

4 Things I Think You Should Know About Emojis



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You stare at your phone obsessively for what feels like hours. You're weighed down by the pressure of a text message from Dave from bio class who just asked you to go to dinner. You're not exactly sure what your next move is: Do you respond right away? Do you wait a few minutes? Do you use an emoji? You decide you want to throw in an emoji, just to help catalyze the conversation a bit. The tiny faces stare back at you mockingly as you nervously scroll through, trying to decide what kind of emoticon would best convey to Dave how you feel. You overanalyze each and every one, desperately trying to figure out how he will interpret it. You eventually decide on the little blushing one with the rosy cheeks.

Hey dinner at 5 sounds great 😊

. . .and then you hit 'send'. Your heart rate immediately jumps to a borderline lethal level as you watch your text slip away from your fingers and into cyberspace. The overanalyzing commences as you nervously pick apart every little bit of your message, wondering if it was too forward or if the emoji was effective. I'm sure this is a feeling we've all been burdened with quite intimately; The obsessive scrutiny over emoticons and their respective connotations has become a commonplace practice for texting millennials. However, upon further observation, I've noticed something fascinating- girls seemed to treat emojis with much more

gravity and significance, whereas the boys I know seem more careless about their emoticon use. While this might seem to be a small and trivial issue, it is in fact a manifestation of some pretty deep psychological and sociological concepts.

1. Emojis and emoticons reflect our emotions- but only to an extent



First, let's take a look at the words "emoji" or "emoticon". In case you didn't notice, they both start with the same root as the word "emotion". This isn't a coincidence; Emojis are meant for us to express ourselves, and help tell other people what we're feeling. After all, we all have emotions. We all get happy, sad, angry, frustrated, excited, among thousands of other more complicated feelings. For example, upon receiving a text from Dave, you feel a rush of elation and giddiness. Or perhaps you become anxious and even a little worried about the potential of the impending conversation. Regardless of what you are feeling, you want to express that to Dave.

Now, if this conversation with Dave were happening face-to-face, obviously the pressure to properly convey your emotions would be much less intense; rather than having to choose an emoji to send and try to decipher his emojis, your face would naturally display your emotions. When we look at people in person, our brains have the ability to pick up on facial cues and physical signals given off by others. We do this subconsciously and automatically- it's not something we have to take a few minutes and think about. Humans' ability to understand and empathize with what other people are feeling is actually an evolutionary adaption. Facial expression has allowed people to help communicate how

they feel, which in turn helps them survive (Enchautegui de Jesus). Facial signs such as smiling, frowning, laughing and crying are often seen as universally recognized demonstrations of human emotions such as sadness or happiness.

As you know, however, the emotional depth of any individual is far more nuanced than the two aforementioned emotions. Happy and sad are but the tip of a massive, complicated iceberg. Thus, many emotions are not so universally recognizable; Different cultures emphasize different parts of the human face for emotional recognition. A 2011 study examined two groups, one group comprised of Chinese participants and the other of Caucasian participants. Researchers asked each participant to examine an image of a facial expression and determine what emotion was being conveyed. “The study found that the Chinese participants relied on the eyes more to represent facial expressions, while Western Caucasians relied on the eyebrows and mouth” (Perception of Facial). On top of this, each individual’s emotions and outward expressiveness develop with their respective cognitive maturity. Basically, as each person grows and evolves into young adulthood, their ability to articulate and empathize with others becomes more individualized.

I know this all seems like a psychology lecture, but it directly correlates with why emojis themselves can be so confusing and so impacting. When you text Dave, you and him are trying to convey what you feel through a teeny tiny little image. You don’t have any other cues to rely on, like you would if you were sitting across from him at Starbucks. Instead, you’re dependent solely on an emoji. When you see the emoji, you try to make sense of it the same way you would if you were looking at Dave in person. A 2014 study even concluded that the sight of an emoji face triggers a response from the same part of our brain that is activated

when we see a real human face (Churches). Essentially, our brain wants to understand what emojis mean as if emojis were people too. The problem with this is that there are only 96 facial emojis- whereas there are millions of facial expressions that can be made by a human face. This leaves room for a lot interpretation by the recipient, who might have different personal connotations with different facial expressions. So, although emojis do help us show what we can't actually say, they can also complicate conversation due to their ambiguity. Dave might send you an 🐱, which to him has a flirty connotation. But maybe you hate cats, and you associate that emoji with negativity. My point here is that everyone thinks different (which I'm sure you're aware of).

2. Emojis are essentially nonverbal communication



Facial expressions are part of a much larger phenomenon of human psyche referred to as nonverbal communication. Nonverbal communication encompasses a wide array of physical motions people do to convey what can't be said verbally. This includes all sorts of actions: Shrugging, laughing, the way we position our bodies, and yes, facial expressions.

We all have our own personal paradigms concerning our nonverbal messages. Of course, gender is a very significant determinant of these internal paradigms engrained within us all. In a study done by Judith Hall and Nancy Briton in 1995, a group of college students were asked through a written survey their perception of nonverbal contact among genders. The students were asked questions about ability to recognize facial expressions, laughing, and smiling, among many other

forms of nonverbal discussion. It was concluded from the study women were seen as more likely to be able to understand others' facial expressions, smile, and "decode" what others are trying to convey nonverbally (Briton and Hall 84). Men were seen as more likely to be interruptive and frown, and were less able to decode what others meant. Interestingly, women were also seen as more talkative than men (Briton and Hall 80). I would argue the fundamental differences in how men and women communicate nonverbally, as shown in Hall and Briton's study, lay the foundation for how individuals will communicate with images, or emojis. Another study of 1984 conducted by Kay Deaux examined how gender roles themselves are perpetrated and treated. According to this research, "warmth and expressiveness" are quintessentially feminine qualities, whereas men are generally expected to be more stoic (Deaux 992). Though this study is nearly 33 years old, the fundamental ideas it proposes about communication are still relevant to today, as its central claims remain consistent with contemporary data. Furthermore, the study discussed the dichotomy of societal expectations for gender performances. According to Deaux's research, humans tend to see traits as being related to a certain specific gender (Deaux 993). In other words, we have a largely binary view of gender, and see a behavior as either masculine *or* feminine, but not both. So let's connect the dots: The outward expression of our emotions is largely viewed as feminine. Emojis are primarily used to express emotions. Therefore, emoji usage is viewed as a more feminine behavior.

3. Boys and girls text differently- and use emojis differently too



These ingrained expectations for gender behavior do not exist in a vacuum; They play a daily role in how we implicitly understand and make judgements on others. Gender stereotypes are so deeply rooted within our society, we often do not even consciously think of them, even when we are constantly acting upon them. More often than not, we let these gender biases limit what we deem to be socially acceptable behavior. In 2004, a study was conducted on the impact of challenging traditional gender roles. Referring to this as “gender role transgressions”, the study investigates how and why we react differently when an individual behaves contrary to the conventional conduct of their gender. More often than not, defying the standard is met with negativity and scorn. However, past research referenced throughout the article asserted males are more mistreated when it comes to deviation from the set gender standards (Sirin 120). From this, we can logically extrapolate that males are less likely to use emojis in their texting, because emojis are a form of emotional expression. Because emotional expression is typically associated with femininity, males would likely feel emasculated or deemed overemotional when they express their emotions.

Although gendered stereotypes perpetrate rather narrow ideas of how people should act, it can be argued these stereotypes are not always inherently bad. There is, in fact, a psychological benefit to categorizing people based on clichés: It makes life a lot easier. Gary D Levy’s 1995 study on childhood development analyzed the advantages to stereotypes, stating “. . .stereotyping can be considered a normal and cognitive process: in order to organize adaptively and efficiently. . .we create

simplified representations that are often structured around prototypical instances” (Levy). What Levy is arguing here is that the binary gender categories by which the vast majority of society uses to understand others is essentially, at its core, an evolutionary adaption to help us make more sense of the world around us. To put it another way, the reason we are so quick to make assumptions about others based on gender is because it allows us to make decisions and understand others more efficiently.

Let’s connect even more dots now. We’ve already established that emoji usage is seen as more of a feminine behavior. Because of this, boys are less likely to use emojis and girls are more likely to use them. In the next section, we’ll take a look at how expected behaviors impact the usage of emojis in texting.

4. You’re overthinking it



When we consider the complex psychological background underlying decision making and bias, we can begin to apply these concepts in a tangible, real-life setting. As we’ve already established, there are some pretty significant differences in the way that men and women communicate with each other nonverbally, so now let’s take a look at how emojis come into play.

A study conducted by clinical psychologist Leslie R. Brody examined college students and their usage of emojis. The study concluded women are more likely to use emoticons such as 😊 or 😞 face to denote their emotional response to a text. Furthermore, this research also concluded more feminine individuals were also more likely to send

emoticons. (Brody) Another study in *Journal of Children and Media* conducted an investigation on the usage of emojis and text messages by teenagers 13-19 years old. Additionally, Brody examines and compares different cultures' perceptions of emotional expression among genders. Her research has found that both Western and Asian cultures exhibit stereotypical expectations for behavior (Brody). The study concluded not only do boys and girls have different styles in texting, but different motivations for texting fundamentally. The researchers of the 2014 study stated "Boys view phones as a status symbol to perform a basic function; they are direct and rapid in their conversations, make their arrangements and go. . .Girls undeniably like to chat, socialize and enhance their conversations with smiley faces etc" (Taylor and Francis). In other words, while boys are more likely to text strictly for communication purposes, girls are more likely to use texting as a medium through which they can share and express feelings.

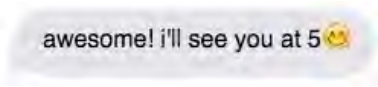
All of this being said, we can begin to understand how girls and boys use emojis differently. Socially, it is acceptable and expected for girls to be emotional. Girls have historically been perceived as more demonstrative and expressive of their feelings. In contrast, boys are expected to withhold emotions- or run the risk of being viewed as less masculine. That is to say, when boys show more emotions than usual, they are seen as challenging typical gender roles. We can then make the connection between these gendered pigeonholes and the frequency of our emoji usage when we text. If outwardly expressing emotions is viewed by society as a feminine behavior, and emojis serve the primary purpose of expressing emotions, it would make sense for it to be more socially acceptable for a girl to use them while texting. By the same token, the likelihood of a boy using emojis through text is less than that of a girl,

because using emojis is seen as analogous to emotional expression. So, let's revisit my main point: Girls seem to be more analytical of emoji use than boys. Considering the double-standards that exists among boys and girls that girls are allowed to share their emotions. Since it is less acceptable for boys to be emotional, boys in turn learn to put less emphasis on how others feel- and how they themselves feel as well. Correspondingly, girls have never been shamed for crying or being emotional. Therefore, they see emotional expression has being a valid and normal aspect of human behavior. Girls take emotions seriously rather than brushing them off as being "too dramatic". Even when boys and men do use emojis, they use them differently than women typically do.

When we look at emojis as a virtual manifestation of nonverbal communication rather than merely computer symbols, we can gain a more comprehensive appreciation for the reasons behind gender difference in usage. The psychological studies of Judith Hall and other social scientists have shown there are multiple deviations among gender when it comes to the way people communicate without words. Although the conclusions from these studies pertain primarily to physical mannerisms, the ideas presented throughout their works can unquestionably be applied in the more contemporary world of 😊, ❤️, and 👍.

After what feels like an eternity has passed, you're still anticipating a response from Dave. You've spent nearly all day mentally prepare yourself for disappointment. *"He probably thought my emoji was weird. . .he's probably going to cancel on me. . ."* goes through your head as you try to distract yourself from the suspense of his reply. From the corner of your eye, you see you phone light up to notify you that you've

gotten a new text. Eagerly, you unlock your phone and open up your messages. At the top of the screen you see Dave's name.



awesome! i'll see you at 5 😊

...and you wonder why you were so worried in the first place.

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