The Expression of the Internet: Emoji Function and Controversy in the Digital Space

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Introduction:

Over the course of the last few decades, the use of emoji has only grown. Chances are you have seen emoji make appearances on pillows, stickers, music videos and elsewhere the bright icons can be placed to represent ideas and expressions. However, the popularity of emoji extends past marketing and promotional content; it tells us about how individuals communicate non-verbally and express themselves on a daily basis. Language changes and develops over time. One of the ways language has evolved is through the encompassment of 'text speak' in our language which includes emoji. As a result, how we communicate using language on social media platforms, and through messaging is very different from the prescriptive grammar many feel confined to. Analyzing the origin and use of both emoticons and emoji, shows that they are an important part of our communication and expression, altering the way we use written language in the digital space.

The Rise of Emoticons and Emoji

The earliest form of emoticons emerged in the form of American emoticons and Japanese kaomoji (Kavanagh, 2015, pg. 36). The goal of emoticons centered around finding ways to convey emotions through the use of keyboard characters such as numbers, punctuation and letters. As David Crystal, in *Txting The Gr8 Db8*, describes, "the meaning [of emoticons or smileys] is entirely a function of the shape of the symbols" (p. 38).

Emoticons in America and Japan

In America, the first emoticon emerged from Scott Falhman at Carnegie Mellon University. On September 19, 1982 Falhman proposed the following in a post to an internet thread:

> From: Scott E Fahlman <Fahlman at Cmu-20c>
> I propose that the following character sequence for joke markers: :-)
> Read it sideways. Actually, it is probably more economical to mark things that are NOT jokes, given current trends. For this, use :-(

After Fahlman created this forum post, the concept quickly caught on and became known as the emoticon. The use of emoticons spread through the internet to other universities and research labs (Fahlman, n.d. para.6). With increased use, it also gave way to the development of emoticons in multiple variations to depict a range of emotions and later, concepts (Falhman, n.d. para.7). A few variations of American emoticons can be viewed in Table 1.

Emoticon	Description	Emoticon	Description	Emoticon	Description
:-)	Original emoticon used to indicate a smile.	:)	The simplified variation of the original smiling emoticon.	:))	A variation of the smile to indicate an emphasis on happiness.
:-(	Original emoticon used to indicate a frown.	:(	The simplified variation of the original frowning emoticon.	:((	A variation of the frown to indicate an emphasis on sadness.
;)	Indicates winking	XD	Indicates laughing	:P	Indicates silliness
~(_8^(\)	Homer Simpson	:[	Vampire	*<]:{)	Santa

Table 1: Variations of American Emoticons

The versatility and endless combinations of keyboard characters make it easy to develop new emoticons at the liberty of the user. Crystal recognizes the creation of new emoticons that build off previous ones as language play. Not only do emoticons allow for language play purely through building off old emoticons, but it also allows for the invention of new emoticons with new meanings. Table 1 depicts variations of emoticons1 that represent characters and objects that were created not because there was a need, but simply because they could be made.

A few years later in Japan, similar emoticons surfaced called kaomoji (Kavanagh, 2015, pg. 36). Kaomoji directly translates to ‘face character’ in English. Although kaomoji is used for the same purpose of expressing emotions, the manner in which it does so differs from its American counterpart. For one, kaomoji are horizontally oriented and do not require the user to view or picture the characters at an angle (“Japanese Kaomoji vs Western Emoticon,” 2018). Secondly, although kaomoji can be used to portray novelty characters (such as the emoticon of Homer Simpson in Table 1), they are much more complex and arguably allow for more variations for a single concept such as conveying happiness (as seen in Table 2).

[1] Not all variations of the specified emoticons in Table 1 are depicted since variations are created by individuals sometimes on whim.

Kaomoji	Description	*Kaomoji*	Description
(^_^)	A few of many variations of *kaomoji* that express happiness.	(T_T)	A few of many variations of *kaomoji* that express sadness.
(≧∪≦)		(╯︵╰,)	
(◠‿◠)		｡ﾟ･ (>﹏<) ･ﾟ｡	
<(￣ ‿ ￣)>		(╥﹏╥)	
ʕ•ω•ʔ	Bear	✳==≡눈९(`皿´≠)ง	Mini gun
(∩ ͡° ͜ʖ ͡°)⊃━☆ﾟ			Wizard
(╯°□°）╯ ┻━┻			Flipping a table

Table 2 Variations of Japanese Kaomoji

In addition to portraying emotions, kaomoji also has the ability to portray animals such as bears, objects such as guns, characters like wizards, and actions such as flipping a table. Moreover, in Table 2 the versatility of kaomoji is further demonstrated by the multiple and unique combinations to express basic emotions such as happiness and sadness as compared to American emoticons. This can be attributed to the fact that in the past, Japanese and Americans had different word processing keyboard technology which meant that their emoticons had to be different (Wong, 2015, para.2). Lastly, cultural differences between Japan and America affect how both kaomoji and emoticons are created and viewed as seen in Table 3.

Expression	American Emoticons	Japanese *Kaomoji*
Anger	:-@	(#`Д´)
Crying	;-(	o(〒﹏〒)o

Table 3 Comparison of American Emoticons and Japanese Kaomoji

The composition of kaomoji is heavily influenced by the Japanese style of drawing comics known as manga (Kavanagh, 2015, p.43). In Table 3, by comparing the emoticon and kaomoji version of the same concept, we see that the emphasis on the mouth and the eyes are different. American emoticons place emphasis on the shape of the mouth while Japanese kaomoji place emphasis on the eyes (“Japanese Kaomoji vs Western Emoticon,” 2018). According to a WAttention blog post, in reference to both western and Japanese happy faces, it points out that the way kaomoji and emoticons look indicate that:

> The western emoticon obviously has a smiling mouth, but its Japanese variant does not. However, the eyes of the kaomoji express joy. While in western culture smiling emphasizes on the mouth, the Japanese tend to silently give a friendly nod. They express their joy with their eyes.

Western people look to the mouth to interpret a person’s expression while Japanese people look to the eyes (WAttention). This same observation can be viewed in Table 3 where in the American emoticons we see an

emphasis on the mouth shape for the expression of anger and crying while the Japanese kaomoji directs attention to the eye shape.

Emoji History

The first set of emoji were originally created in Japan during 1999 by artist Shigetaka Kurita. (Pardes, 2018, para.4) According to Arielle Pardes, “Kurita wanted to design an attractive interface to convey information in a simple, succinct way.” These first emoji were to be used on “‘i-mode,’ an early mobile internet platform” (Pardes, 2018, para.4). The first set (pictured in FIgure 1 below) contained only 176 characters (Pardes, 2018, para.4).

Figure 1 Shigetaka Kurita, NTT DOCOMO, Emoji (original set of 176)

Kurita was able to create small, simple icons that clearly conveyed common concepts such as the weather. Emoji which started out as shorthand as seen through the many traffic, weather, and sports themed icons, also allowed for users to add tone to their written message such as using a heart emoji for love (Pardes, 2018, para.4). The popularity of emoji spread to multiple Japanese companies which copied the concept and created their own versions of emoji (Galloway, 2016, para.2). While emoji have been around since 1999, it was not until 2010 that a standard set of 625 characters were adapted into the Unicode Consortium, which made “emoji accessible everywhere” across different devices and further solidified their legitimacy in non-verbal communication (Pardes, 2018, para.7). Today, new emoji are ongoingly proposed, reviewed, and accepted per the Unicode Emoji Subcomittee’s selection criteria (Unicode, para.3).

Where and how are emoji used?

With the internet regularly used on a daily basis, there is an increasing amount of people using digital communication to meet people and create connections. With this, comes the problem of not being able to rely on in person non-verbal forms of communication to connect (Gesselman, 2019). When approaching digital encounters using “computer-mediated communication” (CMC) with other people on platforms such as on online forums and dating apps, we are met with the challenge of forming a meaningful relationship with other users. This challenge involves “engaging in affective self disclosure” (Gesselman, 2019). Failure to do this hinders our ability to understand and progress our online relationships on a closer level (Gesselman, 2019). That is where emoji fills the gap and help convey intent in our language. In Worth a thousand interpersonal words: Emoji as affective signals for relationship-oriented digital communication, it mentions that emoticons were first used as “non-verbal surrogates” meant to convey irony, or soften and emphasize tones of messages. Emoji, which are more developed, are more effective at this goal. The colors, expressions, shapes, and actions of emoji contribute to replicating the same sensory information and experience we have with face-to-face

interaction. (Gesselman, 2019). Since emoji are more developed and detailed, it is arguably better than emoticons at fulfilling the need to express tone.

Furthermore, one of the most prominent places where emoji is used is the social networking and microblogging application known as Twitter. One glance at the emoji tracker by artist and hacker Matthew Rothenberg shows that emoji are constantly being used on Twitter, with hundreds of emoji being counted every second in real time (Rothenberg, 2014, para.3). It is no wonder that emoji are so popular on Twitter; there are about 340 million users on the platform who have the ability to interact with others digitally (Sehl, 2020). However, understanding how emoji is used on a social media platform presents a unique challenge. Twitter and the use of emoji on the platform are analyzed by using TSA or Twitter Sentiment Analysis which looks at the attitude of the text or the context in which an emoji or multiple emoji are used. The struggle of analyzing emoji use on Twitter is that, “a lot of tweets contain “textual peculiarities and colloquial expressions… [that are] dynamic in nature with new expressions, hashtags and emojis emerging constantly” (Mengdi et al., 2018). From what can be interpreted using TSA, the journal reports that the emoji less frequently employed, seem to have a neutral sentiment or no emotion attached to it (Mengdi et al., 2018). Because of the fast pace at which the internet moves and the struggle of interpreting TSA, it is hard to gather information on how emoji are used.

Emoji Controversy

Is emoji a language?

The main controversy surrounding emoji seems to be around if it is a language or if emoji can eventually evolve into becoming one. Linguists would most likely classify emoji as an ideographic writing system since they represent concepts rather than words (Flavelle, 2017). Flavelle mentions that because there is often an option to replace a word in the text with an emoji, this may indicate a step towards emoji becoming logographic. While I do not agree that emoji are fully logographic writing systems, I think they can be classified as ideograms because they represent concepts rather than lexicon (Merriam-Webster, 2020). Although it is possible for them to replace words when there is context, there are not enough emoji to make up a full and comprehendible logographic writing system. Since one emoji can have several interpretations and mean different lexicons across speech communities, there is too much variation in the meaning of one emoji to effectively communicate with them. For example, with the folded hand emoji (as seen in Figure 2), it is associated with praying and religious concepts in the U.S., however in Japan folding your hands is a symbol of politeness or “thanks” (Rawlings, 2018, para.15).

Figure 2 Apple’s Variation of the Folded Hand Emoji

Since one emoji can have multiple meanings, it cannot be a universal language. Maybe in the future, emoji will be classified as a new and different type of writing system independently.

Is emoji degrading to the use of more traditional languages?

In order for new emoji to be standardized online, they are reviewed by the Unicode Consortium which also reviews and standardizes written languages. However, Unicode’s split attention between the review of new emoji and languages causes controversy about emoji’s role in harming speech communities. Michael Erard, reports that “not everyone thinks that Unicode should be in the emoji business at all.” This is because much of Unicode’s time is spent approving new emoji, instead of written languages for digital standardization (Erard, 2017, para.7) This delay in standardizing languages not only defeats the purpose of Unicode, (to expand linguistic powers) but also hinders speech communities from being able to connect in their native language

online (Erard, 2017, para.7). While I believe that the review of emoji is extremely important in terms of representation and how we interact, Unicode needs to focus on getting more written languages from speech communities to be approved for use on devices and software. This will give more people access to voice their thoughts and communicate with each other. The languages of speech communities that are delayed from being put into a code and used digitally, are not able to share their thoughts online. The only way for them to speak digitally is through the use of audio clips, video, or by simply using another language.

One speech community that is already seeing the effects of not having digital language representation is Iceland. While Icelanders still use their language, the younger generation spends a lot of time on the internet and are constantly exposed to English and emoji. Many people think that this is contributing to a decline in proficiency of their native language. The problem is that the internet and many of its applications and systems do not display or represent the Icelandic language correctly such as putting names in the wrong grammatical form (Henley, 2018). Neglecting to expand and approve written languages by the Unicode Consortium, such as Icelandic, could lead to a decline of speech communities' culture as more people are discouraged to use their native language since it is not as efficient as communicating with English or emoji.

On the other hand, many believe that emoji does not degrade the use of traditional language, but rather enhances it. Mack Flavelle, argues that the idea of emoji hindering modern communication is false. Flavelle supports his argument by comparing emoji to hieroglyphics. In addition to using hieroglyphics, a logographic writing system, Egyptians simultaneously and more frequently used hieratic script which was alphabetic (Flavelle, 2017). This arguably is similar to how we use emoji today. While we primarily write with our alphabetic language system, emoji is a logographic system similar to hieroglyphics. He further argues that the inference that alphabetic writing systems are somehow better than logographic ones (e.g. emoji) because we "evolved" from them is a one sided Western perspective on written language (Flavelle, 2017). Countries such as China and Japan still use logographic writing systems such as Hanji and Kanji, respectively (International Phonetic Alphabet). To suggest that their writing system is old or primitive is disrespectful especially since they have survived the test of time.

Moreover, the defense for emoji, as type of text speak, is further supported by Gretchen McCulloh. According to McCulloch, she does not consider emoji a language, however she mentions that emoji are similar to gestures in that we use them to communicate alongside our words (McDonough, 2019). If we still need our alphabetic written system to fully communicate and emoji are to be thought of as accompaniments to a conversation, then the degradation of written language is not a valid concern. Emoji are not capable of conveying complex ideas and messages which further supports the stance that alphabetic writing systems will continue to be used. There is still a need for them that cannot be equally replaced solely by emoji.

Conclusion

Overall, the history of emoticons and emoji highlight how their popularity rose because they were created out of a need to express tone in communication. Although the use of emoji has some complications, such as not being an equivalent substitute for alphabetical written language, its benefits far outweigh the criticisms against their usage. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased our reliance on digital communication, further stressing the importance digital communication and emoji play in our social lives. Ultimately, emoji is our digital 'body language' serving as a crucial way to show our intentions and attitude online. According to MOMA, "emoticons, kaomoji, and emoji reassert the human in the deeply impersonal, abstract space of electronic communication." Unless each emoji becomes more defined in their meaning, I imagine that its usage will only expand in the future for this very purpose — to attach a human and personal connection to our written language online.

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