

The Use and Effect of Emojis in Communication

Dan Marchildon
Kennesaw State University

Emojis are small icons used to express ideas and emotions through digital communication. The far spread use of emojis to communicate condensed and complex thoughts into digital imagery has sparked heated debate throughout branches of

Linguistic Theory, Language, Psychology, and Communication Studies. The purpose of this paper is to analyze and assess the meaning and function of emojis in the era of online and digital communication. The paper will also discuss in what way emojis have impacted the way we communicate with one another in digital media. Through a literature review, the authors cited present through their findings that emojis and online communication transcend traditional means of communication and go beyond our natural discourse. Psychology and human emotions both play vital roles in coming up with the proper answer. The question remains, How have the use of emojis affected the way we communicate?

Meaning

Robert Cincu (2017) pointed out that “several features specific to online communication correspond to what contemporary cultural studies refer to as a posthuman shift in discourse” (p. 88). One of the features of online communication that Cincu referred to is that of emoticons or emojis. Posthuman is a term that refers to the extension of natural human communication, or discourse, that has been seen throughout the internet age of digital communication (Cincu, 2017). Emojis are, at the same time, a throwback to ancient human communication as well as the simplification of modern language for digital media. In the world of real-time responses while chatting, the need for emojis became a natural progression and response to the rapid-fire speed of our conversations (Cincu, 2017). Emojis first came into being by way of emoticons, combinations of punctuation signs that generate a certain visual meaning (Cincu, 2017).

This became the standardized way of expressing emotion through online discourse. The emoticons themselves became iconic signs, in the same sense of signs that have a direct connection and derive meaning from real human expression (Cincu, 2017). A smiling emoticon, “;),” is a universal sign that is acknowledged as a smiling face. Emojis, on the other hand, not only convey human expression, but they also resemble the same functions as ancient hieroglyphs—symbols that transcend linguistic barriers that became iconic signs (Cincu, 2017). A “rabbit” as a word does not resemble or describe the emoji of a white, furry mammal eating a carrot in every language. The emoji itself expresses what a rabbit is universally through its visual depiction, as a symbol (Cincu, 2017).

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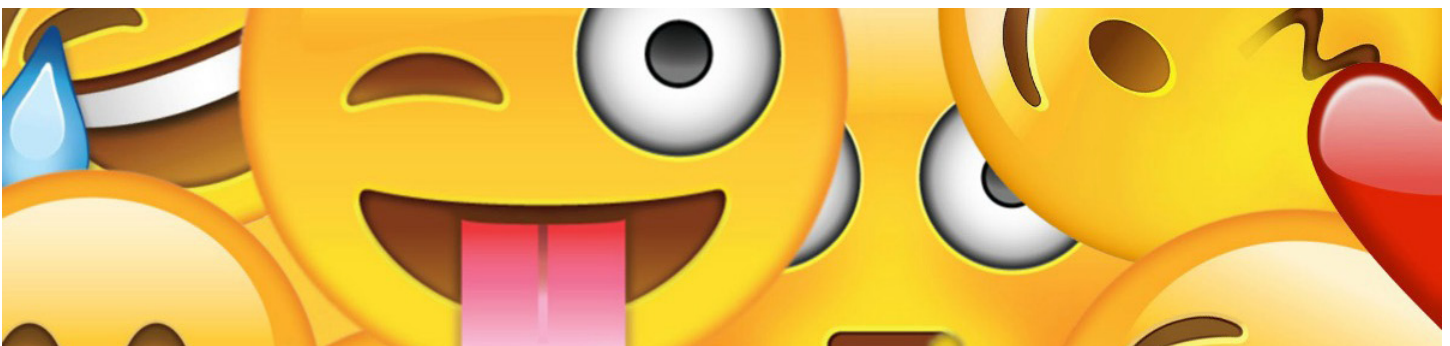
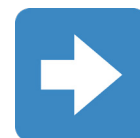
Before the time of emojis, emoticons were the definitive way to express emotion through non-verbal means—digitally, this was referred to as computer mediated communication (CMC) (Krohn, 2004). Franklin Krohn (2004) defines emoticons as “punctuation marks that viewed sideways resemble facial expressions” (p. 322). Ilona Vandergriff (2013) states that CMC cues, such as emoticons, have been used frequently in text-based digital communication (p. 1). They are regarded as stand-ins for nonverbal cues of oral interaction, and even seen as strategic markings of oralization (Vandergriff, 2013). Emoticons sometimes lack range and nuance, and doubt has been cast on how they translate nonverbal cues of face-to-face communication into text-based (Vandergriff, 2013). This is where the symbolic tone and nature of the more complex emoji shines through, being able to express concepts and emotions that emoticons can only slightly convey through digital media.

Communication

Emojis can also be harnessed successfully through more traditional means of media throughout society. Nikola Vangelov (2017) analyzed emoji use through marketing communications, which in turn helped companies connect with potential and target audiences (p. 131). Vangelov (2017) described emojis as being filled with “brevity and clarity,” very important for an ad campaign’s message to be received by its audience (p. 135). Marketing is an expensive form of communication, and the interestingly “succinct” form of expression through emojis has become a major player in the world of advertisement (Vangelov, 2017). Companies such as Chevrolet and Domino’s Pizza have used emojis as a marketing ploy in their own tweets to great benefit—Chevrolet used an emoji laden tweet to announce the launch of their 2016 Cruze and Domino’s tweeted a triangle of pizza to acknowledge their twitter campaign of simply tweeting a pizza emoji to order (p. 136-137). Emojis used in communication also come with an emotional impact.

Emotions

As the name implies, Emojis are emotional depictions and symbols, pictures and concepts delivered in a concentrated sign. Nusrat Zareen, Nosheen Karim, and Umar Ali Khan (2016) evaluated the potential psycho emotional impact that emojis had on users of instant messaging applications (p. 257). Through a questionnaire about “psychological dependence related to emoji use,” results showed that 90 percent of participants thought messages that included emojis were more meaningful than traditional texting (Zareen, 2016, p. 258). Also, 47 percent claimed that missing an expected emoji on a received text proved to make their current mood moderately suffer. The conclusion of the questionnaire was that emojis had the ability for both positive and negative psycho emotional effects on users. (Zareen, 2016).



Statistics

Reid Goldsborough (2015) showed several statistics about emoji use throughout Instagram (IG) to drive home the point of their relevance in online communication media (p. 64). A study by SwiftKey, a productivity app maker, found that half of comments on IG included emojis (Goldsborough, 2015). Other interesting insights included emoji use statistics from around the world. The French use the heart emoji the most, Canadians use sports emojis the most, and Americans heavily use emojis related to money, basketball, birthday cake, pizza, and eggplants (Goldsborough, 2015). The most popular emojis around the world happened to be general happy faces (44.8 percent), sad faces (14.3 percent), hearts (12.5 percent), and hand gestures (5.3 percent) (Goldsborough, 2015).

Kralj Novak, Smailović, Sluban, and Mozetič (2015) researched some other statistics in the form of the first emoji sentiment lexicon, or Emoji Sentiment Ranking (p. 1). The research drew from a map of 751 most frequently used emojis according to Twitter, and with the help of annotators, each emoji laden tweet (1.6 million of them) was marked either negative, neutral, or positive in sentiment (Kralj Novak, 2015). The results turned out to be mostly positive, where the popular tweets were most likely to contain a positive message and emoji. Emojis also almost exclusively were placed at the end of each tweet's message (Kralj Novak, 2015). The study conducted also compared tweets with emojis and without emojis. Tweets without emojis were significantly more negative and neutral in sentiment, while tweets with emojis were significantly more positive in sentiment (Kralj Novak, 2015).

Criticism

Johnathan Kalb (2015) describes emojis as "social lubrication in electronic messages" (p. 42). "They're a cute, shorthand way of clarifying emotional intention and smoothing the rough edges of quickie notes that are easily misunderstood without crucial facial cues" (Kalb, 2015, p. 42). Their downside, however, lies in the "infantilization" of language in order to make it appear more amusing (Kalb, 2015). Among the educated, emojis are sometimes seen as pandering to youth, as can be seen with White House notices about the Affordable Care Act and emoji translations of such classic novels as *Moby-Dick* (Kalb, 2015). Emojis are also seen as "digital masks," symbols used to convey superficial emotional responses. (Kalb, 2015). Means of online communication

are typically void of emotion, and the overcompensation of emotion through use of emoji can be seen as emotionally deceptive.



Analysis and Discussion

Since the introduction and mass popularization of emojis, their effect on the way communication is handled throughout digital media shifted the meaning of nonverbal communication dramatically. Essentially what are digital representations of ideas, emojis are now symbols of complicated and complex emotions. With those ideas and emotions come both positive and negative impacts on human communication and language as a whole. Emojis are much more emotionally invested than previously given credit for. The connection between emojis and the emotional and mental well being of a user, as demonstrated by Zareen (2016), is surprisingly significant. The tone of a message without an emoji is drastically different than one that does use an emoji. Messages with emojis are viewed much more positively than ones without. Using an emoji can be seen as easier, and more desirable, to convey and express an emotion than using actual text and words. This is especially true for social media platforms, such as Instagram, for the use of emojis cannot be denied as a dominant force of communication. Emojis are also being employed in use across the societal spectrum, especially in terms of marketing and advertising communication. Nikola Vangelov (2017) detailed the emotional investment behind emojis and marketing. Not only are emojis a social media phenomenon, they are directly being used as a profitable phenomenon through use of that emotional connection. The digital media world has been filled with emojis, and not all discussion surrounding them has been that of praise. Critics, like Johnathan Kalb (2015), protest that emojis are gross simplifications of speech, infantile, and pandering to youth. They no doubt feel that emojis have had a negative impact on communication as a whole. But in review, emojis appear to be a widespread boon for communication—not that dissimilar to an "opiate of the masses." From a research and statistical background, messages and tone are easier to convey and express with text including emojis. Not only easier, but more desirable, which is an important point. The amusement factor of emojis may be overlooked, but it's essential to why they are so prominent in today's communication.

Conclusion

In conclusion, emojis have become an important tool and resource that we use to communicate and express our emotions. The psychological impact of emojis have demonstrated that a simple, visual depiction of an emotion or an object greatly changes the way we perceive and interpret messages—especially messages through social media. Emojis have rapidly become the dominant way that people express themselves through online communication. They have both their critics and praise-filled followers, but one thing is for certain, emojis have irrevocably become a part of the digital landscape of communication.



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