

Visualizing Textual People-Pleasing in Digital Communication: An Interactive Design Framework

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Abstract: The Chinese colloquialism “textual people-pleasing” describes the online use of tone softeners, affective particles, emoji, disclaimers, and repetition to maintain rapport and avoid negative evaluation. It is not a clinical diagnosis but a platform-shaped communication practice. This study combines a literature review, an interface comparison, and a retrospective analysis of the board game Please Don’t Say It Like That. It examines how relational maintenance, visibility competition, and persona management encourage tone softening, modifier accumulation, stance avoidance, and feedback dependence. These tendencies are translated into visual variables such as density, saturation, hierarchy, rhythm, and occlusion, and into rule variables including role constraints, cards, points, and penalties. The prototype uses six platform-based identities, a 74-space map, and a dual-feedback system that contrasts immediate rewards with delayed communicative costs. The analysis suggests that social issues become more open to critical examination when the media rules that shape them are made playable and open to discussion.

Keywords: Digital communication; Textual people-pleasing; Visual communication; Interaction design; Board game; Platform mechanisms

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1. Introduction

Mobile platforms compress interpersonal communication into text, emoji, and interface feedback while reducing cues such as tone, hesitation, gaze, and bodily posture. Users therefore rely on affective particles, nicknames, repeated laughter, exclamation marks, stickers, and emoji to signal warmth or soften requests. These resources often prevent unnecessary friction. Problems arise when emotional packaging becomes a default condition of acceptable speech and must be intensified to preserve the same relational effect.

Chinese online discussions describe this pattern as “textual people-pleasing.” The term is colloquial rather than psychiatric. Here, it denotes relationship-maintenance strategies shaped by interfaces and

public feedback. Research has addressed linguistic inflation, emotional labor, social alienation, and the tension between friendliness and self-effacement^[1–5], but it has paid less attention to how prompts, reaction animations, rankings, and identity badges influence which forms of expression appear safe, visible, or professionally appropriate.

The phenomenon also appears in customer service, community management, livestream commerce, comment moderation, and content marketing. As communication is evaluated through likes, reactions, read receipts, and algorithmic reach, wording may be optimized for visibility rather than understanding. The concern is not politeness itself, but the replacement of situational judgment with reusable scripts: a message may look enthusiastic while remaining vague, and engagement may rise without a corresponding increase in trust.

This study asks which platform mechanisms intensify people-pleasing language, how linguistic tendencies can be translated into visual and rule-based variables, and how an interactive artifact can support discussion without prescribing a single correct way to speak. People-pleasing is distinguished from ordinary politeness by three contextual signs: modifiers overwhelm the informational content, wording is chosen primarily to avoid disapproval, and tone is repeatedly recalibrated in response to visible metrics. When these conditions converge, flexible politeness becomes platform-managed emotional labor.

The research does not attempt to identify a universal list of problematic words. The same hedge or emoji may express care in one relationship and avoidance in another. Instead, it examines the incentives surrounding a choice and the way design can make those incentives perceptible. This shift from vocabulary to mechanism is central to the proposed framework.

2. Research scope and method

2.1. Research objects and materials

The study examines two connected objects: interface features associated with affective expression on social networking, short-video, and microblogging platforms, and the board-game prototype *Please Don't Say It Like That*. The platform comparison explains the media conditions of textual people-pleasing, whereas the game shows how those conditions can be converted into an interactive visual system. The materials include research in linguistics, communication, visual semiotics, and educational game design, together with observations of representative interfaces and records from the original design process.

The graduation project included a questionnaire, but the sample and results were insufficient for statistical inference. Accordingly, this article reports neither response percentages nor behavioral effects. Its evidence is design-based: each graphic and rule must be traceable to a communication mechanism, and the relationships among role, scenario, choice, and consequence must remain coherent.

2.2. Analytical procedure

The analysis proceeded in three stages. A literature review first identified tone softening, modifier accumulation, stance avoidance, and feedback dependence. A platform comparison then linked communicative goals and visible feedback to likely expressive consequences. Finally, the characters, map, cards, scoring system, and visual language were examined retrospectively. Semantic, visual, and behavioral levels were kept distinct to avoid treating a fixed vocabulary as proof of people-pleasing or reducing visual translation to an imitation of chat bubbles and stickers.

Three analytical levels guided the analysis. The semantic level asks whether the information and the speaker's position remain clear. The visual level examines how words and emoji are layered, enlarged, obscured, or prioritized. The behavioral level considers the situation in which an expression is chosen and how the system responds. Keeping these levels separate prevents decorative imitation from being mistaken for an explanation of platform-conditioned behavior.

3. Mechanisms of affective expression on digital platforms

3.1 Relational maintenance: Softened language as a low-risk option

Social networking platforms often support established or semi-established relationships, in which continuity matters more than public argument. Reactions, chat bubbles, keyword effects, and suggested replies reduce the effort required to signal warmth, while emoji supply paralinguistic cues and help regulate politeness, intimacy, and stance ^[6–11]. Yet convenience can raise the politeness baseline. Once a brief reply such as “received” or “okay” is routinely embellished, an unmodified response may appear cold. The interface does not impose this rule explicitly; instead, it normalizes a higher threshold of visible friendliness.

3.2. Visibility competition: affective intensity as an interaction metric

Short-video and open-comment platforms organize expression around rapid distribution and public feedback. Reaction animations, ranked comments, emoji suggestions, and trending labels make attention visible, while motion design amplifies rapid emotional recognition through expansion, bouncing, and displacement ^[12,13]. Exclamatory phrasing and emoji clusters can therefore become techniques for gaining reach rather than merely personal habits. People-pleasing is directed not only toward a known interlocutor but also toward an imagined majority assembled by recommendation systems.

3.3. Persona management: visible status as a constraint on wording

Microblogging and content platforms render identity through verification marks, follower counts, badges, profile frames, and topic tags. These cues establish expectations before a message is read: service accounts should remain calm, livestream hosts should sound energetic, and professional accounts should appear cautious. Relational maintenance, visibility competition, and persona management therefore overlap. In private messaging, users may fear appearing indifferent; in short-video comments, they may fear being overlooked; and in public communities, they may avoid contradicting an established persona. Transplanting high-engagement language across contexts may produce forced intimacy, misplaced cuteness, or uncertainty in professional communication.

The mechanisms differ by platform. Private messaging rewards responsiveness and relational stability; short-video comments reward speed and collective resonance; public content communities reward consistency with a visible identity. Consequently, the same linguistic strategy can carry different risks. A phrase that seems warm in a private exchange may appear performative in a professional setting, while a high-energy comment that succeeds in a feed may weaken credibility in public-interest communication.

Table 1. Comparison of expression mechanisms across three platform types

Platform type	Primary communicative objective	Visible interface feedback	Typical expression and risk
Social networking platforms	Maintain ongoing relationships	Read receipts, suggested reactions, keyword effects	Tone softening and intimate address; an escalating politeness baseline
Short-video platforms	Capture attention and collective resonance	Reaction animations, ranked comments, emoji suggestions	Affective intensification and imitation; information may be displaced by emotion
Microblogging/content communities	Public positioning and identity construction	Trending lists, badges, verification, topic tags	Stance performance and persona maintenance; increasingly formulaic expression

4. A visual translation framework for textual people-pleasing

4.1. From linguistic tendencies to visual variables

A linguistic pattern becomes usable in design only when form is linked to communicative function. Affective particles, intimate forms of address, and repetition can be treated as modifier density; emoji, repeated exclamation marks, and accumulated stickers as affective intensity; hedges as reduced stance clarity; and anticipation of likes or replies as feedback dependence. These dimensions can be translated into graphic density, saturation, typographic scale, hierarchy, animation rhythm, and occlusion. The aim is to show how a core statement can be delayed or obscured by relational signals, not to classify every emotional marker as redundant.

4.2. From visual representation to rule-based representation

Visual representation alone cannot explain why expressive overload recurs. The framework therefore incorporates rules. Roles establish habitual pressures, scenarios define the social stakes, cards introduce events, and points or penalties reveal immediate gains and delayed costs. A softened response may prevent conflict but reduce informational efficiency; an affectively intense response may attract attention but undermine trust. Players encounter these trade-offs through repeated choices rather than through a direct instruction to avoid people-pleasing.

4.3. Recognition, choice, feedback, and discussion

The communication sequence moves through recognition, choice, feedback, and discussion. Familiar cues such as chat bubbles, pop-ups, emojis, and feed-like layouts support entry. Participants then respond from a particular role and situation; scores, skipped turns, role exchanges, or suspension make consequences visible; discussion cards reconnect play with ordinary communication. This structure preserves conflicts among clarity, relational care, efficiency, and self-protection. Educational board-game research likewise shows that roles, tasks, and situational feedback can turn abstract knowledge into decisions ^[14–18].

4.4. Maintaining critical distance

Critical distance is maintained by interrupting familiar social-media graphics with excessive symbols, broken routes, delayed information, and contradictory prompts. Formal choices remain analytical: saturation indicates affective intensity, occlusion indicates semantic loss, and repeated icons indicate accumulated modification. Four principles guide the framework: graphics and rules must map to documented

communicative behaviors; causes and later costs must be visible; choices must remain open; and post-game reflection must reconnect outcomes with experience. Together, these principles protect analytical accuracy without turning the artifact into moral instruction.

The framework therefore moves from seeing to acting. A poster can reveal density or occlusion, but a playable system can show why users repeat those forms under pressure. Scenario risk and identity constraints make the social stakes explicit, while delayed penalties prevent immediate engagement from being treated as the only measure of success. The combination of visual and rule variables also allows designers to compare alternative responses without defining one as universally correct.

Table 2. Translation of linguistic tendencies into visual and rule variables

Linguistic tendency	Communicative implication	Visual variable	Rule variable
Tone softening/modifier accumulation	Reduces relational risk while increasing informational packaging	Graphic density, layering, repetition	Immediate reward paired with later penalty
Affective intensification	Seeks attention and affirmative response	Saturation, scale, animation rhythm	Trending zone and high-visibility events
Stance avoidance	Limits conflict but delays a clear position	Occlusion, blur, reduced visual prominence	Hedges, skipped turns, and failed tasks
Feedback dependence	Adjusts language to visible metrics	Likes, badges, rankings, reaction labels	Expression points, role skills, and risk states

5. Interactive communication design: Please don't say it like that

5.1. Character system: Turning platform identities into expressive constraints

The game contains six online identities: a campus blogger, a medical-service agent, a livestream host, an anonymous academic account, a food-review account, and a technology editor. Each corresponds to an offline occupation and combines an advantage with a communicative risk. The blogger gains expression points from highly interactive posts but may be penalized for repetition; the medical-service agent can avoid sensitive wording but cannot state a personal position; and the livestream host can raise scores through promotional language while risking a loss of trust. Shared cartoon proportions support visual cohesion, while clothing, objects, and dominant colors distinguish the roles. Their friendly appearance contrasts with constraints imposed by likes, filtering, professional authority, and traffic targets.

5.2. Scenario map: Spatializing platform pressures

The 74-space map contains six zones: the Social Plaza, Group Chat, Hot Topics, Social Trap, Semantic Collapse, and Debate Arena. Each spatializes a different pressure. The Social Plaza introduces identity; Group Chat multiplies intersecting messages; Hot Topics increases rewards and public risk; Social Trap foregrounds conflict; Semantic Collapse uses fractured routes and frequent negative events; and the Debate Arena turns expression into public comparison. Browser windows, numbered labels, message boxes, blurred imagery, and burst-shaped icons form a recognizable digital vocabulary, but changes in density and order correspond to changes in rule-based risk rather than serving as decoration.

5.3. Cards and dual feedback: Immediate gain and delayed communicative cost

The card families include reward, penalty, event, discussion, performance, trending-topic, identity-exchange,

emoji-assistance, and expression-point cards. Reward cards model approval; penalty cards represent redundancy, misunderstanding, and affective fatigue; and event cards turn workplace replies, awkward group chats, and the imitation of top-ranked comments into tasks. Performance cards expose mimicry and role compliance, while identity exchange shows that a strategy effective for one persona may fail for another. Expression points reduce complex communication to a visible number, but high scores may later result in penalties, skipped turns, or removal from play. Immediate approval and delayed social costs therefore unfold over different timescales.

5.4. Visual system and temporal pacing

The visual system borrows from mobile pop-ups and social-media feeds, using saturated gradients, blurred layers, emoji textures, and system prompts. Dominant colors, icons, and borders distinguish the card families; high-risk cards introduce stronger occlusion, displacement, and noise. The round structure also translates online time pressure into play: ordinary zones allow observation, hot-topic and conflict zones increase event frequency, and trending cards interrupt plans. Because no single strategy works throughout the game, players must adjust their strategy to their role, location, and current state. The board game slows choices that are normally private and instantaneous, making them public, repeatable, and available for reflection.

The modules are designed to correspond with platform mechanisms. Characters personalize persona expectations; the map turns relational pressure and visibility competition into a navigable route; cards model immediate feedback and affective amplification; expression points, skipped turns, suspension, and identity exchange expose metric-based discipline. This correspondence keeps the prototype from becoming a decorative social-media collage. Each visual feature and game event has a stated analytical function, and the dual-feedback structure makes clear why high interaction does not necessarily indicate high-quality communication.

6. Conclusion

Textual people-pleasing is best understood as a platform-shaped communication practice arising from visible feedback, relational expectations, attention competition, and persona performance. Tone softening and emojis may reduce interpersonal risk, but continual intensification can blur meaning and increase emotional labor. This study translates linguistic tendencies into visual variables and platform mechanisms into roles, zones, cards, and scoring rules. Please Don't Say It Like That turns a sociolinguistic issue into a participatory experience through which communication strategies can be compared and discussed. For advertising, brand communities, and public-interest communication, the key question is not simply whether language sounds pleasant, but whether it remains clear, credible, and open to an honest response.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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