

FROM CAVE PAINTINGS TO SHAKESPEARE AND BACK AGAIN:
WHAT ARE EMOJI AND SHOULD I BE AFRAID?

HONORS THESIS

Presented to the Honors College of
Texas State University
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements

for Graduation in the Honors College

by

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San Marcos, Texas
May 2016

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Dedication

For John Hood and Jordan Icenhower, both of whom contributed to the version of me that wrote this thesis, and both of whom are not here to see it.

Acknowledgements

To Dr. Deborah Balzhiser who gambled her limited time and energy on a clueless undergrad stranger who showed up in her office wanting to study communication on the Internet. I am confident that my thesis would not have been something I was so excited to work on and so proud to complete without her guidance and support.

To my husband, Colin, who has loved and supported me every step of the way and never let me give up on myself.

To Dr. Raymond Fisk, Mr. Keith Needham, and Dr. Graeme Wend-Walker who taught me so much about the world and about myself. I will always be grateful to each of them for being my teachers.

Abstract

Little pictographic characters have begun to infest written communication on the Internet. Advertisers and politicians are trying to leverage them, linguists are intrigued by them, journalists disdain them, and *Oxford Dictionaries* named one the Word of the Year for 2015. Emoji are small graphics that depict a variety of expressions, people, symbols, and objects. They are supported by the Unicode Consortium, which allows them to be used on virtually any website around the world. This thesis explores how emoji were created and how they have been used and studied. It includes a study on *Twitter* use of the emoji that was named Word of the Year to help determine what role this emoji is actually serving when users decide to include it in their self-expression. From there it argues that emoji are part of a family of expressive and stylistic tools that are becoming increasingly important to our Internet lexicon, and even if the populace would rather not call them words, they ought to be awarded dignity in that respect.

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Introduction



Fig. 1.

On November 16, 2015, the *Oxford Dictionaries* website declared a pictograph the Word of the Year. The pictograph was an emoji—a small image that is typically embedded in text message—often called “face with tears of joy” (see Fig. 1). In response, many news websites and blogs mocked the decision; they do not consider emoji to be words at all, much less words of extreme importance or significance to our culture. For example, the *New York Post* reported that the Word of the Year choice proves that “we are dumber than last year,” and the decision is “bound to make some shed tears” (“Word of the Year”).

In fact, even before *Oxford Dictionaries*’ announcement, opinion articles posted by a variety of old- and new-media websites took turns throughout 2015 declaring that emoji are ruining communication. In a departure from the cynicism, *USA Today* experimented with placing emoji next to their articles to indicate the dominant emotion of the story for an October 2015 issue. In response, Kyle Smith of the *New York Post* wrote

that “*USA Today* is worried that it needs to lighten the load it places on readers,” and that emoji are used with a “goal” of making things “dumb.” In May of 2015, Jonathan Jones of *The Guardian* responded to the rise of emoji, writing, “After millennia of painful improvement, from illiteracy to Shakespeare and beyond, humanity is rushing to throw it all away.” A very similar opinion was echoed by Joan Gage in the *Huffington Post* in August of 2015.

Further news stories reported on various websites have referenced the work of linguist Vyvyan Evans who has determined that emoji are the fastest-evolving form of language at this time—perhaps of all time (Wheaton). Or they cite linguist and political commentator John McWhorter, who says that emoji are not a language, but they do take the role of nonverbal communication that we have always used in face-to-face communication (Haber). However, when a news website covers some of these more charitable takes, it does not necessarily indicate what position that organization holds on the debate. In fact, Vyvyan Evans himself wrote an article about how emoji are becoming a form of language for *The Guardian* in February of 2015. A few months later, in May, *The Guardian* published one of the most scathing dismissals of emoji that I have found (Jones).

In light of all of this confusion and controversy about emoji and their place in our culture, I have decided to conduct my own research and join in the burgeoning scholarly conversation. The Word of the Year decision provides a topical subject for my research, so my study will focus on the honored pictograph in particular.

Words (and pictographs) have no inherent significance; they are only as significant as society makes them. Based on the aforementioned journalists’ derision, I

can safely assume that they are not big emoji users themselves. On the other hand, based on the Word of the Year decision, I can also assume that *Oxford Dictionaries* has reason to believe that some part of society has made emoji like 😊 (“face with tears of joy”) significant as a part of their lexicon. All of this—the disdain for and use of emoji—in happening in a world where technological changes have drastically transformed how people communicate. Some of these changes are relatively easy to see; for example, we know that people are communicating through text instead of speech far more often than they did twenty years ago. Unfortunately, it is more difficult to find information about some other aspects of technology-driven change, like specifics of emoji use.

To research phenomena related to the “face with tears of joy,” I utilize *Twitter.com* as a resource for examples of emoji usage. The text posts featured on *Twitter*, commonly called “tweets,” will be a primary source for research data. My reason for selecting *Twitter* is that *Twitter* is the largest social media website in which the focus is on textual posts, the posts are all publically available, and emoji use is common.

The intent of this thesis is to analyze how emoji function in casual self-expression as demonstrated in English-language tweets that use the 2015 *Oxford Dictionaries’* Word of the Year, the “face with tears of joy.” I am interested in better understanding what made *Oxford Dictionaries* choose an emoji—and this emoji in particular—as the Word of the Year. To research this issue, I ask these supporting questions:

- How do *Twitter* users use this emoji to communicate information or express themselves?
- How does use of this emoji reinforce, modify, or augment the meaning of the words in tweets?

- Does this emoji *create* meaning in tweets?
- What patterns of emoji use can be observed?

This thesis explores these questions by first researching the background of emoji and their use on *Twitter*. From there it investigates current literature on the topic. Next is the primary research study on emoji use, which informs later conclusions about what emoji really are for those who use them in their communication and whether we may one day consider emoji to be part of our language.

A Note on Terminology

One difficulty in studying and writing about emoji is that the terms used to describe them are inconsistent and occasionally vague. Some writers call all faces in text “emoticons” (a portmanteau of “emotion” and “icon”), whether they are graphics or a series of ASCII characters. By that use, facial-expression emoji would be a type of emoticon rather than a separate phenomenon. Even in the realm of ASCII character-constructed faces, some recognize a clear split between the classic Western emoticon viewed on its side, and its Japanese-origin counterpart, the *kaomoji*—for example, :-) and (^_^), respectively (Stark and Crawford 3). This leaves me in a bit of a quandary about how to proceed with terminology, both in discussing my own research and when referencing other sources.

The topic of my research is *emoji*, the rapidly-popularizing pictographic form, and I am studying it in response to the controversy surrounding the Word of the Year announcement. Distinguishing the emoji from the decades-old emoticon is necessary to preserve the intended focus of this thesis, yet the particular emoji I study is remarkably similar to emoticons in terms of its functionality. “😊” is a depiction of a facial expression, very much like traditional emoticons, so existing research on emoticons is

applicable to the study of this particular emoji. However, emoji as a whole include a variety of characters that are not depictions of facial expressions; these characters' usage may differ greatly from observed emoticon use. Arguably, from a functional perspective, 😊 is both an emoji and an emoticon, but 🍎, for example, is exclusively an emoji. It is the emoji aspect of the former that is important to my research topic, so even if some journalists and researchers call it an emoticon, I will refer to it as an emoji and call ASCII character faces emoticons to maintain the necessary focus for this piece.

Pleasantly, *Oxford Dictionaries* backs me up on the emoji/emoticon distinction. It defines emoticons as “combinations of keyboard characters” and emoji as “digital image[s] or icon[s]” (“Emoticon;” “Emoji”). Also according to *Oxford Dictionaries*, both “emoji” and “emojis” are considered correct pluralizations of “emoji” (“Emoji”). Emoji will be used as the plural for the entirety of this thesis, for the simple and easily-stated reason of personal preference.

Background

The following section will provide background on the primary focuses of this study, namely emoji and *Twitter*.

Emoji

Emoji are only the most recent form of notation used to express emotion for computer-mediated communication: the first were emoticons. Emoticons were originally created by Scott Fahlman in 1982 (Krohn 321). They comprise a row of characters found on a standard keyboard that, when viewed from the side, form faces with recognizable emotions. Fahlman noticed the need for such a device when he experienced fallout due to “misunderstood sarcasm and wisecracks” in the “early stages of electronic communication” (Curran and Casey 620). The first emoticons were “:-)” and “:-(,” which Fahlman suggested should denote a joking or not-joking message for Carnegie Mellon University’s electronic message board (Krohn 321). Fahlman believed that emoticons would eventually need to be “replaced with an improved approach to solving the problem of non-expressive [electronic communication]” (Curran and Casey 620). Emoticons certainly have been replaced, but time will tell if the replacement, emoji, is truly an “improved approach.”

Emoji, the cartoony little faces and images that are embedded into textual communication now, originated in Japan (Lebduska). The word emoji comes from the Japanese “e” meaning “picture,” and “moji” meaning “letter” or “character” (Lebduska). The first emoji designer, Shigetaka Kurita, worked for NTT Docomo, a cellular phone company that incorporated emoji as a new feature in their product launch in February of 1999 (Negishi). The emoji started out as a proprietary feature for NTT Docomo phones,

but other Japanese cell phone companies and Internet products also began to incorporate similar designs.

Before long, “Japanese programmers reached a consensus on computer codes for the emoji,” which allowed the Japanese “networks to communicate with one another” (Lebduska). After reaching that consensus, they were able to make sure that all Japanese cell phone and Internet users were able to send and receive emoji without technical problems. Years before they reached mainstream awareness in America, emoji enjoyed popular use in Japan.

Google and Apple—both heavyweight US-based technology companies—worked to bring emoji stateside in the mid-2000s (Lebduska). They presented Japanese emoji to the Unicode Consortium, which is “a non-profit corporation devoted to developing, maintaining, and promoting software internationalization standards and data” (“The Unicode Consortium”). What that means for emoji is that the Unicode Consortium has the ability to standardize code for the Internet on an international level. When the Unicode Consortium made standard codes for 722 emoji in 2010, it meant that all up-to-date websites in the world could display the emoji characters and everyone could easily send emoji to each other on these websites (Lebduska). It is this Unicode Consortium standardization that allows me to type emoji like 😊 in a standard word processor for this thesis. The international Internet community has been evolving and growing the use of emoji ever since.

Inconveniently, American cell phone companies did not follow Japanese companies’ lead in standardizing emoji across different manufacturers. Instead, American cell phone providers have their own emoji keyboards. The consequence of this is that

some phones have different emoji available, and the recipient of an SMS message from another phone brand may not be able to view the emoji at all. Even when both phones have the intended emoji, they will appear as different images. For example, here are some different versions of an emoji:



(Apple version)

Fig. 2.



(Samsung version)

Fig. 3.



(LG version)

Fig. 4.



(HTC version)

Fig. 5.

Even though these four emoji depict someone dancing (with varying degrees of clarity), they are each capable of communicating very different things while remaining under the same label of “dancer emoji.” For example, a woman with an Apple iPhone 6 may text a friend, “I’m feeling 🍷.” In such a case, the texter may be attempting to indicate that she feels glamorous or feminine. If the friend has an HTC Sense 7, he or she would receive a message that says, “I’m feeling 🕺.” The receiver may then interpret the message as saying that the woman who sent it feels energetic or jubilant.

Most emoji do not have such stark differences on different devices; the most common differences between different versions of an emoji are color shade, outline thickness, and whether they look two- or three-dimensional. Many websites and apps (*Twitter*, *Facebook*, etc.), not to mention the Unicode Consortium, have their own versions of emoji that will display uniformly for all users on that website or application. Confusion caused by clumsy emoji synonyms on different devices for the United States market is not common, but these emoji variations can complicate discussions about individual emoji among both users and researchers.

Twitter

Twitter was launched in 2006 and is now among the top social media websites in the world (Boyd, Golder, and Lotan 1). The primary function of the site is that it allows users to publically share short messages, or “tweets.” The maximum tweet length is 140 characters, which was originally constrained due to technological limitations (Boyd, Golder, and Lotan 2). The technological limitations have passed, but the short length of tweets has become a characteristic feature of the website. This format of short, public messages is considered “microblogging” (Boyd, Golder, and Lotan 2).

Twitter users are able to “follow” other users to receive updates about others’ tweets, which was an original feature of the website, but many more features have followed (if you will excuse the unintended pun). For example, the “hashtag” came into use for the first time ever on *Twitter* in 2007, though other mainstream social media websites have since picked it up (Zak). Other *Twitter* feature additions include the “@” used to tag other users into tweets and, of course, emoji.

Though *Twitter* was not the first social media website to enable emoji, it has become a high-profile site for emoji use. For example, in August of 2015, presidential candidate Hillary Clinton solicited emoji in *Twitter* replies when she tweeted, “How does your student debt make you feel? Tell us in 3 emojis or less” (Clinton). Domino’s Pizza turned to *Twitter* emoji for a new service in 2015 through which customers can “order a pizza by tweeting the pizza emoji to @Dominos” (Grossman). Overall, the use of emoji on *Twitter* shows no signs of slowing down.

Literature Review

For this thesis I am most interested in emoji’s place in our communication and self-expression. As such, I explore works that seek to ask what emoji are and what they do for us, plus other topics that add to the conversation about textual communication. In this respect, studies concerning emoticons are still applicable because emoticons achieve a similar nonverbal-cue-like effect in textual communication.

Linda Kaye, Helen Wall, and Stephanie Malone conducted a study on how and why people use emoticons and emoji (the researchers use the term “emoticon” to refer to both) through an online questionnaire administered to undergraduate students for course credit in a freshman-level psychology course. Ninety-two participants were asked to

score their emoticon use across three different platforms (SMS messages, Social Networking Sites [SNS], and email) on a five-point scale and write in descriptions of how and why they use emoticons along with their impressions of emoticons used by others (Kaye, Wall, and Malone 464).

They found that self-reported use of emoticons was highest in SMS messaging, followed by SNS, with email having the lowest emoticon use. The researchers discovered three primary themes in how students described their impressions of emoticons and their use; (1) emoticons aid personal expression, and (2) they reduce ambiguity, but (3) they are only appropriate in some contexts. Respondents considered Social Networking Sites (like *Twitter*) to be appropriate for emoji and emoticons, so only the first two themes are applicable to my research.

The first theme, aiding personal expression, was further divided into two subthemes, establishing tone and lightening the mood. In the open-ended responses, multiple students said that it is challenging to establish a vocal tone over textual communication. They said that emoticons can assist with intonation and allow them to employ stylistic devices like sarcasm with a greater chance that the recipient of the message will understand the intended meaning. Even when emoticons are not required to communicate the intended meaning, multiple students said that they can improve conversational flow and make the communication more “chatty” or “friendly” by lightening the mood (Kaye, Wall, and Malone 465).

On the theme of ambiguity reduction, the use of emoticons was reportedly useful to prevent messages from being taken to indicate something that the writer did not intend. Students expressed concerns that messages they send or receive might appear sarcastic,

rude, blunt, or mean-spirited when they were not intended that way. They reported that emoticons help prevent misunderstandings.

John Ehrett's "Toward a Textualist Paradigm for Interpreting Emoticons" describes the necessity of being able to interpret both emoji and emoticons, and proposes a method for standardizing interpretations. Ehrett explains that, while Internet users are accustomed to parsing out symbolic and contextual meaning from emoticons and emoji, it is difficult for courts and law enforcement to make clear interpretations for legal purposes. This difficulty has even been a problem for the Supreme Court of the United States in *Elonis v. United States*, a case in which the defense argued that the use of an emoticon proved that the defendant did not intend to make a threat. To simplify future interpreting for legal purposes, Ehrett recommends that the process begin by treating emoji and emoticons "as simple proxies for words." He recommends using the Unicode Consortium's emoji list as a dictionary for translating emoji pictographs into their associated descriptive words and using that translation as a basis for future interpretations. Ehrett does caution that some emoji have developed a specific colloquial usage—for example, the eggplant emoji as a "phallic symbol." However, he also argues that courts and law enforcement ought not assume that any use of such emoji is indicative of the colloquial use: "in other words, an eggplant may be simply an eggplant" (Ehrett).

Jaram Park, Clay Fink, Vladimir Barash, and Meeyoung Cha's "Emoticon Style: Interpreting Differences in Emoticons Across Cultures" comprises a study about emoticon use and propagation through social connections on *Twitter* with comparisons across different cultures and languages. This study was conducted before emoji were integrated into *Twitter*, so the focus is on emoticons specifically. Park et al. write that

emoticons are necessary stand-ins for nonverbal communication in computer-mediated communication, and that their use is culturally defined. The study included tracing emoji use through @replies of individuals on *Twitter* communicating with each other to see how emoticon usage and variations are transmitted and diffused culturally and linguistically. The authors found that emoticons were most likely to accompany “positive and light” messages, and less likely to appear in “angry or anxious” tweets (Park et al. 466). They also found that users “continuously expand the meanings of emoticons” by both using existing emoticons in novel ways and creating variations that provide different affects. Emoticon use was likely to be similar among friends and, to a lesser degree among users who speak the same language, but geographic differences did not affect usage as much as the authors expected.

In Federico Pozzi, Vincenzina Messina, and Elisabetta Fersini’s “Expressive Signals in Social Media Languages to Improve Polarity Detection,” the authors describe several “expressive forms” used in textual communication, including emoticons (3). The focus of this piece is how we can determine if a message is positive or negative. They outline three main signifiers of polarity: adjectives, pragmatic particles, and expressive lengthening. Emoticons are pragmatic particles that mirror “facial expressions in speech,” according to the authors’ analysis (Pozzi, Messina, and Fersini 4). Initialisms (lol, rofl, etc.) and onomatopoeic expressions (“such as ‘bleh’ and ‘wow’”) are also in the category of pragmatic particles according to this article (Pozzi, Messina, and Fersini 4). The authors make the case that emoticons can and should be understood as pragmatic elements that aid in clarifying a writer’s mood and intended tone.

Another source that discusses the role of pragmatic particles in casual text-based conversation is linguist John McWhorter's TEDTalk "Txtng is Killing Language. JK!!!" In the talk, McWhorter argues that SMS messaging is a medium that replicates spoken language rather than writing, which makes it a fertile landscape to develop new forms of expression. While McWhorter does not specifically discuss emoji in this talk, he does speak at length about how concerned voices have always, for centuries, bemoaned the regression of language spoken by the younger generations, yet that such fears have never been demonstrably realized. Instead, McWhorter posits that the dialect of SMS messaging (which I posit has great similarity to dialects of casual online communication) is co-evolving with face-to-face spoken and written forms of English. As such, those who use the texting dialect are actually "bidialectal," and being thus practiced at expressing the same idea in different ways depending on the medium of communication, he says, provides similar cognitive benefits as being bilingual (McWhorter). The development of these new, seemingly uncouth ways to communicate is actually "an expansion of their [young people's] linguistic repertoire" (McWhorter).

Methods

To answer my research questions, I analyzed emoji use in 100 English-language tweets as gathered through *EmojiTracker* on March 4, 2016. *EmojiTracker* is a website that was created by Matthew Rothenburg in 2013 (“Frequently Asked”). The website uses the “streaming search” function on *Twitter* to filter in tweets from around the world that contain emoji as they are tweeted in real time. *Twitter* emoji are processed as images rather than text characters on the website, which means that the standard *Twitter* “search” function, which only searches for text, is unable to search for emoji. This means that it is not possible at this time to search for tweets with emoji that were posted in the past; I can only harvest them as they are posted, which is best accomplished through *EmojiTracker*.

EmojiTracker’s main page is a grid, not unlike an Excel spreadsheet, with a cell for each emoji that was available on *Twitter* at the time the website was created. Each emoji has a number beside it that represents a tally of the number of tweets that have used that emoji since *EmojiTracker* was launched. Every time a tweet with emoji is created anywhere in the world, that emoji’s cell flashes green and the number ticks up. The emoji are ranked by popularity. “Face with tears of joy” is the most popular emoji on *Twitter* according to *EmojiTracker*, with 1.2 billion tweets at the time of writing this; its cell flashes constantly.

To conduct my analysis, I took screenshots of tweets that contain the emoji, “😄,” from *EmojiTracker*. Many uses of this particular emoji are occurring every second, such that the tweets stream through the *EmojiTracker* so quickly that they are unreadable. Using the screenshot application that came with my Windows computer, Snipping Tool, I was able to pause the stream of posts to capture whatever happened to be on the screen at

that time. On my workstation, I was able to capture approximately 10 tweets at a time in a single screenshot. Many tweets occurred while I was taking and saving the screenshots, so I was not be able to capture them. As such, I gathered what amounts to a random sampling of tweets from the general time frame in which I took the screenshots.

From preliminary testing of this method of capturing tweets, I could generally expect to have 3-5 usable tweets per screenshot. Unusable tweets include those in non-English languages, due to researcher limitations, or tweets that reference the “Word of the Year” decision, because emoji in such tweets represent the topic of conversation rather than actual use of the emoji. I took 30 screenshots in order to have enough usable tweets to reach my 100 tweet goal. From there I went through the screenshots chronologically and identified the first 100 usable tweets.

Before beginning work with my official study tweets, I did some initial analysis to get an idea of what the tweets would look like. Preliminary scanning of tweets containing the Word of the Year prior to taking the official study screenshots showed use of the emoji in multiple distinctive ways. In some cases the emoji simply reinforced the meaning that already existed in the text. In some cases the emoji modified or softened the meaning of the text. In some cases the emoji completed or stood in place of text. This third case was further split into cases in which the emoji was used as the entire commentary on something referenced in the tweet—like a link or quote—or cases in which emoji took the role of part of the sentence. For example, a tweet might say something like, “When my brother still can’t remember the wifi password 😊.” In that case, the emoji completes the thought in lieu of words. In other instances, the emoji simply expresses an emotion or suggests how readers are intended to feel. In terms of

structure, emoji tend to follow after the main text, although in some cases they precede text or links. I used these initial observations to help guide my coding of the 100 tweets.

To conduct the coding of my 100 tweets, I printed out the screenshots and cut them out. Printing them and cutting the tweets out individually allowed me to code them in a very tactile way, unencumbered by the lens of a computer screen. By spreading them out on a table (see Fig. 6), I could see all of them and sort them by what I perceived to be the function of the emoji in the tweet. I repeated the process of taking them out and resorting them several times over the course of about two weeks before I felt comfortable that I knew what general themes I was looking at and how individual tweets fit into the emerging schema. I began by trying to sort the tweets by topic. However, by second or third read-through I realized that the topic of the overall tweet had little to do with what function the emoji performed in the tweet. It took some trial and error before I developed a knack for categorizing tweets by their emoji use.

Abbreviations and slang were an obstacle to understanding several of the tweets, particularly when the slang was specific to a region outside of the United States. At times I thought that I understood a tweet and, consequently, the function of its emoji, only to realize that I mistook a specific slang term or abbreviation as an inconsequential onomatopoeic expression. *Urban Dictionary*, a website that allows users to submit their own definitions of words and slang to be judged by other users for their accuracy, was a useful tool for interpreting unfamiliar slang, even if its data had to be taken with a grain of salt.

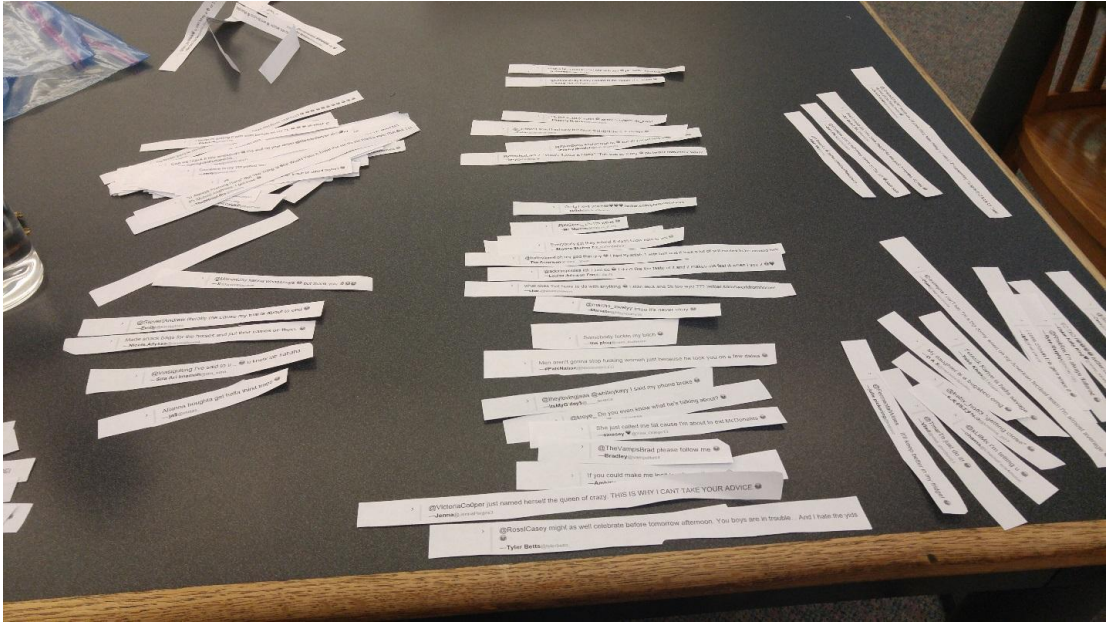


Fig. 6.

Limitations

Understanding meaning in emoji communication often relies heavily on contextual cues, but in this study most context is not available because of the technical limitations related to *Twitter's* format and my random-collection methodology through *EmojiTracker*. The scope of my research is focused on and narrowed to understanding how an emoji is used in short, microblog messages, but there is a wide range of emoji applications and contexts that will still need to be explored. I recommend further study that explores emoji use in the context of back-and-forth conversations to expand on the understanding of emoji use afforded by this study

One of the primary ways that emoticons and emoji can differ is that emoticons have been almost entirely limited to depictions of facial expressions, while emoji represent a wide range of expressions, actions, objects, etc. This study is focused on the emoji that is most popular on my chosen platform, *Twitter*, and that has been recognized for its significance to modern culture by *Oxford Dictionaries*, but there is a whole world of emoji that I was not able to include. I recommend further study on the use of emoji that are dissimilar from emoticons.

Twitter and emoji use are global, but I am only able to study usage in English. That said, there are multiple cultures represented in my 100 suitable tweets, and I only have the tweet itself to inform me of what the cultural context of the tweeter is. Some of the slang in the tweets was not immediately familiar to me, and while I was able to find information about likely meanings, it would always be preferable to work with people from every major cultural group represented in the samples. I recommend further research with a diverse group of researchers, particularly a global and multi-lingual study.

My sample size is too small by multiple orders of magnitude to be able to generalize on the global Internet or *Twitter* populations. Instead, the purpose of this study is limited to making observations about emoji use that could help inform the public about this new stylistic and communicative form, and discover some general trends in how emoji are used. I recommend that further studies include a much larger sample for the purposes of obtaining statistical data about emoji use.

Results

After completing my coding process, I had identified six primary types of tweets/uses of emoji. This section will contain descriptions of those six categories with example tweets from each category.

Smoothing/softening (36%)

The messages in these tweets varies quite a bit, but I've grouped them into the same usage type because the emoji are doing the same thing in all of them—smoothing or softening a message that has some chance of being ill-received. This usage type accounted for 36% of the tweets, but it is further divided into two subcategories.

The first subcategory is tweets that might be awkward to send or receive and could possibly cause readers to get a negative impression of the writer for that reason.

> |
—Bradley@vampette64

> |
—X@XavierAlexzandr

This subcategory accounted for 15% of the total tweets.

The second subcategory contains tweets that are more explicitly upset-sounding, judgmental, or are very likely to be considered offensive.

> |
—The American@Caleb__Wyatt

> |
—M@mollielouiseday

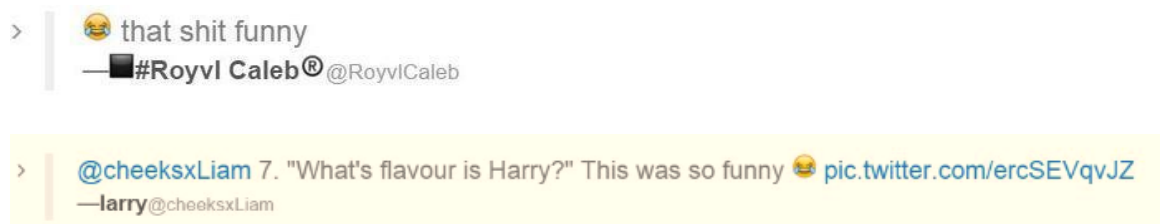
The use of the emoji does necessarily imply that the writers were joking about their experiences with and opinion of the person or place in question. As such, the emoji

does not serve to prevent ambiguity in the message, but it does serve the function of smoothing the delivery of the given sentiment.

This subcategory accounted for 21% of the total tweets.

Reinforcing (15%)

In these tweets, the emoji are directly complementing and reinforcing the text. They are either tweets in which the user is explicitly reacting to something they found humorous, or they are saying something that is clearly intended to be funny or a joke from the way it is worded. Therefore, these tweets are fulfilling expectations for the use of an emoji that depicts laughter to the point of tears.



This usage type accounted for 15% of the tweets.

Personality Marker (15%)

The text of these tweets did not indicate that the writer was trying to tell a joke, nor that they were reacting to something that made them laugh, nor that they might not mean what they said, nor was it a message that might be interpreted in a mean-spirited way. Many of the tweets in this category are conversational @ replies to other users or statements that were typically positive in sentiment. More than anything, they just seem like someone wanting to put a thought into the world, and wanting to do so nicely. The emoji in these tweets are evocative of a light-hearted and friendly tone.

> | Made snack bags for the horses and put their names on them. 🤪
—Nicole.Allyssa@nicoleallyssa4

> | @Sarahdarbs @pearson_jen I have distinct memories of the Darby children being sent to the bathroom 🤪
—Melissa Musso@melissaamusso

This usage type accounted for 15% of the tweets.

Primary reaction (14%)

The tweets in this usage category contained a single word or sentiment in the textual message. Many said an equivalent of “yes,” “no,” or “thank you,” or had a single noun, adjective or interjection, along with the emoji. In these cases, the emoji actually plays a major role in communication. The text only says a simple concept, and the emoji represents the way that the user feels about the concept.

> | @alexagrash basically 🤪
—Sydney@sydneyMFmorris

Very short tweets that qualified for other categories were sorted into those other categories.

This usage category accounted for 14% of the tweets.

Modifying (8%)

The emoji in these tweets change the reading of the tweet by casting doubt on the seriousness of the message or wording in the text. Generally, they did not add new meaning to the existing message, but instead changed the reading of that message. This is a usage that may be particular to the specific emotion portrayed by the target emoji.

> | Anddddd i want a bird now 🤪 twitter.com/theanimalvines...
—\$@shaaalynn

In this tweet, the presence of the emoji implies that the writer is not necessarily serious about wanting to actually own a bird. A reader would not necessarily expect that he or she is now in the process of investigating how to obtain a pet bird.

This usage type accounted for 8% of the tweets.

Functional (6%)

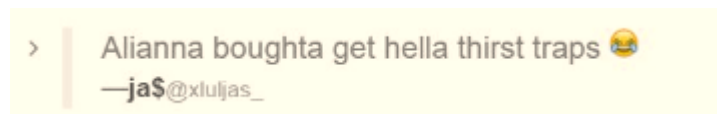
Tweets in this category used emoji as necessary components to construct the meaning of the sentence, often standing in for words or phrases to complete the thought

>  [@FuegeNameEin](#) 😂 because he loves anime 🤔 and its naruto 🤔 #teamgaara
—❤️ [thewisehigaholic](#) 🙌 @robinaSkaur1990

In this tweet, the emoji function as the author’s commentary for the situation identified by the text. In this way, the emoji is the primary instrument of self-expression. For example, you could interpret this tweet to say, “I feel very amused, and it’s because he loves anime. The situation is particularly entertaining to me because the anime in question is Naruto, which I love.”

This usage category accounted for 6% of the tweets.

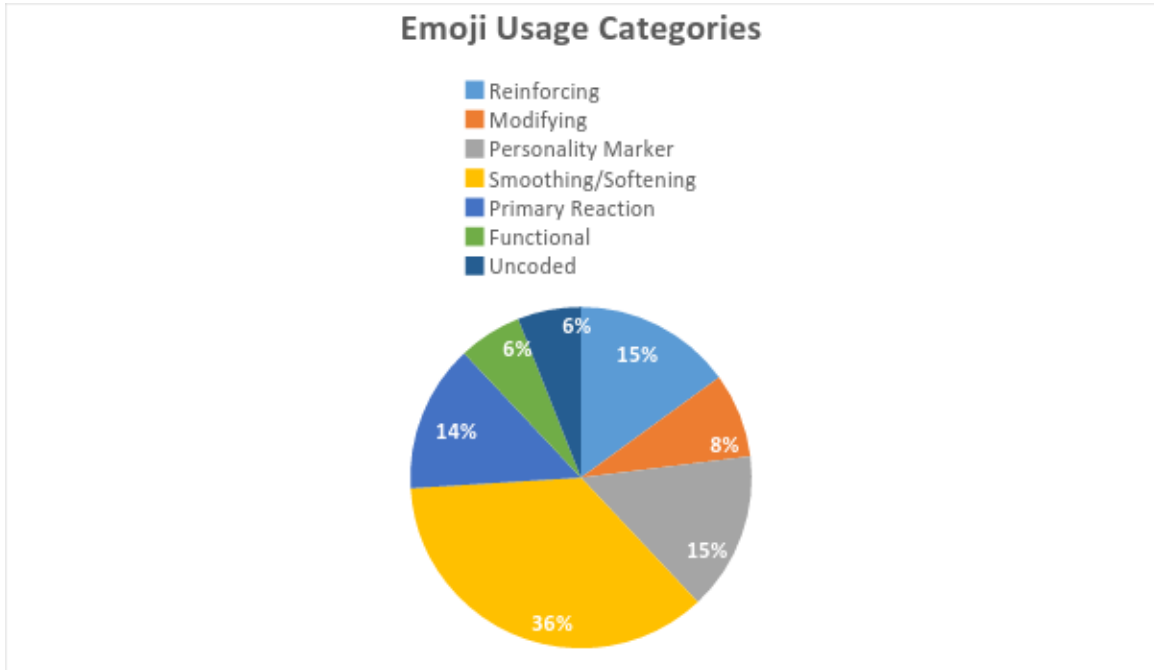
The remaining 6% of the tweets could not be coded into any of the categories because they were incomprehensible or overly ambiguous.

>  Alianna boughta get hella thirst traps 🤔
—ja\$@xluljas_

Even though I researched the words and phrases in the above tweet, and was able to understand parts of it, the overall sentence remains incomprehensible to me. I suspect that there may be typos or missing words in the tweet that would otherwise allow me to interpret it, or there may be contextual information that would allow the tweeter’s

intended audience to understand. As it is, I could imagine the tweet's emoji to be a personality marker, a comedic reinforcement, or serve to soften the message of the tweet, but I could not code it.

The following pie chart provides a visual breakdown of the distribution of different categories.



Discussion

This section is where I get into what exactly my results tell me about this emoji's function in tweets and how *Twitter* users use it, particularly in light of the pre-existing research on the subject. The process of coding the 100 tweets and the resulting data has shown an unexpectedly wide range of applications for the “face with tears of joy” emoji among *Twitter* users. Using the emoji to reinforce humor in a tweet only made up a small portion of the total, which helps reinforce Pozzi, Messina, and Fersini's classification of emoji as pragmatic particles.

The fact that a small portion of my tweets had anything to do with the “literal” meaning of the emoji indicates that John Ehrett's definition-driven paradigm for interpreting emoji may be woefully insufficient to account for how emoji use is evolving. Considering my results coupled with Vyvyan Evans' belief that emoji use is evolving incredibly quickly, I would hazard to say that there might not be a long-term reliable method for legal interpretations of individual emoji, other than a simple rule of thumb: take advantage of all available contextual information.

Emoji use in 2016 has drastically departed from emoticon use on the same platform a few years earlier. Park et al's 2013 *Twitter* study found that light-hearted messages were most likely to include emoticons, but my results indicate that the same does not hold true for emoji in 2016. In fact, the largest category of emoji use mostly contains tweets that appear “angry and anxious,” a tone which Park et al. found to be *least* likely to include emoticons. Of course, this difference could be the result of styles changing over time, but my personal experience with emoticons is more similar to Park et al's findings than my study's results on emoji use. Though I cannot support this

speculation with this particular study, I suspect that there may be real usage differences between emoticons and equivalent emoji—for example, :) and 😊—that has not been identified in any literature I found. It is pretty exciting, actually. I am pretty stoked about that.

As I was reading back through the tweets post-coding, it suddenly struck me that uses of the emoji were remarkably similar to uses of “LOL” that I have seen in my experience as an Internet user. The similarities were so striking that I began to suspect that use of the emoji 😊 has been highly influenced by earlier use of the initialism LOL, which took me right back to John McWhorter’s TEDTalk, “Txtng is killing language. JK!!!” In the talk, McWhorter points out that LOL is rarely used to indicate that the writer is laughing, even though the initialism stands for “laughing out loud.” Instead, he says that LOL has become “a marker of empathy” (McWhorter). What he means by that is that texters whose SMS messages he analyzed had fallen into a pattern of using LOL to indicate something like “I want you to understand what I’m feeling” or “I understand how you/they feel,” even if they were not doing it explicitly or consciously. Consider the following tweets from my study:

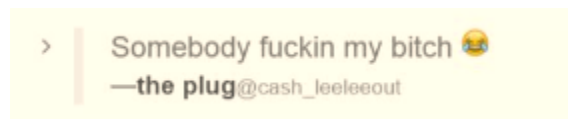
> | @KiGees_ Lls I'm weak 🤔
—Mr. Marcus@Marcus_R_Us

> | @SievertAndrew literally me cause my trial is about to end 🤔
—Emily@EmillyInez

> | Went to Shell/Fina tacos today and told the guys they were famous and they said they were embarrassed 🤔
—Veronica@_Veroooh

In tweets like these, the emoji could be empathy markers in the same way that McWhorter considers LOL to be an empathy marker. They may be softening a potentially uncomfortable message or lending a light-hearted tone, but acting as an empathy marker might be part of the mechanism for achieving those functions.

When comparing my results to Kaye, Wall, and Malone's, I find some similarities with the views of their respondents, but also some differences. The coding process definitely supported the result that emoji (and emoticons, per the study) aid in self-expression by allowing users to establish tone and lighten the mood. However, I found that they did not often reduce ambiguity. Consider the following tweet:



In this case, the text of the tweet clearly alleges that someone with whom the user has a relationship has committed infidelity. The choice of words expresses the allegation in a coarse, stark, even blunt way, with no apparent ambiguity. Yet, strangely, the light-hearted emoji is tagged on to the end. Perhaps the user is utilizing 🤔 unconventionally to indicate hysteria rather than amusement, but perhaps instead he or she is being deliberately incongruous, just for cathartic irony. Perhaps 🤔 is added to *increase* ambiguity, thereby giving readers the task of interpreting how the writer feels as a substitute for putting those feelings in clear, insufficient words. Regardless of the user's intention, tweets like these illustrate that the uses for emoji are continuing to expand.

Conclusion

Over the course of conceiving and writing this thesis I have learned more about emoji than I ever expected to know. I have delved into the rich, interdisciplinary, and ongoing body of research about emoji and their use, and done my best to add to that conversation. After all of this, I had hoped to be able to make some conclusions about whether or not emoji are or should be words. After a lot of time going back through my notes and taking long evening walks with my thoughts, my ultimate conclusion is that whether or not emoji are considered words does not really matter. It is the wrong question.

In addition to my research on emoji, I have also spent some time trying to pin down the technical definition of “word.” Without venturing too deeply into the rabbit hole of that line of research, to sum it up, “word” is not necessarily a useful technical term for linguists (Lamb 37; Greenberg, Hollenback, and Ellis 1; Derwojedowa et al. 352; Dagut 21). Many languages do not split bits of language the same way that we do in English, which means that the term “word” is generally insufficient when comparing different languages. For example, in Japanese they conjugate verbs and add endings to them to mean different things; “taberu” means “to eat,” “tabetai” means “want to eat,” and “tabenaide” means “do not eat,” stated as a command, and that is only a tiny sampling of ways to modify Japanese verbs. Based on English layman’s terms, you could argue to that there are many, many words for “eat” in Japanese, but that is not useful for understanding Japanese language. Instead of words, linguists talk about things like lexemes as components of lexicons, or discuss subjects, objects, and verbs (in addition to

adjectives, articles, particles, etc.) as elements of syntax, or phonemes as phonological units. Whether or not the public calls emoji “words” is not important.

The question should be, how are emoji significant? Given their brief, yet eventful history, the attention they have garnered and the global human energy that has fueled their evolution as an expressive form has given them significance. It is important that emoji are useful for communication and self-expression. In fact, they are an incredibly exciting new item in humanity’s expressive toolbox, and we are still discovering their potential. John McWhorter described spoken language and written language as two separate forms of communication that are governed by different norms, and he said that SMS messaging has developed a textual form of spoken language. We are now developing a third form of communication that contains expressive forms that are not needed in formal writing, yet are entirely unpronounceable, which precludes them from becoming part of spoken language. I expect the norms of spoken dialects and the norms of Internet dialects to continue diverging as our global population finds new ways that technology can help express what it is to be human—emoji are just important members of a family of technology-enabled expressive forms.

Modern poetry has taught us that the decision to omit punctuation or present personal pronouns with a lowercase “i” allows the poet to say something inexpressible under the standards of correct usage. An E. E. Cummings poem cannot be fully experienced through the spoken word, and, in an ever-increasing way, neither can the dialect of the Internet.

If *Oxford Dictionaries* intended to honor 2015’s most significant unit of expression, I have no evidence to contradict them.

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Fig. 4. "Dancer Emoji." LG Electronics, n.d. Accessed from *Emojipedia.com*. Web. 28 Apr. 2016

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Fig. 6. "Coding." Author's photo.