

# Modalities of expressing emotions in digital communication

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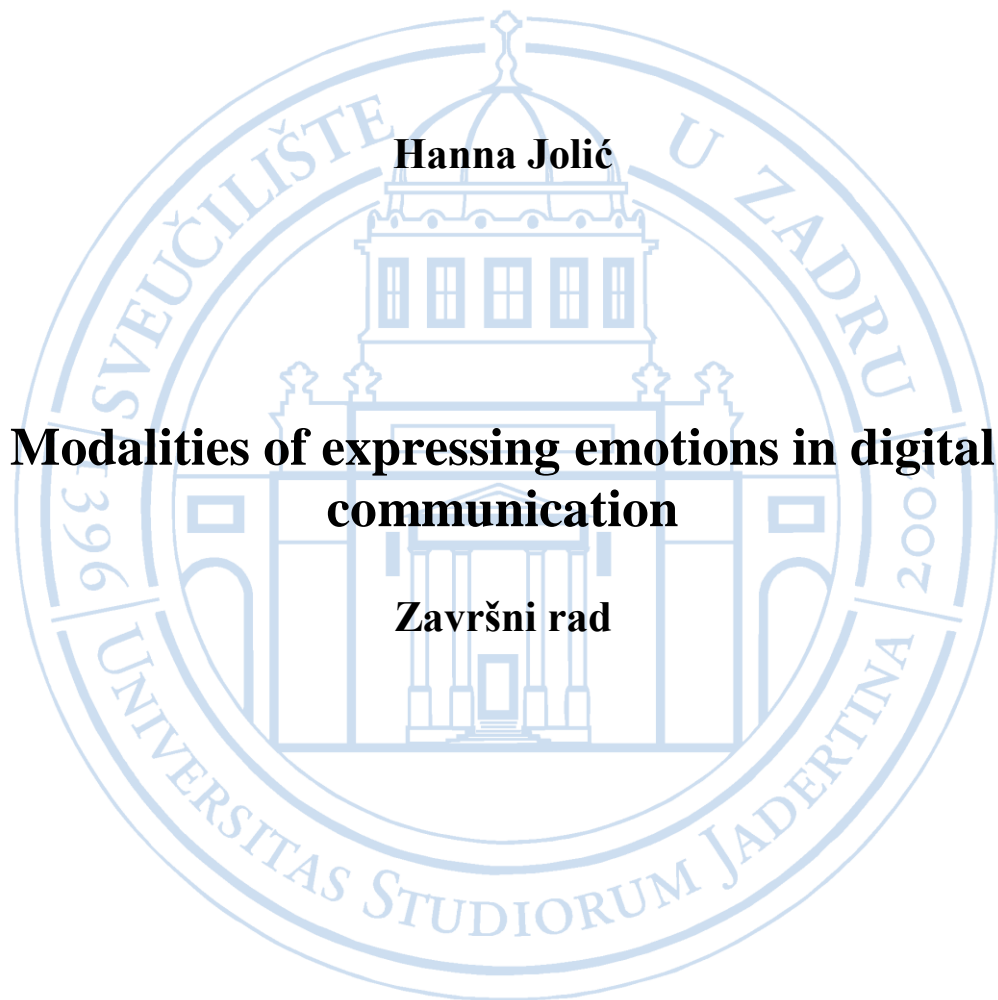
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Sveučilište u Zadru

Odjel za lingvistiku

Prijediplomski sveučilišni studij Jezik i komunikacija u višejezičnom društvu (dvopredmetni)



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Modalities of expressing emotions in digital communication

Završni rad

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Zadar, 2023.



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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Modalities of expressing emotions in digital communication**

Nonverbal cues, which help to express emotions, are unintentional in Face-to-Face communication. The ambiguity of online communication created a demand for the transfer of those nonverbal cues, but they are used deliberately. This study will try to explain how well alternatives to Face-to-Face communication function, as well as which of them are most used and most reliable. Some of the nonverbal cues examined include emojis, emphasis, Internet slang and stickers. A mixed method approach consisting of a questionnaire and five semi-structured interviews was used. The results show that there is a connection between the emotion people feel and the emoji they insert. Additionally, emojis can set the tone of the message and often act as hedges or intensifiers. The use of nonverbal cues in online communication can help in expressing emotions and reducing miscommunication.

**Key words:** online communication, emotions, nonverbal cues, emojis, stickers, Internet slang.

## **SAŽETAK**

### **Izražavanje emocija u digitalnoj komunikaciji**

Neverbalni znakovi, koji pomažu u iskazivanju osjećaja, nenamjerni su u komunikaciji „licem u lice“. Nejasnost u online komunikaciji stvorila je potrebu za prenošenjem tih neverbalnih znakova, ali se koriste s namjerom. U ovome radu želi se prikazati koliko uspješno funkcioniraju alternative komunikaciji uživo, kao i koje od njih su najkorištenije i najpouzdanije. Metodologija uključuje anketu te pet polustrukturiranih intervjua. Rezultati pokazuju postojanje poveznice između emocije koju ljudi osjećaju i emojija koji upotrijebe. Također, emojiji mogu odrediti ton poruke te često postupaju kao sredstva ograđivanja ili kao pojačivači. Korištenje neverbalnih znakova u online komunikaciji pomaže u izražavanju emocija te smanjuje nesporazum.

**Ključne riječi:** online komunikacija, osjećaji, neverbalni znakovi, emojiji, naljepnice, Internet slang.

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## 1. Introduction

The rise of online communication created a demand for new ways of expressing the nonverbal cues which are present in Face-to-Face (FtF) communication. The way in which we exchange information is just as important as the information which is being transferred because people are reliant on nonverbal cues to sufficiently understand the transmitted information. Some of the alternatives of nonverbal communication are the use of emojis, stickers, GIFs, emphasizing and Internet slang. Emoticons, which later evolved into emojis, were one of the first occurrences of displaying non-verbal features in a digital setting.

Communication, or exchange of information, has been increasingly present in online communities. Since online communication is still a somewhat new medium, the messages being shared can be ambiguous. This creates a demand for new ways of expression of body gestures, facial expressions, and other important nonverbal behavior, used to clarify the tone of the message. Some of the newest aspects of the new medium of communication popularized in the last decade have been stickers and GIFs (Herring, 2004). As expected, Generation Z, born after the invention of the Internet, were first to accept these changes and are now the most prominent users of the new technology features. Millennials, born from 1981 to 1996, adapted to the online aspect of communication as they came of age, but for Generation Z, born after 1996, the constant stream of connectivity is the norm (Dimock, 2019). The emergence of the Internet caused a substantial rise in human behavior research, as communication between people in an online setting is permanent, and therefore easier to analyze (Herring, 2004).

It is widely thought that nonverbal communication is unintentional. As a consequence, in situations in which nonverbal and verbal cues are conflicting, nonverbal cues are more likely to be

trusted. Since emoticons are deliberately used to show nonverbal cues, the question remains whether the same situation applies to the online exchange of information (Krohn, 2004).

The study will try to explain how well alternatives to Face-to-Face communication function, as well as which of them are most used and most reliable. The ambiguity posed by emoticons and the generational difference in Internet slang use will also be explored.

### **1.1. Motivation**

Growing up in a generation which was acquainted with the Internet from an early age, information was often exchanged on online platforms. Generations before mine were consumed with Tamagotchis, while my generation, Generation Z, found the same obsession in online games such as Pet Society on Facebook or Pou on our phones. The popularity of online games ultimately led to online platforms with options to chat to other gamers and eventually make friends. Being a part of online communities from an early age helped in my knowledge of the so called “Internet language” and how to efficiently convey my emotions in online communication. I first learned about emoticons and was slowly introduced to emojis, stickers and GIFs over the year. It was interesting to me how Generation Z uses no punctuation, but prefers to emphasize using capitalization and emojis, and how differently we convey our emotions online with our friends, family which belongs to older generations and in professional settings. I wanted to explore those differences and prove that nonverbal cues are just as important as the verbal message in online communication.



## 1.2. Research questions and aim

This study aims to investigate how emotions are conveyed in digital communication, through verbal language as well as alternatives. Some of the alternatives include emojis, emoticons and stickers. The study will attempt to answer the following questions:

- 1) Does a correlation between human emotion and emoji use exist?
- 2) Can emojis accurately represent human feelings?
- 3) Are emojis as reliable as Face-to-Face communication in expressing emotions?
- 4) Can expression of feelings in an online setting be facilitated by the use of capitalization, emojis, Internet slang and stickers?
- 5) How do nonverbal cues translate from Face-to-Face communication to online communication?

## 2. Theoretical background

Emoticons are graphic indicators used in online communication which were created to represent facial expressions. They were first used in 1982, by Scott E. Fahlman to signal if something was a joke in a computer science discussion forum (Krohn, 2004). The use of emoticons depends on the culture, in the Western world emoticons are presented sideways, while in Japan they are viewed straight on (Dresner & Herring, 2010). As well as helping to express emotions more easily, emojis make using prevalingly English social media platforms easier for non-native speakers of English (Boothe & Wickstrom, 2017). Even though they were created to express emotions, such as amusement, many of them do not represent a single emotion, for example, :-\*, which represents a kissing face and shows a facial expression.

Along with punctuation marks, emoticons are used to signal sarcasm. For example, the sentence “Oh, great! 😊” has a completely different connotation from “Oh, great.” even though they consist of the same words, just different punctuation and emoji usage (Dresner & Herring, 2010). Smiling emoticons can signal that the writer is joking and make the conversation more casual and lighthearted, rather than a smiling expression. Emoticons are typically used to make the meaning of the message clearer, but sometimes the misinterpretation of emoticons leads to an even higher chance of miscommunication between interlocutors. Markman and Oshima (2007) claim that the emoticon’s main purpose is punctuation, as they are always placed at the end of the sentence or message.

According to Dresner and Herring (2010), the term ‘emoticon’ is misinterpreted because the purpose of a smiley is to carry pragmatic meaning and signal the illocutionary force of the sentence. For example, if a message contains a joke and a laughing emoji, the emoji is supposed to communicate the illocutionary force of the message, joking. Even facial expressions in real life sometimes do not represent actual emotions but are often conventional. For example, smiling during the job interview because of the need to present as a pleasant and friendly person, while experiencing stressful emotions because of the interview itself. Emoticons have three functions: 1) to indicate emotions through facial expressions; 2) to indicate nonemotional meanings through facial expressions; 3) to indicate the illocutionary force (Dresner & Herring, 2010).

The illocutionary force and speech acts were first introduced by J. L. Austin in his book “How To Do Things With Words” (1962). Austin claimed that when producing a sentence, people perform three acts: locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary. A locutionary act is the production of a linguistic expression which has a structure and meaning, e.g., the coldness in “It is very cold in this room.” An illocutionary act comprises of the speaker’s intention performed

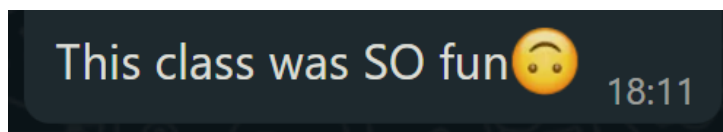
through the act of locution and what is achieved because of the act, e.g., a request to close the window or turn on the heating as a response to “It is very cold in this room.” The speaker may ask a question, make a promise, beg, assert a claim, and even marry someone. Lastly, the perlocutionary act is the effect that the previous two speech acts have on the recipient, e.g., somebody closing the window. Dresner and Herring (2010) argue that emoticons contribute to the illocutionary force by helping to express the speech act which is performed through the production of the sentence and in that way revealing the speaker’s intention.

Emoticons can also downgrade the speech act to one which is less face threatening. For example, “Could you close the window?” can be direct and face-threatening, but “Could you close the window? 😊” lessens the threat and makes the message more pleasant. In this way emojis act in the same way as hedging, using a hedge (*please, perhaps, maybe*) can help to avoid threatening the face of other people. Hedges can either emphasize the message or weaken the meaning, similarly to emoticons. Skovholt et al. (2014) found that smiley face emoticons can show friendliness in articulation of agreement and reduce the effect of face-threatening actions, such as complaining and requesting (as cited in Hew & Tang, 2019). An example of the smiley having the mitigating function can be found in Dresner and Herring (2010, p. 257):

“I wonder if you could recommend me some good readings related to conversational data. We just collected some IM data and are about to conduct some analysis on it. Since I’ve never worked on this kind of data before, I am writing for some suggestions.:)”

The smiley tries to downgrade the face-threatening act of inquiring, but also acts as portraying a facial expression of someone who is anxious as this student is in this instance (Dresner & Herring, 2010). Emoticons can also mitigate the situation by implying that the writer thought of

the message as joking. Emoticons which express sarcasm give important cues to how to clarify the linguistic part of the message (Dresner & Herring, 2010). An example would be a message my friend sent to me after class:



Picture 1. A message sent by my friend after class.

Using the 🙄 emoji assures the participants that the message was sarcastic and emphasizing the “so” establishes the sarcasm even further. An instance in which the emoji which is not sarcastic is used to cue sarcasm is when my friend went to the store, but it was closed:

“It opens at 8 🙄”

“I’m in the shade and I’m studying.”

“It’s so hot that I was looking for the shade at 7 in the morning 🙄”

“And it was all pointless because I came too early 🙄”

There are many instances in which the emojis are not used for their intended purpose, but for reiterating the sarcastic tone of the message.

Users using emoticons feel that they are a quicker way of transmitting the message (Huang, Yen & Zhang, 2008 (as cited by Riordan, 2017)). Emojis decrease the ambiguity of messages, because our vocal tone, gestures and facial expressions often carry the same value as what we are actually trying to say, or the linguistic content of the message.

Additionally, emoticons serve as intensifiers of word messages. However, they cannot completely change the tone of the message. If the message was positive, emojis enhance it making

it more positive, but a positive emoticon cannot alter the tone of the message and make a negative message into a positive one, however it can help downplay the negativity (Riordan, 2017). However, despite the ability of emoticons to intensify the message in a positive or negative way, Riordan and Trichtinger (2016), as cited in Riordan (2017), have established that emoticons are not used as much as they had expected. The reason is the ambiguity which emoticons cause, which can lead to miscommunication and confusion. Even though the writer's intention might be to intensify the message by using an emoticon, capitalization, or multiple punctuation marks, it does not always translate to the recipient. As Riordan (2017) explains, emotions are not always deliberately expressed on the speaker's face in Face-to-Face communication, as they are in online communication using emoticons. Therefore, the smiley at the end of the sentence acts similarly to the "LOL" which is often used yet not expressed in real life. The usage of "LOL" does not imply that the speaker is "laughing out loud" at the time of sending the message, but as a cue for a polite reply, sarcasm, or an expression of intimacy by informality.

Riordan (2017) connects the use of emoticons with the Theory of Emotion Work by Arlie Russell Hochschild from 1979. Emotion Work Theory is based on a concept which states that in order to keep a status of the relationship between two people, they need to make effort, manage the emotions and at the same time fulfill the social role they play in that relationship. An example which includes emojis is:

Me: "I'M GOING TO HARRY STYLES AHHH"

Friend: "omg yeYYY"

"idk if my dad is looking into buying tickets, i'm still stuck in the waiting line..."

"but yey youuuuu ☺ ☺"

In this situation my friend was not excited about herself because she still has not gotten the tickets, but was excited for me, which means she is fulfilling her role as my friend and doing the emotion work which makes it possible for her to continue being a good friend. If she had not replied to my message or was not excited for me, she probably would not be in good standing as a friend. Overall, putting the effort to pick the emoji most appropriate for the situation allows for strengthening and managing the relationship between participants.

Emojis can also be used to control the intonation of messages, or to hide the speaker's true emotions. Using emojis which are happy to show our happiness, even if we are not feeling that way at the moment, could be a way to please the person we are talking to and delay our expression of sadness or the way we are actually feeling when replying to the message (Kelly & Watts, 2015).

According to Krohn (2004), the conventional rules about spelling, capitalization, grammar, and emoticon usage are overlooked by the majority of e-mail users in formal situations. Many guidelines for business communication include organizing, proofreading, and using simple language to transmit business communication in a fast and efficient manner.

Stickers can be defined as bigger and more expressive than emojis and emoticons, usually appearing in animated GIFs or static PNG image (De Seta, 2018). They can be personalized, because anyone can upload pictures and write text on it to create a sticker (Hew & Tang, 2019).

### **2.1. The difference between emojis and emoticons**

Emoticons are a blend of the word "emotion" and "icon", meaning they are icons which show an emotional expression. They are created with a sequence of ASCII symbols, such as :) for a smile and :O for a surprised face. Emojis are a blend of a Japanese term for "pictograph", "e" meaning picture and "*moji*" meaning character or letter. They were created in 1997 in Japan, and

they represent actual pictures which are often used next to or instead of text. Some illustrate facial expressions, such as 😊 and 😐, but most portray a variety of things, such as animals, fruit and flags (Hew & Tang 2019).

Emojis are usually used by women and people under 30 (Marengo et al., 2017). According to Wirza et al. (2019), men and women use the same amount of emojis, but have different preferences over the choice of emoji. The 🍌 was found to be the most used emoji among both groups, and therefore determined a gender-neutral emoji. Men preferred the 🙌 emoji the most, while the women used 😊 in majority of situations. Even though the study had limitations, such as only having 20 participants, it was conducted fairly recently compared to studies which showed that the majority of emoticons were produced by women, such as (Wolf, 2000), which are perhaps outdated. In Wolf's study, men were also said to use more emoticons to express sarcasm.

Emojis can be useful to determine variations within personality traits (Marengo et al., 2017). People who use positive emojis showing faces, objects and hands tend to be more extroverted, while the less emotionally stable trait was found in people who prefer negative emojis. This study was contrived using the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (TIPI), which lets participants choose between five different personality traits – agreeableness, emotional stability, extroversion, conscientiousness, and openness to new experiences – to represent their personality. 36 out of 91 emojis are associated with one of five personality traits. None of the emojis seemed compatible with openness and conscientiousness because those traits do not represent an emotional or facial expression, but rather the cognitive ability of an individual. The study showed that emojis can indeed be beneficial in differentiating personality traits (Marengo et al., 2017).

## **2.2.Theories on human communication**

The growth of the Internet brought a rise of research in communication because the information on how people communicate is permanent, and therefore easier to examine. This new information gave ground for new research to flourish and many theories concerning human communication were developed. Some of the theories relevant for this research paper are Uncertainty Reduction Theory, in which speakers look for cues to minimize the uncertainty and guess the recipients' attitudes; Intimacy Model, in which one of the studies (Janssen, IJsselsteijn & Westerink, 2014, as cited in Hew & Tang, 2019) proved that the increased use of emojis increases people's perception of intimacy; Politeness Theory, in which speakers care about sustaining each other's "face" (as cited in Hew & Tang, 2019).

Uncertainty Reduction Theory examines the use of communication strategies to reduce uncertainty in socialization between people. The theory was created by Berger and Bradac in 1982 (as cited in Baldrige & Byron, 2005) and explores how people try to reduce uncertainty by searching for information about the people they are communicating with. The lack of nonverbal cues present in Face-to-Face (FtF) communication may increase the uncertainty, which is why emoticons and emojis may help lower it. Some other cues which help reduce the uncertainty are communication styles, punctuation marks and spelling (Baldrige & Byron, 2005). The results from Byron and Baldrige (2005) suggest that the use of capitalization and emoticons can affect the recipients' impressions of senders, finding users who use emoticons more likeable. E-mail recipients in the study were inspired by reduction of uncertainty of online communication which lacks nonverbal cues and tried to form impressions of senders as well as trying to understand the intended tone of the message by the speaker. Because of the need to reduce uncertainty, they were subjected to online versions of nonverbal cues, emoticons and capitalization. Emoticons indicate



a positive tone in a message, lessen uncertainty and ambiguity, and make the sender seem more likeable and the relationship between the sender and recipient stronger.

The Intimacy Model describes a feeling of closeness present in social interactions. Wang (2016) explores how an increase in self-disclosure, or revealing information about yourself to others, and emotional self-disclosure has an impact on intimacy levels between people communicating in the mobile messaging app context. The results of the study discovered how stickers in mobile communication may function in the same way as emoticons in CMC, preserving the nonverbal acts and supporting the message in that way. Janssen et al. (2014) found that the increased use of emoticons correlates with a higher level of perceived intimacy and proves that online communication does not need to be less intimate than FtF communication. In the second experiment automated communication was compared with user-initiated communication. The results showed that less intimacy was present in automated communication, as user-initiated communication does not only convey emotions but also the intention from the sender for the receiver to have this information.

Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory explains how language use affects the construction of social relationships. The concept of our public self-image, or "face" created by Goffman (1967) is one of the main aspects of the theory. Speakers find it important to maintain each other's face when communicating. However, certain kinds of speech acts directly threaten the other interlocutor's face. An example would be "Please hand me your test." The speaker limits the other participant of the conversation to act freely and in that way restricts their freedom, which furthermore negatively threatens their face. The two components of 'face' are negative and positive face. 'Negative face' is the freedom of actions every person desires, while 'positive face' is the desire of a person that his/her desires are acceptable by others. Five politeness strategies which

should be employed when using FTAs, or face-threatening are: 1) directly performing the FTA; performing the FTA with consideration of 2) positive or 3) negative politeness strategies; 4) indirectly performing the FTA and 5) to refrain from using FTAs. Another important concept of the theory is a “hedge”, which has a similar effect as emojis. Hedges such as *maybe*, *sort of*, *definitely*, can be “intensifiers” which strengthen the message or “softeners” which soften the content of the message (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Skovholt et al. (2014) explored the use of the Politeness Theory in a workplace environment. The findings showed that emoticons can be used to mellow a face-threatening request or further intensify a positive message. Emoticons have a communication role and are often used as softeners and directed toward face-threatening acts, rejections, corrections, complaints, and requests. When emoticons follow FTAs, they act as a counterbalance for the risk of offending the participant’s face, and portray the directive acts in a less authoritative way. Emoticons can also act as intensifiers of positive messages and increase expressive speech acts. Emoticons serve as a positive politeness strategy in that they regulate social relations. Employees modified the face threatening speech acts with emoticons to be more polite, less authoritative and to avoid offending the participants “face” and used positive emoticons to intensify the positivity of messages when agreeing, thanking, greeting, wishing, appraising, and promising.

Uncertainty Reduction Theory is relevant because it emphasizes the importance of use of nonverbal cues in online communication, which is to keep the levels of uncertainty and miscommunication low. The Intimacy Model may help clarify how the increased use of emoticons can increase the perceived intimacy levels between people, meaning online communication may not be worse for building intimacy levels compared to Face-to-Face communication. Lastly, the

Politeness Theory shows how emoticons sometimes act as softeners against face-threatening acts or intensifiers of positive messages, which proves their versatility in online communication.

### **2.3. Internet slang**

To accommodate the new media, people developed a new type of writing on the Internet. McCulloch (2019, p. 56) defines internet writing as “a distinct genre with its own goals, and to accomplish these goals successfully required subtly tuned awareness of the full spectrum of the language”. Along with the common use of abbreviations, Internet slang is widely spread across Netizens, people actively participating in online communities. It started out as “hacker slang” from 1975 among several universities’ computer science departments and developed from programmer jargon, eventually becoming published as “The Hacker’s Dictionary” in 1983. Some acronyms such as “R U THERE?” can be dated back to 1977 (McCulloch, 2019) and were used mostly to save time while typing. Therefore, programmers were one of the first people to use Internet slang and the extended knowledge of slang they had directly correlated with how long they had been using the Internet.

### **3. Method**

A mixed method approach was used in the study. The first method was the questionnaire, which included questions about the users’ habits in everyday communication with their friends and family online. Second, five in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted in which participants were asked to elaborate on their online activity and different ways they show emotions with their family, friends, and colleagues. The questionnaire was posted on different social media several times and sent to various groups. The reason I chose the mixed method approach was to encourage interviewees to explain their reasoning behind their answers, which was impossible

with some questions in the questionnaire. Even though participants from the questionnaire had the ability to provide longer answers and explanations in most of the questions, most of them answered with a simple yes or no, and I wished for more elaborate and detailed answers which were provided in the interviews.

Out of 56 participants for the questionnaire, 44 of them are female, 11 are male and one participant identifies as non-binary. The questions were about emoji usage (which ones do they use, how often, with whom, what for); emoji preference (in serious conversations), misinterpretations of emojis, reasons for using emojis, interpretations of two emojis, the effect emojis have on negative messages, Internet slang usage, using emojis for reassurance, punctuation usage, the use of punctuation for everyday vs formal messages, stickers usage and overall preference for expressing emotions in online communication. The interviews were conducted over video call because most of the participants were not available for in-person interviews. They were recorded and lasted 15-20 minutes. The questions were the same as in the questionnaire; however, the interviewees were encouraged to explain their reasoning and give additional examples. The interviewees consisted of a 32-year-old woman (referred to as VM in the analysis), 50-year-old woman (VA in the analysis), a 31-year-old man (IM in the analysis) and two 21-year-old women (TB and FŠ in the analysis).

#### **4. Analysis and discussion**

The age of participants varied from 13 to 56, while most of them (23,2%) were 21 years old. Out of 94,6% of participants who use emojis, 89,3% like using them. The people who do not like using emojis claim they do not know what most of the emojis represent, that emojis have double meaning and they cause awkwardness, so they refrain from using them.

The reasoning behind their emoji use is the accessibility of use, their ability to show the nonverbal aspects of Face-to-Face communication, to clarify interlocutor's emotions, the ability to respond very quickly to a message, expressiveness of humor and emotions, explanation of emotions which are hard to explain with words, using them is entertaining and fun, the ability to make the interpretation of the message's tone easier, the diversity of emotions they are able to transmit, and increase of the message's interest.

Participants mostly do not like emojis because of their double meaning and ability to be misinterpreted and cause miscommunication. Some of the other reasons are not being able to completely express the emotion they are trying to express, some emojis are inappropriate or useless, and do not align across all social media platforms, the multitude of them, and the ambiguity of their meaning.

There is a connection between the emotion people feel and the emoji they insert. When the participants were replying to a message in a positive way, as they would in real life with a smile, they used positive emojis which show their facial expression such as 😊, 😄, 😁, 😂; as well as emojis showing gestures, such as 👍, 🙌, 🙏 and things: ❤️ and 🍷. If the message they are replying to has a negative tone to it, they mostly avoid using emojis or use emojis with sad expressions, such as 😞, 😓, 😔. Emojis showing annoyance and anger are rarely used: 😠, 😡, 😤, 😩, 😫, 😬, 😏. However, some participants use the "passive-aggressive smiley" 😊, which has a completely different goal from its intended purpose of showing happy emotions. It can represent anger or frustration. Additionally, a large number of participants, 83,9%, use the highest amount of emojis when they are happy whereas 73,2% of participants avoid using emojis in serious conversations.

Some people use emojis to further explain what they are trying to say and the overall tone of the message. Emojis are also used to express their feelings, emphasize the message, to shorten the text and give the message a better effect, or to show sarcasm when the words are not enough to express it fully. This directly correlates to the Uncertainty Reduction Theory by Berger and Bradac (1982), as cited in Byron and Balridge (2005). Since there is a lack of nonverbal cues in online communication, emoticons act as cues to determine the tone of the message. People are often uncomfortable with uncertainty and use nonverbal cues such as emoticons to reduce the uncertainty and interpret the tone of the message as intended by the sender. This lowers the ambiguity that can often be found in online communication.

An example in which the tone of the message is clearly illustrated by the emoji is:

“He’s so fun to be around! 😏”

The emoji shows the sarcastic tone of the message and ensures there is no ambiguity. If there was no emoji, the message would have a positive tone, but the emoji acts as an indicator of sarcasm.

When relying only on facial expressions of emojis as representations of the feelings the participants are experiencing in that conversation, there tends to be a lot of miscommunication. However, even face-to-face facial expressions do not always represent our feelings. As explained by Dresner and Herring (2010), sometimes smiling during a job interview can make people think you are happy and enjoying it, even though the feelings you are experiencing in reality are nervousness and anxiousness. The same applies to online communication. People do not feel the way they are expressing by the emojis most of the time. Sometimes the crying emoji (😭) is misinterpreted, and recipients think the people using the emoji must be sad or crying, which is the case with 42% of participants. However, others claim they use it to express that they are crying

from laughter when they feel awkward or stressed or when they are trying to persuade the recipients to do something.

Furthermore, a seemingly simple emoji which has a double meaning is the smiling and blushing emoji (😊). 57.1% of participants use it to show they are smiling, but the many uses of this emoji include: using it in professional situations, with strangers, for threatening situations, passive aggressively, sarcastically, when they are angry or shy, and when they are thanking somebody or want to appear pleasant and friendly.

Emoticons and emojis can sometimes act as hedges, according to Skovholt et al. (2014). They act as intensifiers of expressive speech acts, compliments, thanks, and greetings and are oriented toward the recipient's positive face. An example from when I was first contacting my new boss about the accommodation I was going to live in while I worked:

Me: Do you maybe know if there is a fridge in the bedroom?

I was going to stop by the store on my way there.

Boss: No

But you can get it

I'll take care of it



Me: Amazing thank you 😊

Since I was requesting information about the fridge, I was threatening the negative-face of my boss, so I first used hedging “*maybe*” and explanation as to why I was asking and then after

she also used an emoji to reassure me, I used a smiling emoji to indicate I was sincerely thankful which further strengthened the speech act performed by the message.

One emoji that tends to be misinterpreted is the smirking face emoji (😏), because people use it to voice concern, but its purpose is to show a suggestive facial expression most commonly used to flirt.

As mentioned previously, the simple smiling emoji (😊) can also be misunderstood because it represents two different emotions: happiness and anger.

The interviewee VM claimed the emoji which shows the most positive emotions for her is the emoji with sunglasses (😎), which is rarely used by other people and therefore can cause miscommunication, so she refrains from using it with people who do not know the way she usually replies to messages.

IM said: “I always use the smiling emoji with one bead of sweat coming down its face (😓), which is a combination of I’m confused because of the weird situation but it’s also cool, and it tends to have people confused. Another one is the emoji with the glasses (👓), which to me says that the message they (the receiver) sent was cool, but people do not understand.”

FŠ said: “I usually use emojis when I’m happy, because in a negative situation I want to show that I’m serious, and emojis can soften the hard messages and then the message is not taken seriously. Maybe I would even use punctuation marks, which I usually don’t.”

73,2% of participants agree and avoid using emojis in serious conversations. The majority thinks the use of emojis in this context is unsuitable, however one participant claims the emoji helps with “being supportive in a sad situation.” Many serious conversations, especially ones



related to business communication, have conventional rules which are often neglected by most e-mail users (Krohn, 2004). An interviewee confirms this statement: “I definitely use less emojis in serious conversations, as the possibility of misinterpretation is bigger. I avoid using them in business e-mails, unless it’s a colleague whom I know very well, but then I only use a few positive ones.”

Nonverbal cues, such as emojis, capitalization, stickers and Internet slang help in reduction of ambiguity often found in online interactions (Riordan, 2017). Emojis can also serve as intensifiers of positive messages and downplay the negativity of negative messages.

In the survey, the participants were asked to pick between two messages, one including an emoji and the other one without:



Picture 2. The first message contains the sentence “I lost your charger.” and the second has the same sentence with a frowning emoji.

This example correlates with the Politeness Theory by Brown and Levinson (1987). The face-threatening act of confession and admission of guilt causes distress to the recipient and therefore damages the recipient’s positive face. Confessions threaten the positive face of the recipient by implying that the speaker does not care about the recipient’s feelings or wants. In this situation, the emoji acts as a softening hedge and lessens the threat which was directly damaging the recipient’s positive face. The emoji with a sad face expression indicates that the person genuinely cares about the person to whom they are confessing, and their ‘positive face’ is not as threatened.

As for the results, 83,9% of respondents agreed that they would have more sympathy for the sentence which included a sad emoji at the end of the sentence, since the emoji downplays the

situation of somebody losing your charger and provokes more sympathy from participants. The sad emoji shows that the person is remorseful and sad, while the message with no emojis has a tone of no regrets and simply stating the facts which happened, with no sympathy for the accident.

The interviewee TB said:

“I would have more sympathy for the message with the sad emoji because it shows some sort of emotion, while the message without the emoji is more of a report, like, hey I’m reaching out to tell you this information.”

FŠ revealed: “I would react better to the message with the emoji because I can tell that the person actually cares about my charger. In the second situation the tone of the message is unclear, which makes me think the person who lost the charger doesn’t care.”

Two questions from the questionnaire were related to the use of Internet slang, as I noticed the vocabulary change between Generation Z and older generations in online communication. Even though Millennials are very experienced with emojis, stickers and GIFs (Krohn, 2004), Internet slang is more common in conversations between people born after 1996. The results from the survey report that the average age for people using Internet slang is 20.75 years, while the average age for people not using Internet slang is 31.5 years. Speakers use slang because it is easier for them to speak in that way, while also improving their vocabulary at the same time. Brown and Levinson (1987) claim that using slang to refer to a certain object induces a shared feeling and attitude that the recipient and speaker shared towards the object and connects them in that way. By using slang in a group setting, it can create a feeling of belonging to a group or a group identity.

Internet slang has become a part of Internet culture. Changes in culture cause changes in language, so when the culture change is occurring in an online setting, where millions

communicate every day, new utterances are common and spread quickly. Petrova and Vasichkina (2021) claim "...the Internet is a cognitive revolution that has created a new Internet culture and a new Internet slang that has no age or geographical boundaries". New vocabulary is more likely to be welcomed by people during the first third of their lifespan (McCulloch, 2019). This claim is consistent with the results which confirm that younger people tend to use more Internet slang, new words created in online communities. Younger participants who use Internet slang in their daily life claim "the generational gap is too big to use it with older family members", so they prefer to use it with friends.

Capitalization of letters, commonly representing anger and shouting can also express an emotional reaction to happy news, as confirmed by 62,5% participants. Punctuation marks, which are a part of conventional rules for business and professional communication (Krohn, 2004) are not a common practice in everyday online communication for 30,4% of participants. The reasoning behind using punctuation marks in business e-mails is because it is a formal type of communication, there are rules to abide by, and so employers and professors would not find them illiterate.

Even though the use of many variants of nonverbal cues for online communication express emotions to a certain level and can set the tone of the message, it is not always preferable to rely on them. They often cause miscommunication between people, especially if the difference in age is big between speakers. The difference of use of emojis is also dependent on how close you are to the person. The majority of participants prefer to use the most emojis with the people they are closer to because they are sure those people know the way they behave and will interpret the purpose of the message correctly: "With people I'm close with I frequently and relaxingly use emojis because we have the same understanding of their use, while with strangers I'm shy and

prefer less emojis.” Participants refrain from using emojis with strangers and tend to exclusively use very positive or smiling emojis “to seem more friendly”, while with people they have known for a long time “there are more emotions present”, or they “use them ironically”.

However, the interviewee TB uses more emojis with people she just met: “I use more emojis with people I just met to stay polite. If I’m using emojis with people I talk to on a daily basis I use different emojis. With strangers I often use “*could you, please, maybe, possibly*” and a lot of smiling and positive emojis to, sort of, make the conversation more natural and less awkward. Emojis also help establishing intimacy, in a way.” Emojis are used alongside hedging to help the conversation with strangers feel less awkward and more friendly.

Nonverbal cues are considered unintentional, therefore in a situation with both verbal and nonverbal cues, the latter are more accurate to the existing emotions a person is experiencing (Krohn, 2004). In Face-to-Face communication, emotions are clearly visible from facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, body language, which are lacking in online communities.

The interviewee VM states:

“I found a perfect solution which transfers some of the nonverbal cues lacking in online communication but is at the same time a part of online communication, which are voice messages. Okay, you don’t see my face or body language, but a lot can be interpreted from loudness, the way you speak and the tone of your voice. It leaves less space available for a subjective interpretation.”

Stickers are comprehensive symbols of body language, facial expression, and external descriptions (Hew & Tang, 2019). Because of their size, they emphasize the feeling the person is trying to express. 64,3% of participants use stickers, which have risen in popularity when they

were introduced to mobile communication. First introduced in Japan in 2011, stickers can be purchased in dedicated stores, or created by everyday users by uploading pictures and adding customizable text. Zhou et al. (2017), as cited in Tang and Hew (2019), established that participants used stickers over emojis due to the level of expressiveness, pleasure, amusement, and personalization. Participants who use stickers regularly prefer to communicate with their friends with stickers, due to their customizable nature. Since they are created from an abundance of inside jokes, pictures and personal messages, users find them funny, relatable, and useful as a substitution for nonverbal cues which are not present. Nonetheless, stickers are sometimes excessive for people who use emojis in everyday communication. IM says:

“I like using emojis because you can use them in the middle of the message and then again later at the end. It makes the message clearer and emphasizes the tone of the message. That’s why I prefer using emojis over stickers: you can put many of them in one message whereas the sticker can only represent one emotion and it is too big. I don’t like that, it’s too aggressive.”

Stickers may function the same way as emoticons in CMC because they preserve the nonverbal cues. Wang (2016) found that emotional self-disclosure increases intimacy levels between people socializing in the mobile app context.

In the first example, the recipient replies with a sticker similar to the sender’s sticker, which acts as a nonverbal cue of gratitude for the sender getting them cereal and may increase intimacy levels between interlocutors.

In the second example, the sticker acts as a nonverbal cue of sympathy and solidarity towards the sender. This example can also be connected to the Theory of Emotion Work by Arlie Russell Hochschild, as explained in Riordan (2017). People have to make effort in relationships, managing the emotions as well as fulfilling the role they play in that relationship. Since the sender explains they were embarrassed in this situation, with the use of the sticker “pain”, the recipient also feels bad for the sender and replies with a sticker which expresses pain, but at the same time solidarity, to say that there is nothing the sender can do about it now.



Picture 3. The sender says they got the receiver the cereal they have been talking about for days and put a positive sticker. The receiver excitedly replies and uses a positive sticker.



Picture 4. The sender explains they said thank you to the waiter with the ‘pain’ sticker. The receiver replies with an uncomfortable looking cartoon character with the same tone as the first sticker.

According to Markman and Oshima (2007), emoticons act as punctuating devices, in place or with punctuation marks which close the sentence off. Emoticons conclude the sentence by additionally supporting the sentence and approving the action executed by the text of the sentence. As well as defining the illocutionary force of the sentence, the emoticon provides a structure to the

message by acting as a pragmatic marker. The answer from an interviewee VM which is in favor of Markman and Oshima:

“If I have a message with three sentences, by adding an emoji after each sentence I’m confirming the tone and purpose of the message. The emoji acts as a conclusion of each sentence.”

## 5. Conclusion

Overall, the study successfully investigated many of the ways emotions are conveyed in digital communication. It proved that there is a connection between the emotion people feel and the emoji they insert. When participants feel happy, they insert positive emojis which show happy facial expressions, gestures which suggest approval and supportive emojis such as the heart emoji. If they are replying to a message with a negative tone, they avoid using emojis or they use emojis with sad expressions. Emojis showing anger and annoyance are rarely used, however the “passive-aggressive smiley” 😊 is used instead.

Emoticons are used to indicate the tone of the message, express feelings, emphasize the message, shorten the text and show sarcasm when the message itself is not portraying it well. In the Uncertainty Reduction Theory by Berger and Bradac (1982), emoticons act as nonverbal cues which lessen the uncertainty and interpret the tone of the message as intended by the sender.

The degree of reliability of the expression of emotions by the emoji does not always represent the reality, but neither does Face-to-Face communication. A lot can be learned from body language, but people often smile to appeal to others even if they are not feeling happy in the moment, such as waiters in service jobs, because they want to attract customers and look friendly and approachable. Similarly, relying exclusively on the facial expression of emojis can often lead to

miscommunication. The crying emoji is often used for laughter and the smiling and blushing emoji also has a double meaning. For some it represents a feeling of happiness, while others use it passive-aggressively and sarcastically. The smirking face emoji, which is often used to voice concern, actually represents flirting.

The ambiguity emoticons often cause is the reason why 73,2% participants avoid using them in serious and formal conversations. Business communication has conventional rules which often imply that emojis should not be used (Krohn, 2004). In serious conversation, the possibility of misinterpretation is bigger which is why they are avoided by most.

Emoticons and emojis can also act as hedges and intensify expressive speech acts such as compliments and greetings. The results from the survey showed that participants show more sympathy for the message which includes an emoji because it acts as a softening hedge of the negative message and the emoji shows that the sender has feelings.

As for the Internet slang, it is mostly used by people belonging to Generation Z because the generational gap between the generations their older family members belong to is too big. It helps in creating a shared feeling and attitude towards a certain object and may make the connection between friends using the same slang stronger.

Nonverbal cues in online communication express emotions to a certain degree, however it is not always best to rely on them. They can cause misunderstandings, especially if the difference in age between participants is bigger. Participants of the survey prefer to use emojis with people they are close to because they are more likely to predict the tone and intention of the emoji correctly and tend to use exclusively positive emojis with strangers in order to raise the level of friendliness.



An alternative to emojis as suggested by one of the interviewees was voice messages because the tone of voice and loudness can help in the interpretation of the message.

As for stickers, they are used by 64,3% of participants. Since they are customizable, they can be created from inside jokes which makes them relatable and fun for users. Wang (2016) found that they may increase intimacy levels through emotional self-disclosure between people socializing on mobile apps.

As explained by Riordan (2017), sending emoticons and stickers can fulfill the role that the person is playing in a relationship. For example, if something embarrassing happened to the sender, the receiver can express sympathy for them and put emojis which express embarrassment, even though they themselves are not embarrassed at the moment but are showing empathy towards the sender. In this way they are doing emotional work and fulfilling the role of a friend.

Lastly, emoticons may act as punctuating devices, concluding the sentence and approving the action executed by the text of the sentence.

The main limitation of this study is the number of participants and the smaller number of male participants as well as participants older than 30. Perhaps generational and gender comparison would be possible, and it would have interesting insights. Equally, the CMDA approach may be better for this type of study because of its objective perspective obtained by the observation method. Since the survey collected answers from people in a way in which they explicitly state their opinion, observing them or using a database might have a different outcome. Furthermore, future research should perhaps consider the comparison of Face-to-Face communication with the use of voice messages in online communication, because of their ability to convey some of the nonverbal cues, such as tone of voice, which are lacking in online communication.

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## 7. Appendix

### Questionnaire

This appendix consists of questions and answers conducted for this study. For the questions which I did not add the suggested answer, participants were supposed to answer in their own words.

1. Gender: M/F/Other
2. Age
3. Do you use emojis? Yes/No
4. Do you like using emojis? Yes/No
5. What do you like about emojis?
6. What do you dislike about emojis?
7. Do you use emojis more with your friends or family? Friends/Family/Add own answer
8. Do you use more emojis with your friends or your family?
9. What are your most used emojis (5)?
10. Do you have preferred emojis for positive message replies? If yes, what are they?
11. Do you have preferred emojis for negative message replies? If yes, what are they?
12. Do you use more emojis when you are: a) happy b) sad c) angry
13. Do you use emojis in serious conversations? Yes/No
14. Have you ever been in a situation in which the other speaker misinterpreted your emoji usage? Explain the situation and include the emoji used.
15. Do you use emojis the same amount of emojis with people who are close to you and a person you just met? If the answer is no, explain how it is different.
16. Do you use this emoji (😭) to express that you are crying? If not, when do you typically use it?
17. Do you use emojis to further explain what you are trying to say? If yes, how?
18. Do you use this emoji to express that you are smiling (😊)? If not, when do you use it?
19. Out of these two options, which one are you more likely to have sympathy for when receiving these messages: I lost your charger. vs. I lost your charger 😞
20. How would you react if your friend sent you a message that they failed an important exam or lost their job? Would you:
  - i. send them a message reassuring them using emojis
  - ii. send a message reassuring them without using emojis
  - iii. meet up with them in person and comfort them
21. Do you use Internet slang in online communication? (e.g. hits different, sus, slay, bruh...): Yes/No
22. Do you prefer using Internet slang with your friends or family and why?
23. In a situation in which your close friend had something exciting happen to them, such as getting the job they were after, do you use capitalization to reply to their message? Yes/No
24. Do you use punctuation in your everyday texts? Yes/No
25. Do you use exclamation points for emphasizing? Yes/No
26. Do you use punctuation in e-mail messages? If yes, explain why.

27. Do you use stickers in textual conversation? Yes/No
28. Do you prefer to have a serious conversation through online communication channels or in person?
29. If you think a text message you received is funny, how do you answer it:
  - a. emojis
  - b. stickers
  - c. words
  - d. voice message
  - e. other (write your own answer)
30. Do you prefer to use emojis or words when expressing a reaction to something in your textual conversations?
31. Do you prefer to express emotions in face-to-face communication or text and why? Is it somewhat the same?