

The Use of Symbols (Emoticons) in Social Media: A Shift of Language from Words to Symbols

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Abstract: *Emojis is the fast-growing language in the world, attracting viewers and has a great impact on their minds. This research aims at exploring how the use of emoticons leads to the emergence of a new universal language preferred by youth, thus, inviting a shift from words to other symbols. This study is proceeding from a quantitative survey analysis of the international students at Eastern Mediterranean University, North Cyprus. A questionnaire was designed to conduct a survey and to collect data for this study. The relationship is measured by using a statistical correlation test. For the sample, 100 hundred students from different departments of the university were randomly selected. A proportionate sampling method of sampling technique was used to collect the data. It was found that social media has provided a platform for the use of emojis that not only makes communication easy and more user friendly but also adds to understanding in different age groups.*

Key Words: Emojis use, Communication Context, Emoticons, Symbols, University Students

Introduction

Emoji is a fast-growing language. It is believed that images attract viewers and have a great impact on their minds in the media. The use of images in social media is very common because it is easier to express while using images than using lengthy sentences and difficult literary words. These images include photos, charts, drawings, pictographic, ideographic, emojis, etc., and collectively all these are known as emoticons. Emoji is an image that may be static or animated that represents human expressions in digital communication. These are the

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graphical successors to the emotions that show similar things through some characteristics. There are applications in mobile phones and computers that have emojis, and by simply clicking the desired one, it is inserted, or it can be converted from the text as well, which carry the body and facial expressions. The collections of emoji are available on Smartphone apps, social networking sites and other platforms (Wigmore, 2015).

The word emoticon is the combination of two words, “emotions and icon”. An emoticon means the representation of facial expressions graphically used on social media and messaging devices. These emoticons carry expressions, which are understandable and take very little in writing and interpretation of sentiments (Dresner, 2010).

According to Walter (as cited in Dunlap, 2015), “Emoticons are the graphical representation of facial expressions”, and there are most emotions that are commonly recognized and are well known among the users. These act as non-verbal cues, which are the short substitute of the lengthy text. In addition to this, they may be used as a complement to the text to add more attractiveness. For example, a smiley face adds a smile to the receiver's face, which, according to some scholars, has a stronger impact on the receiver's mood than the text.

The civilization is evolving as Jonathan Jones (2015) argues that “emoji is dragging us back to dark ages”. Emoji is a fast-growing language in Britain. We move back to the ancient Egyptian civilization and then to the Stone Age as again the world has shifted from words to the images which were used in the ancient civilizations and people in the caves (Jones, 2015). A study that investigated the Facebook conversation of Malaysian college students showed that most of all the sentences there were contained a smiley or other emoticons, which shows the common trends and a shift in the language in the communication by adding emoticons (SitiHaminStapa, 2012).

The posts on social media include images having more response, i.e. more likes and comments. According to Fizz (2013), seventy percent of posts had images in the top 20 posts. On Facebook, the viewership rate is 37% greater for the posts which are having images. Studies showed that viewers are more likely to remember posts with images for a long time, and an image can convey an idea better than words (Fizz, 2013).

According to a report by the Social Times website, 92 percent of social media consumers use emoji. Further, the report found that the consumers use emoji for the reason that it can accurately and quickly express their thoughts. It is easy to transfer the ideas and make the people understand the message and can carry the exact emotions (Shaul, 2015). The emoji, pictographic, and ideographic are widely used on social media, and the world is again returning to the age of images that were used for communication. Social media has made communication instant, like emoji played a vital role in rapid and easy communication.

Emojis have taken over almost everyone's communication that uses social media. According to Insider, in the US, 74% of people are using emoticons in social media. All over the world, about six billion emoticons are flying every day on online communication. This huge amount of emoticons shows its importance to study it further. Many studies are conducted to know the impact of emojis on the human psyche, and it has been investigated that looking at the smiley emoji can make our expression like that, so it has a long-lasting and deep effect on our mind. This is something which is not by birth, but we have been mentally associated with these expressions for some years (SEITER, 2015).

Methodology

This study is quantitative in nature, focusing on international students at Eastern Mediterranean University, North Cyprus. This research aimed at determining to know about the understanding and use of emoticons as the emergence of a new language. Further, the aim of the study is to determine how and why language is shifting from text to image and are becoming a popular medium on social media and also to know the preferences of youth while using emoticons. A questionnaire was designed to conduct a survey and collect data for this study. A simple random sampling was used for the collection of data. The relationship is measured by using statistical correlation tests. For example, 100 hundred students from different departments of the university are selected randomly. A proportionate sampling technique was used to collect data.

Universe

The universe of the study is Eastern Mediterranean University, North Cyprus.

Population

Population in social sciences means people, things or events in a group where data is collected and explored by researchers. Dixon and Marry (1957) defined population as “any set of individuals or objects having some common observable features are called population or universe”. In this study, the population is the students of the above-mentioned university. The university has a diverse kind of students from various countries, mostly from the Middle East, Africa and South Asia. The university has six faculties; all are included in the study.

Research Design

As already said, this is quantitative research. This type of research refers to a study based on systematic empirical techniques where analysis is conducted through a statistical tool, computer or any other statistical measurements. In this research, the data collected through a questionnaire has been analyzed through SPSS, a statistical tool.

Sample

According to Hall (1952), a sample is nothing but a representation of a large whole where the members are selected through different sampling techniques. It means a sample is a subset of the population. One hundred students from all the faculties and schools at EMU North Cyprus are taken as a sample.

Data Collection Tools/Instruments

A predesigned questionnaire was used to collect data from the participants where questions related to demographic variables and the target study in terms of direct questions related to the use of social networks were set.

Literature Review

Emoticons are becoming a popular language which will be soon competing with English. According to an article on BBC by Neil Cohn, the evolution of emoji is exciting for communication with other people. Emoji enhances the writing when it appears with a text. Just like it is when speech is accompanied by gestures. Gestures with speech clarify the

messages more, and people can easily understand them. For contemporary digital interactions and conversations, emoji are very useful to enrich and enhance its text. Besides words, it reminds us that there are a lot more ways for our communication (Cohn, Future, 2015).

It is said that the brain processes visual data 60,000 times faster than text does (Parkinson as cited in Vilnai-Yavetz, 2015). People “remember 10 percent of what they hear, 20 percent of what they read and 80 percent of what they see and experience” (Wyzowl). Cognitive researches have shown that images are processed quicker than words by the human brain, and images remain in long-term memories for a longer time (Baker, 2015). In digital media, Emojis have emerged as a new medium of communication. There has been a dramatic change in the language of the new media, which is dominated by emoji than text (Morrison, 2016). Emojis are not only used for daily friendship communication, but the advertisers and marketers also take great advantage of their use. A study has found that the advertisement of brands with emojis has more likes and views. About 59 percent of the world’s top brands are using emoji on social networks (E Marketers, 2016).

Many linguists claim that emoji is a way towards the creation of new language, which means that humans are shifting again from words to symbols and images. The way we communicate on social media is changing. A new language of images is becoming so popular in the recent era by using emoji, pictographs, and ideographs instead of lengthy explanations by writing lengthy texts. People use emoticon for the reason that they need less explanation, require less time and space and the feelings are communicated significantly. People react to emoticons as they react to the real human face. It makes people friendlier (Seiter, 2015). Not only teenagers are using these hashtags, but it has been reached the mainstream. It is a glaring fact that the English language alone is not sufficient to meet the requirements of 21st-century communication (Read, 2016).

The popularity of emoji is different from state to state in the USA and from country to country in the world. Various degrees of emoticons are used on different social websites. Social media is used for instant communication, and also companies are using it to improve business opportunities, although communication using emoticons is informal communication. The users of social media can enrich their messages with social meanings by the use of emoticons that represent facial expressions. The use of emoticons is becoming part of the communication culture on social media.

Emoticons have overcome the barriers in language because it’s in the form of pictures or images which are universal, and almost everywhere, one can understand the message. Neil Cohn (2015) argues that “When emoji appear with text, they often supplement or enhance the writing. This is similar to gestures that appear along with speech. Over the past three decades, research has shown that our hands provide important information that often transcends and clarifies the message in speech. Emoji serve this function too – for instance, adding a kissy or winking face can disambiguate whether a statement is flirtatiously teasing or just plain mean”; he further argues that “This is a key point about language use: rarely is natural language ever limited to speech alone. When we are speaking, we constantly use gestures to illustrate what we mean. For this reason, linguists say that language is “multimodal”. Writing takes away that extra non-verbal information, but emoji may allow us to re-incorporate it into our text” (Cohn, 2015, p. 12).

Results and Discussions

In order to know the use of emojis, data from students belonging to different age groups,

genders and different departments and faculties were collected. Out of 100 students, 45 were female, and 55 were male. Similarly, taking different age groups, the respondents included 4 participants from age group 18-20, 37 participants from age group 23-26, 38 participants from age group 27-32, 20 participants from the age group 27-35 and only one belonged to the age group that is above 35. As said earlier, due to the multicultural environment, students belonged to different nationalities. There were 24 students who were from the sub-continent, 34 from the Middle East, 24 from Africa, and 18 from Central Asia. The respondents had different educational backgrounds belonging to different faculties. From the faculty of Architecture, 33 students participated in the survey while 30, 29, and 8 belonged to the faculty of Communication and Media Studies, Business and Economics and Arts and Humanities, respectively. Most of the respondents were PhD students making the number 60. There were 36 graduate students and only 4 undergraduate students.

In response to the question, what social network sites are being used by the respondents, it was reported that Instagram was mostly used by the respondents (i.e., 29). It was followed by Snapchat (used by 23 respondents), Facebook (used by 18 respondents), and Twitter (used by 15 respondents). In the option “any other”, 15 respondents ticked Whatsapp. The following table summarizes the details:

Table 1. Social Network Sites used by the Respondents

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Facebook	18	8.7	21.2	21.2
	Tiwitter	15	7.3	17.6	38.8
	Instagram	29	14.1	34.1	72.9
	Snapchate	23	11.2	27.1	100.0
	Whatsapp	15	7.3	17.6	38.8
	Total	100	41.3	100.0	
Missing	System	121	58.7		
Total		206	100.0		

When it was asked that what social network sites are used frequently by the respondents, the results were a little different when Instagram again was on the top used by 61 respondents, followed by Facebook with 21 users and Snapchat with 18 users. The following table gives the details.

Table 2. Social Network sites used Frequently by the Respondents

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Facebook	21	10.2	21.0	21.0
	Instagram	61	29.6	61.0	82.0
	Snapchat	18	8.7	18.0	100.0
	Total	100	48.5	100.0	
Missing	System	106	51.5		
Total		206	100.0		

Considering the duration of the use of social media, quite surprisingly, it was found that most of the respondents opted for the longer duration of social media use. Sixty-seven

respondents said that they use social media 6-7 hours daily. Five respondents said that they use it 4-6 hours, while 12 respondents replied that they use it 1-3 hours. It means that most of the youth spend more time on social networks.

Table 3: Time spent on social network sites daily

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Less than 1 hour	16	7.8	16.0	16.0
	1-3 hours	12	5.8	12.0	28.0
	4-6 hours	5	2.4	5.0	33.0
	6-8 hours	67	32.5	67.0	100.0
	Total	100	48.5	100.0	
Missing	System	106	51.5		
Total		206	100.0		

After finding out how much time youth spends on social network and the particular social network in use, it was inquired as to what extent the respondents use emoticons. To this inquiry, most of the respondents, i.e., 22 said that they use emoticons very frequently, 41 said that they use emoticons frequently, 28 said that they use them occasionally, and only nine said they use them occasionally. It means that majority of the respondents were frequent users of emoticons.

Table 4. Frequency of the use of Emoticons

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Frequently	22	10.7	22.0	22.0
	Frequently	41	19.9	41.0	63.0
	Occasionally	28	13.6	28.0	91.0
	Rarely	9	4.4	9.0	100.0
	Total	100	48.5	100.0	
Missing	System	106	51.5		
Total		206	100.0		

The next question was about the context of the use of emoticons, i.e., with whom the respondents mostly use emoticons. To this, 51 respondents said that they use emoticons mostly with friends, 35 said that they use emoticons with family members, 7 said that they use it with romantic partners, and only 5 said that they use emoticons with fellow students.

Table 5. The Context of Emoticons use

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Friends	51	24.8	51.0	51.0
	Family	35	17.0	35.0	86.0
	Romantic Partner	7	3.4	7.0	93.0
	Fellow students	5	2.4	5.0	98.0

	12.00	1	.5	1.0	99.0
	21.00	1	.5	1.0	100.0
	Total	100	48.5	100.0	
Missing	System	106	51.5		
Total		206	100.0		

Regarding the mood in which emoticons are mostly used, 58 respondents said that the use of emoticons is very normal, which is used in a normal mood. However, 22 respondents said that anger often drives them towards the use of emoticons, and 17 respondents said that they use it when they are sad. A very small number of respondents, i.e., only 3, were of the opinion that they use it when they are happy.

Table 6. The Relationship of Mood and use of Emoticons

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Sad	17	8.3	17.0	17.0
	Happy	3	1.5	3.0	20.0
	Angry	22	10.7	22.0	42.0
	Normally	58	28.2	58.0	100.0
	Total	100	48.5	100.0	
Missing	System	106	51.5		
Total		206	100.0		

In the next section, it was explored that how often and why there is a gradual shift from the use of words on social networks to emoticons.

When enquired whether the use of emoticons has a positive relationship with the understanding of the interlocutors, 65 respondents said that they strongly agree with the statement that “emoticons are more understandable than text”, and 35 strongly agreed. It means that no one went against it, showing a strong correlation between understanding and the use of emoticons.

Table 7. The relationship between the use of emoticons and understanding

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	65	31.6	65.0	65.0
	Strongly Disagree	35	17.0	35.0	100.0
	Total	100	48.5	100.0	
Missing	System	106	51.5		
Total		206	100.0		

To know the relationship between the use of emoticons with different age groups, most of the respondents, i.e., 62, agreed with the statement that “it is difficult while communicating with old age people through emoticon”, while 38 disagreed, claiming that emoticons can be used with any age groups.

Table 8. The Relationship Between the use of Emoticons and age Groups

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	62	30.1	62.0	62.0

	Strongly Disagree	38	18.4	38.0	100.0
	Total	100	48.5	100.0	
Missing	System	106	51.5		
Total		206	100.0		

To know how likely emoticons can lead to a change of the language and communication through words, most of the respondents disagree with the statement that “Emoticons are changing the language” and “Emoticons are replacing the words quickly”. Table 9 and 10 present the details as the following:

Table 9. Emoticons and language change

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	39	18.9	39.0	99.0
	Strongly Disagree	60	29.1	0.0	60.0
	11.00	1	.5	1.0	100.0
	Total	100	48.5	100.0	
Missing	System	106	51.5		
Total		206	100.0		

Table 10. Emoticons and words change

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	29	14.1	29.0	29.0
	Strongly Disagree	71	34.5	71.0	100.0
	Total	100	48.5	100.0	
Missing	System	106	51.5		
Total		206	100.0		

In this sections, it was enquired that how the users of social media gratify their needs of its users. In this respect, 75 respondents strongly agreed that “The expressions are clearly understandable through emoticons”. It means that social media users believe that the use of emoticons has a relationship with understanding, confirming the statement already given in table 7.

Table 11. Emoticons and understanding of expressions

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	75	36.4	75.0	75.0
	Strongly Disagree	22	10.7	22.0	97.0
	12.00	2	1.0	2.0	99.0
	21.00	1	.5	1.0	100.0
	Total	100	48.5	100.0	
Missing	System	106	51.5		
Total		206	100.0		

Knowing about whether old age people respond accordingly to emoticons, 76 respondents agreed with the statement while 24 respondents disagreed. It is shown in the following table:

Table 12. Emoticons and reply of old age people

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	76	36.9	76.0	76.0
	Strongly Disagree	24	11.7	24.0	100.0
	Total	100	48.5	100.0	
Missing	System	106	51.5		
Total		206	100.0		

Whether emoticons give the exact meaning and sentiments or not, 72 respondents said that emoticons convey the desired meaning and sentiments, while only 28 respondents disagreed with the statement.

Table 13. Emoticons and message clarity

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	72	35.0	72.0	72.0
	Strongly Disagree	28	13.6	28.0	100.0
	Total	100	48.5	100.0	
Missing	System	106	51.5		
Total		206	100.0		

It was further explored that the use of emoticons saves time on social media. 52 respondents agreed with the statement, and 48 disagreed.

Table 14. Emoticons and Time Saving

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	52	25.2	52.0	52.0
	Strongly Disagree	48	23.3	48.0	100.0
	Total	100	48.5	100.0	
Missing	System	106	51.5		
Total		206	100.0		

Regarding the ease and friendly use of emoticons, most of the respondents, i.e., 76, agreed with the statement that emoticons are user-friendly, while 24 did not agree.

Table 14. Emoticons as user-friendly symbols

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	76	36.9	76.0	76.0
	Strongly Disagree	24	11.7	24.0	100.0

	Total	100	48.5	100.0
Missing	System	106	51.5	
Total		206	100.0	

To know about the impact of emoticons, it was reported that emoticons have a pleasant impact on the users, and they enjoy the chat. 86 respondents were in favour of the statement, while 14 disagreed. The table summarizes the data as the following:

Table 15. Emoticons and pleasant impact

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	86	41.7	86.0	86.0
	Strongly Disagree	14	6.8	14.0	100.0
	Total	100	48.5	100.0	
Missing	System	106	51.5		
Total		206	100.0		

As communication is an important aspect of human life, apart from many other tools, emojis adds to communication as an essential tool. Its use is user-friendly and clear as far as understanding is concerned. It is present all over social network sites that not only cater to expressing different emotions but also has a role in expressing the desired meaning. Moreover, the use of emoticons is more frequent in similar age participants. Its use is not only limited to the youth, it is seldom used with old age people, but this use is quite limited. Mostly, its use is connected with the expression of sorrows, sadness and anger; however, it is also a part of normal life.

Conclusion

To conclude, it can be said that though emoticons cannot replace the words and bring heavy changes in the communication system, emoticons, because of their user-friendly nature: understanding, message clarity, and pleasant impact, have secured a good place in communication on various social networks. If it not a threat to change in the writing system, it is indeed a valuable addition to the writing system used on social networks.

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