

Together, apart with emojis? Thoughts about the role of emojis in a digital environment (particularly relevant in times of social distancing)

If these times have taught us anything, it is how much we need human interactions. Since the beginning of lockdown, face-to-face human interactions have become rare and we feel their absence, often painfully. Interactions happen increasingly on instant messaging applications, which don't allow us to express ourselves in the same way. In fact, since the onset of the internet and the corresponding increase in text-based communication, there were fears that interactions would become less deep and meaningful (Chartrand & McKenna, 2004). One of the reasons is that this form of communication lacks para- and non-verbal elements of communication, which would normally convey information about the intent of a message, or the feelings of communication partners. With most of our conversations happening online, how can we have the same deep connection as we would face-to-face?

Emojis add context and allow deeper connections

Emojis have embellished our text messages for years. Initial evidence suggests that emojis convey information about the sentiment or tone of a message (Tossell et al., 2012), which in face-to-face conversations, is mainly done through non-verbal communication. In fact, studies show that people are more satisfied with a conversation if emojis were used (Kelly & Watts, 2015). Moreover, people who use emojis in the early stages of online courtship are more likely to go on a date (Gesselmann & Garcia, 2019)

Emojis have great potential to facilitate communications that match, or even surpass, the quality of face-to-face communication. Because of the deliberate and asynchronous nature of computer-mediated-communication (CMC; Derks, Fischer, & Bos, 2008), the information we convey to our conversation partner can be carefully thought about, understood and responded to appropriately. This is particularly useful for people who have difficulties understanding and expressing the nuances of a face-to-face interaction. What is more, emojis as a new tool for communication are developing and being learned by everyone simultaneously around the world, so they have the potential to be less biased and be more universal. Furthermore, many of them are "colour-free", so that communicating via CMC might enable communication that is free of subconscious bias.

Emojis have the potential to divide us further

Unfortunately, emojis are currently not used and understood in the same way by everyone. In fact, numerous studies have demonstrated that the meaning of an emoji is dependent on who is using them (e.g. Wiseman & Gould, 2018). Being prone to misinterpretation, emojis could impede communications rather than enable them. Studies have shown that even among groups of people who use emojis a lot, there is still large disagreement over their use (e.g. Miller et al, 2016; Annamalai & Abdul Salam, 2017). Machine learning algorithms are still failing to pin down the exact meaning of emojis (Barbieri et al., 2017), and even sentiment analyses, which aim to determine whether the meaning of an emoji is positive or negative, are sometimes failing to agree (e.g. Kralj Novak et al., 2015). Imagine if you didn't know whether what someone just said was meant in a friendly or a nasty way!

There is also a sinister aspect to emoji use, as they can be used as code for all sorts of deviant or criminal activities, often hiding in plain sight on social media and in instant messaging. For example, there are a number of emojis that are being used to signal the use and sale of drugs (Lambert, 2017), as insult (Vigil, 2016) but also with explicit sexual innuendo – the most famous examples being the peach and aubergine emoji.

It has also become evident that emojis can be used as symbols for socio-political movements. A recent and prominent example is that of 🍌 which is used as a statement for 'Black Lives Matter'. If emojis can be used as symbols for such important issues, it is essential to ensure that all suppressed and minority groups have an equal chance of expressing their cause through emojis. Otherwise emojis support supremacy – this is especially significant considering that the organisation currently in charge of emojis is allegedly not particularly diverse or incentivised to give voice to suppressed groups. While technically anyone can submit an emoji, apart from the substantial effort required to submit an emoji, the final decision on whether the emoji is actually needed is based on criteria which are to some extent based on opinion. To date, no research has been undertaken to investigate how emojis become symbols for causes, in which way they are used and what their impact is. This makes it very difficult to ensure an objective procedure for emoji additions. It is evident that since emojis are being used by everyone, they have entered the public domain and are therefore of public interest. It follows therefore, that the process should represent everyone equally. But even with the best intentions, it would be difficult to ensure everyone's interests are being represented when it isn't clear what emojis are and what their impact on our day-to-day interactions, and on a much bigger level, society, are.

The need for a model of emojis

The field of emojis needs a lot more investigation in order to understand them as a phenomenon, as well as to make recommendations and inform policies regarding their governance. The fact that so far all attempts at understanding emojis have failed could be because they are lacking a model of emojis. Machine learning treats them as language, but psychologists have found similarities to emotional expression (e.g. Tossell et al., 2012). Even if emojis are tested for valence, these bipolar models fail to detect sarcasm and joking (Barbieri et al., 2014). So far, there exist no definitions of emojis' meanings. This is further complicated by the fact that emojis have only recently been created, which means the rules have not been written, and we are all learning it right now. Furthermore, contrary to our language and gestures, which are constantly evolving, emojis have been created deliberately and are locked in. Moreover, despite the fact that the communication can be almost instantaneous, any signal that is shared – words and emojis, require deliberation and are not spontaneous (Derks et al. 2008). That means, if emojis are an expression of emotion, they would likely serve a social purpose and would be chosen to display an emotion, but might not necessarily express the emotion the sender is feeling. It would, however, still be of interest and has not yet been investigated whether an emoji still elicits the same reaction as seeing someone express an emotion.

In order to move forward and enable emojis' potential as well as ensure social fairness and prevent psychological harm, it is paramount to develop a model of what emojis are – a new

language, an expression of emotion, or both. With this model as a basis, it will be possible to arrive at definitions of emojis to prevent misunderstandings and inform policy around emojis' creation and maintenance. Furthermore, emoji use can be applied to a number of therapeutic settings, for example, knowing about the (positive) impact of emojis could enable the safe delivery of teaching or therapy online or emojis could help people with difficulty expressing their emotions face-to-face in their interactions. Overall, emojis should be promoted for positive use to allow creative expression in our online communications.