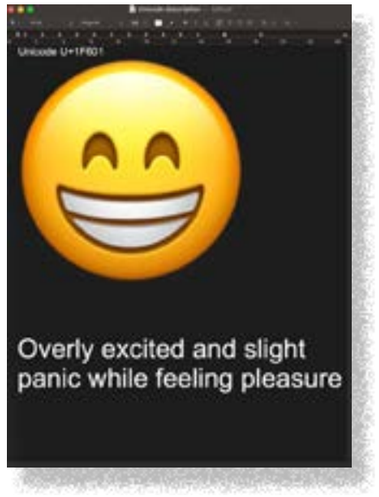
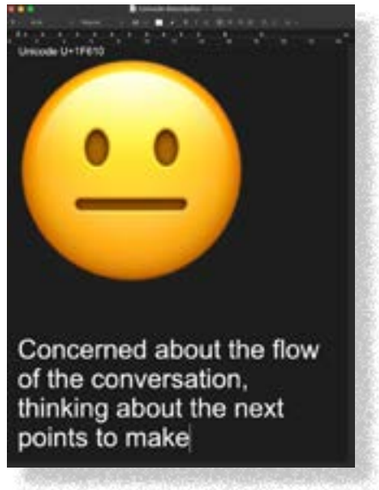


A call for friction in digital culture





What is friction?

Friction is resistance. It derives from physical interaction between humans, and humans and things – its reach is holistic. All senses, elements and emotions play a role: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, air, earth, temperature, agitation, passion, joy, sadness... With movement comes friction. The more we move and act, the more friction we encounter. The more friction there is, the more we engage and care. Friction drives our engagement. Friction, in this context, is not synonymous with either anger or conflict, nor is it malfunctioning technology. Friction is an essential ingredient that makes up our humanness and sparks human connection. Friction is a lively, intrinsic experience.

Loss of friction
Digital technology has long pursued the goal of eliminating friction, striving for seamlessness. We now navigate a sea of frictionless experiences. (With the possible exception of two factor authentication.)

Function and form are detached
Digital technology goes hand-in-hand with the loss of physical resistance. Philosopher Haroon Sheikh explains that digital technology turns our interactions with things into interactions with devices. A thing is split into its object, or form, and its function. A device is the same object for each function. It's your purse, your musical instrument and your letterbox, each of which now demands the same bodily action.

Removing physical human interaction
Instead of using our whole hand to interact, we now often use our fingertips to swipe screens or interact with air. Each new app or innovation replaces a previously friction-laden human interaction process, David Byrne states. Transactions with machines are perceived to be smoother than interactions with fellow humans.

How Designing Friction Shifted My Project

At the beginning of this project, I was looking at how digital systems use facial recognition and interaction to turn emotions such as anger, fear and tiredness into measurable signals and visual outcomes. At that stage, I saw the system mainly as a tool for detecting and translating emotion.

After reading Designing Friction, I started to rethink the relationship between digital technology and emotion. The text discusses how digital culture is always trying to make experiences smoother, faster and more seamless. Physical interactions that once involved different textures, movements and bodily experiences are now often reduced to the same gestures of clicking, swiping and touching a screen. This made me realise that digital systems may not only simplify physical actions, but emotions as well.

Because of this, my project shifted from asking, “How can digital systems recognise emotions?” to asking, “What kinds of emotions become hidden, flattened or misread within digital systems?” Clear, strong and easily named emotions are easier for a digital interface to represent. However, feelings such as awkwardness, tiredness, suppressed anger and concealed fear are much harder to read because they do not always appear through obvious facial expressions. They may be classified as calm or neutral, or may not be recognised at all.

This shift also changed the way I approach my visuals and interactions. Instead of simply asking the system to display an emotional label, I began to explore the emotional friction that still exists underneath a calm digital surface.

Designing Friction helped me understand that uncertainty, hesitation, suppression and discomfort are not errors that a system needs to remove. They are important parts of human emotional experience. My project therefore begins to question what is being hidden when digital systems require emotions to become clear, readable and easy to classify.

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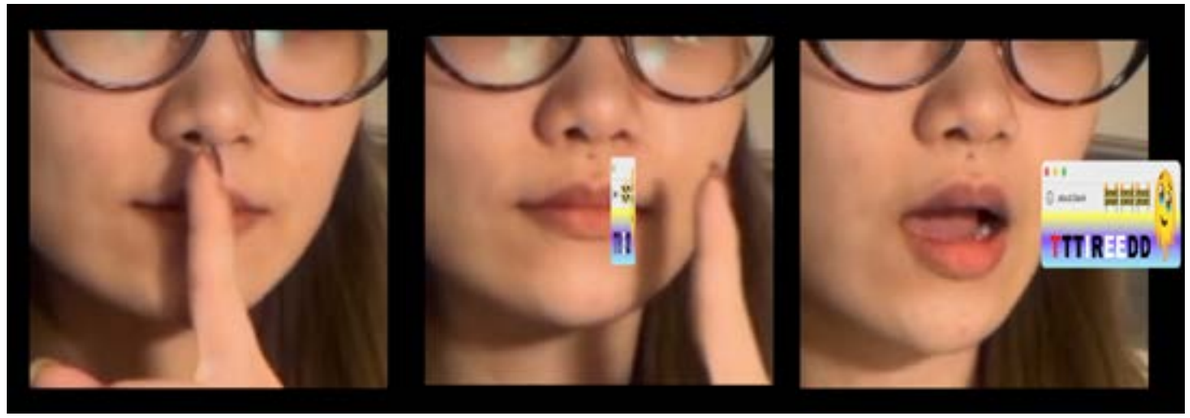
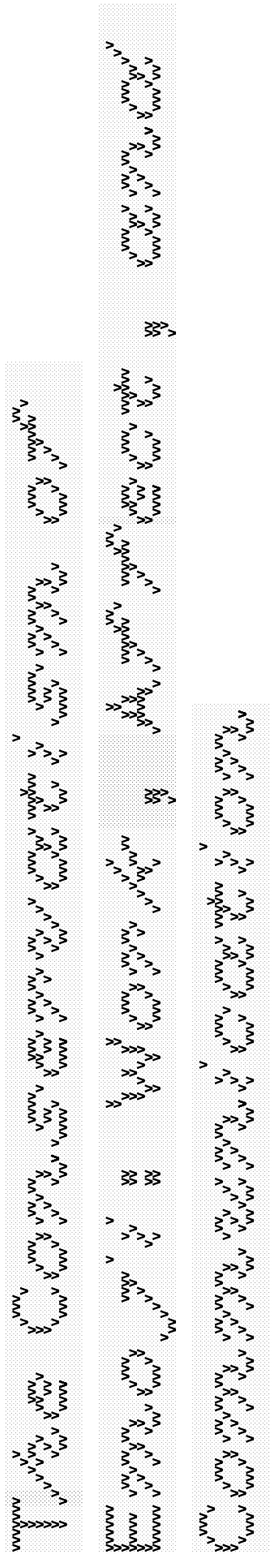


Translation Tired

Maurer, L., Wouters, R. and Barancová, A. (n.d.) Designing Friction: A Call for Friction in Digital Culture. Available online via the official project website. Accessed: 26 May 2026.



The Conservatism of Emoji

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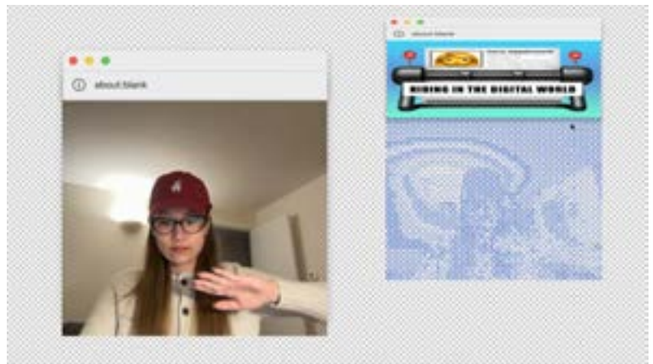
What is the Conservatism of Emoji

The anthropologist Nicholas Gessler (1998) terms skeuomorphs “material metaphors” that persist in computational media in order to “help us map the new onto an existing cognitive structure.” Yet, the affective power of emoji can in part be explained not just by their skeuomorphism, but also by their conceptual plasticity.

An emoji, like emoticons or kaomoji, straddles the conceptual line between ideogram and pictogram. Ideograms are symbolic representations of a particular concept or idea; pictograms are ideograms that show a pictorial image of the object being represented. To a greater degree than the emoticon, the utility of an emoji lies in the indeterminacy of its pictographic versus iconographic legibility as a signifier of affect, emotion, or sociality.



"Emoji are useful components for working socially across computational media: they show the importance, and paradoxical invisibility, of affective and social ties across digital structures of work."

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Emoji are reshaping mediated communication in the personal as well as in the corporate sphere—precisely because our interactions in both arenas are often mediated across the same platforms. The patterns of use for emoji over time between friends and partners can become abstract and cryptic, or can degenerate to become pro forma: just plain basic. In the best case, there is a unique personal subtext to that exchange of a rainbow or the love-heart smile, many layers of unspoken meaning that would be difficult for intelligence analysts or machine-learning algorithm to parse.

Nonetheless, this complexity has not stopped institutions from making the attempt, and commercializing emoji sociality in other ways. Applications such as Couple are designed to convey the sentiment of “I’m thinking of you” in as few keystrokes as possible, in what human–computer interaction (HCI) designers call “low-content intimacy signaling” (Kaye, 2005).

Angry text

#Reference Reflection: The Conservatism of Emoji

Stark and Crawford’s discussion of emoji changed the way I understood digital emotion. At first, I saw digital interaction as a way of translating feelings into visual forms. However, this text made me realise that digital expressions are not neutral. Emoji may expand communication, but they also organise emotion into a limited set of readable and selectable signs.

This became important to my project because I am interested in emotions that do not fit easily into clear digital categories: suppressed anger, concealed fear, tiredness and awkwardness. These feelings may not appear through an obvious facial expression or a single emoji. Instead, they can remain underneath a calm or neutral surface.

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).

Shift

This text shifted my project from designing visual representations of emotion to questioning which emotions digital systems are able to express, and which ones are left out.

In my earlier project, I used facial recognition and interaction to translate anger, fear and tiredness into digital signals and visual outcomes. At that point, I saw the digital system as a tool for “translating” emotion: when a person made a certain expression, the system would produce a corresponding visual response.

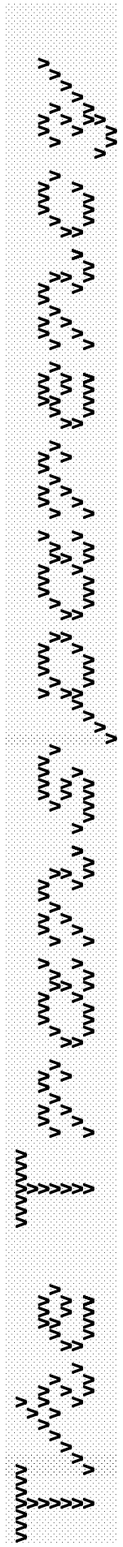
However, after reading Stark and Crawford’s article, I started to realise that this process of translation is not neutral. Digital emotional language is already built around simplification. It needs feelings to be clear, selectable, readable and easy to circulate. In the same way that emoji organise emotions into a menu of images, digital systems tend to reduce complex emotional experiences into surface expressions that are easier to recognise and understand.

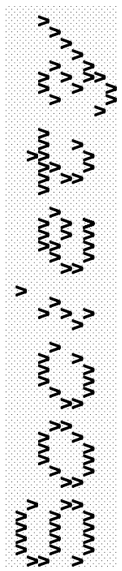
Because of this, my enquiry shifted from:

How do digital systems detect and represent emotion?

to:

When emotions have to be expressed through digital interfaces, which complex, subtle or hidden feelings become simplified, misread or invisible?





The Transparency Society

Byung–Chul Han

MA GCD Di

What is The Transparency Society

Transparency makes the human being glassy. Therein lies its violence. Unrestricted freedom and communication switch into total control and surveillance. Social media are also coming to resemble, more and more, digital panoptica that discipline and exploit the social.

In disciplinary society, the occupants of the panopticon were isolated from each other for more thorough surveillance, and they were not permitted to speak. The inhabitants of the digital panopticon, on the other hand, engage in lively communication and bare themselves of their own free will. In this way, they actively collaborate in the digital panopticon.

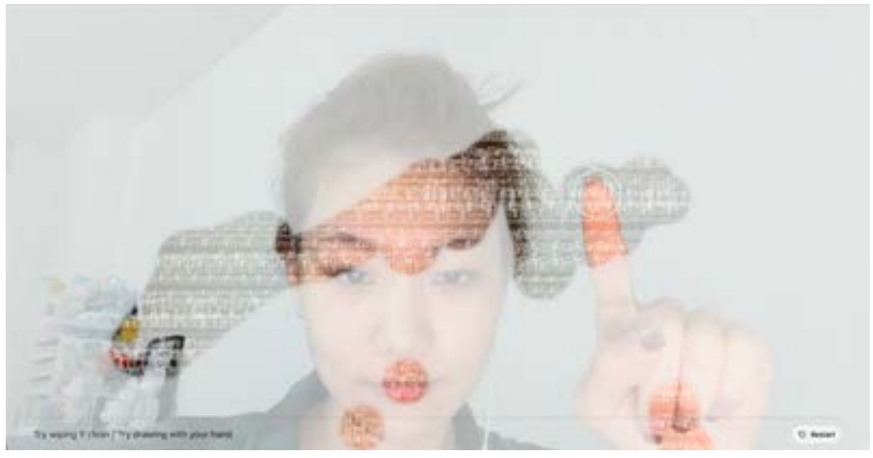
The digital society of control makes intensive use of freedom. It is only possible thanks to voluntary self-illumination and self-exposure. It exploits freedom. The society of control achieves perfection when its inhabitants do not communicate because of external constraint but out of inner need—that is, when the fear of giving up a private and intimate sphere yields to the need to put oneself on display shamelessly.

“Transparent communication is communication that has a smoothing and leveling effect.”

“Transparency makes the human being glassy. Therein lies its violence.”

People are required to constantly present themselves in the digital space, but that doesn't mean their true emotions are truly seen.
On the contrary, the more they need to be visible, readable, and shareable, the more likely they are to only present a smooth, clear, and acceptable emotional surface.

The digital world doesn't make emotions completely invisible; rather, it forces them to appear in a clear, smooth, and categorizable form. Therefore, truly complex emotions can only remain hidden behind these visible surfaces.



#Reference Reflection: The Transparency Society

After reading Byung-Chul Han's The Transparency Society, I began to rethink what it means for emotions to be "hidden". At first, I believed that digital systems simply failed to capture people's real feelings. Han's discussion of transparency made me realise that the problem may not be a lack of visibility, but the pressure of being constantly visible. In digital spaces, people are repeatedly encouraged to present themselves in ways that are clear, readable and easy to share. However, being visible does not mean being understood. When emotions are expected to appear in quick and recognisable forms, feelings that are more uncertain, suppressed or difficult to express can easily be flattened or overlooked.

This changed the direction of my project. I began to focus on revealing emotions that remain hidden beneath digital surfaces. I see digital systems as filters that reduce the friction and complexity within people's emotional experiences. Through an interactive webpage, I invite audiences to engage with my work and experience emotions that are often concealed, blurred or made less visible within social media.

Han, B.-C. (2015) 'Preface', in The Transparency Society. Translated by E. Butler. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. Available at: Stanford University Press, The Transparency Society: Preface (Accessed: 26 May 2026).

Thank you