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Personalizing Emoji Meaning and Use in Digital Communication

Emoji w osobistej komunikacji cyfrowej: adaptacja znaczenia i użycia

Abstract

Communication via digital media is characterized by growing use of graphic elements employed to convey emotions and concepts in a succinct form, especially in interpersonal interactions. Emoji are naturally ambiguous in meaning, which undergoes various modifications. One way of incorporating emoji into interpersonal communication is repurposing their meaning and use, so that a shared personal meaning develops between individual users or within small groups. The article explores novel and unique applications of certain emoji in an independent (conceptual) replication study of Wiseman and Gould's work (2018). The present study analyzes the data obtained via a web-based survey in a group of 132 respondents aged 17 to 55+ to subsequently get to know their motivations behind the repurposed use of emoji. It is demonstrated how this adaptation of graphic icons helps people express their likes and preferences, romantic feelings, amusement, and, as a result, can aid users in building closer relationships in micro-communities. In essence, the article is intended to contribute to a better understanding of emoji use in multimodal interpersonal communication.

Keywords: emoji, repurposing meaning and use, text tone analysis, interpersonal communication

Abstrakt

Komunikacja zapośredniczona cyfrowo charakteryzuje się wzrostem wykorzystania elementów graficznych w celu wyrażania emocji i pojęć w zwięzłej formie, zwłaszcza w interakcjach międzyludzkich. Emoji mają naturalnie niejednoznaczne znaczenia, podlegające modyfikacjom. Jednym ze sposobów włączenia ich do komunikacji interpersonalnej jest takie przekierowanie ich znaczenia i użycia, by wspólne rozumienie rozwijało się wyłącznie między poszczególnymi użytkownikami lub w małych grupach. W artykule badam nowe i unikalne zastosowania niektórych emoji w (konceptyjnym) badaniu replikacyjnym pracy Wiseman i Gould (2018). Artykuł analizuje dane uzyskane za pomocą ankiety internetowej na grupie 132 respondentów w wieku od 17 do 55+ lat, przeanalizowane pod kątem

motywacji związanych z personalizowanym użyciem emoji. Pokazuję, w jaki sposób adaptacja grafikonów pomaga wyrażać upodobania i preferencje, uczucia romantyczne, rozbawienie, a w rezultacie może pomóc użytkownikom zbudować lub wzmocnić relacje międzyludzkie w mikrospołecznościach. Artykuł ma na celu przyczynienie się do lepszego zrozumienia wykorzystania emoji w multimodalnej komunikacji interpersonalnej.

Słowa kluczowe: emoji, przekierowanie znaczenia, komunikacja interpersonalna, analiza tonalności tekstu

1. Introduction

Communication via digital media has gradually become an integral part of interpersonal interactions. Computer Mediated Communication (henceforth CMC), or more generally Technology Mediated Communication (TMC) systems are crucial for the initiation, development and fostering of interpersonal relationships, at the same time enhancing communication skills, intercultural awareness and collaboration skills (Walther 2011). The graphical elements such as (emoticons and/or) emoji, defined as pictograms that typically display a facial expression, symbol, object or action (Völkel et al. 2019: 1), are one of the most characteristic elements of online texts, treated as a surrogate for nonverbal cues where no face-to-face communication is available. Though largely a conventionalized linguistic feature of TMC discourse, their usage turns out to be more complex than previously thought. From when they were first introduced, their popularity in digital media has increased considerably, with estimates as high as 6 billion messages with emoji being sent daily (Wiseman and Gould 2018).

Such pictographs purport to represent a type of “ubiquitous language, capable of being understood by people from varying linguistic, social and cultural backgrounds” (Wiseman and Gould 2018: 1), to the effect that the meaning of the most popular emoji are similar across countries or cultures, with “money”-emoji being the primary example (Völkel et al. 2019; Guntuku et al. 2019). However, variability and differences in emoji meaning also occur across cultures, e.g., in expressing notions such as ‘time’, ‘positivity’, ‘praise’, ‘friends’, ‘work’ or ‘discrepancy’ on the East-West axis (Togans et al. 2021; Guntuku et al. 2019). For many users, creating a shared emoji with special meaning is a way of communicating important ideas in entirely non-verbal ways. In that sense they are appropriated e.g., for inside jokes or references within a relationship, which can be thus impacted by increasing intimacy and closeness (Völkel et al. 2019). Users’ preferences for particular emoji are influenced by a plethora of factors, among them contextual information, interpersonal relationships, familiarity with emoji

and personal interpretations other than the official definitions (Bai et al. 2019), e.g., those included in Emojipedia.

Technology Mediated Communication may actually create very personal and private places for interaction and communication, so that the aforementioned differences in usage can be observed in much smaller communities. Emoji are then used for the digital creation and maintenance of personal relationships. In such micro-communities they are often appropriated for purposes other than expressing emotions and in meanings/uses not typically afforded, thus they become “repurposed” in that these individual varying interpretations lead to an emoji being assigned a different meaning (Wiseman and Gould 2018). Such repurposed, individualized emoji can be employed to maintain connections, to add a playful element, to create a “shared uniqueness” (Kelly and Watts 2015). This *repurposing*, understood as “giving an emoji a specific and constant meaning beyond the initial ‘intention’ of the emoji designer, inaccessible to an outside observer without explanation”, has been investigated in the study carried out by Wiseman and Gould (2018: 3). They found that among family members, close partners and friends, non-standard and non-conventional emoji convey intimate and personal sentiments, inexpressible in words to the users and these create a sort of secretive communication, which may also relate to logistics, power, sex and fun. Some novel uses stem from common shared experiences, irony, play on words or the visual affordances of certain emoji. These additional or alternative uses testify to the fact that the behaviour that is normal in the real world has found its place in the digital world too, via Technology Mediated Communication.

In this paper we explore the communicatively personalized and repurposed use of emoji in an independent (conceptual) replication study (Peels 2019). We analyze new data within a slightly revised research protocol and via a modified instrument to establish whether the overall results of the original study are reproduced, and to a what degree.

The study is, therefore, conceptualized as a contribution to emoji sentiment analysis, in the light of the fact that they often do not correspond to their intended or culturally accepted meanings or uses, to the effect that if the meanings or uses are not shared, the messages may be misconstrued (Kelly and Watts 2015).

The paper is structured as follows: after the introduction to the problem, we proceed to briefly characterize emoji and their use in discourse as defined in the subject literature. The study section details the data collection procedures, and describes the results, before the analysis and discussion which concludes the paper.

2. Emoji and their use

Emojis are one of the most characteristic elements found in online texts, particularly those which are less formal. Occasionally they are also found in other publications, e.g., colourful printed magazines. For years, their application was guided by the simple principle of making use of a few elements with clear unambiguous meaning(s) conveyed.

The primary function of these elements was to express speaker/sender emotions. They are now seen to play a central role in TMC text messages interpreting, adding strength, punctuation or direction changes, in addition to positive-negative value connotations and general message disambiguation (Aldunate and González-Ibáñez 2017). They are thus compensatory for facial expressions in contexts where face-to-face encounter is unavailable to the interlocutors and a natural lack of the paralinguistic occurs due to spatial separation (Garrison et al. 2011). They also serve a number of pragmatic functions, e.g., as markers of illocutionary force (Dressner and Herring 2010) or as a universal and efficient interaction device (Li and Yang 2018). Kelly and Watts (2015) observe that emoji are adapted for purposes unconnected to expressing emotions (digital creation and maintenance of relationships, adding playfulness to communication, creating a 'shared uniqueness'), while Riordan (2017) looked into the possible communicative potential of emoji other than faces to communicate positive affect, specifically joy, thus helping to maintain and enhance social relationships. Language users also employ emoji to clarify message intention in written communication, e.g., to signal sarcastic versus literal intent (Thomson and Filik 2016), and thus to enhance communicative accuracy and efficiency (Liu and Sun 2020).

Emoji are universally used across genders and formal/informal situations, including, e.g., the workplace. In this last context, emoji performed the role of delivering deliberate expression, as nonverbal cues providing social and emotional information, as part of feedback given to team members, and also in helping to alleviate the concerns of losing face when negative feedback is received via TMC channels, increasing the likelihood for the feedback to be accepted (Wang et al. 2014). In addition, Skovholt et al. (2014) establish that in workplace emails such elements can serve to signal a positive attitude when used in email signature, and they are also employed as joke or irony markers, as discourse hedges or in order to soften negative face threatening speech acts. Prada et al. (2018) claim that (especially younger) women reportedly use emoji more often than men, and have more positive attitudes towards using them. Butterworth et al. (2019) assert that the recipients' perceptions of the message can be affected both by the sender's gender and their emoji

use (here the friendly vs. the affectionate), which is consistent with gender stereotypes in communications, where men are expected to exhibit less emotion in communicative acts.

All this demonstrates that emoji are used in functions other than the simple expression of emotions, as clarification acts appear an equally relevant use (Skovholt et al. 2014). As such, they may provide assistance in message disambiguation and better comprehension (Aldunate and González-Ibáñez 2017) while they also enhance the comprehension of messages, e.g., by conveying information through imagery.

Emoji are inherently flexible in their meanings and use, and thus varying interpretations can lead to them being assigned a variety of novel meanings, especially in small communicative communities, where they can be given additional or alternative designations characteristic only of those micro-cultures. The issue has been investigated in the study carried out by Wiseman and Gould (2018). In a web-based survey they asked respondents how they personalize and actively repurpose emoji to function within their community. They detail which emoji were selected, what the reasons for the choice were, and why they are repurposed.

The present paper investigates the same concept of emoji repurposing in a group of participants from an apparently different and yet linguistically uniform background, with Polish as the L1 and English as the L2¹. It draws on the findings of Wiseman and Gould (2018) but within a modified and conceptually different study protocol. In addition, we do not specifically analyze the relationship between gender and repurposing.

3. The study

The study was conceptualized as a mixed quantitative-qualitative design, using a web-based survey to collect the material pertaining to personalized emoji use in small micro-communities. Specifically the following issues were addressed:

- 1) If and how individuals declare they actively repurpose emoji to serve new personalized functions when communicating in groups or pairs.
- 2) The specific motivations for the individuals' behavior in TMC.
- 3) Whether the affordances of different emoji influence the personalized uses.

¹ Though Wiseman and Gould do not specifically say what was the language background of their respondents.

3.1. Data collection and participants

A short web-based survey in English was created using the MsForms web app. It was piloted on three random users and the questions were not modified, as the format and the intent were clear.

The survey was advertised on MsChat among the students and staff of the English Department at an urban state university in Poland. There was no particular incentive to work on it.

The exact survey formula departs slightly from the original survey of Wiseman and Gould (2018), in that the form of some questions is different and the question about keyboard shortcut was not included. It consisted of 8 questions, both multiple-choice and open format, where the first two referred to the respondents' age and gender. The intention was to minimize the amount of and necessity for written input, as well as to prevent high drop-off by purposefully keeping the survey both succinct and user-friendly. Instead, the snowball effect was encouraged so that some of the respondents could effectively advertise the survey further among family, friends and acquaintances. It was open for a total of 20 days.

The survey was completed by 132 respondents. Age-wise they ranged from 18 to 55+, with the following range break-out².

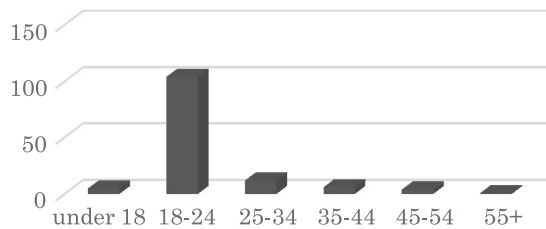


Fig. 1. Respondents' age range

28 of the respondents (21%) reported that they did not use a repurposed, personalized emoji, and they did not provide any further data. A further 29 people (22%) answered 'maybe'. A closer analysis of their responses revealed that they were largely uncertain whether their use of certain emoji is personalized or idiosyncratic enough to count as repurposing; in 24 cases it turned out to be the case. They still proceeded to do the rest of the survey. 75 respondents selected the "yes" option. In total 99 responses were used in subsequent data analysis. The obtained material was then coded for common themes in the open questions.

² In terms of gender, the participants were unevenly distributed, with more women (95) taking part than men (30).

Is there an emoji that has a special meaning just for you and the message recipient?

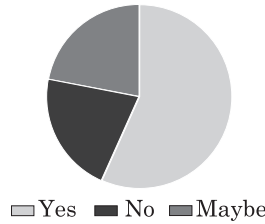


Fig. 2. Emoji repurposing

3.2. The results

The following analysis is based on the 99 responses from participants who state they use a personalized emoji in specific communicative contexts. Those involved family member exchanges, between partners, among friends as well as in professional contexts. The chart below shows the numerical breakout. The figures are greater than the n -number of participants because respondents could mark more than one answer.

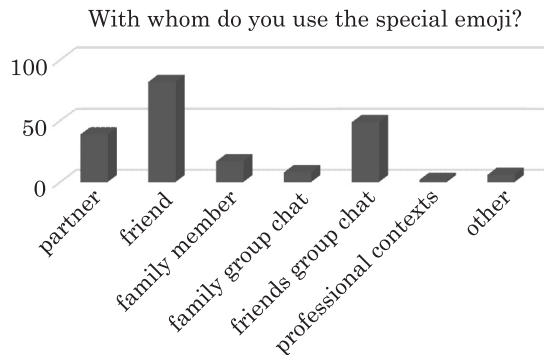


Fig. 3. Repurposed emoji in specific communicational contexts

Of the possibilities listed, the most popular uses of repurposed emoji are among friends, either individually or in a group chat, closely followed by those used between partners, with the order in this case the reverse of what is revealed in Wiseman and Gould (2018). These contexts suggest the relevance of close or even intimate relationship. Among those who chose the 'other' option, only one answer, *like-minded individuals*, contributes to a novel insight.

3.2.1. The emoji used

The variety of personalized emoji used is astonishing. Several respondents reported on more than one such pictogram, some contributed combinations. The contributions (types) can be grouped into the following categories, labelled differently than in Wiseman and Gould (2018), in part because different items were suggested:

1. FACE (18): grinning / stunned / upside-down / hot / pensive / weary / disguised / flushed / kissing / unamused / smirking / sly / star struck / cowboy hat / loudly crying / in clouds (brain fog) / smiley face; smiling face with hearts; pleading face;
2. HEARTS (7): red/blue/brown/purple/white/frozen heart, the *victory hand*+black heart
3. BODY PARTS (6): simple eyes; closed eyes; raised eyebrows; nose; brain; skull (& crossbones)
4. ANIMALS (13): piggy/pig; skunk; dolphin; whale; blue fish; baby chick; hedgehog; bear; monkey; penguin; goat; duck; rabbit;
5. PLANT/FRUIT (7): cherry blossom; hibiscus; four-leaf clover; hot pepper; red apple; tangerine/pineapple; flowers (any);
6. OTHER (19): woman fairy; sparkles; splash droplets; toilet; chair; alien monster; nail polish; couple/holding hands; Moai; backhand index pointing right&left; sun + new moon; shopping cart/trolley; pot of food; screen + glass of wine; woman dancing; devil (smiling)/face with horns; :3; XD; LL.

Altogether 70 different types of emoji received a unique personalised use, which matches the 69 items discussed in Wiseman and Gould (2018). The last 3 in the final category are in fact emoticons, yet they are nonetheless included because they are pictograms as well. Of these, a total of 118 tokens was commented on and new uses/meanings were defined.

3.2.2. The sentiments emoji expressed

Unlike in the original study of Wiseman and Gould (2018), rather than coding the sentiments of emoji ourselves based on the meaning assigned to them by users, we asked the participants to code them. This was due mainly to the idea reiterated in Pang and Lee (2008), namely that private states (opinions, evaluations, emotions, etc.) are typically not open to objective observation or verification, so that subjective individual perception will always be more accurate than any external algorithm. Where needed, respondents were told to mark as many categories as they found applicable, which is why no percentage breakout is given. The responses produced the following results.

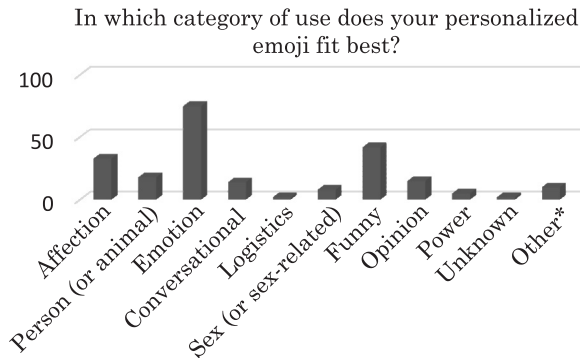


Fig. 4. Repurposed emoji sentiments subcategories

* Many of those who chose the *Other* category simply misallied their sentiments with items such as affiliation, relationship, emphasis, insanity, good mood, scared, something quickly passing. Therefore this category can be safely re-distributed.

Emotion was by far the most frequently communicated sentiment. It varied from expressing feelings of joy (*red heart* – “I am happy now”) or good mood (*smiley* – “In good mood now”) to some negative feelings such as disagreement, anger (*grinning face* – “ready to end it all”) or irritation (*smiley* – “a toxic situation”), or neutral ones, e.g., “being ridiculous with no harmful effect” (*the clown face*). It was most commonly expressed among friends, both individually and in groups.

The subcategory *funny* comprised all those uses that signified humour, laughter, and the perception of the surreal between the senders and the recipients of the messages. Here the respondents commented: “we use it because it is funny”; “to mark a (inside) joke”; “because for me it just looks funny in some sentences or replies”³.

Affection was the third most popular category, comprising romantic love between partners, or generally being disposed favourably towards somebody or something. This correlated with the one-to-one communicative exchanges, rather than the group exchanges. The participants’ avatars were used often in these instances: “he is cuddly as a bear”, “brown heart is like a chocolate-covered ginger heart cookie that we both like and it means we like each other”.

Person (or animal) is the category where the emoji is used in place of a specific individual, mostly external to a conversation. One of the more creative was *alien monster* to refer to a former teacher, another was a *shopping cart* (= trolley) to refer to online trolls. The animal emoji were frequently repurposed

³ Many of these uses will be related to the affordances of given emoji.

to refer to people (*bear/pig* – a partner: “because I laugh like a pig and he is a nice brown bear”).

Participants also use emoji as *Conversational words*, in turn taking or in communicating simple reactions. Among the examples, we have uses such as *piggy* to mean “thumbs up, ok”, as a simple message acknowledgement, or *star struck* as a quick comment meaning “idiotic”. Two participants reported using flowers, alone or in combination, to quickly signal “I am ok, even if I can’t pick up the phone now” when away from home, as part of an agreement with their mothers. These uses are judged to be quick and efficient in expressing ideas that take a long time or are completely inexpressible in words.

The *Opinion* subcategory was selected by some, mainly to refer to what they think after reading some messages (*moai* – “this is how my face look when I have read some messages”) or to comment e.g., on the quality of food (*pineapple/tangerine* – “tasty food”) or on something in general (*goat* – G.O.A.T. = superior quality).

The *Sex-related* uses were reported among partners, in flirtatious conversations, not necessarily referencing sexual intercourse itself (the *splash*), but sometimes to express sexual interest (the *sly face*) or a reaction to a sex-related comment (*raised eyebrows*).

The three subcategories of *Logistics*, *Power* and *Unknown* were almost negligible with respect to their representation. Interesting examples include the use of *hibiscus* – a symbol of Hawaii – used to refer to the place, or *blue heart* as a symbol of the Persian Monarchy, turquoise being the Persian colour. The best instance in the *Unknown* is (according to respondent R90) *woman dancing* meaning “please respond to my email”.

3.2.3. Reasoning behind chosen emoji

In this section of the analysis, the coding was done after a closer inspection of the respondents’ answers and comments. Answers varied from none to several explanations. The categorisation produced the following subsets.

A. *Historical* (28) – used due to a shared history between the users, where emoji understanding relies heavily on a specific shared story, experience or an inside joke. A very good example is using the *hot pepper* emoji to signal a positive opinion, due to the fact that both the sender and the recipient like the chef Robert Makłowicz, whose favourite spice is hot pepper. Or a *dolphin* to refer to something funny and amusing because of a video watched together, in which a man laughs like a dolphin.

B. Avatar (30) – these emoji are intended to represent a particular person or place digitally. Various emoji belong here: animals, objects or plants representing partners, friends or places (Hawaii, Persia). Some are taken to denote specific individuals, external to the friend or family group (the *alien monster* as R59’s high school Polish teacher).

C. Visual affordance (22) – the use of these emoji has nothing to do with their regular semantics but is based exclusively on their rendering, on how they look, not what they represent. One example is the *stunned face* used because it referred to “a woman too stunned to speak”, as well as occasionally being used to command “stay silent”, or a *moai* representing the look on a person’s face.

D. Irony or valence change (15) – these items were chosen because they came to represent a reversed sentiment to what they would normally be taken to mean. Interesting examples involve the *smiley* to communicate the notion “I’ve had enough”, or the *grinning face* to mean something toxic or insane.

E. Image of the word (6) – this sort of repurposing requires that the image represents something that is special to both parties, as they represent a word used in the participants’ real life conversations, e.g., a direct translation of a pet’s name or a combination of *screen+glass of wine* taken as an invitation to meet online and talk.

F. Play on words (4) – where the emoji is chosen because of the way it sounds to refer to a real life object or concept, e.g., *trolley* to represent trolling.

G. Random (13) – this subcategory comprises all those instances that either stem from an accidental random typo or were randomly selected, with the feeling that they are just as good as any other. The *smiling devil* is a good example, now used to end a conversation. Another one is the emoticon *XD*, since, as respondent R94 explained: “I am too lazy to search for other emoji, because *XD* is universal”.

3.2.4. Reasons for using the selected emoji

In one of the survey questions the participants were asked to explain why they use the special emoji in communication with others, instead of relying on verbal elements. The following categories of use emerge:

1. *Cuteness*: participants explained that they used particular pictograms “because they are cute”, much more so than using the actual words. *Flowers* sent to mean “I’m ok” to a mother is a “*cute* way to honour our agreement”.

2. *Funny*: the amusing effect of the emoji was decisive in choosing to employ it in communication, with the amusement shared by the sender and the recipient(s). The emoji *penguin* is used to refer to anything funny in a film, for instance. Or a *chair* signals an inside joke in a sort of secret code perceived as funny.
3. *Intimacy*: here the participants wanted to create a secret code, an inside level of communication over a shared secret, or to help sustain an intimate relationship. All items used with a direct or implied sexual reference belong here, but also those used to underscore the friendship (*cherry blossom*, *holding hands*)
4. *Ease*: some participants use their personalized emoji because it is easier and faster and more convenient than typing actual words, or trying to find appropriate words. All instances of using the partner's or friend's avatars belong here, as well as items signalling a positive or negative emotion or opinion.
5. *Discretion*: we mean within this category all those instances where the pictograms were used either with some sexual connotations or related to illegal activities. An example of the first would be *sparkles* used to refer to orgasm, and of the second *pot of food* to refer to "going out for a smoke of pot". Likewise, *nail polish* is used to mean a non-heteronormative individual.
6. *Emphasis*: in some cases emoji underline the message or add extra power, like the *woman fairy* used as a full stop after saying something nice. Some emoji are used to manipulate self-representation, for example to emphasise one's great sense of humour, such as the animal emoji signifying amusing incidents in various contexts.

3.3. Discussion

The findings support the earlier findings (Wiseman and Gould 2018; Bai et al. 2019; Kelly and Watts 2015) that emoji often take on an alternative meaning, for a variety of reasons (visual rendering, associations, interpersonal experiences) and as a result they lend themselves easily to personalized use and repurposing. It is the personal aspect that appears to come to the fore, though reasons connected to ease of use, cuteness, intimacy and discretion have also been identified in the sample. It also transpires that the repurposing is not a single-occurrence phenomenon, but that once repurposed, the novel usage stays with the users for good, or perhaps until a new, more attractive alternative is created.

It needs to be mentioned that the older the respondents were, the more frequently they admitted to not having a personal emoji. The majority (82%) of the *NO* answers came from the 25+ participants, with the 5 responses in the *maybe* category also included. This may be due to the general trend of not using as many graphic elements in messaging as younger people tend to, since it is believed that user demographics plays a role in the interpretation of emoji as well as the range of frequency of their usage (Koch et al. 2022). Likewise, although the gender-linked variations in emoji use were revealed in a number of studies (Koch et al. 2022; Oleszkiewicz et al. 2017; Butterworth et al. 2019; Prada et al. 2018), in this survey a nearly equal proportion of the male and female respondents identified their repurposed emoji. These results may be the effect of having a rather uniform sample in terms of age.

The most common categories, similarly to those found in Wiseman and Gould (2018), are those where users want to communicate emotions and affection, typically to maintain and sustain personal relationships. In accordance with the studies and findings reported in Liu and Sun (2020), it has been confirmed in the present study that the graphic elements are typically used to communicate emotions and feelings, to establish emotional tones and create a positive mood in conversations. They thus contribute to enhancing emotional expression, sociability and enjoyment. Respondents mentioned factors such as the desire to communicate warm feelings towards their online interlocutors, to create a sort of secret code to add to their intimacy by using items representing what was unique only to them, to enhance the bond, to underscore like-mindedness, which is in general agreement with the results reported on in Wiseman and Gould (2018). The initial worry that the respondents would confuse emotion and affection was levelled out, as they used the pictograms interchangeably, even if they mistook affection for emotion.

Another very significant motive was to add to the amusement of a conversation (the category *Funny*). This may be related to the respondents' strategic wish to manage their impression and image, to be perceived by others as having a great sense of humour, for example. Thus, to avoid social awkwardness and to lighten the mood they would insert emoji with connotations of funniness or a play on words, augmenting the media richness of the communication. Interestingly, this subcategory of use was the third-lowest in the original study.

When they wish to communicate sarcasm or irony, or to give an (un) favourable opinion, the participants adapt the uses of certain emoji. Strikingly, some of the uses demonstrated the valency change of the prototypical

understanding of an element (Kelly and Watts 2015), where the smiles stands for something annoying or fake happiness. This alternative understanding would not have been possible without certain meaning/use negotiations between interlocutors, again strengthening the mutual bond. The meaning reversal need not relate to the above or be very extreme. Two separate participants reported that they used a four-leafed clover slightly differently from the reading of “good luck”, instead using it to mean “hope”, though this allowed the possibility of using it sarcastically. This understanding follows the premise that the sender and the receiver assign identical meaning to a message augmented by such an appropriated emoji.

Our respondents indeed make use of the visual affordance of emoji and word image (section 3.2.3. – B, C, E, F) to refer to something visually similar or to stand for a similar concept. The *peach* is usually mentioned in this context, as it is used to refer to buttocks rather than the fruit itself (Bhunjun 2018). The *brown heart*, with its visual similarity to the brown chocolate-covered heart-shaped ginger cookie is but one example. Such appropriation requires the receiver to be engaged in an active interpretation task (Völker et al. 2019). Admittedly, the imagery and visual affordances ranked higher in the study of Wiseman and Gould (2018), yet this may be the result of the specific selection of emoji, which differed in the two surveys.

Some repurposed uses are directly related to previous real-life events or experiences, and these have been assigned to the *Historical* subcategory (section 3.2.3. – A) of reasons for use, which ranked higher than the same class according to Wiseman and Gould’s (2018) findings. “A film/silly TV series we once watched”, “an old joke we always enjoy”, “had a good laugh when discussing cowboy culture” are only some of the shared experiences mentioned to explain the particular emoji adaptation. Without the explanations, this new understanding in a micro-culture could not be established (Wiseman and Gould 2018).

Other repurposed emoji are linked exclusively to the digital world, such as the *Avatar* subcategory, though in certain instances the personalized uses encroach on real-life events or visual affordances as the cause of repurposing. *Baby chick* has been taken to represent the participant’s partner, because “it fits the vibe of the person”. The *blue fish* is used as avatar for another partner “because she likes blue and her mother calls her *Rybciu* ‘diminutive of fish as endearment term’”. The *rabbit* signifies “me and my friend being really crazy in a funny situation”. Many of them now function as regular nicknames for the individuals involved or referred to. Their use, however, is confined to the TMC contexts (Wiseman and Gould 2018), similarly to the subcategory of *Random* uses. The best example to illustrate how they may

originate in a post-hoc (mis-) analysis is using the *hedgehog* emoji to mean – to quote from R 75 – “Cause it’s funny – one of my friends started to use an emoji of an octopus instead of *okay* [...] and the trend began with some of us choosing our own animal emoji, and it now continues”.

Finally, there were certain respondents who reported using emoji not so much in a repurposed but definitely in a personal(ized) manner, which is a new element in comparison with Wiseman and Gould (2018). The *smiley* used because “it used to mean ok it is the only one that I use”, the *see-no-evil monkey* to signify embarrassment or the *XD* as the universal emoji are good example of this category, although admittedly the examples are not very numerous.

4. Conclusion

Emoji are regularly used in TMC, however, their intended meanings may at times be ambiguous and thus open to individual interpretation and personalization. The discussion above clearly demonstrates that the study does not describe any new or novel human behaviour. It looks at a specific micro-cosmos of interpersonal communication executed via TMC platforms. The results reveal that, just as in the study by Wiseman and Gould (2018), widely varied sentiments are ascribed to emoji, which in itself poses a challenge in interactional contexts. The study also details how emoji are appropriated for purposes other than expressing emotions, despite communicating emotions and affection remaining their primary function, even though sometimes the usage is the complete opposite of what is universally or culturally accepted, a direction observed also in the original findings of Wiseman and Gould’s (2018) study.

What becomes clear is that many of usage novelties or modifications are largely intuitive. The multitude of contexts and interpersonal exchanges contributes significantly to the rise of repurposed emoji. We also observe the substitutability of many universal emoji with new uses or combinations that allow a better expression of the desired sentiments. Whether stemming from the need to clarify the message, lighten the mood, end conversation or express emotions, emoji repurposing and personalization is to be expected to occur frequently.

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