7-2016

The Nature, Function, and Value of Emojis as Contemporary Tools of Digital Interpersonal Communication

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THE NATURE, FUNCTION, AND VALUE OF EMOJIS AS CONTEMPORARY TOOLS OF DIGITAL INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

by

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A Thesis submitted to the faculty of
Gardner-Webb University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of English

Boiling Springs, N.C.

2016

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Introduction

The roles and characteristics of emojis are rapidly expanding within computer-mediated communication spaces, forcing many to acknowledge their seemingly inescapable social influence as tools of digital written communication. Within cultural discourse, various theorists and researchers including Adam Sternbergh, Shao-Kang Lo, Vyvyan Evans, Steven Heller, and Katy Steinmetz have characterized them as annoying cartoons, nonverbal cues, paralinguistic icons and universally-recognized communication forms. Some, including Steinmetz and Evans, hail their importance and suggest they have the potential to become a new universal language. Others are less convinced of their value and are seemingly annoyed by their presence, calling them "an itchy rash" (Heller 28). To view emojis through a one-dimensional lens is to completely underestimate their ability to serve as signifiers of emotion, clarifiers of intent, and even mediators of self-identity. These colorful, contemporary icons—which became widely available through a range of global, technical platforms in 2011—convey interpersonal emotional expressions in a much more sophisticated manner than their charming appearance initially indicates.

Invented in Japan in 1998 by Shigetaka Kurita on behalf of a Japanese mobile phone operator, the word "emoji" essentially means "pictograph." The creation of emojis followed the establishment of emoticons, defined by OxfordDictionaries.com as graphically represented "facial expressions formed by various combinations of keyboard characters and used in electronic

communications to convey the writer's feelings or intended tone." Both emojis and emoticons are used in computer-mediated communication (CMC) spaces somewhat interchangeably, depending upon which tool of technology is available within the particular space. For instance, not all laptops are enabled with an emoji keyboard, so a user who is accustomed to inserting emojis as part of their message might revert back to emoticon use (see fig. 1).

Emoticon "Smiley"	Emoji "Smiley"
:-)	

Fig. 1 The emoticon preceded the emoji in CMC. Data Source: Apple iOS 2013

For the purposes of this discussion, most references to emojis should be understood as inclusive of emoticons and other similar icons that may be available within a variety of technology spaces and platforms, since they are typically used for the same purposes in CMC spaces.

Taking a closer look at the value of emojis is a worthwhile endeavor. As images, they transmit ideas, emotions and intents from one digital user to another. Those who are particularly emoji enamored may be ready to hail them as "a new universal language" (Evans). That assignation may showcase the enthusiasm emojis can generate among fans, but may broadly overstate their abilities. For others, emojis are easily dismissed, a "ridiculous… invasive army of faces and vehicles and flags and food and symbols trying to topple the millennia-long reign of words" (Sternbergh). The scope of their influence as compositional aids is a complex, necessary and continually-evolving form of interpersonal communication. Emojis function not only as signifiers of emotion and clarifiers of intent in digital spaces, but also as mediators of self-expression and cultural identity. As the use of these unique, full-color icons has already saturated many

contemporary digital spaces through widespread technical assimilation, a close examination of the roles that are assigned to emojis has become increasingly relevant. In addition, communicators should be willing to learn more about the processes of interpretation that are contributing to the continued and expanding use of emojis. Additionally, users also need to better understand how emojis' perceived meaning can paradoxically be clear in one instance and ambiguous in another when utilized as compositional aids in computer-mediated communication spaces.

An Iconic Medium of Interpersonal Communication

When blogger Phoebe Connelly struggled to find the right way to verbally convey the exciting news of her engagement, she enlisted the assistance of emojis in her communications, and ultimately arrived at the conclusion that emojis allowed her both the freedom and flexibility to discuss "a marriage I'm emotionally ready for, but still lack the language to describe" (qtd. in Sternbergh). Connelly indicated that some people questioned her use of emojis to convey such deep emotion because they were concerned that emojis trivialized such an important event in her life. This is one example of a way emojis have already altered elements of interpersonal communication in digital spaces such as texts, social media networks, and emails.

Although there are some individuals who may frown upon the use of emojis and choose not to use them, many others are enjoying the communicative benefits of digital tools such as smartphones, tablets, laptops, and desktop computers and are rapidly authenticating emoji use in a range of electronic spaces, integrating their communicative properties within much of their own

interpersonal digital composition. As communication theorist Marshall McLuhan observed, the "message of any medium of technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs" (20). There is no use denying that the presence of emojis has altered elements of digital communication. In fact, the digital communication changes we have witnessed within the last two decades—particularly with the invention and use of smartphone technology—have affected the entire modern world. *New York Magazine* Culture Editor Adam Sternbergh acknowledged some of the changes that have been detected through use of emojis: "If the exclamation mark was the signature punctuational flourish of Generation X, emoji is the signature generational flourish of the Millennials." In this aspect, Sternbergh calls to our attention the use of emojis as tools that offer composers the ability to emphasize and enhance messages in a way that text alone simply cannot do. Just as genuine excitement was once signified by the use of the exclamation point, emojis offer users the same opportunity to focus the sentiment of their message. In this sense, likely without even recognizing that they are doing so, senders are implementing a contemporary, culturally-accepted form of multimodal composition.

Scholar Jason Palmeri argues that composition has always been multimodal, and he discusses the work of Ann Berthoff, who believed "people make meaning through multiple symbol systems" (38). Throughout history, a variety of symbol systems have been used in different eras by specific cultures: Paleolithic cave drawings, Cuneiform pictographs, Egyptian hieroglyphics, coat of arms, punctuation, brand logos, cartoons and comics, computer icons, emoticons made with punctuation, and emoji (Steinmetz). Utilizing emojis along with

alphabetic text within computer-mediated communication spaces certainly involves multimodal composition. Instead of producing a detrimental effect on writing, emojis can spark an imaginative course and assist composers in the "process of visual thinking" (Palmeri 39).

Face-to-Face vs. Computer-Mediated Exchanges

Just as Connelly expressed, the use of Emojis can offer tremendous assistance in a range of digital communication realms when word content alone fails to convey the depth of an emotion, thought or idea. Within face-to-face interactions, nonverbal cues can often account for the majority of perception. Gestures, along with vocal tonality and inflection, can offer more cues to a recipient than the actual words spoken. Sociologist Shao-Kang Lo of Chinese Culture University conducted empirical research to learn whether emoticons function as nonverbal cues within digital communication interactions. Lo discovered that when Internet users were faced with "pure text without emoticons," the correct intents of the message were more difficult to ascertain and "receivers … correctly understand the level and direction of emotion, attitude, and attention expression" most frequently when emoticons are employed (597). These conclusions, while certainly not shocking, may be somewhat skewed because the sender's initial message was fabricated to evaluate the effect on the receiver. In addition, senders and receivers did not know each other, a dynamic which can create more opportunities for miscommunicated exchanges. A less-artificial exchange involving actual senders and receivers may be needed in order to draw such bold conclusions that "most people cannot perceive the correct emotion, attitude, and attention intents" (597) without

emoticons (or by extension, emojis). Lo's study doesn't prove that messages are always misinterpreted without the addition of emoticons and/or emojis. However, it does reveal that emoticons can push receivers into a specific direction of interpretation. When used in that capacity, emoticons and emojis operate as clarifiers of intent—powerful enough to convey meaning that could be perceived as opposite of the language used. For instance, the words "I'm sad" accompanied by a smiling Emoji or emoticon would override the receiver's initial response to the alphabetic text and direct them towards a conclusion in which they would assume the sender was being sarcastic. In this regard, the emoticon serves less as a nonverbal cue and more as an instructor of the tonality of voice, which would stress the word "sad" in order to convey sarcasm.

In a face-to-face scenario, people are accustomed to perceptions that often prioritize gestures, facial expressions, and vocal inflections above word content. The words "I'm fine" uttered through a clenched jaw and accompanied by a scowl immediately inform the receiver that the speaker is actually far from "fine." In digital communication environments, emojis foster elements of both verbal and gestural expression that are present in face-to-face interactions, and these characteristics reveal why they have been quickly embraced as necessary enhancers and clarifiers of sentiment within technological communication. Users have discovered there are emojis that can mimic their thoughts/feelings, even if they are purposely exaggerating or dramatizing those sentiments through emoji use. When words alone fail, the insertion of emojis can assist a receiver in accurately decoding the intent of the digital message.

Extending these thoughts toward ancient concerns about the limitations of writing offers yet another layer of interpretation with regard to the function of emojis. Philosophers like Plato privileged face-to-face, verbal communication over written communication. Within digital communication outlets, writing tends to be abbreviated and is often stripped of the nuances of interpersonal speech that help bring understanding to the writer's intent. Thousands of years ago, Plato downplayed writing as a mere child or derivative of speech, and believed that when the author's intent failed to register with an audience, speech must rush to the rescue and explain the "true" meaning. These concerns about misunderstandings and miscommunications have proven to be quite valid, particularly in the digital age. The birth of emoticons can be traced to an attempt to correct digital miscommunications on online discussion boards. In 1982, Carnegie Mellon University computer-science staffers discovered that their efforts to be witty in online spaces often failed to translate. Research professor Scott Fahlman offered the idea that "sarcastic messages be labeled with a smiley sign :-). It worked, and soon after came the displeased :-(, the winky ;-) and the embarrassed XD" (Steinmetz). In face-to-face environments, the sentiments between sender and receiver would have been identified through the nonverbal cues such as vocal inflection, facial expressions, and gestures. Emoticons essentially reintroduced these essential nonverbal cues in an abstract, technical way and helped prevent further miscommunications in networked spaces.

These occurrences show that at least in some sense, there are gaps in comprehension between a removed speaker and a present one. Hand and/or body gestures, vocal inflection and tonality, and other visible and audible clues

offer layers of understanding within face-to-face communication and are often removed completely in computer-mediated interactions. Emojis restore the cues that can reinforce the writer's intent of meaning as well as the recipient's accurate understanding of the particular communication—although there is still the possibility of an erroneous interpretation. In this regard, we do witness emojis operating in a parental role as they serve to guard against misunderstandings that Plato feared would lead people away from the truth instead of towards it. In essence, they operate as clarifiers of intent, providing a receiver with more information to increase the likelihood of correctly translating the message.

Prevalence of Emoji Use

Perhaps it is safe to conclude that most audiences already recognize the primary roles of emojis within computer-mediated communication. Emojis also serve as mediators of digital communication between individuals and groups that amplify personal characteristics and heighten connections between senders and recipients as they traverse spaces of time and distance. Massachusetts Institute of Technology theorist and psychoanalyst Sherry Turkle has focused her scholarly interests on the intersection of technology and the psychology of the individual's interaction with it: "Technologies are never 'just tools.' They are evocative objects. They cause us to see ourselves and our world differently" (*Whither* 18). In some cases, as Joseph Walther discovered through his primary research on interpersonal communication in computer-mediated spaces, the technology itself becomes the tool through which individuals advance a relationship into new territory, writing what they may not dare say in a face-to-face environment. This phenomenon is dependent upon an overall sense that the technology offers more

control over how personal thoughts and emotions are constructed and received. Members of society who utilize the new technology believe it functions in a manner that offers greater communication options than previous technologies. These changes in interpersonal communication dynamics and utilization of a new technology don't happen instantly, but rather become authenticated through a very specific process.

Composition scholar Dennis Baron suggests each new literacy technology traverses three stages from creation to cultural acceptance: "After their invention, their speed depends on accessibility, function, and authentication" (71). Access to a new technology happens somewhat slowly, but eventually, enough people discover its availability and begin to assess its value through knowledge of prior media forms. The function stage often showcases a familiarity with another medium, but in an enhanced or improved way. Then, the culture moves into a stage of authentication, in which the new technology becomes part of the common discourse and is consequently validated. Emojis have certainly followed this trajectory. Vyvyan Evans, professor of linguistics at Bangor University, offers telling evidence of the cultural accessibility and authentication of these unique graphic images:

> Emoji is incontrovertibly the world's first truly global form of communication. English is often said to be the world's global language, so a comparison is instructive. English has both status and reach that puts it on a different level to any other spoken variety: 335 million native speakers, and a further 505 million speakers who use it as a second language. It's the primary or official language in 101 countries, from Canada to Cameroon, and from Malta to Malawi—far outstripping any other language. [...] But in comparison, emoji dwarfs even the reach of English. (Evans)

Emoji use, according to Evans, has prodigiously surpassed the reach of the most common language in the world, showcasing their global accessibility and function. The next stage to evaluate is whether emojis have reached enough users to be considered authenticated: “Almost everyone is using emojis. [They] are used by 92% of the online population” (Montague 4).

Contemporary audiences have also fully embraced the hardware and software connected to the technology, including the use of the emoji-enabled keyboard. These images have enjoyed a rapidly expanding base of social acceptance and authentication within interpersonal digital communication spaces including text messages, social networking sites, email correspondence, and more. The rise of the emoji has been “stratospheric” (Evans), as the culture’s accessibility to the new technology has rapidly increased:

> Today one quarter of the world's global population owns a smartphone; and based on a survey of mobile computing habits in 41 countries it is estimated that there will be over 2 billion smartphone users by 2016, and 2.5 billion by 2018. (Evans)

This materiality of emoji accessibility through increased access and use of smartphones brings the materiality of language within digital spaces to the forefront. Studying how we interpret signs and symbols as well as their use and interpretation has been a focus of semiotics for decades. Eventually, when we become familiar with the semiotics of language, our brains no longer register the unique formation of letters as they combine in abstract form to create specific meaning. The brain immediately interprets a sign as its signified person, place, thing, or concept. Emojis may be even easier to decipher because their representations are more direct and less abstract. Therefore, rather than being

able to slip away as an invisible interface, the written word—within the context of these electronic communication spaces—becomes more overt and cumbersome. Simultaneously, the appearance of emojis becomes more invisible. Instead of noticing the iconography of the cartoon, the user immediately understands a signified intent and language itself—even abbreviations like "lol" for "laugh out loud"—are no longer necessary. When the 'Face with Tears of Joy' emoji (see fig. 2) is an optional response to a humorous digital message, "lol" may be interpreted as less enthusiastic. The static alphabetic signifier "lol" is much more abstract in concept than a visual depiction of facial expression, which the mind more immediately connects to a three-dimensional image and therefore, an emotional reality. These nuances, while subtle, illustrate Baron's point: "As [...] the technology becomes better able to mimic more ordinary or familiar communications, a new literacy spreads across the population " (71).

Fig. 2 The "Face with Tears of Joy" emoji is one of the most popular emojis in use. Data Source: Apple iOS 2011

Scholar Christina Haas explored similar concepts in *Writing Technology: Studies on the Materiality of Literacy*. Through Marx and Engel's theory of historical materialism, Haas argues that the material world has significant effects upon people and actively shapes social awareness: "The materially-based conduct of human activities has profound implications for the development of human culture and the shape of human consciousness" (4). Applying these ideas to the rapid adoption and perpetual use of emojis—typically through the material technology of the smartphone—showcases the increasing significance of how, when, and why we connect to one another in either physical or digital spaces.

Users may not even be consciously aware of the ways their own digital communication habits—which are a direct reflection of their own self-identity—may influence their interpretation of an emoji's meaning.

As emojis have gained cultural acceptance and popularity, users have recognized a level of ambiguity or duality of meaning for certain Emojis. Much like slang, some emojis have become graphic codes for broader ideas and concepts than what their initial presence—or primary definition—might suggest.

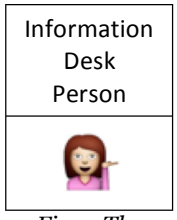

Fig. 3 The "Whatever Girl" showcases an emoji's fluidity of meaning. Data Source: Apple iOS 2013

New York Times technology reporter Jenna Wortham branded Emojis as "an ever-evolving cryptographic language that changes depending on who we are talking to, and when" (qtd in Steinbergh). A great example of an emoji with an ambiguous meaning is officially titled the "information desk person" (see fig. 3). According to Matthew Rothenberg, creator of a site that monitors emoji use on Twitter, this image has become known as something entirely different: "There's something about her pose or the look on her face that people have read into. Everyone I know who uses that one, they use it to mean like … she's the 'whatever' girl. 'Like, whatever'" (qtd in Wroclawski). Others have named the image the "hair flip girl" since her hand almost appears to have casually tossed her long hair from her shoulder.

Other euphemisms have also become popular with Emoji use, which in some instances has encouraged certain populations to embrace the technology because its materially whimsical, innocent appearance can sometimes mask a covert motive:

> That "winky face/heart/peach" signoff on the text you sent her could bode well for your erotic possibilities. According to a Match survey, 64 percent of single guys who use Emojis in every text see action at least monthly; that's three times as much as the (probably) frowny-faced dudes who never use them. (*Men's Health* 44)

The example (see fig. 4) conveys the message "I want to have sex with you," although not all users would understand the implications of the symbols used. In this sense, users select Emojis for specific recipients and unique situations, and in ways that represent their distinctive personalities. When cast in this role and used in this manner, Emojis function as mediators of personal identity and surrogates of self in digital spaces.

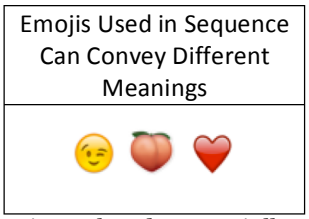

Fig. 4 Placed sequentially, emojis can offer unconventional meanings. Data Source: Men's Health 44

Various research demonstrates that there are significant differences in how, when, and why various groups use emojis in digital communication spaces. Between gender, culture, and generation, a wide range of reasons and philosophies for their use can be detected. Derks et al. investigated the roles and social motives of emoticons within computer-mediated communication. Results of the study offered evidence that a greater number of emoticons were used to communicate with friends than in communication with strangers, and more emoticons were used within positive contexts than in negative contexts. Park et al. studied the use of emoticons within Twitter messages from a range of cultures around the world. Their study essentially determined that people with individualistic (Western) cultures tend to favor horizontal and mouth-oriented emoticons, such as :-), while collectivistic cultures, which value unity and selflessness, favor vertical and eye-oriented emoticons, such as ^__^.

Gender-specific behavior in emoticon use also fluctuates depending upon user, receiver, and environment, as noted by Alecia Wolf in her empirical study. Wolf noted that female users were more likely to use emoticons to convey "solidarity, support, and assertion of positive feelings and thanks" (833), which were elements absent from the male-created definition of emoticons and their use. She also noted a "pattern of change" in use of emoticons that takes place when users move from same-gender to mixed gender groups: "Rather than the females adopting the offline male standard of *less* emotional expression, the opposite occurs: both males and females display an increase in emoticon use" (831). These gender-use differences highlight how various groups within computer-mediated communication spaces can impact a broader culture through their use of contemporary technology and showcase the complex ways emojis operate as intermediaries of both self-identity and a broader, cultural identity.

Emojis as Tools of Self-Expression and Identity

The discussion of materiality, ambiguity, and cultural influence offers yet another dimension for investigation. Self-expression and social connection is a main component of digital communication. In fact, we humans have an innate tendency to see ourselves in just about everything in the world around us, even in the most abstract and cartoonish representations. Emojis convey basic concepts, words, or emotions that either enhance textual correspondence or operate in a standalone capacity in which their meaning is approximated. In his book *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud posits that cartooning is "a form of amplification through simplification" (30). Due to the universality of such imagery, McCloud asserts, "The more cartoony a face is, the more people it could

be said to describe" (31). Applying these concepts to emojis offers a new layer of understanding to their appeal. Because the emoji faces and symbols represent real concepts in simple ways, more people can identify with their meaning. "The cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled… an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm" (McCloud 36). In other words, the "Face with Tears of Joy" conjures a mental image of both the sender and the intended recipient emoting a sense of happiness and joy. Yet, W. J. T. Mitchell reminds us that there is an inherent enigma between mental images and iconography:

> It is because an image cannot be seen as such without a paradoxical trick of consciousness, an ability to see something as "there" and "not there" at the same time. When a duck responds to a decoy, or when the birds peck at the grapes in the legendary paintings of Zeuxis, they are not seeing images: they are seeing other ducks, or real grapes—the things themselves, not the images of the things. (17)

Although humans understand the difference between what is represented and what is real, extending Mitchell's research to the realm of emoji use offers a broader lens through which to view the cultural assimilation to digital communications involving these mental image stimuli. A sender imagines the recipient's response, and selects emojis that will elicit the visualized response. But such a mental process has limitations. Imagining a likely response to a stimulus is where the sender's control ends. The recipient may or may not experience the imagined scenario. Even as emojis have served as catalysts for more effective online interactions, there is always a possibility that the message will be misunderstood or that it will fail to fully convey the sender's ideas, personality, emotion, or perspective. Additionally, emojis are often used to

convey the sender's own sentiments, and it is up to the receiver ascertain those differences in emoji use and successfully decode the transaction.

A significant drawback of perpetual image/icon use is that familiarity tends to breed indifference. In his book *Technopoly*, Neil Postman suggests that "when the scale of accessibility changes" the significance of the image tends to fade: "One picture, we are told, is worth a thousand words. But a thousand pictures, especially if they are of the same object, may not be worth anything at all" (166). Just as the overuse of the exclamation point resulted in a less-emphatic meaning, the 'Face with Tears of Joy' emoji may also eventually slip into an invisible, ignored background of cultural familiarity. As we begin to see an emoji used in more frequent settings, the ability of that emoji to represent an individual expression or a personal identity begins to fade. Overfamiliarity with certain emojis may in fact solidify that emoji's meaning at a universal level and perpetuate its ubiquity in multiple communication exchanges.

As we consider the range of reasons we enjoy and employ graphic icons in order to extend our expressive abilities within digital communications, we cannot neglect to remember that our own ideas are thus impacted in profound ways. Turkle points to the importance of including psychoanalytic understanding "to adequately confront" the ever-changing nature of the culture's "relationships with a new world of objects. Psychoanalysis needs to understand the influence of computational objects on the terrain it knows best: the experience and specificity of the sensual and speaking human subject" (Turkle, *Whither* 17). Linking emoji use to broader concepts of cultural expression and identity may seem to be an endeavor fraught with inherent challenges, but cross-cultural research by Park et

al. signifies an array of clues that affect issues of social and cultural identity. By analyzing the differences in the types of emojis employed by individualist versus collectivist cultures on Twitter, Park et al. confirmed that most users conform to their own culture's traditional expectations, which showcases their effectiveness as surrogates of self:

> Our results provide strong evidence that the individualism-collectivism dimension successfully predicts the type of emoticon (vertical or horizontal) as well as the style of facial cues [eye-focused or mouth-focused] a user will adopt in his or her emoticon usage. In addition, we found the femininity-masculinity dimension of national culture to be an important factor predicting people's choice of emoticon style. (349)

Just as self-identity and personality are often transformed based on experiences, emoji usage in digital spaces can fluctuate depending on culture, gender, and even age. In her latest book, Turkle admits her own lack of texting ability, including her frustration with not being sure exactly how to use emojis in the "right" way: "Across the generations, there is a lot of learning to do" (Turkle, *Reclaiming* 134). She warns that technology is a tool but should not become more important to a culture than meaningful conversation, which she believes offers true connection to one another.

Research Overview

In the succeeding chapters, I will discuss the *nature*, *function*, and *value* of emojis as tools of interpersonal communication using Sonja Foss's theory of visual rhetoric analysis as a comprehensive methodology for exploring their overall impact and acceptance by audiences with access to emoji-enabled devices. To achieve this goal, I will investigate several sites that are specifically connected to emoji use. First, I will examine some of the complexities of emoji use—

including themes that relate to invisible decoding operations as well as how exposure to previous cultural artifacts may impact one's ability to interpret emojis. Next, I will investigate the interpersonal communication component that relates to *who* is sending and receiving emoji messages, *what* those messages mean, and *when* senders and receivers may experience disruptions in the clarity of the messages compared to traditional face-to-face communication.

Using primary research and an emoji survey, I have further explored the signs, symbolism, and locations of meaning where signs may differ depending on contextual clues and rules of language and societal discourse, which will offer another integral point of reference regarding sites of emoji significance. Finally, I discuss the value of emojis within computer-mediated communication (CMC) spaces and additional ways they both reciprocate prior media forms and enhance personal technical communication practices. I also discuss the value of emojis within non-interpersonal CMC (e.g. advertising practices), and offer data on other interpersonal communication shifts that can be expected in the future or that have already occurred since their invention and widespread use.

Chapter 2: The Nature (Qualities, Components and Characteristics) of Emojis

Throughout history, most interpersonal communication has been conducted face-to-face. The advent of letter writing and complex postal delivery systems has offered individuals the opportunity for longer-distance interpersonal written communication only within the last few hundred years. As computers became widely available toward the end of the twentieth century, electronic written communication gave people the ability to transcend time and space through personal connection via emails, text messages, and social media posts. As we have already seen in chapter one, a range of tools has been developed to aid in newer digital communication endeavors. Of those tools, emojis have become one of contemporary culture's most rapidly-accepted innovations.

As artifacts of visual rhetoric—that is, visual images communicating a message in a nonverbal, nonaural format—emojis transmit emotions, attitudes, and sentiments between digital users. Since 2011, accessibility to emojis has increased exponentially—particularly with the proliferation of smartphones and tablets—and these tiny digital images are sparking a range of responses from senders and receivers regarding their use. In this chapter, I will investigate the complex ways individuals authenticate emojis as necessary tools of digital communication within specific sites of interpersonal discourse. In addition, I will identify some of the distinctive attributes that emojis possess and will discuss ways those characteristics intersect with and are informed by society's inherent need to connect to others within computer-mediated communication spaces.

Immediacy, Hypermediacy, & Remediation

Many new technologies possess elements or qualities that replicate artifacts of the past. As scholar Ben McCorkle suggests, audience familiarity with a previous technology or product typically presents a doorway through which a newer form can enter into that society's cultural norm. Cultural knowledge of the messages conveyed through certain symbols and icons has helped authenticate emojis, and this knowledge of iconography offers new and expanding opportunities for discourse within contemporary digital communication spaces. Often, individuals take for granted the ways they make meaning from cultural symbols because the process occurs rapidly and the presence of the medium tends to disappear. Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin discuss this experience as immediacy, in which an interface "erases itself, so that the user is no longer aware of confronting a medium, but instead stands in an immediate relationship to the contents of that medium" (24). In contrast to immediacy, the logic of hypermediacy occurs when an interface is no longer invisible to the user but its presence and operation as a medium is more overt. In this sense, emojis rely upon a culture's understanding of symbolic representations of past technologies, and they possess an ability to exist both transparently and overtly, depending upon an individual's familiarity with previous icons. In addition, an individual's experience with emojis as either transparent (i.e. immediate) or overt (i.e. hypermediate) icons will vary according to their specific familiarity and exposure to previous forms of symbolic representation. For instance, in the United States, a red octagon likely communicates a directive to "stop," even without the alphabetic language added. The cultural reference to a traffic sign is immediate,

and therefore, the processes through which meaning is made are concealed. However, that referent may only be immediate to a population of drivers. A public that is not familiar with traffic signs may not experience the same invisible decoding operation. The less familiar an audience is with a medium, the more aware they become of the translating processes and the ways they draw from previous knowledge in order to decode an unknown visual artifact. This dynamic reflects aspects of Bolter and Grusin's theory of remediation, which is "a complex kind of borrowing in which one medium is incorporated or represented in another medium" (45).

These ideas about remediation are important to ponder as we seek to learn more about how and why emojis continue to gain acceptance as increasingly-relevant communication tools among modern audiences. Specific characteristics of emojis provide individual users with auditory, visual, and even alphabetic representations within digital reception sites. As tools, emojis are impacting the culture at large and rapidly developing into a new discourse community. In an effort to look ahead to innovative ways emojis may be leveraged by various audiences as communication tools in digital spaces, symbolic representations of the past must be examined to note operations of remediation that may be assisting contemporary users' decoding processes.

Symbolic Representations of the Past: A Look Back

In 2014, scientists discovered 40,000-year-old cave drawings in Indonesia, proving that humans have enlisted images and symbols to convey personal and cultural realities for thousands of years—long before the establishment of alphabetic language systems. The material sites of reception

have shifted over the millennia from the cave wall to personal computer screens (i.e. smartphones, laptops, tablets, and other computerized devices). Simply put, emojis are "the latest example of that pictorial impulse [and] have become such a critical part of our hyperconnected exchanges that they are emerging as a dialect all their own" (Steinmetz 52). But our understanding of symbolic representations has remained relatively intuitive, even as the materials surrounding our communication attempts have changed:

> Human beings have used and continue to use technologies (e.g. sticks on sand, pen and ink on parchment, No. 2 pencil on legal pad, cursor on monitor) to bring language to material life. [...] The materially-based conduct of human activities has profound implications for the development of human culture and the shape of human consciousness. (Haas 3-4)

Generally speaking, mankind's use and understanding of symbols, including emojis, as communicative tools follows a timeline through which meaning is constructed and informed by a culture's previous exposure to similar symbols, icons, or representations. Paleolithic cave drawings, cuneiform pictographs and Egyptian hieroglyphics are some of the earliest-known representational symbols, and certainly related significant, relevant information about pre-historic life. Coats of Arms served a unique and specific purpose in the Middle Ages: "[W]hen most Europeans were illiterate, these displays of heraldry could quickly communicate family ties and alliances—particularly useful in the heat of battle" (Steinmetz 52). Other symbolic representations of the past that have played important roles in cultural communication include cartoons and comics, punctuation, brand logos, road signs/directional icons, computer icons, and more.

Cartoons and Comics: Prelude to Emojis

A universal sign of happiness, the yellow smiley face cartoon has been part of both American and international culture for nearly seven decades, although versions of smiling, humanoid faces have appeared in a variety of places throughout the centuries. Harvey Ball is typically credited with the design that has become iconic, although he never took out a copyright and died in 2001. In 1963, he was a graphic designer and co-owner of an advertising agency when he developed the smiling symbol as part of a campaign to pacify employees of an insurance company who were feeling nervous about an impending corporate merger:

> [T]he smiley face triggered a nationwide fad in the early 1970s. An estimated 50 million buttons alone had been sold, and the image appeared on countless other products as well, many of which are still licensed through Ball's foundation. In 1999, the United States Postal Service even issued a smiley face stamp. (Heller 28)

Perhaps one of the reasons the smiley face remains so universally embraced is related to the simplicity of the conveyed sentiment. An individual would likely not need instruction in order to understand the emotion behind a smiling face:

> Pictures are received information. We need no formal education to 'get the message.' The message is instantaneous. Writing is perceived information. It takes time and specialized knowledge to decode the abstract symbols of language. When pictures are more abstracted from 'reality,' they require greater levels of perception, more like words. When words are bolder, more direct, they require lower levels of perception and are received faster, more like pictures. (McCloud 49)

In this sense, pictures (i.e. visual representations, symbols, icons, etc.) are more realistic and words (i.e. alphabetic language) are more abstract. We often

forget just how abstract written language is because our brains have become hardwired to instantly decode words (i.e. the abstract) into the actual objects or ideas (i.e. the realistic) they represent. For example, as my six-year-old son was learning to read, he automatically decoded certain sentences by looking at the pictures in his books instead of looking at the letters and the words they formed. He innately understood that he could extract meaning from the visual representations in a more immediate way. After months of practice and repetition, he learned how meaning could be made from the right combinations of letters and words; however his efforts were much more hypermediated as he struggled to understand the medium of abstract language. Many children's books feature elements that might be considered cartoonish or comic in nature. They often feature visual representations or illustrations along with alphabetic text in which both modes effectively tell the story.

Although our decoding of visual artifacts may be immediate in some instances and hypermediate in others, "icons demand our participation to make them work" (McCloud 59). In this sense, many individuals may gain an ability to successfully ascertain an emoji's sentiment from past experiences with both abstract and realistic representations within comics and other similar art forms. Through previous exposure to the medium of cartoons, emojis became more quickly naturalized as icons accompanying alphabetic text—in a sense remediating cartoons and comics. Receivers successfully interpret a message because of their prior exposure to other cartoons and comic images. Their experiences with cartoons as well as with the individuals with whom they were communicating offered enough contextual information for successful

interpretation on the nonverbal sentiment being conveyed.

The representational complexities of emojis are now even more apparent, which leads a range of ideas related to their nature. Emojis simultaneously operate as objects both connecting to past artifacts and extending beyond them to forge new intersections of meaning. There are clearly certain qualities, elements, and characteristics of emojis that assist users in a process of message interpretation. As we will see more in the next chapter, those interpretations can be both static or dynamic depending upon message context. The relationship between sender/receiver may be one of the most important operations with regard to the process of interpretation, since an emoji can in one instance serve as a representative of a sender's emotions or attitudes and in the same message, reflect the perceived sentiments of a receiver. I am convinced that a closer examination of the signs and symbolism of emojis will shed new light on ways society establishes meaning for them and will result in a better understanding of human processes of signification and interpretation of emojis within computer-mediated communication channels. Semiotics, or "the study of signs and symbols and how they are used" (Merriam-Webster) can provide additional context for the ways in which emojis bring heightened meaning to text-only interactions in networked spaces.

Social Semiotics: Iconography & Emojis

In his contribution to semiotics, American philosopher Charles S. Peirce suggested there were three types of signs, "differentiated by the way in which the relation between the signifier and the signified is understood" (Rose 83). Peirce referenced that objects could be iconic signs, indexical signs, or symbolic signs.

Iconic signs have a signifier that resembles or has a likeness to the signified (e.g. a picture of a chair signifies an actual chair). Indexical signs involve a relationship between the signified and the signifier (e.g. smoke signifies fire). Symbolic signs are arbitrary; the relation between the signified and the signifier is purely conventional and culturally specific (e.g. alphabetic language). I suggest that almost all of the more than 1,600 emojis can be defined as iconic signs. They depict a likeness to something materially experienced by users. However, there are certainly times when some emojis traverse into the realm of indexical and symbolic. In order to understand the nature of emojis, we must understand the role they are playing within the context of the relationship and the particular correspondence between users of emojis. Any attempt to simplify emojis to an "either-or" role—either symbolic or iconic or indexical—is futile. Emojis operate in complex "both-and" scenarios. The *relationship* between communicators often sets the tone for these more complex interpretations. I will delve into these occurrences more fully in the next chapter on audience studies and interpersonal communication in digital spaces as we discover ways in which "signs are complex and can do several things at once" (Rose 84).

To elaborate on these complexities, emojis can reference a tangible object—something that can be tasted, smelled, seen, touched, or heard. In another instance, the same emoji can refer to something much more conceptual or abstract—such as identities, ideas, or even alphabetic language. For example, the use of a crown can indicate an actual item in the material world, or the concept of identity (i.e. set apart, unique, or special). Thus, emojis simultaneously possess qualities of the sensual world and serve as symbols of the

conceptual world. For emojis to effectively mediate a user's idea or emotion and a receiver's ability to interpret it accurately, the complexities of the material world must be visually reduced to their essence. "By deemphasizing the appearance of the physical world in favor of the idea of form, the cartoon places itself in the world of concepts" (McCloud 41). As an emoji is employed by a user to communicate an idea or emotion, the receiver immediately attaches a specific concept to the sender's identity, state of mind, or situation. This interpretive process is typically culturally situated and intuitive (i.e. immediate) because of users' previous exposure to similar signs, symbols and icons.

Remediation & Reciprocation of Emojis

Travis Montague's 2015 Emoji Report identifies the progression of usage of emojis as signifiers of both alphabetic signs (i.e. language) as well as general emotional concepts. For instance, in digital spaces one person might tell another "that's funny" by writing out the phrase. If that person is texting or sending a message through a social networking site, the long form of that phrase is shortened to "haha" or "lol (laugh out loud)"—abbreviations which are the result of former text messaging systems in which users paid a "per character" price to send text messages and developed a relatively complex system of abbreviations to avoid extra fees. As emojis emerged on the cultural scene in 2011, users began substituting the 'Face with Tears of Joy' emoji for "haha" or "lol." Several other common phrases and abbreviations are also represented by various emojis (see fig. 5).

Alphabetic Phrase	Common Abbreviation	Emoji
"Just kidding!"	"jk"	
"Okay"	"K"	
"I like it"	"like"	
"I love you"	"ily"	

Fig. 5 Emojis represent both the sensual and the conceptual world.
Data Source: Montague (6)

These transitions do not suggest that the alphabetic phrases or abbreviations are now nonexistent, but rather, they offer evidence of a culturally-understood link between the icon and the concept being conveyed. This remediation occurs as users contribute meaning to the new technology as informed by their broader understanding of and experiences with the previous media form.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, emoticons made with punctuation were developed in 1982 to help convey tone and message intent in non face-to-face communication spaces. Emojis are a less-abstract, remediated form of emoticons in that they share certain characteristics (i.e. facial expressions and features). At the same time, emojis are different from emoticons in that they are more representational, less abstract, and typically vertically oriented. A user's familiarity with emoticons as a former communication technology helps to authenticate emojis through naturalization: "[A] strategy… which allow[s] [a] new crop of media forms to enter the cultural sphere without the kind of scrutiny

that might otherwise have made people acutely aware of their… presence as media forms" (McCorkle 123). Prior media forms that likely helped prepare individuals for the authentication and prompt cultural acceptance of emojis include emoticons and cartoons.

Other Characteristic Features of Emojis

Like cartoons, emojis contain aural, visual, and/or gestural components. Some include props or the addition of non-realistic icons to help convey a concept or idea (see fig. 6). In order to better understand how users employ certain emojis to convey a specific message, unique emoji characteristics must be analyzed.

An exhaustive study of all 1,600 emojis is beyond the scope of this research. However, it will be important to take a look at a few commonly-used emojis to learn more about how certain features may impact or inform a user's interpretation of their meaning. The purpose of this study was to learn more about ways emojis help offer nonverbal cues that are missing in non face-to-face communication environments. To that end, evaluating emojis that depict facial expressions was important.

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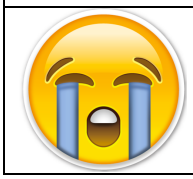			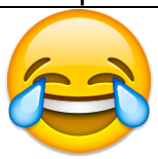		

Fig. 6 Six commonly-used emojis offer additional visual cues through the use of props, or the addition of icons and color. Data Source: Apple iOS 2013

Upon viewing this series of emojis, several characteristics are immediately apparent. Each has a round head/face, two eyes, and a mouth. Two have tears. Two have represented eyes (i.e. sunglasses, hearts). None of them have a nose or

ears. Four of them have eyebrows. Three have teeth. One has horns. Five are yellow. Four have yellow with another hue. One is purple with facial features in black. Each of these differences conveys unique information to a receiver. Exactly what these emojis mean may vary by context of the alphabetic language used in conjunction with the symbol as well as varying "degrees of understanding and misunderstanding in the communicative exchange" (Hall 93). It is, however, safe to say that each of these variations offers important clues to the viewer and can simultaneously convey physical sensations and emotions as well as more abstract concepts and themes.

Encoding/Decoding and Sender/Receiver Dynamics

In this sense, emojis are sent forth in messages as digital ambassadors—representatives of a sender's emotions and/or attitudes that words alone would not successfully convey in such networked spaces. The sender employs the emoji as a messenger to represent nonverbal cues that would typically be viewed between interactants in a face-to-face environment but are noticeably absent in asynchronous exchanges. Each image offers data that is viewed and deciphered by the receiver. This process of encoding and decoding is another systematic and invisible operation related to emojis that help define their nature. However, we must also carefully note the ways encoding and decoding processes are tied to individual senders and receivers as well as a larger social structure. The context of the sender/receiver relationship may in fact play a pivotal role in how emojis are understood and whether emoji meaning might be more individually situated than previously thought.

As emojis transcend the limitations of abstract language into a new

discursive realm, we must note which "formal rules of discourse and language are in dominance" (Hall 93). For instance, if certain emojis carry meanings that are widely interpreted in the same way, we also need to know whether relational elements between sender and receiver have the potential to impact that universal meaning and shift the interpretation into a non-dominant direction. Ideological meanings of certain signs may reflect prevailing interpretations but can also showcase complex ways that audiences obey certain performative rules within specific sites of discourse, just as they would do in a face-to-face communication environment.

Summary

Our ability to make meaning from visual artifacts like emojis is constructed from various intersections of previous experiences, contextual relevance, and discursive rules of language. In addition, societal operations of communication and previous exposure to similar media forms also impact our ability to successfully decode various communicative exchanges involving emojis.

The following chapter will take a look at the function of emojis within digital interpersonal exchanges to learn more about variances in emojis use. The interpretation processes and differences between the encoder/sender and the decoder/receiver will be examined as we learn more about additional ways emojis simultaneously operate as cultural icons with both singular and multiple layers of meaning.

Chapter 3: The Function of Emojis in Digital Interpersonal Communication

Introduction

Generally, current discourse tends to oversimplify the role of emojis and emoticons as "quasi nonverbal cues" that "allow receivers to correctly understand the level and direction of emotion, attitude, and attention expression" (Lo 597). Since nonverbal cues in interpersonal communication are usually detected both visually and audibly, then learning more about ways emojis offer specific visual and audible nonverbal cues is an important undertaking. If Lo's findings are reliable, then the use of emojis would indicate a specific nonverbal, physical facial expression, gesture, or emotion of the sender and would almost always be interpreted by the receiver as such. However, Lo's study was primarily directed at users who did not know one another and it did not account for dynamics of intimacy between senders and receivers in message interpretation—even though our understanding of interpersonal visual cues in face-to-face exchanges is greatly influenced by the nature of our relationship with the other person. As discussed by John Cresswell, to build a more thorough understanding of the ways emojis operate in digital spaces, I have employed a social constructivist worldview, wherein meanings are varied and layered and complexities are identified rather than a singular meaning determined.

Three key features of face-to-face communication are often referenced as the communications pie. These include body language, tonality, and word content. According to the communications pie (Knox), 55% of communication involves body language and other nonverbal cues (e.g. clothing, eye contact,

physical gestures. etc.); 36% relates to tonality (i.e. the way our voices inflect certain words and deliver the message); and just 7% of communication is delivered as word content. By using the communications pie as a model for understanding digital interpersonal connections, one quickly realizes that more than 93% of successful communication is lost when the connection removes cues offered through vocal inflection and body language. Emojis remediate certain dynamics of body language and vocal tonality that are absent in digital interpersonal communication. To learn more about the ways in which emojis function as tools of non-verbal communication, I conducted empirical research to identify patterns in how senders and receivers use and interpret emojis. This study aims to determine how modern audiences—primarily within the United States—use emojis as a routine part of their digital interpersonal communications and whether emojis' meanings are fixed and stable or fluid and changing. My research specifically included questions related to a respondent's use of emojis as both sender and receiver in order to monitor potential uniformity and variations in how emojis are used and interpreted by individuals.

Theoretical Background

In locating the various intricacies of emojis, my research needed to examine ways in which individuals use emojis both as senders (composers of messages) and as receivers (interpreters of messages). Since emojis function not only as nonverbal signifiers of emotion, but also as clarifiers of intent and mediators of self-expression and personal identity in digital spaces, I examined the degree to which individuals rely upon them as tools of communication. Bolter and Grusin's theory of remediation and dynamics of immediacy and

hypermediacy, as discussed in the previous chapter, remain important considerations in learning more about the functions of emojis. Stuart Hall's methods of encoding and decoding—which specify that any interpretation process is impacted by an individual's personal experiences—offer other important lenses through which to evaluate emoji use and to learn more about why individuals tend to endorse or oppose the use of emojis in interpersonal digital spaces.

Research and Methods

To look at the *function* of emojis in interpersonal CMC, I distributed surveys[1] (see Appendix A) with targeted, qualitative (i.e. open-ended) questions related to an individual's general understanding of emojis, their personal use of emojis as sender/composers, and their own interpretation of emojis as receivers/decoders. Data from this research survey was analyzed to examine variances that may occur within the emoji interpretation process, and how frequently such discrepancies are detected. The data was coded to acknowledge both common and unique sender/receiver characteristics, in consideration of Walther's existing interpersonal communication theories as well as Hall's encoding/decoding theories through which sites of meaning and variances in interpretation could be identified. Unless otherwise noted, all answers were provided by respondents in fill-in format, and then grouped according to patterns of similarity.

To distribute the research tool, I posted a link to the online, anonymous survey on my personal Facebook account, and then relied on a snowball sampling

[1] I completed Gardner-Webb University's Institutional Review Board process and received approval for my research study.

technique in which existing survey participants were encouraged to send the survey link to their own specific contacts via direct message or sharing to their Facebook account connections. I established a goal of accumulating fifty to seventy-five responses during the month of April 2016. By the end of the month, ninety-three people had responded to the survey. The survey was officially closed on April 30.

Most survey questions were structured in essay format in which participant was asked to explain his/her answer. Approximately three questions were in list format, in which the respondent was asked to "check all that apply." These questions included a fill-in option for "other." This format gave participants a platform to more thoroughly describe their interactions with emojis in digital communication spaces. Several respondents even used emojis in their survey answers, either as examples or to accentuate a point, although there was not any noticeable pattern to their use of emojis in this survey.

Demographics of Respondents

Of the ninety-three individuals who responded to the online survey, 82% were female and 18% were male. One respondent (1%) was born before 1946 (i.e. the Greatest Generation), 12% of respondents were born between 1946 to 1963 (i.e. Baby Boomers), 37% of respondents were born between 1964 to 1980 (i.e. Generation X), and nearly half (49%) were born between 1981-1998 (i.e. Millennials). Nearly all (96%) of respondents reported owning or using a smartphone, tablet, or other device equipped with an emoji keyboard with just three respondents indicating they did not own or use such a device. No substantial conclusions were drawn from this data specifically relating to gender

or generation. Although the data was collected to ascertain variances in emoji use and understanding, significant differences in responses were not detected.

Survey Questions

The survey was divided into four main sections. The first section involved background information as mentioned above (gender, generation, and smartphone access). In the next section, participants were asked questions related to how they use emojis as senders (e.g. "When I Use Emojis"). This section included both open-ended questions and select-from-list options aimed at learning more about how and when individuals use emojis in interpersonal digital communications. Additionally, respondents were asked to describe emojis and explain the types of communication in which they would use emojis.

The third segment focused on interpretation of emojis from the receiver's perspective (e.g. "When I See Emojis"). Participants were asked open-ended questions in which they reported their own interpretation of emojis and factors that could affect that meaning. Respondents were asked to report which qualities or features of emojis they typically rely upon in order to correctly ascertain meaning, and the degree to which their understanding of an emoji is dependent upon their relationship with the sender.

The fourth and final section offered participants an opportunity to analyze six different emojis for meaning. Participants were asked to interpret the meaning of each emoji in order to determine if meaning is fixed (i.e. always the same) or fluid (i.e. open to interpretation and dependent upon context). The six emojis were: 'Sobbing' emoji, 'Sunglasses' emoji, 'Upset/Frustrated' emoji,

'Laughing with Tears of Joy' emoji, 'Heart-Eyes' emoji, and 'Smiling Devil' emoji (see figure 7).

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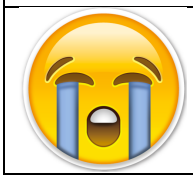			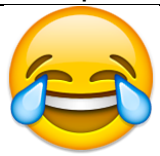		

Fig. 7 Respondents were asked to interpret these six emojis. Data Source: Apple iOS 2013

Survey Results—"When I Use Emojis"

Several factors emerged through the second section of the survey. When asked to describe emojis, 38% of respondents characterized them as "fun," which was the most common answer to this open-ended question. 19% of respondents specifically called them "pictures," "symbols," or "icons." Ten participants described the way they use emojis (e.g. "instead of words" or "to enhance existing text"). Ten people specifically referenced "faces," "facial expressions," or "silly faces." One reported she felt "handicapped without them," and one called them "fun, but unnecessary and also addictive."

Participants were also presented with a list of situations and asked to report when it was appropriate to use emojis and to check all answers that were applicable. In addition, the survey offered a place for respondents to fill in answers that were not represented in the list. 96% of respondents indicated "casual situations;" 80% checked "intimate/relational situations;" 5% indicated "formal/professional situations;" and one respondent added "semi-professional situations."

Survey questions related to the individual's use of emojis followed. Respondents were encouraged to check all answers that apply, and they were also

given an opportunity to fill in customized answers in an "other" section. For this reason, the percentages do not always total 100%. Most respondents indicated they used emojis in casual situations among friends, close friends, family members, and significant others (see fig. 8). Fewer respondents indicated a willingness to use them in more professional settings (i.e. with colleagues or coworkers).

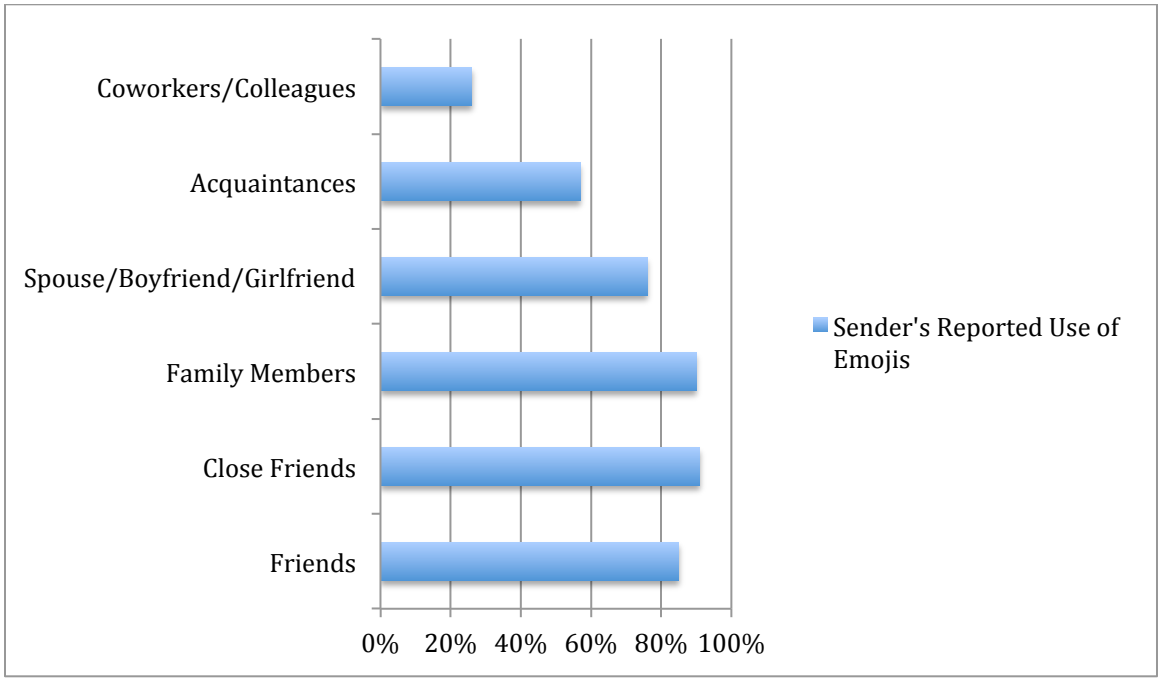

Fig. 8 Percentage of respondents who indicated they frequently use emojis with the above-listed groups.

The next question asked individuals to explain whether an emoji's appearance affected their willingness to use it. A majority—68%—of participants reported "yes." 94% admitted that they use certain emojis more frequently and consistently. For instance, three people reported mostly using the face emojis. One participant stated:

> I almost always use the winking eye emoji and the huge smile emoji showing all the teeth. I used to carry the nickname 'smiley' as a kid, and when I smile, I use my entire face. So I like to think that people

> who know me can actually envision my huge cheese face when I say something.

Another participant said she uses the smiley most frequently:

> As a user who remembers using emoticons—the predecessor to emojis—smileys are just a personal go-to out of habit. Plus, it takes too much time to figure out what all of the new non-smiley ones mean. I'm worried I'll send a sex emoji to a coworker or friend by accident!

One woman indicated that she uses faces more often to help replace elements that are present in face-to-face conversations: "[I use] the faces […] because that's what is missing from the text. The emotions that are portrayed in our faces during normal conversation are absent in sterile texts."

While these respondents indicated using certain emojis because their meanings are clearer or they help connect to their personal identity, three respondents said convenient access was a factor that affected their use of certain emojis. One male said, "The sheer breadth of field combined with the Apple feature that places most commonly-used emojis at the front of the selection field ensures that those are used more." A woman agreed: "I use the common sad, happy, or winking face more often than the other faces. Partly because they are in my 'recently used' part of the keyboard."

Of all of the questions in this section, the one that garnered the most varied responses asked, "In what way does your use of emojis mirror your own emotions?" 87% of participants said they use emojis as a direct reflection of their emotions or to further clarify the intent of their message: "I normally use the emoji to express whatever emotion I am feeling at the time." Another participant reported, "I pretty much rely on emojis to express emotions so I don't have to."

One respondent said she chooses the emoji that represents her attitude in that moment: “They reflect my mood. If I’m annoyed, I can send an eye-roll emoji to someone who can’t see me roll my eyes in person. I feel like emojis are an extension of how I would express myself physically.” Another respondent said, “They always mirror my emotions. I am the kind of person who can’t hide my how I feel, no matter how hard I try! So, that need to communicate my emotions via text is strong.” On the other end of the spectrum was one respondent who indicated she is cautious in how she shows emotion, which transfers to the use of emojis: “[I am] guarded. I only show so much.”

Other respondents shared that the emojis don’t necessarily mirror their immediate emotions, but rather offer information related to the sentiment they may be trying to express. One male participant stated:

> The emojis accent my emotions more than they reflect my emotions. In some cases, the emoji may be used to convey a tone or attitude that is difficult to express solely through text (e.g. cool dude with sunglasses or sarcastic wink).

In this sense, the emoji is being used to showcase the sender’s general attitude or sentiment, not necessarily specific emotions they may be feeling. One respondent touched on ways that emojis help her sort through complicated feelings and how she has used emojis to stimulate a desired internal response:

> They can communicate precisely how I am feeling. Conversely, they can communicate how I wish I was feeling or what the perceived/acceptable response should be. For example, if someone texts “I am pregnant,” and that makes me a bit jealous, I would be inclined to use emojis to show overwhelming love, support, and congratulations—coupled with excessive exclamations, of course—which would then help to influence my actual emotional response,

> shifting my feelings [towards a desired response]. In that sense, the emojis impact both sender and receiver.

This user, therefore, admitted to employing emojis to convey a socially-accepted response to good news, even though her actual emotions may be operating in contradiction to the emoji sentiment she shared in her message.

Five participants reported a tendency to use emojis to reflect moods that are happy, funny, or sarcastic and to refrain from using them when they are sad or angry:

> I rarely text or send a message with an emoji when I'm sad. If I want to express my frustration about something to someone I have an open and trusting relationship with, I will possibly use an emoji. If I share something funny via text with my friend or my spouse, it is often followed with an expressive emoji—likely one laughing or crying or both.

Similarly, one respondent said emojis offer a format through which to "dull an insult or negative emotion—masking more than displaying." In this sense, respondents seemed to indicate wide variances in how emojis can be used. In some instances, people use emojis to be as clear as possible about how they really feel. At other times, emojis are used to indicate a sentiment contrary to the individual's authentic emotions. Respondents are clearly aware of the ways emojis may represent their own face-to-face expression tendencies. At least five people reported they tended to be more guarded emotionally in face-to-face interactions, and so they transferred those tendencies to their use of emojis in their digital interpersonal communications.

This phenomenon may reveal at least one important self-reflection question that the survey did not ask, but may have been helpful in ascertaining meaning behind the reported uses of emojis: "Do I consider myself an open

book? Or am I more guarded?" Further studies of emoji use should include individual personality aspects that would help determine if individuals use emojis in digital environments similarly to how they interact with people in face-to-face situations. Individuals may maintain consistency in face-to-face and digital interactions or they might privilege authenticity in one environment over another. Regardless, at least five survey respondents shared that their use of emojis was sometimes intentionally deceptive, guarded, or masked their true emotions, and this is an important factor to consider in analyzing emojis' use in digital exchanges.

Survey Results—"When I See Emojis"

This section of the survey asked respondents to report their experiences with emojis as receivers. The first question asked them to share their level of understanding when they see an emoji that is sent to them by another individual. Nearly 98% of participants stated they understand an emoji's meaning. Two people said some emojis were confusing. Respondents indicated that the most likely groups from which they would receive emojis were close friends, family members, and spouses/boyfriend/girlfriend. The least likely people to send respondents an emoji were listed as bosses/professional colleagues/coworkers or associates, older family members, and distant personal or professional acquaintances (see fig. 9).

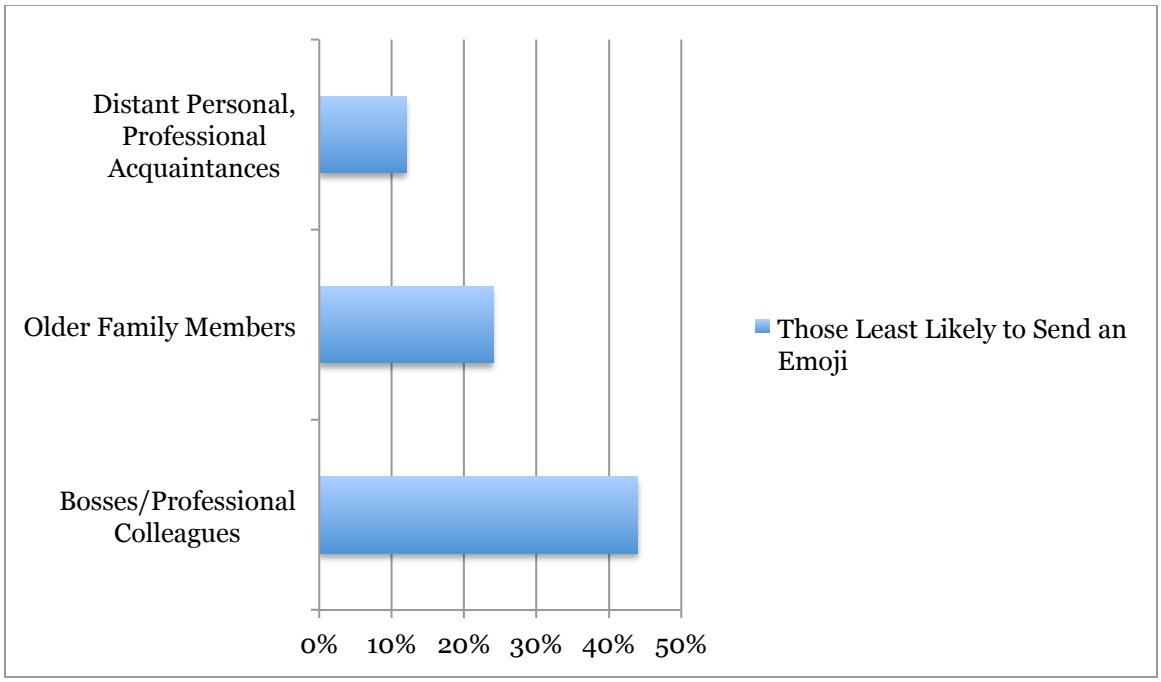

Fig. 9 Percentage of respondents who indicated the groups above were least likely to send them an emoji.

Another important factor to consider regarding how receivers view emojis is which characteristics of the emoji help them interpret meaning. In a previous empirical study of emoticon use by Derks et al., researchers learned that individualistic, Western cultures tended to focus upon features of the mouth in face-to-face interactions to locate meaning. Collectivist cultures typically looked at the eyes first. Both carried these cultural preferences into their decoding of emoticons. Participants in my emoji study were asked to list which features of emojis they study in order to understand their meaning. A range of answers was offered ranging from mouth, eyes, entire expression, conversation context, and more (see fig. 10).

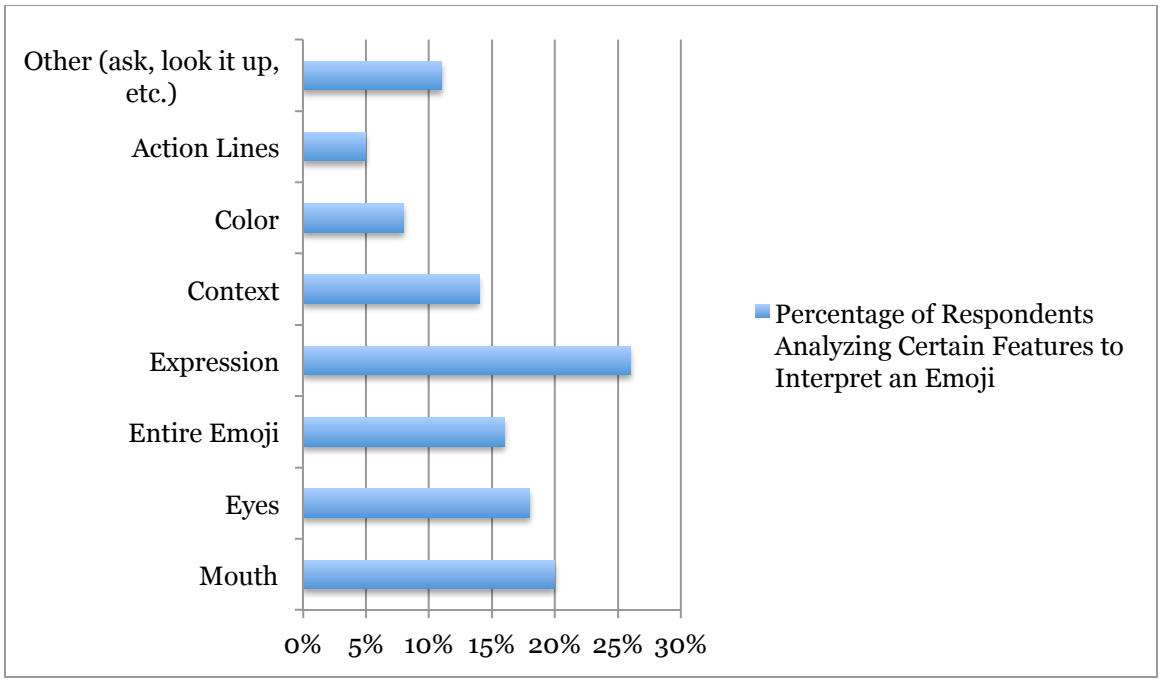

Fig. 10 Percentage of respondents who indicated they looked at above-listed features to understand an emoji.

Two respondents indicated hovering over the emoji until text appeared that helped offer an interpretation. No other participants mentioned this function, so it is either not available across platforms or most people are not aware of or don't need that assistance. Five people said they look for action lines or indications of motion within the image to locate sites of meaning, which could be linked to a user's familiarity with cartoons and comics. Others did not mention this as a factor in their interpretation process, so it is either not a major part of how they make meaning from emojis or their methods include this information in the decoding in a hidden, more immediate manner.

In an attempt to learn more about how receivers connect an emoji's use to the sender, survey participants were asked if they assumed an emoji is intended to represent a sender's *actual* facial expression. A majority of respondents (73%) answered yes, an emoji should be interpreted as the sender's actual expression.

Approximately 27% indicated that is the case some of the time, but at other times, the use of an emoji is more complicated and may not indicate a sender's actual expression, but rather an attitude or direction they want the receiver to understand: "[They don't represent] an actual facial expression or gesture, more of a figurative expression." Five respondents connected their personal use of emojis to how they interpret them:

- "Yes, that's how I use them, so that's how I typically interpret them."
- "Yes, because that is the way I use them."
- "Most likely. Personally, that's how I use them."
- "Yes. In my case, that's why I use them."
- "Yes, probably because that's the reason I use them and intend them to be taken."

These answers may indicate certain receiver assumptions that could impact the interpretation process.

The sender-receiver relationship dynamic was inspected further through the next question on the survey: "In what way is your understanding of an emoji's meaning influenced by the person who sent it?" Most respondents (73%) indicated their relationship with and personal knowledge of the sender is the factor that most affects their interpretation of an emoji's meaning:

> The relationship I have with the sender acts as a foundation for the emotional intention of the emoji. My personal experience with the sender allows me to take the emotions conveyed in their emoji and better apply them to the sender. I am able to more precisely interpret the intended emotional response from someone with whom I am close.

Approximately 14% of respondents said the context of the communication/word content was a heavy influencer in their meaning-making process. About 6% of individuals reported that the emoji's meaning was fixed or static, and was therefore not influenced by other factors: "The emoji should only mean one thing regardless of who sends it." Five people said they didn't know or were not sure how to respond.

Survey Results—"Interpreting Emojis"

The final section of the survey asked respondents to view a certain emoji, and then offer an interpretation of its meaning—including any alternative uses/meanings of which they were aware—filling in the answer they felt was most appropriate. The first emoji to be analyzed was the 'Sobbing' emoji (see fig. 11).

	Crying, Sad	Crying or Laughing	Crying/Silly, Dramatic, Sarcastic	Laughing to Tears	Crying, Context Needed
	52%	14%	9%	8%	4%

Fig. 11 Percentage of respondents who associated each meaning above with 'Sobbing' emoji.

Although there was consensus that the blue lines emerging from the eyes indicated tears (i.e. crying), respondents said the emoji could be used in a variety of situations and its meaning could change accordingly: "This is usually, 'Oh no! I am so upset!' But it could be sarcastic, 'Cry me a river!' or even 'I am laughing my ass off!' depending on the context." Most identified the tears in this emoji as representative of sadness, but in a more dramatic manner: "I would see this as being used when someone was being humorous about being sad over something (e.g. 'I dropped my cup of coffee'), not actual sorrow or deep-seeded sadness (e.g. 'My grandmother died')."

Next, respondents were asked to interpret the 'Sunglasses' emoji (see fig. 12), and several acknowledged the importance of context in understanding the sender's intended meaning.

	Cool, Happy, Confident, "Nailed it"	Sunny Place, Beach, Outside	Disguise, Incognito, Hiding	Proud, Smug
	93%	27%	4%	2%

Fig. 12 Percentage of respondents who associated each meaning above with 'Sunglasses' emoji.

One participant noted, "[This emoji signifies] cool, confident, nailed it. Again, context may suggest that the sender is having a good time at the beach, or the image may carry a certain level of pride or even sarcasm with it, depending on the associated message." At times, one respondent noted, the emoji is used to punctuate or express agreement about something being discussed: "'Sounds good to me' or 'I'm good with that' are what typically precede this emoji." Four participants suggested that they had seen this emoji used to convey that someone is being incognito, sneaky or is perhaps hiding something.

The next emoji participants were asked to interpret was an 'Upset/Frustrated' emoji (see fig. 13). Although there are many emojis that indicate sad or upset emotions, this one also appears to be wailing as its eyes are scrunched, its eyebrows furrowed, and its mouth open in a frown. Respondents indicated this emoji is generally used to reflect a negative emotion. Most people suggested this emoji is offered to show dislike, disdain, frustration, or sadness.

	Angry, Irritated, Frustrated	Sad, Upset, Dislike	Complaining, Whining, Crying	Rant, Tantrum, Dramatic	In Pain, Annoyed,	Gross/Yucky, Hungry, Torn
	35%	28%	14%	13%	9%	6%

Fig. 13 Percentage of respondents who associated each meaning above with 'Upset/Frustrated' emoji.

One respondent said this emoji, like others, is completely dependent upon the context of the conversation, illustrating the importance of the relationship between sender and receiver in the interpretation process:

> Again, so many meanings. [It could mean] 'Oh, shit,' 'This isn't fair,' 'Ouch,' 'These labor pains hurt,' 'I stepped on a bee,' and I have to say, in case you didn't know, that many of these can be used for sexting or dirty talk between friends.

If it is possible to gather almost universal consensus, the next two emojis interpreted by respondents seemed to offer it. The 'Laughing with Tears of Joy' emoji and the 'Heart-Eyes' emoji, both among the most popular emojis used, each have much more fixed meanings and applications (see fig. 14 and fig. 15).

	Laughing So Hard, You're Crying	Smiling Through Tears
	99%	1%

Fig. 14 Percentage of respondents who associated each meaning above with 'Laughing with Tears of Joy' emoji.

	"Love" or "In Love with" Someone or Something	Like Something a Lot	Sex
	93%	6%	1%

Fig. 15 Percentage of respondents who associated each meaning above with 'Heart-Eyes' emoji.

The last emoji survey participants were asked to interpret is a purple, smiling devil emoji (see fig. 16). The meaning of this emoji was more fluid, and a few respondents said they didn't know.

	Sneaky/Naughty, Rebellious, Mischievous, "Little Devil"	Devious, Actually Mean	Sexual, Flirtacious, Horny "Horny Devil"	Don't Know
	74%	13%	5%	3%

Fig. 16 Percentage of respondents who associated each meaning above with 'Smiling Devil' emoji.

One participant noted, "I imagine this emoji attached to a message that conveys some aspect of temptation. It could possibly be used as a more serious or accusatory icon, but it's hard to get past the level of 'cuteness' or fun it seems to convey." Another respondent offered, "'I am the devil, and I'm also sneaky.' But in a meaningful, non-threatening way, as if I'm up to no good. But more prankster than legit demon."

Implications/Conclusions

In reviewing the data from this survey, users are clearly connecting emojis in very specific ways to the people with whom they are communicating. However, emojis are frequently cast into diverse roles in a socially organic manner. One emoji can shift from a symbolic icon that conveys a specific concept or idea to a nonverbal cue that indicates an attitude or emotion of the sender or receiver—with each intuitively able to understand the varying roles. The complicated elements of these encoding and decoding processes are extremely immediate for more common emojis and more hypermediate for less common emojis. When

encountering an unfamiliar emoji, individuals reported a tendency to draw from context clues within the message content as well as the interpersonal relational information in order to form meaning. In most cases, people felt confident that they were correct in their interpretation process, with only two individuals reporting they felt some emojis were confusing.

Another valuable component of emoji use relates to a very clear consensus among users related to *when* emoji use is appropriate. A clear majority of users reserves their emoji use for individuals with whom they experience close personal ties—friends, family members, and intimate partners. I will explore additional implications with regard to how emoji use may in fact be strongly connected to informal social distance and language rules in the following chapter.

This survey reveals that emojis serve in multiple roles and remediate both nonverbal expressions and attitudes while simultaneously drawing upon users' previous knowledge of prior media forms (e.g. cartoons, comics, icons, and symbols). We can now begin to assess their value within computer-mediated communication spaces and learn more about potential limitations. They have enriched previously static platforms with vivacity and reinserted valuable emotional cues into one-on-one exchanges in computer-mediated communication spaces.

Chapter 4: The Significance of Emojis in Digital Interpersonal Communication: An E(VALUE)ation

Introduction

As we have seen thus far, emojis have assisted in facilitating tremendously satisfying interpersonal connections among individuals separated by time and distance. People frequently report feeling united with others through using emojis in social media networking sites, texts, emails, photo sharing applications, and a host of other modern technologies which allow them to interact with one another in both known an unknown communities. In their 2013 discussion of sociality within both prevalent and emerging network sites, Nicole B. Ellison and danah boyd addressed the phenomenon of Internet sociality and connection as one that was surprising to those who did not use computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools: "Early laboratory studies reinforced the notion that CMC was less effective than face-to-face for group communication processes" (Ellison and boyd 163). Many of these early-held beliefs that privilege face-to-face connections and minimize the significance of computer-mediated connections still stand today, despite compelling research to the contrary by Walther, Jiang, and others.

In fact, the inherent lack of nonverbal cues in CMC is a key reason that early theorists—including Walther—initially rejected the notion that relationships could develop and be fully nurtured within digital spaces. Emojis have demonstrated ways individuals can express most of the sentiments that would be accessible to them in face-to-face environments. In fact, respondents overwhelmingly agreed that an emoji's meaning is directly tied to the personality

of the sender—with the full potential to override previous definitions of a specific emoji's meaning as well as accompanying text. The 'Winking & Blowing a Kiss' emoji could be a sweet and innocent "love you, see you later" between friends or a sexy and seductive "love you, see you later" between romantic partners. The relationship between sender and receiver, therefore, becomes an implicit conduit through which conveyed sentiment and emoji meaning shifts.

The Sender/Receiver Dynamic of Emoji Interpretation

The more familiar a population is with an emoji, the more likely its meaning tends to be fixed rather than fluid. For instance, the 'Heart-Eyes' emoji and the 'Face with Tears of Joy' emoji both offered nearly universal consensus of meaning among this study's survey respondents. More than 90% of individuals reported the same answer for these emojis—while simultaneously rejecting the idea of alternative meanings. Participants' overall understanding of less commonly-used emojis (e.g. 'Smiling Devil') showcased more fluidity of meaning and left room for the possibility of more variances, depending upon their relationship with the sender and the context of the message.

The relationship between sender and receiver affects both the frequency of emoji use and the accuracy of emoji interpretation. This study's respondents reported they are comfortable sending and receiving emojis from individuals they know well and in situations that are considered more casual and less formal. In these instances, invisible social rules that are inherently obeyed in face-to-face interactions are being transferred into the digital environment as they allow the relationship with the individual to inform their emoji use. Emojis that carry more fixed or universally-consistent meanings (e.g. smiley face) are more likely to be

used by senders regardless of their relationship with receiver because they are perceived as safer (i.e. fewer opportunities for misinterpretation). The receiver's perception of these types of emojis is one of sender friendliness without being inappropriately familiar. Those boundary lines may shift over time as the relationship progresses, but more formal connections will likely refrain from excessive or varied emoji use in order to avoid a perceived social faux pas. "In everyday interaction, social relations determine the distance (literally and figuratively) we keep from one another" (Kress and Van Leeuwen 124). In face-to-face interactions, we innately tend to follow these unspoken rules of social distance through body language, physical position, and verbal language.

Linguist Martin Joo discussed the phenomenon of language registers in his 1967 book *The Five Clocks* (see fig. 17). Ninety-seven percent of survey respondents indicated

Register	***Explanation***
Frozen	Language that is always the same. For example, Lord's Prayer, wedding vows, etc.
Formal	The standard sentence syntax and word choice of work and school. Has complete sentences and specific word choice.
Consultative	Formal register when used in conversation. Discourse pattern not quite as direct as formal register.
Casual	Language between friends and is characterized by a 400- to 800-word vocabulary. Word choice general and not specific. Conversation dependent upon non-verbal assists. Sentence syntax often incomplete.
Intimate	Language between lovers or twins. Language of sexual harassment.

Fig. 17 The Five Registers of Language as developed by Martin Joo. Source: Ruby Payne (27)

that using emojis is appropriate for casual situations between close friends or intimates, placing emojis within the casual and intimate registers of language. As noted in fig. 17, the casual register of language involves "conversation [that] is dependent upon non-verbal assists" (Payne 27). This helps reveal the value of

emojis in digital environments that are stripped of the nonverbal cues naturally more present in casual face-to-face interactions. “Texting can be tricky because you can’t rely on facial expressions and tone of voice to communicate what words cannot,” one respondent wrote. “Emojis fill that void by aiding effective communication so the person you’re communicating with can access the same social cues as if they were talking to you face to face.” Because such communication between close friends relies heavily on nonverbal expression, emojis offer tremendous value to users as they help explain the underlying emotions and attitudes of the word content—and in some cases present the entirety of the message without any alphabetic text accompaniment.

Social Distance & Represented Proximity

Survey respondents reported using emojis as surrogates of their own identity and as objects to which they attach the identity of the sender. Through this encoding/decoding phenomenon, new ideas merge with regard to how emojis replicate social distance and physical proximity between individuals who are emotionally or psychologically close but who are physically separated by time and distance. In this sense, emojis become an embodiment of sender/receiver, in which they are understood as symbolic representations of a specific individual’s nonverbal cues, ideas, qualities, or feelings. By accepting emojis as embodied stand-ins of interactants (i.e. nonverbal information that connects emotions and attitudes between senders and receivers), we can begin to correctly ascertain their enormous value as interpersonal tools within digital environments.

Emojis represent a situated proximity that in the face-to-face environment we would likely term as ‘intimate distance’ or ‘personal distance’ (Hall qtd in

Kress and VanLeeuwen 124). The user can typically see elements of emojis that offer views of just head/face or a specific body part (e.g. thumbs up, etc.): "Non-intimates cannot come this close and, if they do so, it will be experienced as an act of physical aggression" (Kress and VanLeeuwen 124). Sixty-eight percent of survey respondents reported the person least likely to send them an emoji would be a boss, a professional colleague, or a distant personal or professional acquaintance. Whether they realize it or not, audiences apply formal language and social distance rules to their use of emojis, and therefore, the use of emojis by both sender and receiver declines in more formal environments. In formal types of communication, interactants showcase less dependency on nonverbal cues and more reliance upon articulated language. Within this location of social distance, colloquialisms like emojis are incongruent, and more formal aspects of speech are utilized. Users immediately sense a disruption in appropriate social distance rules when non-intimates attempt to enter a realm of personal familiarity before considered socially appropriate.

Social Connectivity and Emoji Use

In the early 1990s, theorists believed that almost all interpersonal communication options were secondary to face-to-face (FtF) interactions. Telephone calls, letters, emails, and internet chat rooms were tools that helped people who were separated by time and distance feel more connected to one another, but they paled in comparison to real-life conversation. Surprisingly, as new digital tools were developed and nonverbal cues were represented through emoticons in networked spaces, empirical studies began to reveal ways that "interpersonal perceptions are frequently intensified in CMC, including

perceptions of personal qualities, behaviors, and relationship estimation" (Jiang et al. 130). Walther's hyperpersonal model considers the ways in which people overcompensate for lacking visual cues and situational information that is available to them in FtF but is missing in CMC interactions. This overcompensation was referenced as a biased perception mechanism:

> The hyperpersonal model … [suggests] that one's idealized impressions of an online partner may lead a CMC user to reciprocate based on that impression, transmitting messages that, in turn, may shape the partner's responses, shifting the target's personality in the direction of the communicators' mutually constructed and enacted impression. In this way, feedback may intensify the hyperpersonal effects of idealization, selective self-presentation, and channel exploitation. (Walther "CMC…" 463)

Initially, these theories about interpersonal communication in computer-mediated spaces were considered secondary to the privileged FtF communication environment. However, the advent of emoticons and emojis has increased users' ability to convey specific sentiments to recipients in CMC, which as my survey revealed, was a tremendously attractive component that contributed to their use and broad-based acceptance. Walther's studies evaluated dimensions of relationships between strangers in CMC, and monitored ways those relationships grew in intimacy through CMC channels. At this point, no empirical study has evaluated the use of emojis between strangers in CMC in a direct comparison to how emojis are used between casual acquaintances, close friends, and intimate partners. Such a study could be extremely valuable in further identifying ways people obey the unspoken rules of social distance and language register within their computer-mediated interactions.

The social presence theory, developed by Short, Williams, and Christie in 1976, measures the perceived psychological distance between communicators along a continuum in which the degree of social presence is connected to the medium used and the degree to which emotional and relational satisfaction fluctuates because of that medium. On their spectrum, FtF interactions are considered the most socially satisfying and written, text-based interactions the least. Additionally, the theory suggests that individuals will seek mediums that offer richer, more satisfying social connections.

CMC can offer an environment in which partners can exceed face-to-face levels of self-disclosure within their networked spaces: "Increased anonymity and control over self-presentation in text-based CMC make it easier to disclose personal aspects of the inner self than in FtF" (Jiang et al. 128). Through this dynamic, relationships within CMC have the potential to offer a level of intimacy and satisfaction that some users might find difficult to replicate in a FtF interaction. There may also be a perception of safety in an asynchronous communication, or an internal preparation that could mitigate the possibility of social rejection. These factors with regard to emoji use have not been measured or explored thus far in empirical research, but could be valuable as we seek to understand additional ways emojis are being used by senders and receivers in networked spaces.

Text-based written communication has increased exponentially in the digital age. Although many individuals do use emojis to aid in their interpersonal interactions to help convey a message's sentiment, some researchers are more concerned with a perceived societal shift away from FtF interactions. Emojis may

enhance interpersonal connectivity and provide richer social presence experiences, but they can also be used to hide a sender's genuine emotions, thus reducing personal authenticity. A receiver may or may not be aware of the ways emoji use can foster counterfeit connections. So while they can be extremely effective tools that enhance text-only interactions, users should also be aware of ways a sender might be intentionally deceptive with their use of emojis in CMC spaces. In fact, at least five survey respondents in this study shared that their use of emojis was sometimes intentionally deceptive, guarded, or masked their true emotions.

In addition, users of modern technology should always be aware of the ways "we are all vulnerable to the emotional gratifications that our phones offer—and [how] we are neurochemically rewarded when we attend to their constant stimulation. […] We are exhibiting a predictable response to a perfectly executed design" (Turkle, *Reclaiming* 126). We should consider the ways that emojis may be helping us retreat from FtF interactions into a technical, virtual world in which a significant number of relationships and interpersonal exchanges are happening asynchronously within computer-mediated spaces. We should also be aware of ways that non-intimates, such as corporations, may be attempting to leverage emojis as a gateway to access our personal thoughts, feelings, and sentiments.

Emoji Use in Advertising

Through advertising, companies often intentionally foster a false sense of relational intimacy by utilizing personal language, but there is clearly an ulterior motive to these tactics. They have a product, good, or service they want to sell or promote. Typically, advertisers intentionally avoid more formal language and

social distance rules and immediately adopt a very familiar and casual voice as they position their message. Users should be wary of efforts by strangers—including advertisers—who enter a realm of personal familiarity through the innocent appearance of emojis. Similarly, advertisers need to be increasingly aware of the fluidity of meaning of certain emojis as they launch new ways to reach various publics.

It is no surprise that advertisers and marketers have jumped onto the emoji bandwagon in an effort to capitalize on the use of emojis by contemporary audiences. According to Montague's 2015 Emoji Report, brands including McDonald's, Burger King, Foot Locker, Bud Light, Chevy, and Dominos have all worked to figure out ways to include emojis in their marketing efforts, some with award-winning results. Several companies have created brand-specific emoji sets, while others have intentionally sought consumer feedback through the use of emojis in digital advertising, resulting in an inherent problem:

> Marketers are struggling to understand the data behind emojis. What does the user mean by using a blue heart versus a yellow heart? What does a growing heart mean? Does a broken heart followed by a full heart show affection or anger? How can we target people based on emoji [use]? (Montague 17)

Because these marketers do not personally know the individuals from whom they are seeking emoji feedback, it becomes very difficult for them to ascertain the specific sentiments those users are attempting to convey using emojis alone. As we have seen from the data in the previous chapter, correctly understanding an emoji's intended meaning is often bound to the receiver's knowledge of the sender's identity. In fact, a 2016 commercial for Chevy Cruze showcases this dynamic as observers (identified as real people, not actors) of a new vehicle are

asked to describe their feelings about various characteristics of the car by using emojis ("The All-New 2016 Cruze"). Several of the emojis chosen by the individuals need additional explanation in order to be understood. In fact, one of the most confusing emojis initially looked like a trash receptacle. The moderator states, "Trash can?" and the respondent replies, "No! It's a basketball net. Swish!" Within the advertisement, there are multiple opportunities for various audiences to either interpret the selected emojis through a negative lens or completely misunderstand the sentiment behind the emoji choice.

Individuals willingly and unknowingly obey the unspoken rules of formal language and public distance in both face-to-face and digital environments. Users who are not familiar with one another socially must provide additional explanations in conjunction with their use of emojis in order to elicit a correct interpretation about the attitude, emotion, or sentiment being conveyed. For these reasons, advertisers and marketers should consider limiting their emoji feedback to more fixed or static emojis, such as a smiley face, a frowning face, or heart-eyes emojis. As we have seen, these types of emojis carry more fixed iconic representations and are more likely to be used to indicate true reflections of positive, negative, or indifferent sentiments. If done in the right manner (e.g. close-ended emoji feedback options instead of open-ended response options), advertisers may be able to harness the public's willingness to use emojis to their benefit. Analytics have revealed that digital advertisers can increase their click rate by almost 10 percent when they seek emoji-enabled feedback (Montague 20). Therefore, marketers seeking emoji responses should be aware of the various ways an emoji could be misinterpreted, which could lead them to falsely believe

their product, good, or service has been valued by an audience as relevant, important, credible or interesting. Additionally, marketers and advertisers should understand that self-disclosure in digital spaces is a give-and-take process. If one partner showcases willingness to share more intimate information, there is, as Jiang et al. concluded, a reciprocal effect in which the other partner shares similar information. These typical disclosure functions are socially situated and occur in private computer-mediated communication portals (i.e. text messages, emails, direct digital correspondence). Marketing attempts that entice individuals to connect themselves to a product, good, or service through the use of emojis may be futile as the rules of social distance and formal language would generally dominate one's feedback and disclosure habits.

Conclusion

The nuances of emoji use in contemporary culture are as varied as their users. Their value as communication tools in an increasingly digital world is indisputable. Computer-mediated communication has become a primary way in which individuals connect with one another for both personal and professional reasons, and emojis help provide significant information related to emotions and attitudes in digital interactions.

In discussing the nature of emojis, I have established a framework for understanding emojis as visual artifacts that have achieved widespread cultural acceptance through their cartoon/comic-like abstract representations of nonverbal expression. Because of the previous knowledge users already have about icons and indexical symbols—including the more abstract emoticons—interactants quickly adapted ordinary, text-only messages to include emojis,

harnessing the icons' ability to more rapidly convey personal thoughts, intents, and attitudes. Specific relational connections do determine the level of comfort one feels when sending or receiving emojis. Senders overwhelmingly reserve their use of emojis for close friends, family members, and intimate partners. This function may indicate an unspoken, social limitation on emojis, in which users operate under a belief system that emojis are used appropriately only within certain social interactions and relational distance rules, including systems of formal versus casual language register. To use them outside of these unspoken casual interactions is to break implied social distance rules. In addition, survey respondents repeatedly reported the importance of context in understanding an emoji's meaning. This context is ascertained through sender/receiver relationship knowledge as much as the actual word content that accompanies emojis. Survey participants experienced an almost instantaneous connection between their perception of an emoji and their perception of the sender, which reveals intricate ways that emojis can serve as abstract surrogates of personal identity in an often-bland digital environment.

Finally, there is mounting evidence that where text-based CMC was once perceived as lacking important nonverbal cues and therefore always subjugated by face-to-face exchanges, the development of emojis reinserted these relational cues into digital interactions, leading participants to experience much richer social interactions in networked spaces. Survey responses revealed that commonly-used emojis may be less likely to be misunderstood by receivers, but there is still a chance that an emoji cue can be misread and therefore misunderstood. This phenomenon becomes increasingly likely as users select

less-known icons along with little or no alphabetic text. The meaning of some emojis may even be culturally or generationally situated, which reveals additional limitations on their ability to serve as a quasi-universal language.

Whether smiling, winking, frowning, crying, laughing, surprised, upset or sneaky, hundreds of sentiments can be conveyed through the use of emojis within digital environments. But as we have witnessed, complex processes of encoding and decoding occur each time we select an emoji to be transmitted to a receiver. These processes are not static, but rather, exhibit fluid properties that necessarily shift in degrees of meaning depending upon the context of the relationship between sender and receiver. Perhaps the general sentiments of positive or negative emotions remain more static within more commonly-used emojis, but receivers consistently reported an ability to morph their decoding methods to fit the situational context (e.g. alphabetic text and relational knowledge of the sender) of the digital exchange. With the aid of these context clues, receivers can successfully decode both the sender's general attitude as well as the specific sentiment or emotion being conveyed. In a world that is increasingly dependent upon technology for daily relational interactions—particularly among individuals who are separated from loved ones by time or distance—emojis are accessible, functional, and authentically-validated iconic ambassadors fostering meaningful visual connections between users in computer-mediated communication spaces.

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Appendix A

Emojis: Nature, Function, and Value

Project Name: The Nature, Function, and Value of Emojis as Tools of Digital Interpersonal Communication
Primary Researcher: Niki Bliss-Carroll
Faculty Researcher: Dr. Jennifer Buckner

There are no known risks for your participation in this research study. The information collected may not benefit you directly. The information in this study may be helpful to others.

The completed survey results will be stored by the researcher in Google documents, and findings will be accessible to primary researcher and faculty researcher.

Individuals from the Gardner-Webb University Master of Arts in English graduate program and the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and other regulatory agencies may inspect these records. In all other respects, however, the data will be held in confidence to the extent permitted by law. Should the data be published, your identity will not be disclosed.

Taking part in this survey is voluntary. By completing this survey, you agree to take part in this research study. You do not have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable—simply type "n/a" if you choose not to answer a question. You may choose not to take part at all.

If you decide to be in this study, you may stop taking part at any time. If you decide not to be in this study, or if you stop taking part at any time, you will not lose any benefits for which you may qualify.

Please complete the survey, if you wish to participate, by Friday, April 29, 2016. If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about the research study, please contact Niki Bliss-Carroll at (*email*) or (*phone*)[2].

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may call the Gardner-Webb University IRB Office at (704) 406-4724. You can discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB or staff. The IRB is an independent committee made up of people from the University community, staff of the institutions, as well as people from the community not connected with these institutions. The IRB has reviewed this research study.

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[2] Information removed before publishing to maintain privacy.

* Required

1. **Please check the appropriate response below.** * *Mark only one box.*
   - ☐ I am 18 years or older and I consent to taking this anonymous survey.
   - ☐ I am 18 years or older and I do not consent to taking this anonymous survey. *Stop filling out this form.*
   - ☐ I am younger than 18 years of age. *Stop filling out this form.*

Some Basics...

Please provide the following information.

2. **Please indicate your gender.** * *Mark only one box.*
   - ☐ Female
   - ☐ Male

3. **Please check the box that contains your birth year.** * *Mark only one box.*
   - ☐ Born before 1946
   - ☐ Born between 1946-1963
   - ☐ Born between 1964-1980
   - ☐ Born between 1981-1998
   - ☐ Born after 1998

4. **Do you own/use a Smartphone, tablet, or device equipped with an Emoji keyboard?** * *Mark only one box.*
   - ☐ Yes
   - ☐ No *Skip to question 12.*

When I Use Emojis...

This section will ask questions related to your use of Emojis.

5. **How would you describe Emojis?** *

6. **Do you use Emojis to communicate a message to someone? Please explain.** *

7. **In what type of communication would you use an Emoji? Check all that apply.** * *Check all that apply.*
   - ☐ Casual situations
   - ☐ Formal/Professional situations
   - ☐ Intimate/relational situations

- [ ] Other:

8. **Are there certain people you use Emojis with? Check all that apply.**
   * *Check all that apply.*
   - [ ] Acquaintances
   - [ ] Friends
   - [ ] Close friends
   - [ ] Family members
   - [ ] My spouse/boyfriend/girlfriend
   - [ ] Coworkers/colleagues
   - [ ] Other:

9. **Does their appearance affect your willingness to use them? Please explain.** *

10. **Do you use some Emojis more than others? Please explain.** *

11. **In what way does your use of Emojis mirror your own emotions?** *

When I See Emojis...

This section will ask questions related to what you understand when you see Emojis in messages from other people.

12. **Generally speaking, do you feel you understand Emojis?** * *Mark only one box.*
   - [ ] Yes
   - [ ] No
   - [ ] Other:

13. **Who is most likely to send you an Emoji?** * *Check all that apply.*
   - [ ] Close friends
   - [ ] Family members
   - [ ] Acquaintances
   - [ ] Professional Colleagues
   - [ ] Other:

14. **Who is least likely to send you an Emoji?** *

15. **To understand an Emoji's meaning, which features do you examine? Please explain.** *

16. **Do you assume an Emoji is intended to represent an actual facial expression or gesture of the sender? Please explain.**

17. **In what way is your understanding of an Emoji's meaning influenced by who sent it? Please explain.** *

An Emoji Analysis

Please reference the figures below to answer questions referencing your understanding and use of the pictograph.

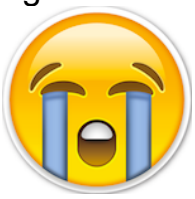


Figure 1

18. **How do you interpret the meaning of the Emoji in Figure 1? Are there alternative uses/meanings? Please explain.** *

An Emoji Analysis (2nd of 6)

Please reference the figure below to answer questions referencing your understanding and use of this pictograph.

Figure 2

19. **How do you interpret the meaning of the Emoji in Figure 2? Are there alternative uses/meanings? Please explain.** *

An Emoji Analysis (3rd of 6)

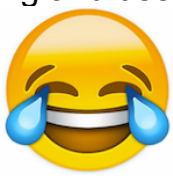
Please reference the figure below to answer questions referencing your understanding and use of this pictograph.

Figure 3

20. **How do you interpret the meaning of the Emoji in Figure 3? Are there alternative uses/meanings? Please explain.** *

An Emoji Analysis (4th of 6)

Please reference the figure below to answer questions referencing your understanding and use of this pictograph.

Figure 4 

21. **How do you interpret the meaning of the Emoji in Figure 4? Are there alternative uses/meanings? Please explain.** *

An Emoji Analysis (5th of 6)

Please reference the figure below to answer questions referencing your understanding and use of this pictograph.

Figure 5 

22. **How do you interpret the meaning of the Emoji in Figure 5? Are there alternative uses/meanings? Please explain.** *

An Emoji Analysis (6th of 6)

Please reference the figure below to answer questions referencing your understanding and use of this pictograph.

Figure 6 

23. **How do you interpret the meaning of the Emoji in Figure 6? Are there alternative uses/meanings? Please explain.** *