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I 🌹🍀🇫🇮 You! - Emojis as Emotional-Political Signifiers in Finnish Election Campaign Discussion Online

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Abstract

Social media platforms and the forms of vernacular expression they support invite citizens to emotionally react to political content. This study focuses on the affective networks of emoji use in the Facebook comment threads on 18 politicians' public pages before the Finnish 2019 parliamentary elections. We aim to provide a more systematic study of the affective practices emerging from the use of emojis in specific contexts of online communication, such as in relation to particular political actors. We analyze the data using computational methods and network analysis and complement these methods with qualitative analysis. The results indicate that emojis are used to connect with ideological coalitions across the parties and to reinforce connections with political actors. Particular emojis become distinctive emotional-political signifiers whose connotations have departed from their original denotations and are formed and shared in specific communities in relation to specific political candidates and parties.

Keywords: Emoji, political communication, campaign communication, online discussion, social media

1. Introduction

Social media has introduced new forms and modes to political campaign communication. Previous studies have suggested that the development of these forms, as well as the nuances of communication styles, are modified by the social media platform infrastructure (Bode et al., 2015; Nelimarkka et al., 2020). In particular, the social media logic favoring attention, clicks, and shares supports actors who can offer affective content for the emotional audience to engage with (Papacharissi, 2015; Ceron & D'Adda, 2016; Van Aelst et al., 2017; Knuutila & Laaksonen, 2020). Furthermore, the platforms and the forms of vernacular expression they support also invite citizens to react to political content emotionally with Facebook reactions and visual emojis (Stark & Crawford, 2015; Matamoros-Fernández, 2018).

Our study contributes to the research on networked, affective politics (Papacharissi, 2015) in the context of Finnish campaign communication. The focus is on the 2019 Finnish parliamentary election campaign and the affectivity in the Facebook discussions on key politicians' public pages examined through emojis used in the comments to the candidates' posts. While previous studies have focused on the sentiment in candidate-citizen communication (e.g., Gerbaudo et al., 2019) or analyzed Facebook reactions as indicators of affective politics (e.g., Muraoka et al., 2021; Knuutila & Laaksonen, 2020), we lack a detailed understanding of the uses of emojis in the candidate-citizen discussion and the related affective political engagement. By examining emojis, an emblematic form of contemporary online communication (Bai et al., 2019; Highfield & Leaver, 2016) we aim to provide a deeper understanding of their role as affective practices (Wetherell, 2012; Nikunen et al., 2021) emerging in specific contexts characterized by specific candidates or parties.

Furthermore, while there is an expanding body of literature that looks at political campaign communication on social media (e.g., Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Boulianne & Larsson, 2020; Knuutila & Laaksonen, 2020), most of these studies focus on messages sent by politicians themselves (cf. Gerbaudo et al., 2019; Nelimarkka et al., 2020). Less emphasis has been placed on the ways in which the public contributes to the online presence of the candidates (Kannasto, 2020, 2021), and what kinds of affective communities are formed around the candidates. We explore these affective communities by focusing on the use of emojis by citizens on candidates' Facebook pages. It has been argued that emojis can act as visual signifiers that indicate and shape affective practices and wider digital affective cultures (Döveling et al., 2018). Therefore, we conceptualize them as portrayals of citizens' emotions, as fast and simple signals of communal and ideological ties, and also collective

affective practices that connect to the political-ideological collectives assembled on the candidates' Facebook pages. We ask: 1) How are political emotions expressed and signified through emojis in candidate-citizen discussions? 2) In what ways are emojis used to establish, reinforce or challenge political relationships and loose ideological formations in these discussions?

In what follows, we first explore our theoretical starting points: affectivity of politics, the connective and communal role of affects, and emojis as signifiers of those affects. Next, we discuss the uses and prevalence of various emojis in our data. First we employ network analysis to visualize and cluster candidates and emojis. After that, a qualitative analysis of comments in those clusters is presented in order to understand the affective, political cultures formed around specific candidates. After the analysis section, we conclude by discussing the different semiotic uses of emojis in political online communication and election campaigns: to express support towards actors, to express an emotional reaction to post topics, and to express community, values, and party identity. Emojis, thus, are not only visual expressions of digital feelings, but symbols that can signify political ideologies and represent political relationships.

2. Theoretical background

Recently, there has been a rising interest in the affectivity of politics both in academic research as well as more generally in society, including fields of media studies and cultural theory (Clough & Halley, 2007; Nikunen, 2019) and political communication (Papacharissi, 2015; Boulianne & Larsson, 2021). It has been suggested that social media reinforces the affectivity of politics, for example by encouraging campaigning that elicits emotions. It is therefore seen to be one factor in changing the tone of politics (Ceron & D'Adda, 2016; Knuutila & Laaksonen, 2020). This reinforcement takes place in practice through platform interface design and content curation algorithms, titled 'the emotional architecture of social media' by Wahl-Jorgensen (2019). The user interfaces support affective communication by encouraging the use of emotional signifiers in different ways: through 'like' buttons, emojis, and reactions (Boulianne & Larsson, 2021; Sumner et al., 2018; Muraoka et al., 2021). Emotional expressions are also deeply entangled with the popularity and virality of content on the platforms. Algorithms that organize the feeds seem to favor user-engaging, conversational, emotional, and sensational content (Knuutila & Laaksonen 2020). Emotions, thus,

play an important role in the data economy of the platforms (e.g., Stark & Crawford, 2015).

Papacharissi (2015) conceptualizes social media platforms as a storytelling infrastructure that promote a sense of presence and emotional expressions, which emojis support (see also Bai et al., 2019). For online discussion, emojis and reactions offer possibilities to express sentiment. As small, visual non-word expressions in computer-mediated communication (Yarchi, Baden & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021; Lo, 2008), emojis can strengthen presentations, replace missing facial expressions and convey additional meanings to the text or convey a message, such as communality, sarcasm or different greetings, without text (Dujali et al., 2016). In their study on Facebook conversations, Dujali et al. (2016) conclude that "emojis functioned as markers, intensifiers, teasers and strengtheners of speech acts." They also found the emotional factors, conversation tone, and participating in the trend as reasons for the use of emojis. However, while emojis can be used to express emotion, they simultaneously limit the range of expression to the static ideogram, thus challenging authentic expression (Wagner, Marusek & Yu, 2020) and interpretation of the messages in which they are used. However, they offer more variety than for example reaction buttons; the set of emotional reactions introduced by Facebook in 2016 has effectively rendered a limited set of six emotions a prominent feature to organize content on that platform (see Wahl-Jörgensen, 2019).

Our understanding of emotions and their connection to political action is informed by the work of Margareth Wetherell (2012) and her concept of affective practice. Rather than focusing on emotions and affect as psychological attributes of individuals, Wetherell foregrounds the collective and culturally produced component of emotions and affect (see also Ahmed, 2004; Nikunen, 2019). These include collective processes of developing and communicating styles and means of emotive expression, but also direct attention to the influence of the digital platforms, which, through their affordances shape options of expressing, perceiving, and passing on emotion. Individual emotions, conceived in this way, are not independent of but embedded in particular contexts of action—in this case, the participatory forms of political communication. on social media. Moreover, the prevalence of specific affective practices, such as the use of particular emojis, can reveal something about the differences and similarities between groups. For example, Wetherell (2012) points out that boundaries between social classes follow differences in how fear, disgust, and humiliation are displayed.

Affectivity works as a force to mobilize audiences and bring people together, often through media

content that conveys collective sense of emotion (Papacharissi, 2005; Savolainen et al., 2020). The presentation and mobilization of emotions are necessary for politicians and political groups because they motivate and recruit people to participate in political activities (e.g., Gould, 2010). One way of wielding power and influence is to attempt to influence the emotional atmosphere or popularize new styles or structures of feeling. Within political science, emotions have also been studied comparatively to explore the political sentiments of specific political movements and times. According to Martha Nussbaum (2013), different emotional structures support different political ideals. Many political scientists have studied the distinctive emotional regimes related to populism, the success of which has been attributed to communal feelings of anger (Rico et al., 2017) or animosity and resentment among its adherents (Salmela & Scheve, 2018; 2019).

Following Wetherell's (2012) concept of affective practices, we understand emojis not as neutral conveyors of emotion, but as one feature in potentially varied practices of communication. While these practices could range from delineating group memberships to building parasocial relationships, they always also include an affective aspect. Emojis do not always represent affective states, but they can nevertheless amplify, modify and channel emotions (Lo, 2008). As emojis draw from a limited shared set of possible choices, they can help trace shared emotional and behavioral responses, revealing something about the collective aspects of affective practices. Thus, emojis can act as visual signifiers that partake in and shape affective practices and larger digital affective cultures (e.g., Döveling et al., 2018). Images, according to Gillian Rose (2014: 8), are "more-than-representational" in that they convey sentiments, affective states, and sensuous impacts. As Rose (2014: 11) states: "methods are also needed that can engage with the dynamics embedded in the software platforms that structure these sites." To put it another way, we need to investigate how emojis, as affective visual communication, are embedded in and, in turn, shape the affective practices present in election campaign communication.

3. Data and Method

Our empirical analysis focuses on the national level party leaders and vote-pullers during the Finnish 2019 parliamentary election. Election campaigns are sensitive to their context, and there are differences between countries even if political systems would be similar (Humprecht et al., 2020). Thus the country-specific focus is accounted for in the qualitative

analysis. In Finland, parliamentary elections are held every four years, and 200 members are elected to the parliament using an open-list system. The constituents vote for individual candidates who represent parties or electoral alliances but are not set in a fixed order by the party beforehand. Because the candidates compete against contestants from rivaling parties and also against those on the same party list, campaign communications tend to be focused on individual candidates (Railo & Ruohonen, 2016). In addition to appealing to voters in their party, the candidates also aim to gather support groups for themselves. In Finland, many voters change their position between elections (Isotalo et al., 2020), highlighting the need for successful campaigns and influence on voters. This in turn may increase the importance of emotions as they connect voters to candidates and influence voting decisions.

With the increasing importance of social media as a source and context of campaigns (Strandberg & Borg, 2020), Finland presents an interesting empirical context. As in many other democracies, most parties and candidates increasingly use social media for their campaigns, sharing topic issues and campaign-trail updates (Railo & Ruohonen, 2016). In political discussions on Facebook, active members of the public express their support or opposition through commenting on posts by candidates (Kannasto, 2020). While internationally Twitter has gained more scholarly interest, in the 2019 parliamentary elections, almost 90% of the candidates were on Facebook (Strandberg & Borg, 2020), highlighting the importance of Facebook in the Finnish political campaign context.

Our single-platform focus on Facebook is justified by the notion that platforms differ in terms of user base and their digital architecture, which influences political communication on them (Bossetta, 2018; Nelimarkka et al., 2020). Furthermore, emoji sets and their usage are platform-specific. The empirical focus of this study are the emojis used in comment threads. Emojis serve as the visual cues to describe affective aspects of messages that would otherwise be hard to pass on through text content alone. Some of them clearly represent an object (like flowers, flags, bomb), some facial expressions (smile, grimacing, crying), some indicate sentiment (e.g. hearts, thumbs up and down). These are denotations, but in addition emojis can have a variety of connotations. In affective practices (Wetherell, 2012), these connotations are developed through collective processes of meaning making as the emojis are used in different political contexts over time. In a limited number of cases emojis can directly represent affective states, for instance the emojis representing facial

expressions. A wide range of emojis, however, represent connotations beyond the shown symbol, such as certain flowers that are occasionally used as logos or other insignia of political parties.

The empirical data was collected with Facepager (Jünger & Keyling, 2019) from the candidates' public Facebook pages during the final month before the election day, March 14 to April 14, 2019, including in total 713 posts and 15,462 comments from 18 Facebook pages of the current party leaders and vote-pullers. 4,356 comments contained emojis. The parties involved are the National Coalition Party (NCP), The Social Democratic Party (SDP), The Finns Party (FP), The Left Alliance (Left), The Green Party (Greens), The Christian Democrats (KD), Movement Now, Swedish People's Party of Finland (RKP), The Blue Reform Party (Blue) and The Center Party (CP). One party leader (FP) did not have a public Facebook page and was thus excluded from the study.

We used computational methods and network analysis to filter the data and to generate an overview of the use of emojis and emoji-candidate communities. Network analysis was adopted in order to calculate and visualize which emojis were typically connected to each candidate and whether candidates would be connected through similar emojis. This analysis was complemented with qualitative analysis of the data to ensure better semiotic interpretations and that the affective practices emerging from the use of emojis could be situated in their context.

All occurrences of emojis were extracted from the comment files using a Python script, after which they were mapped as a network to show what kinds of communities formed between the emojis and the candidates. We represent the data in graph format by forming a node for every candidate and every emoji, then placing an edge between a candidate and an emoji if the emoji appeared in any of the candidate's comments. The resulting graph was then visualized as a network using Gephi (Bastian et al., 2009) and the ForceAtlas2 layout algorithm (Jacomy et al., 2014). Next, we applied modularity optimization to detect communities within the graph (Blondel et al., 2008). When doing the modularity optimization we removed the most common emoji (👍) which dominated the network. The algorithm was run multiple times to observe the robustness of the clusters. We settled with a five cluster model, ran with 1.0 resolution that resulted in a weighted modularity value of 0.224. Next, we identified the most common and central emojis for each cluster (see Table 1). We included only emojis that appear in the dataset a minimum of 5 times.

In the final stage of the analysis, we engaged in a qualitative reading of the use of these most common emojis in each cluster. We filtered the data by querying for the six most used emojis in each cluster and read through the messages in chronological order, within threads. During this analysis our interest was to inductively interpret the functions of the emoji in their original context from the perspective of affective practice (Wetherell, 2012), that is, we aimed to identify both the denotations and connotations of each emoji in their use context and used both textual content and conversation context to identify the affective attachments of emojis as they become intertwined in social formations of the political online discussion. Furthermore, the data was previously used by Kannasto (2021) in research, where personalization of politics framework (Van Aelst et al., 2012) was used to code the content. Thus, for each message we already had coded whether it was focused on individual politicians, political parties or topic issues, and for those related to politicians the coding indicated whether they related to politicians' personal characteristics or to their private life.

The qualitative phase was done by the first author only, but then discussed in several peer debriefing sessions with other authors. While conducting this analysis, the existing dimensions coded in the data (Kannasto, 2021) were used as cues to interpret the contextual elements. For example, we recognized a typical, communal use of emojis in comment thread texts. Based on this analysis we identified three central types of affective practices: expressions of feelings and support, expressions of emotional reactions to issues, and expressions of community and identity.

4. Findings

Our first research question was: How are political emotions expressed and signified through emojis in candidate-citizen discussions? The wide selection of emojis in the data highlights their centrality in the variety of affective practices (Wetherell, 2012) on the politician's Facebook pages, but also supports their trendiness described by Dujali et al. (2016). The data shows a relatively wide use of emojis. In total, there were 287 different emojis used in the posts and comments, and 3.7% of the comments consist of emojis only. This demonstrates the common use of emojis as easy and fast non-word expressions (Yarchi et al., 2021). For example, the widely used thumbs up (👍) reaction with most (1,647) occurrences is a quick way to show support and agreement, but also substitutes writing 'good luck'. The second most popular emoji was the Finnish flag (🇫🇮) with 542 occurrences.

From the most frequently used emojis in the data, most seem to have a positive denotation and are used

to express a positive stance towards the candidate, party, or an issue. Among the emojis with a positive denotation are those signifying wishing good luck and showing support, expressing positive stance through hearts or ok signals, and the communal emojis such as the Finnish flag, the rose, and the four-leaf clover, which we will discuss in the second section of the findings. The prominent use of positive emojis, such as the heart, might be more common on Facebook compared to other social media channels, e.g., Twitter. As Boulianne and Larsson (2021), and Nelimarkka et al. (2020), point out, Twitter is mainly used for topic-focused communication whereas Facebook pages are more likely to collect fans and followers to like the politicians' pages and comment on them. This shows the intimate nature of interaction specific to Facebook.

One prominent post type that seemed to trigger the use of positive emojis in the comments were posts describing the private and personal dimension of campaigns, for example descriptions of personal characteristics, or announcing the candidate's performance on television, mostly in debates. In addition to this, positive tone emojis were connected with wishing the candidate success in the campaign or debate. The clapping hands emoji (👏, freq.=146) was primarily used to congratulate the candidate for a successful television or campaign performance, indicating applause. The positivity manifested as emojis increased towards the election day, when people were sending their best wishes to the candidates. These were signified with a rose (🌹, freq.=363), especially for candidate Marin, four-leaf clover (🍀, freq.=213), especially for the CP candidates, flexed biceps (💪, freq.=218), and clapping hands (👏 freq.=146). Positivity was also emphasized with the fifth most popular emoji (freq.=335), the smiling face emoji (😊).

> Very nice to listen to somebody speak clearly and to-the-point. 🌹❤️ (comment to SDP candidate)

> Thank you [politician], for the last season, we want you to continue! 💚🍀💚 (comment to CP candidate)

The red heart (❤️) had the third most occurrences (freq.=475). Overall, hearts were used to convey affective commitment to the party or the candidate together with promises to vote, showing support, and sharing memories related to a candidate or a party. As symbols, hearts can be considered personal and intimate. Policy-related communication such as agenda-setting posts did not necessarily promote engagement through heart emojis, but campaign messages seemed to trigger the desire to show

commitment to the candidates. Female candidates generally received more hearts, with the exception of male candidate Orpo, who frequently shared personal content. Photos and posts portraying his family or, in particular, their dog, or "campaign dog" as he was sometimes called, promoted positive engagement. This indicates that personal content also elicits more emotion, which supports existing research (e.g., Enli & Skogerbø, 2013).

> Equally cute, dog and the master❤️ (comment to NCP candidate)

Counterintuitively, some emojis with a negative connotation were also used to show support for candidates who have a controversial public figure. In this respect, the populist right-wing FP candidate Huhtasaari represents an interesting case for the emojis depicting anger. Angry emojis were usually not directed to the candidate but expressed agreement with her communication related to problematic political issues: emojis were thus used to build a shared emotion for the conversation. Similar responses were also given to other FP candidates. Zerback and Wirz (2021) recognize that anger emojis are triggered by the sadness of the content. Our analysis supports this when looking at emojis connected to candidate Andersson who posted, among other themes, sad narratives of the elderly or patients who are dependent on health care.

> Shocking to hear these facts!😠

> YLE [Finnish national broadcaster] sucks big time 😠😠🤮😠 (comments to FP candidates)

4.1 Emoji Networks and Clusters

Network analysis reveals connections between specific candidates and emojis (Figures 1A, 1B). Table 1 shows the political candidates in five network clusters, cluster size in percentage, and the emojis most distinctive for each cluster. The clusters follow party composition to some degree. Cluster B is the only to contain SDP, the Left and the KD hence spanning both center-left parties and one conservative party. Candidates from the center-right NCP span Clusters A, D and E, and The FP candidates are in Clusters C and D. The clustering results may reflect communication patterns specific to parties but, at the same time, similar affective characteristics of individual candidates across parties.

Different emojis are distinctive for each cluster. In Cluster B, with a female majority and mostly center-left candidates, emojis representing hearts, gratitude, but also sadness are overrepresented. In contrast,

laughter, anger, and disavowal group in Cluster A with center-right politicians from three parties. Cluster D draws together top-level politicians mostly from government parties, including the incumbent prime minister Sipilä, and positive emojis. In this cluster, the green heart brings together politicians from CP and the Greens. Cluster C, with FP politicians, has more than half of all the uses of the Finnish flag (🇫🇮). It is one example, together with the green and blue hearts, of party-specific emoji use.
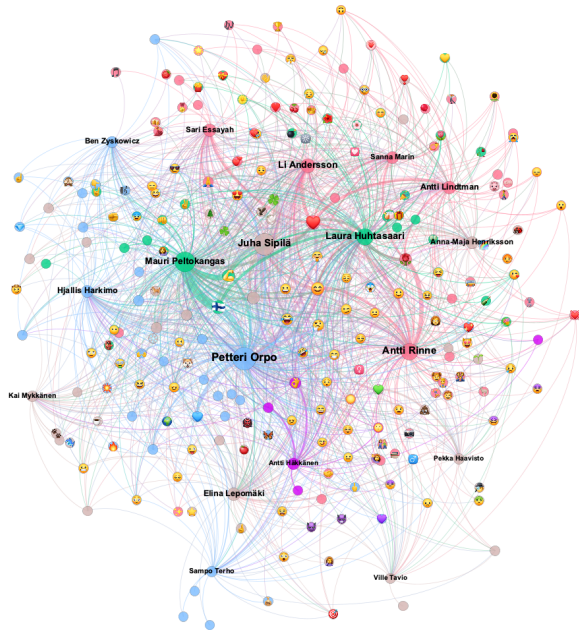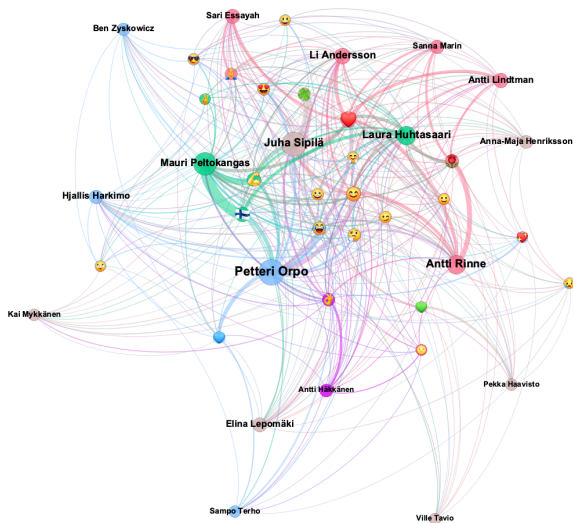

Figure 1A. Emoji-candidate network.

Figure 1B. Filtered emoji-candidate network with only most common emojis.

Table 1. Politician-Emoji clusters.

Cluster	Politicians	Most central emojis (weighted out-degree)	Most common emojis (freq.)
A BLUE (24.32%)	Ben Zyskowicz, Hjallis Harkimo, Petteri Orpo, Sampo Terho	😂 (202) 🤔 (163) 😍 (101) 😅 (97) 🤗 (93)	🙂 (76) 😂 (68) 💙 (66) ❤️ (66) 🇫🇮 (63)
B RED (23.22%)	Antti Lindtman, Antti Rinne, Li Andersson, Sanna Marin, Sari Essayah	❤️ (395) 😊 (310) 🌹 (228) 🙏 (84) 🙂 (62)	❤️ (187) 🌹 (144) 😊 (104) 😂 (54) 🤗 (52)
C GREEN (19.67%)	Laura Huhtasaari, Mauri Peltokangas	🇫🇮 (325) 💪 (227) 😊 (28) 🌷 (26) 👏 (24)	🇫🇮 (196) 💪 (108) ❤️ (84) 😊 (60) 🌹 (56)
D GRAY (17.49%)	Anna-Maja Henriksson, Elina Lepomäki, Juha Sipilä, Kai Mykkänen, Pekka Haavisto, Ville Tavio	🍀 (142) 😄 (100) 😉 (99) 💚 (57) 🙂 (34)	🍀 (132) 😊 (61) ❤️ (57) 💚 (50) 🇫🇮 (48)
E LILAC (3.55%)	Antti Häkkänen	👌 (146) 😬 (31) 🤦 (4)	👌 (26) 🤲 (13) 😊 (9) 😄 (7) 😬 (7)

4.2 Communal emojis

Our second research question was: In what ways are emojis used to establish, reinforce or challenge political relationships and loose ideological formations in these discussions? As mentioned above, some emojis were party-specific, and seemed to be endowed with a community-weaving symbolism. In the qualitative analysis we observed that the most frequently used emojis in each cluster typically are those that carry affective meanings beyond their original denotation. For example, different colored hearts and their placement in the clusters show that the supporters follow party colors when choosing their hearts, thus leading to a collective way of shaping the emoji to portray similarity in party support. The blue heart is used with the NCP and a few times with the Blue (Cluster A). The green heart is prominent in Cluster D, which is characterized by candidates from the Greens and the CP, both of which feature green in their visual identity. This might be an affective practice that has organically developed in the communication between supporters and politicians, and that is adopted by new supporters joining the page.

Similar communal uses were observed for individual emojis. Our data indicates that in Finnish

campaign communication on Facebook, the Finnish flag (🇫🇮) was the second most used emoji with 542 occurrences. A significant number of the occurrences were attached with the comments on the candidates in Cluster C, representing FP, candidates Huhtasaari and Peltokangas,and a former candidate of FP, Terho, who in 2019 represented the Blue (Cluster A). Also the FP candidate Tavio in Cluster D received flags. The posts of these candidates typically represented patriotic values and promoted anti-immigration views.

🇫🇮Finnish Maiden 🇫🇮 Powerful & Strong image (comment to FP candidate)

Our party leader Jussi Halla-Aho IS, debate after another the most calm, reasonable and the smart behaving party leader. --- Vote Finland back!🇫🇮 (post by FP candidate)

Hence, the data shows that FP has harnessed the flag emoji to represent the core message of the party throughout their Facebook discussions in such a way that it can be viewed as a communally employed sign attached to the party. It could also be considered to show successful mobilization, which adds to the engagement and visibility of the party message. Perhaps the national flag emoji is easy for the citizens to engage and use; it expresses everyone's national identity, regardless of the added anti-immigration message when used by the FP. By being connected primarily with the FP candidates, the use of flag emoji in the data both support and challenge the findings of Kariryaa et al. (2020) in their study on Germany and the US: the national flag emoji is not an automatic signifier for traditionalist or conservative values, but national flags are often connected with political ideologies in online communication.

Other adaptations of communal emojis were the CP's green clover (🍀, Cluster D) and the rose (🌹) connected with the SDP (Cluster B), especially candidate Marin. Both resemble the visual look in the parties' current or historical logos and thus, they are known among the supporters, can indicate a broader sense of belonging, and act as an expression of support. The strong relationship of these communal signifiers and parties in the data support Sampietro's (2020) findings that interpretation of emojis relies on pre-existing iconography. However, there are also indications of more recent practices of individual candidates promoting the use of particular emojis connected with their persona and rhetoric. For example, candidate Harkimo frequently uses the three wise monkeys emojis, which are then subsequently used by his supporters.

You fail….. otherwise good but you should have left out flirting for votes from the green-left with that environmental change shit and business! 🙈🙊😡 — (comment to Movement Now candidate)

Another candidate-specific emoji was the folded hands (🙏), used in the comments for candidate Essayah (KD). Similar use of this emoji was also observed with candidate Sipilä, who has publicly discussed faith as part of his life. A few other times, the emoji occurred in greetings and wishes for other candidates, so it was not solely tied with the religious context and candidates, which indicates the importance of contextual interpretation of emojis as visual cues when they are used to replace verbal expressions. Similar ambiguity was observed with both the four-leaf clover (🍀) and the red rose (🌹), which were used to express luck and congratulations, respectively, but both conveyed another meaning as communal party-related signifiers for some participants. These communal emojis also emerged as signs of joy and congratulations following success on the Election Day. Such contextual uses of the same emoji also affect the network layout and introduce instability to the clusters.

6. Discussion

In our data, emojis were not only used to express emotion (Dujali et al., 2016) towards candidates and parties. They were also used connect with the community surrounding political candidates or ideologies, and to convey the tone of the conversation and individual comments. They were used in practices such as expressing solidarity with a party or membership to a nation suggesting their use as political signifiers in social media. The data also implies trends in tones of conversation related to candidates and parties. Thus, there are both generally acknowledged signifiers, such as the thumbs up and the clapping hands, as well as communal emojis specific to the party context, such as the rose, used in the posts and comments.

Even though Laaksonen et al. (2017), Knuutila & Laaksonen (2020) as well as Nelimarkka et al. (2020) have found indications of negativity in Finnish social media campaigning, aligning with international research on negativity in social media campaigns (Stromer-Galley et al., 2016; Zerback & Wirz, 2021), the use of emojis in the data portrays a mainly positive tone. However, some positive emojis signifying commitment are simultaneously negative in their context. For example, the Finnish flag attached to the Finns Party candidates' anti-immigration messages is used to convey negative statements about the current

government and the wish to reset the political agenda. Thus, the ability to understand and analyze political communication where emojis are used, requires deeper reflection of their communal and affective practices suggesting a need for added research on them in different contexts. Also qualitative analysis is needed to recognize for example instances where seemingly negative emojis actually represent communal support.

The communal, affective, and creative use of emojis (e.g., Highfield & Leaver, 2016) visible in the data supports Sampietro's (2020) conclusion on emerging norms in their use: Emojis are not just a trendy way of combining visual characters and text, or to replace text with images. They provide ways to add meaning, express emotion, and connect with a community of discussion participants and therefore enable communicative as well as affective practices (Wetherell, 2012). Their simplified way of expression (Wagner, Marusek & Yu, 2020) can also make them an easy way to connect and communicate in collectives. In online discussion emojis could be less language sensitive, thus offering a more universal and visual way of meaning-making.

Emojis thus work in discussions as one form of affectivity which can mobilize audiences and bring people together (Papacharissi, 2005; Savolainen et al., 2020). These uses are also present when using emojis to present emotional-political stances. Emojis, by nature, are reactions to something, which explains that posts are rarely constructed only through emojis. As comments, emojis are an additional, more broad-spectrum emotional response.

The variety that emojis offer, beyond the few predetermined reactions on Facebook, is evident from the data. Emojis are available in different colors, which also supports expressing identity or community through, for example, different colored hearts. However, our analysis of the emoji clusters indicates that in the context of Finnish political campaigning, the use of emojis focuses on a few specific emojis and the meanings they offer, reinforcing the importance of the discursive community when choosing emojis. As Kreiss, Lawrence, and McGregor (2018) have concluded, genres of political communication in social media determine the social conventions that require consideration from the political actors. Based on our findings it seems that specific emojis become attached to specific genres in the context of Finnish politics; both party-specific and issue-specific genres, but also message types such as supporting and cheering. The connotations of emojis in different contexts are not straightforward, however, and understanding the nuances of citizen-candidate discussion in Facebook in any national context requires previous knowledge

of the candidates and their parties. As most of the most used emojis were connected with the party-specific insignia, they may not be generalized as such with other countries but further country-specific studies might reveal similar types of examples for these communities and their representative emojis. The motives and importance of the use of emojis in citizen-candidate discussions can however, be viewed as more universal, and some similarities may be found in other multi-party democracies.

In the data, emojis are used in three central types of affective practices: first, either to express feeling and support towards a candidate, party, or policy; second, to express an emotional reaction to the post topic, or third, to express community, values, and party identity. The first two uses could be considered to represent the ways emojis were designed to work: to express facial gestures or emotional stances. Previous studies have discussed how in online discussions, emojis are used to express emotions, such as anger, hatred, care, or excitement (Zerback & Wirz, 2020; Bai et al., 2019 for a review). As Wagner, Marusek, and Yu (2020) describe, one emoji can be used to represent a range of emotions. For example, the Finnish flag has a strong adoption in representing the FP, but closer to election it also becomes a representation of democracy and general national pride shown in all candidates' and parties posts and comments thus broadening its use further from the party collective. In addition to emotions, emojis can be used to portray a broad selection of current topics as well as affective stances (Matamoros-Fernández, 2018). They communicate what cannot be expressed in words, save characters and time in communication, and help to gain attention.

The third identified use, however, indicated that emojis also convey a political sense of community. In our data, this was evident with the uses of the Finnish flag, party symbols or the folded hands prayer emojis. In a non-political context, Park et al. (2014) have also recognized culturally related patterns in the selections of emoticons as nonverbal cues used in Twitter communication. This supports Wetherell's (2012) notion of emotions as not independent of but embedded in particular contexts of action. It poses a challenge to communication since all participants do not necessarily recognize the communal significance of a particular emoji.

In this study we explored the uses of emojis as emotional signifiers and as part of political affective practices in the comments posted to politicians' Facebook pages during the electoral campaigning period. The results indicate differences between parties and individual candidates in what emojis the constituents use and what kind of practices the emojis

are a part of. Emojis may have a more prominent role in online political communication. Our analysis indicates that emojis are used to establish, reinforce and challenge the political relationships and ideological formations through their collective use. These affective practices originate either from the party level or have been formed among the discussion participants – perhaps by finding the closest descriptive emoji to indicate the official party color or another visual element attached to the party or candidate. The network analyses showed clear clustering patterns of emojis expressing certain kinds of affects, but more importantly, specific groups of politicians attract the use of a particular set of affective emojis. In addition, we showed how particular emojis, used in connection with specific political actors, become distinctive emotional-political signifiers whose connotations have departed from their original denotations and are formed and shared in specific communities.

The single-approach for platform, election and country in our study is not without limitations. Our data is limited to party leaders and vote-pullers, which excludes the larger variety of candidate communication. Furthermore, the potential effects of platform affordances, such as suggested emojis given by Facebook mobile, cannot be extrapolated from our data. However, the analysis gives indications of the importance of emojis and their possible power in strengthening emotion and community when analyzing political campaign communication, and a limited focus to the central candidates is warranted when exploring from a novel perspective. Further, while the network representation does not fully account for the different contextual uses of emojis as mentioned above, the study contributes methodologically by using network analysis to explore citizen-candidate discussion from the perspective of affective communality and showing the benefits of combining computational and qualitative analysis in order to understand patterns of digital emotions.

12. References

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