

FELLOWSHIP



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If you can read the title of this essay, you know basic Emoji. For those who are beginning learners of this language, it means: “I’m running 30 minutes late. I’m so sorry.” (It should be noted that I use the word Emoji to refer to the entire language system and emojis when I talk about individual symbols.)

An essential limitation that writers of digital messages face is that non-verbal cues such as tone of voice, facial expressions, and gestures are not available in digital discourse. People engaged in face-to-face communication draw heavily upon these cues to interpret how what is being said should be interpreted. To compensate for this shortcoming, computer users first began adapting features of the keyboard to convey how their messages should be read. This was when emoticons (emotion icons) came into being as early as the 1980s; symbols such as colons, parentheses, semicolons, and hyphens were combined to create smiley faces :), sad faces :(or winky faces ;) to provide further information about the intended meaning of a message. These were early attempts to provide contextual information to written digital communication.

In response to the obvious inadequacies of using symbols provided by the keyboard, emojis began to emerge in the late 1990s in Japan. The word emoji is derived from the Japanese words e (picture) and moji (character). What began with 176 colorful characters signifying emotions, moods, or events has become a catalogue of about 2,000 characters that now include food items, animals, objects, holiday themed items, means of transportation to name just a few. However, new emojis cannot be added indiscriminately to the existing list; on the contrary, suggestions for new emojis are

the Unicode Consortium, which stipulates the international standards for representations in digital media, and only Unicode-approved emojis can be used by software companies.

As part of my preliminary research on digital communication, I asked about 50 people who regularly received and sent messages on smart phones about their use of emojis, what they believed the limitations of communication via these symbols were, and if they thought that Emoji was a universal language. All of these texters used emojis to varying degrees; from just a few within written text to many that sometimes substitute text. The most frequently used items within this group were 😊, 😍, 🙄, and 😂.

The majority of them agreed that emojis conveyed the feelings of the sender; often served to “soften the blow” of a message that could be misinterpreted as offensive or harsh; that they might spice up a conversation that could otherwise be perceived as boring, and set the tone of a conversation (e.g., joking, being sarcastic or serious). However, some of the respondents mentioned less common usages of emojis. For example, one person said that she used emojis when she has run out of things to say in a conversation but felt that she could not end it abruptly. Another texter assigned idiosyncratic meanings to emojis to create a “secret language” that only he and a few close friends could decipher. In fact, research has found that individuals frequently “repurpose” emojis when communicating with close friends, family, and partners. In these cases, the writers wish to maintain close relationships by expressing feelings that may be difficult to put into words.

Several of the respondents pointed out that using emojis, saves time and overcomes word restrictions imposed by software applications; for instance,

Twitter limits its messages to 140 words, and some emojis can represent a whole sentence such as 😂, which stands for: “I’m laughing so hard that I have tears in my eyes.”

When it comes to the universality of Emoji, many people in my group believed that some symbols may be understood across many cultures, (e.g. 😊 and 😞) while the meanings of others - in fact, of quite a few of them - seem to be culture-specific. One individual pointed out that the face with a long nose 🤪 would be readily understood in the U.S. and Europe to mean that someone is a liar or lying; in other countries where the story of Pinocchio is not known, people would perhaps be befuddled when seeing this emoji. Another person referred to the emoji of two hands pressed together, 🙏, which in some countries represents a greeting, in others gratefulness, while in the U.S. it mainly signifies prayer.

Studies have suggested that the assessment of feelings expressed through emojis may be based to a large degree on the viewer’s individual interpretation. One would think that if a picture is worth a thousand words, meanings expressed by emojis should be fairly easy to understand.

Imagine sending this 😓 to a friend, which, according to Unicode, indicates that you are sleepy. This emoji could also be easily interpreted as you are sad or have a drippy nose, and prompt your friend to write something back to that effect, which, in turn, may confuse you, and so forth. So a picture may be worth a thousand words but in Emoji the interpretation of these words may depend on the eye of the beholder.

Most of my respondents agreed that misunderstandings are quite common in Emoji conversations not only because of cross-cultural miscommunications or differing interpretations of a symbol but also because different platforms (e.g., Apple, Android, Microsoft) use slightly different renditions of the same emoji so that the emoji being sent may look different from the one received at the other end. However, an effort to make emojis more uniform

across platforms has been under way for a few years now.

Some in my group also pointed out that an Emoji form of slang exists, which, like spoken slang, is always in flux; meanings change, and it is difficult to keep up with the latest trends. This can be a mine field, especially for people not fluent in Emoji like some older users. Younger texters reported that they have to tell older relatives not to use certain seemingly harmless emojis such as a fruit or vegetable to avoid double-entendres, often of a sexual nature.

Attempts have been made to “translate” or write lengthier passages solely in Emoji (e.g., an article in the Wall Street Journal, a Shakespeare sonnet), but most people would be hard-pressed to make any sense of these. In order to learn more about the limitations of Emoji, I asked some people who described themselves as fairly fluent in Emoji to write the sentence, “We visited Rome last year, it was wonderful.” Interestingly, the messages were very much alike across individuals. For example, everyone used 🧑🧑 to express “we;” and ✈️ (or another airplane emoji) for “visited.” Almost everyone found it difficult to convey “Rome” in Emoji as there does not seem a symbol representing the city; thus, many used emojis related to Italy such as 🇮🇹 or 🍕. Another problem was the past tense markers “last year” and “went,” which some writers solved by inserting a calendar emoji 📅, which does not truly convey the intended meaning. The second part of the sentence, “it was wonderful” didn’t pose problems and was typically expressed by a smiley face expressing joy.

What I realized during my research was that Emoji or some future mutation of it is here to stay. Even if some sceptics seem to think that “writing in pictures” may produce deficient writers, Emoji will most likely not replace written alphabets and characters but be one option that writers have to enrich written communication.



COLLOQUIUM

by Prof. Diana Macri, Allied Health Sciences

In order to fulfill its mission of promoting excellence in teaching and learning, The Center for Teaching and Learning hosts a series of colloquiums throughout the academic year. The purpose of these sessions is to provide an opportunity for faculty and members of the college community to gather and discuss topics of interest in an informal, relaxed setting. As members of the CTL Advisory Committee, Prof. Sarah Hoiland, Prof. Andy London and I organized a colloquium in the fall of 2018 to discuss the role and use of social media at Hostos.

Twenty years have passed since social media was first introduced. In that short time, the phenomenon has taken over all spaces of modern life, met with joy by some and chagrin by others. Institutions of higher education have grappled with the repercussions, creating policies which straddle the line between honoring free speech rights while protecting vulnerable communities. We wanted to know: what is CUNY and Hostos' social media policies? What is protected speech? What can be said? What shouldn't be said? Accepting that the environment in which we live and work has shifted, we wanted to know how faculty, administrators and students, could leverage the opportunities of this evolving technology and work collaboratively with one another to navigate it.

Faculty, students, administrators and staff engaged in a lively discussion regarding social media use at Hostos. A panel of experts included Prof. Catherine Lewis who discussed the many ways faculty can use social media to better connect with their students. Lisanette Rosario, Director of Career Services, encouraged use of social media to promote visibility and showcase one's talents when job searching. Carlos Guevara, Director of Educational Technology and CTL, and Richard Pietras, Communications Manager, informed all of the various ways in which Hostos utilizes social media to celebrate accomplishments by members of the college community. Finally, Hostos alumni Axsell Bonilla's artwork adorned the event space as he discussed the importance of social media in allowing him to make his work more visible.



BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE

I was born and raised in Berlin, Germany, where I completed my undergraduate studies in comparative literature and film studies. I received a Masters of Arts and a Masters of Education in applied linguistics from Teachers College, Columbia University. In 2004, I was awarded the degree of Doctor of Education from Columbia University. I have been teaching ESL and linguistics at Hostos Community College since 2005.