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Characterising the Inventive Appropriation of Emoji as Relationally Meaningful in Mediated Close Personal Relationships

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Abstract.
Emoji are two-dimensional pictographs that were originally designed to convey emotion between participants in text-based conversation. This workshop paper draws on interview data to describe ways in which emoji have been appropriated in pursuit of other relationally meaningful behaviours in contemporary messaging applications. We speculate that the presence of appropriable tools like emoji might influence the selection of a communication channel for particular types of mediated conversation.

Introduction

When interacting via text-based communication, it can be difficult for speakers to convey their emotions due to the absence of nonlinguistic cues such as facial expression and body language (Walther and D'Addario, 2001). One means by which people resolve this issue is through the use of *emoticons*—graphics composed of ASCII text that portray affective state through expressive faces, e.g. :-) or :-(. Research suggests that these cues are useful for controlling the perceived emotional valence of text (Walther and D'Addario, 2001) and for allowing speakers to convey other qualities of speech, e.g. sarcasm or mirth (Dresner and Herring, 2010).

More recently, emoticons have been instantiated in the form of small, two-dimensional pictographs known as *emoji*. First developed in Japan, emoji provide

Figure 1. A selection of emoji from the Apple Color Emoji fontset.

an expanded palette of emotive qualities, e.g. surprise or annoyance, that may be tacit in face to face interaction but hidden in text. Furthermore, emoji extend the capabilities of emoticons by incorporating a wide array of characters whose relevance to emotional communication is less clear; for example, coloured circles, a pair of clapping hands, or a selection of foodstuffs (see Figure 1 for examples). Articles in the popular media (e.g. Negishi, 2014) indicate that the use of emoji is now popular and commonplace when communicating through contemporary mobile messaging applications such as Whatsapp and Facebook messenger.

In this paper, we draw on recently collected interview data to highlight several ways in which emoji are *appropriated* in mediated conversation. We define appropriation as usage that lies beyond a designer's original intent (Dix, 2007). The creator of emoji, Shigetaka Kurita, wanted to enable communication of "thoughts or emotions without inspiring strong likes or dislikes in the way a picture might" (see Negishi, 2014). Here we describe additional ways in which emoji are used to facilitate communication. That is, beyond the substitutive role of emoticons for conveying emotional states, emoji appear to have a useful role in either controlling a conversational thread or in encouraging playful behaviour. In describing these appropriations, we attempt to characterise each in terms of its relational value, which means that we consider how a given behaviour may contribute to the maintenance of prosocial bonds between the participants in mediated conversation.

The analysis we report is based on data collected as part of a study that explored the investment of effort into communications between people in close personal relationships. In interaction design, effort is typically seen as something that should be minimised; the less work a user has to do, the better. However, our aim in the study was to understand the value that effort can hold within social relationships, paying particular regard to the way in which invested effort can indicate caring towards others. (Early findings on these matters are presented in Kelly et al., 2015). During the study, 20 participants (16 females, 4 males) were interviewed about the technologies they use to communicate with people they care about in everyday life. It was during the course of these discussions that emoji began to emerge as a topic of interest for our participants, and thus our later interviews included explicit requests for information about how our informants used emoji in mediated conversation. Participants were self-selecting, recruited via an advertisement on our University noticeboard. The sample was culturally diverse, comprising individuals from eight countries (11 UK, two USA, two Malaysia, and one each from Spain, Italy, Germany, India, and Singapore) and had a mean age of 26 years (range = 18–49).

Our interviews were semi-structured, meaning that we used a priori questions

alongside those that emerged organically as each interview unfolded. Interviews lasted 64 minutes on average (range = 41–88 minutes) and were conducted face-to-face or via Skype video chat (two participants). Our procedure was based on grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) in that data collection and analysis proceeded hand-in-hand, allowing us to investigate emerging concepts of interest in subsequent interviews. Verbatim transcription of the audio recorded interviews yielded a total of 543 pages of single-spaced transcript. This data was analysed inductively, following the stages of open and axial coding (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) to identify concepts and develop them in terms of their properties and dimensions. This involved constant comparison of data, as well as memoing to reflect on emergent issues. We also used affinity diagramming to assist in developing relationships among concepts. During the analysis we defined an axial group of 'Using Emoji' and, on reviewing the data, noticed that some of participants' behaviours could be characterised in terms of appropriation. That is, participants reported using emoji for reasons other than conveying emotion. For the present paper, we performed an additional round of analysis that focused on delineating salient cases of appropriation and structuring these cases into categories on the basis of common properties.

In what follows, we report on three interconnected forms of behaviour that we believe can be classified as appropriations, using direct quotes from our participants to illustrate particular points. Before describing these appropriations, we wish to note that our participants did report using emoji in the 'accepted' fashion, i.e. to convey emotion in text. For example, participant 4 believed that emoji were for *"conveying, like, joviality and sarcasm. And... you know, being happy or sad, yeah. Emotion, basically"*. Our participants also reported using emoji to control the intonation of messages:

> "If you're saying something that, you know, that'll wind them up, but and, if you didn't put the winky face next to it, then it could be misconstrued as like, starting on them, or, like quite an aggressive statement, so, yeah, they really help make sure that you don't get into any trouble." [P11]

An additional finding on emotion was that participants described how emoji can be used deceptively in order to mask a speaker's true feelings:

> "There are some people who would, you know, falsely depict their expression so it's, it's in a way exploiting emojis as well... So even if they're not happy... instead of putting a sad tonality to the whole, uhh, sentence, if they simply put a smiley emoji, the recipient would consider it to be a regular sort of statement, rather than a sarcasm or something like that." [P12].

> "Emoji is supposed to, like, represent what you're feeling right now. [But] you can use it to your advantage sometimes... When you're not excited about it you can spam smileys and seem excited about it. Things like that." [P13]

This deception is not necessarily negative, however. Deceptive strategies have been identified as an important outlet for managing availability for conversation (Reynolds et al., 2013). We regard the deceptive use of emoji as a method of managing the extent to which one discloses emotion and mood to an interlocutor.

It may be that the effort to expose one's reasoning for feeling a particular way is too much to handle at the present time. Alternatively, deception may be a means of avoiding a need to deal with feelings about another person. Emoji can serve as a means of deferring that effort until a speaker is prepared to deal with it.

We now attend to the three categories of appropriation derived from our dataset and attempt to position each in terms of its value for relational maintenance.

Findings: Appropriation of Emoji Beyond Emotion

Maintaining a Conversational Connection

Two of our participants described how they would use emoji to keep a conversational undercurrent running even when no words are left to be said. This sort of behaviour can be interpreted as an appropriation in the sense that the emoji are not used to convey emotion but rather become a low-cost means of maintaining a connection through the 'pinging' or poking of another individual. Such behaviour might be relationally valuable by serving as a form of low-cost phatic communication, providing evidence of connectedness via an open channel while indicating that one is thinking about that person, i.e. communicating that they are 'on one's mind':

> "Sometimes, when I talk to my sister on Facebook, that's the only thing we do [send emoji], but that's just cause we don't have anything to say, so we just kind of send them... Not in every conversation but there have been times when I've just had conversations of them." [P14]

However, just as emoji can be used to keep a conversational thread alive, they can also be used to end one if necessary. In this case an emoji serves as a signal that a message has been received but that the recipient has little to say in response:

> "Yesterday we were talking about pancake day, so I just sent some pancakes [an emoji] and that kind of just, finished the conversation. It kind of just, yeah I think it says you have nothing else to say." [P14].

This behaviour may be seen as affinity-building in that the recipient is acknowledging the sender's message while offering a mutually interpretable signal indicating that they have little to offer in reply. It is likely that this use of emoji has symbolic relational value through communicating acknowledgement and improving on mere silence, preventing the speaker from "feeling ignored" due to a lack of response.

Permitting Play

A second way in which emoji were appropriated beyond emotion was to engage in playful interaction with one's partner. Play has been noted as an important feature of close personal relationships (Baxter, 1992) and the following examples illustrate how emoji are used as an outlet for playful interaction:

> "If like I post a picture of something... uhm, a new dish which I cooked... I will use the emoji... the food emoji or the face with the tongue out, like yummy (laughs), so like, just to make them more envious or something." [P19]

> "So for example uhm, one of my friends really likes cats, and so I'll go on the cat one and... like just, its usually to give her laugh it's not usually part of a serious conversation, it would just be like a, here's a cat kneading some dough, just thought you'd like it". [P18]

The latter example is especially interesting from a relational perspective because it shows a speaker orienting their selection of emoji such that it bears clear relevance to the recipient. This type of behaviour has been described as *responsiveness to the self*, and has been associated with enhanced feelings of intimacy and closeness through demonstrating an understanding of one's partner (Algoe et al., 2008).

Emoji can also be used to emphasise a recipient's reaction to a message by 'spamming' emoji as a response:

> "Usually if something's really really funny, so if one of my friends tells me like a really good joke, or they say "oh my gosh [name] you would never guess what I did today" and it's something really stupid, then I will use the same one [emoji], but I'll just use it loads and loads of times... or it's the one where it's like tears of laughter and I'll just use that loads and loads 'cause I think one just doesn't quite do it." [P18]

This behaviour can be traced to the intended use of emoji, in the sense that repetition of a particular symbol gives unambiguous evidence of a reader's emotional response to the topic of conversation. Yet this type of comedic exaggeration may also contribute to the overall atmosphere of a conversational thread by indicating that certain behaviours are permissible, i.e. that it is safe to be playful in ways that might not be acceptable with other professional or 'serious' contacts.

Creating Shared and Secret Uniqueness

The third and final category of appropriation relates to the creation of new meanings in conversation. As with words, the specific meaning of a term depends on its role in a sentence and its interpretation, as anticipated within the relationship:

> "When I send the kiss face to my best friend it means something completely different if I send the kiss face to someone I'm dating. Yeah. Just as a kiss would be completely different in real life with my friend or with the person I'm dating." [P3]

However, speakers can use emoji to build forms of meaning that are uniquely interpretable within a particular relationship. Our participants described developing 'emoji stories' that took on a life and system of meaning all of their own:

> "You just make little stories... you just start playing around with the emojis... like send a picture of a moon with a face on it, and then they would send me back like a cow, and I would send them back a turtle, and it doesn't mean anything, but it's just sort of funny... it eventually develops into a story. Or like a little game, where you have to like guess what they're trying to say with all the pictures." [P11]

Here partners engage in prolonged exchanges in which collections of discrete and isolated symbols are woven into much larger communicative structures. Thus what begins as a relatively meaningless endeavour can become something that is likely to be relationally valuable through the co-creation of unique meanings. These playful interactions may then give partners a shared context to refer back to in the future, perhaps promoting feelings of intimacy within the context of the relationship.

Discussion

Our findings demonstrate that emoji can serve a number of relationally useful roles in conversation, and these roles are not always associated with discrete expressions of emotion. Because our study was not designed to investigate emoji per se, we do not claim that our categories are definitive or theoretically saturated. Since there is some overlap between the categories (creating an 'emoji story' over the course of a day might be regarded as maintaining a conversational connection, for example) there is a need for further research to develop these categories in terms of their uniquely identifying properties. Nevertheless, we believe that our findings have sufficient merit to provoke considerations about the role of appropriation in close personal relationships. In particular, the behaviours we have listed raise several points of engagement which will be worthy of further discussion at the workshop.

The first relates to the way in which users select channels to address unmet and emergent communication needs. Although it is often not characterised as such, relational maintenance can be seen as a type of need because relationships weaken and unravel if they are not attended to. In CSCW, there is an increasing interest in understanding how features of channels can promote or suppress different types of relational communication (e.g. how the visibility of a channel influences the expression of emotion, as studied by Bazarova et al., 2015). However, a question that has not yet been explored is whether channels might be adopted for relational maintenance on the basis of features that are amenable to appropriation. We speculate that, while relationship maintenance is possible with a variety of media, there may be situations in which the potential for productive maintenance is heightened because appropriable resources like emoji are available. However, an interesting counterpoint to this idea is that a channel might also be selected because it has *fewer* outlets for appropriation; for example, there may be a need to discuss a sensitive topic, and the presence of features that are associated with playfulness (such as emoji) may detract from this goal.

Second, from our perspective as researchers interested in the concept of effort, emoji are an interesting case because they are trivial to produce (they are simply selected from a pre-defined list at the touch of a button) yet appear to possess a high ceiling in terms their potential for creating meaning. This emphasises that the relationship between the physical labour required to complete a task and the value that one can build is neither linear nor clear-cut. In the case of emoji, value appears to be derived not from the *act* of selection but from recognising that a selection is playful, intimate, or even responsive in the context of a relationship. (Conversely, one

might appreciate a person's efforts in the act of selection if the process is known to be especially taxing or arduous.) In future research, we hope to explore whether there are links between the effort required by different forms of inventive appropriation, and how these appropriations, together with their associated effort requirements, are identified and appreciated by people in mediated close personal relationships.

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