AT FACE VALUE: WHY DO INDIVIDUAL STUDENT USE EMOTICONS WITHIN TEXT-BASED ONLINE ACADEMIC DISCOURSE?

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Abstract

This paper will focus on ways in which students use emoticons in text-based online academic discussions to add context. A literature study of the use of emoticons reveals common themes around user-defined functions. Emoticons are more than words alone, making it easier to convey feelings by allowing emotional distance and still showing vulnerability. Emoticons clarify meaning; a smiley face can transform an apparently negative statement into something more approachable, or a winking face may hint at sarcasm with a statement that is overtly positive. In online discussions, emoticons are being used more often, yet few studies deal with the reasons individual students use emoticons within text-based online academic discourse. In a virtual discussion, emoticons convey social presence and conventions of politeness which humanize discourse and increase positive engagement. Emoticons also serve academic functions, such as allowing the user to indicate agreement or willingness to share resources, or introducing a new perspective. Students are not haphazard when they use emoticons; emoticons are used deliberately for an intended effect.

Keywords: text-based online academic discussions, emoticons, community of knowledge.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the early days of computer-mediated conferencing (CMC), emoticon use was a topic of discussion with four emoticons represented consistently in online learning environments (OLE): the smiley emoticon, the sad emoticon, the wink emoticon, and the tongue emoticon [1]. Emoticons are more than words alone, making it easier to convey feelings by allowing emotional distance and still showing vulnerability. In online discussions, emoticons are being used more often, yet few studies deal with the reasons individual students use emoticons within text-based online academic discourse. In a virtual discussion, emoticons convey social presence and conventions of politeness which humanize discourse and increase positive engagement. Emoticons also serve academic functions, such as allowing the user to indicate agreement or willingness to share resources, or introducing a new perspective.

In a social constructivist approach, individual learning is framed within a social and cultural foundation. Interaction and collaboration with others is part of a vibrant, knowledge building community. Students are not haphazard when they use emoticons; emoticons are used deliberately for an intended effect. The choice of which emoticon to use is semi-conventionalized with a high level of agreement around broad categories. Individual expression of one emoticon, or a combination of emoticons has a certain level of creativity in both meaning and use which allows the user to enhance a text-only message.

Educators can help students fill in the gaps between verbal and non-verbal exchanges and enable a more vibrant exchange within the online community of knowledge. Today's learners are savvier than those students at the advent of internet discussion about expressing themselves online. Teachers who better understand what is intended when students use emoticons in discourse can encourage students to express themselves in meaningful ways. Students overtly value the expanded discourse enabled by emoticons, but they are hesitant to use emoticons in academic discussions when the teacher is ‘present’. Teachers who understand the varied levels of students’ strategic use of emoticons as a form of paralanguage can model and encourage emoticon use within the discussion.

2 FINDINGS

Emoticons have been a topic of discussion since the early days of computer-mediated conferencing (CMC). An emoticon is a short sequence of characters, usually punctuation symbols. The use of
emoticons is traced to Carnegie Mellon University Professor Scott Fahlman. On September 19, 1982, he used “:-)” and “:-(" to delineate jokes from more serious posts in a computer science message board. Soon after, the use of symbols to represent facial expressions spread with hugs and kisses being added. The first expressions used characters found on a typical keyboard [2].

2.1 More than words alone
Emoticons are more than words alone, making it easier to convey feelings by allowing emotional distance and still showing vulnerability. The term emoticon stands for emotion and icon. This visual cue within the text of online discussion is a relational icon which anchors non-verbal communication, adding a paralinguistic component to a message. Recently, some empirical research has begun to analyze emoticons in CMC as a form of paralanguage, suggesting these expressions have an illocutionary role, emphasizing the nuanced intent of the speaker [3].

2.1.1 Universal but creative
Emoticons are different in scope and use from emojis even though the terms are sometimes used interchangeably. In online discussions of academic discourse, emoticons are usually more accessible to participants as they can be created from any keyboard. More recently, limited emoticons are available within online learning environments. Limited emoticons are built into word processors, often input automatically when a user presses certain keys, : and ) become on many keyboards and are universal across mobile interfaces. Emoticons carry a more clear and universal emotional context and are more limited in number than emojis. Emoticons serve as emotional shorthand, using the interface available to provide various intended applications for the user.

While the more commonly used sideways emoticons are Western in origin [2], cultural variations are claimed as part of an extended context. For example, kaomoji which are the right-side-up text-based faces, are more specific to Japan. Emojis are more developed faces. Emojis are also found in pop-up menus or other menus: a more ready-made symbol which literally means ‘picture character’ [2]. In more recent online dialogue and communication, over 10 billion emojis were used on Twitter in a two year period (2015). Emoticons are more limited, as there are exponentially more variations of emojis to represent variations of the same emotion [4].

Early online computer mediated dialogue had none of the buffer afforded by paralanguage, and such conventions as emoticons. Students today are accustomed through social media to be familiar with text-based expressions, and are savvier about expressing themselves online. Emoticon use affords less misunderstandings and a higher level of personalization. This increased spectrum for expression presumably “helps them in their online courses” [5], [7], but more extensive studies about direct correlations are needed. The use of text-based emotional expression allows for a universal basis for expression, usually along the four most-used emoticons. Emoticons also allow creativity within that same expression with students experimenting with other character combinations to give themselves more latitude for a greater degree of emotional expression and meaning emphasis even within a text-based environment.

2.1.2 Grounded in a social constructivist philosophy
Individual learning has a social and cultural foundation. Interaction within the learning environment, often taken for granted traditional classrooms must be re-constructed in a blended or fully online learning space. Collaboration online presents its own unique barriers, and students develop compensatory strategies to communicate with their peers and within discourse with their teachers online. The interpersonal dimension of a classroom can be lacking in online discussion. This dimension of cooperation and sharing learning goals is particularly important in an online graduate student community or a cohort which shares socially constructed knowledge. When knowledge is expanded and augmented within a community of learners, a text-only discourse provides obstacles to communication. Emoticons fill a gap when the traditional verbal and visual cues are absent [1]. One study by Goertzen and Kristinjansson (2007) recognized the importance of the interpersonal dimension, finding that social presence is more important than social chat. Those who input multiple times to the discussion but did not express themselves as an online ‘personality’ were not perceived to contribute as meaningfully to the discussion. The nature of collaborative learning online is “deeply intertwined with interpersonal engagement” [6]. This engagement is not reflected by quantity but quality of interaction. This multi-faceted interaction is complex, and not explained by computer generated transcripts, content analysis, or surveys of student perceptions. While Goertzen & Kristinjansson found that emoticons are proving “crucial in the automated sentiment classification of
informal texts” [6], students still bring their individuality to online discussion when they use emoticons to mean more than words alone.

2.2 Common themes: user rationale

Users of emoticons are not haphazard in their usage. Rather, when an emoticon is used in an online learning environment, the user is generally quite deliberate, and incorporates a particular emoticon for a specific, intended effect. Emoticon use is semi-conventionalized, there is a high level of agreement around broad categories of use, but individual expression plays out in the nuances of use within an online discussion. There is not a simple one to one relationship in meaning or use. With a greater expression than simple punctuation, emoticons are the online facial expressions students cannot make face to face, often enhanced by a much more deliberate application than a smile or a frown in a traditional learning setting.

2.2.1 Expands plain text

Communicating online makes it difficult to express information with the same richness or perceived usefulness. Underlying face to face communication is tone: and it is hard to be emotionally expressive in a text only environment. In a study which allowed instructors to use fun fonts, emoticons, vocalization or punctuation, those who used these functions on more than half of the pages were considered “emotionally expressive” rather than being cold, with a lack of concern [8]. Emoticon use enhances enjoyment and personal interaction. Mitigating some of the difficulties in expressing feelings in words, emoticons fulfill similar functions to non-verbal displays in face to face communication [3]. Since emoticons are used as visual cues to augment meaning of textual messages, computer mediated conversation can use these visual icons to compensate for the lack of traditional nonverbal cues [2].

Emoticon use is significantly correlated to perceived meaning during message creation, adding clarity to interpretation and eliminating some of the difficulty of expressing feelings in words [3]. Users who are additionally challenged by a text-only based environment, such as English Second Language (ESL) students who rely more heavily on gestures face to face, use emoticons to fulfill many of the same functions as these gestures would. Results from Aragon, et. al [8] are consistent with the claim that emoticons make it easier to convey emotion, introducing emotional distance and reducing vulnerability. When emoticons are used to expand the basic text of an online discussion, they are an “important aspect of linguistic utterance...help[ing] to clarify the meaning of a text and to eliminate misunderstandings” [3]. Emoticons work much in the same way as certain facial expressions, or vocal intonations [1]. They can support and enhance a text message, such as “I am sad :(”, when there is a denotative correspondence or congruence between the text and the emoticon [3]. As emoticons set the tone in computer mediated conversation, they also allow for an atmosphere of friendliness: emoticons are not as language specific as text so these expressions reach out to the interlocutor across culture [8].

2.2.2 Conveys social presence

Social presence is sought for online learning to increase engagement in participation and emoticons can help to provide a vehicle for social presence and gestures of politeness. On a basic level, emoticons buffer text by adding value which includes conventions of thanking and appreciation. A supportive environment is part of what makes online conversation comfortable. Social presence online can be effective in two main ways. First, when participants can surround potentially “face-threatening-acts” with positive comments, then a potentially harmonious collaboration is not disrupted. Emoticons can function to enable and reinforce a “heightened sense of group cohesion” [7]. Secondly, politeness theory suggests a function of emoticons is resolving tension between presenting oneself in a positive light and committing to critical engagement with others [7]. Emoticons can therefore allow more consistent positive reflection of attitude, and afford riskier online engagement.

As part of a student’s awareness of the danger of appearing too harsh in an online environment, emoticons are intentionally used to soften the tone of messages. One student expressed use of emoticons is to control the tone they present to their peers [1]. The humanizing of emoticons allows an author to acknowledge a struggle or weakness: students expressed the sad emoticon would be used when encountering a difficult activity [1]. Smartphone users, while different then dedicated online discussion participants, also convey that they use emoticons to “represent identity, presence, awareness, and feelings” [2]. If a student is insecure online because of the lack of visual and aural information, this same student may have a heightened sense of insecurity if a note or like is not
reciprocated, emphasizing the double-sided nature of increasing social presence and the real fact that online users can also feel left out of the community [1].

Emoticons give immediacy and decrease psychological distance, increasing the positive engagement that is a key factor in vibrant online discussion. Social presence can be a guiding framework to examine non-verbal immediacy behaviours online including emoticons and other figurative language and visual imagery. These behaviours, both verbal and non-verbal, can send positive messages of liking and closeness which “decrease psychological distance between people and positively affect student state motivation” [7]. The use of indicators like emoticons creates intimacy, immediacy and higher levels of social presence, “subsequently, higher student engagement” [7].

In an online context, learners can project their identities while still feeling the presence of others, ideally creating an online community. Emoticons can function to foster humour and self-disclosure which can influence students’ affect and self-efficacy, which is in turn associated with both satisfaction and perceived learning online. Emoticons could be part of engagement socially and cognitive work [11].

2.2.3 Enables academic functions

Students who are socially engaged also need to participate in functions online that are more academic. Studies have found that students are deliberately using emoticons for strategic academic functions: to show agreement, sharing of a resource, giving a new perspective, and providing or receiving feedback from peers [1]. The emoticon makes these academic functions smoother: “If the feedback contained a suggestion, or an alternative interpretation of an idea, the smiley face helped prevent the reader from interpreting the comment in a negative or critical fashion” [1]. The sad-faced emoticon is also a way to show a student was struggling to understand a concept, to encourage others to assist or lend support [1]. Collaboration was assisted within a community of inquiry by students using emoticons to engage and participate in assignment construction [6]. In a more direct way, emoticons can even be used by peers and/or moderators such as the professor to control critical dialogue. For example, emoticons can temper instructions or expressions designed to bring a ‘phantom partner’ into the discussion or bring another student into line after a comment that could be perceived as outside the scope of the intended discussion, or even controversial [6]. Feedback online is harsh when only text-based. When participants use emoticons, they can express their own struggles in the course, or with their peers, in a way that is tempered, just as a face to face discussion would be.

2.2.4 Controls temperature of online interactions

Emoticon support “heats up too cool asynchronous communication with positive emotions, and helps to cool down too hot synchronous communication” [3]. Emoticons enable negotiation in a more nuanced way, and allow users to decide how much information to give, and what to withhold. Emoticons allow users to recognize information in context, and give a more robust flavour to otherwise ‘lean’ media. One study tested different sentiment tools to investigate the impact of emoticons on sentiment classification of short messages. The overall evaluation results using different variations of text still showed emoticons impacting conversation by often reversing polarity of sentiment values [12] [13]. Negative emotions were used least often, especially in task-oriented contexts [13]. People generally display more emotions—and resultant emoticons—in positive contexts. Emoticons are not only a way to express emotions online but also a way to conceal emotion, such as making a negative emotional state warmer, or adding brightness to a darker sentiment [2]. Emoticons allow participants to be inviting, strengthening messages and avoiding some miscommunication. An emoticon in a text message can allow receivers to not only understand the direction of a message, but the level of emotion, attitude and attention expressed. Emotions thus enrich the conversation and allow members to speak with confidence that their real message is being heard [7].

An emoticon serves a valence function, like punctuation at the end of a sentence or expression. If the emoticon is the same valence as the message, then the valance of the message is increased. Positive messages with a corresponding emoticon have a more positive feeling associated. Frowns in criticism increase the overall feeling that the criticism is even more negative. However, judicious use of emoticons can soften a potentially negative emotion: a complaint or request or even a rejection is not as harsh if a happy face emoticon is added. Overall, emoticon use sets a more comfortable temperature and makes communication more enjoyable [10].
2.2.5 Enables participants to laugh a little

Emoticons add the very human element of humour to online text-based discussions. The wink and tongue emoticons are used less than the happy and sad face, and typically are intended to make the conversation seem collegial and friendly [1]. In the absence of non-verbal cues, emoticons clarify message intent. The wink “ ;)” and tongue “:P” are most often associated with sarcasm, but not necessarily with criticism which is usually indicated with an ellipsis [10]. Emoticons help make the intent of the message clear, with the wink or tongue indicating if the message is to be taken sarcastically.

When the emoticon contradicts the message, or directly annuls the text meaning, then they produce ambiguity. A sarcastic ‘tone’ is created when a positive message is accompanied by the opposite negative emoticon: “I am not happy :-)’ and sometimes ironic: “This has to be taken very seriously ;)” [3]. Also, sarcastic expressions enabled by emoticons can mitigate a spirit of disagreement: “Sorry, but I do not agree :-)” [3]. Empirical studies show emoticons can not only strengthen the impact of a verbal message, but can also emphasize message creation, interpretation, and clarify textual messages [3]. Even in ESL courses, emoticons are a more universal way to show approval, or to suggest modifications for the other students. Using emoticons can be a playful way to agree with others, and is often a strategy to get the group, or members of the group, to come alongside an idea, or to increase their own participation in the discussion [11].

There is strong evidence that positive emoticons are not used by the senders to indicate negative sarcasm. The smile is used to relate clearly positive emotions, and is found in praise. The wink or tongue is preferred to mark sarcasm. Mixed messages, like a positive statement connected to a negative emoticon, are sometimes seen or rated as more sarcastic, but the mixed message is not always sent to indicate sarcasm [10].

2.2.6 Strategic, not haphazard

Emoticons are strategically used by students: they are not haphazard expressions of emotions but a deliberate attempt to convey the intent of the author. These cues are part of the way students express themselves in an online community that does not easily allow the affordances of face to face communication. A big part of using emoticons is trying to project certain tones, or to accomplish academic tasks. Students are often aware that the lack of traditional cues could unintentionally produce misunderstandings. Student proficiency with this strategy can be linked to experiences in other web-based communication [1].

Emoticons are universal, but their use is still creatively nuanced. Certain emoticons have a higher level of agreement about how they are used, especially in the broad categories such as representing happiness or indicating sadness. But, there is not a simple or direct one to one relationship which links a specific emoticon to a single meaning. These picture icons can help to fill a gap in written communication. Emoticons seem to be both instinctive and deliberate: they can be used in various roles, limited only by the creativity of the user, and the perception of the receiver [10].

2.3 Application & Significance

Users of emoticons are not haphazard. Rather, when an emoticon is used in an online learning environment, the user is generally quite deliberate, and incorporates a particular emoticon for a specific, intended effect. Emoticon use is semi-conventionalized, there is a high level of agreement around broad categories of use, but individual expression plays out in the nuances of use within an online discussion. There is not a simple one to one relationship in meaning or use. With a greater expression than simple punctuation, emoticons are the online facial expressions students cannot make face to face, often enhanced by a much more deliberate application than a smile or a frown in a traditional learning setting. Emoticons, a form of paralanguage, fill a gap in online discussion when the traditional verbal and visual cues are absent.

2.3.1 Data Mining Applications

Early studies suggest that sentiment conveyed by emoticons is domain and topic independent. A preliminary study found correlations which allowed researchers to construct sets of positive and negative tweets as well as alternative sentiment categories such as angry or sad. These “emoticon-labeled sets” could then be used to train sentiment classifiers [6]. This type of investigation can begin to extend common features used in text mining and to make links to sentiment carrying words. Some emoticons are also used for polarity classification. While there have been changes from early work
which automatically generated positive and negative sample texts based on associated positive and negative emoticons, a more nuanced approach is needed because of sarcasm and other valence factors inherent in emoticon use. The most promising use of emoticons in discourse analysis is in task-oriented online work and is coupled with participants’ views to provide a more “insightful snapshots off the localized dynamics and dilemmas” which shape online discussion [6]. Unlike some combinations of words, emoticons are often in predictable locations, much like punctuation [10]. This may partly explain why emoticons are more effective in increasing valence ratings, even in the absence of standard punctuation, but more study is warranted.

2.3.2 Teacher Modelling & Expression

This study is significant because teachers need to understand what is intended when students use emoticons in discourse and to encourage students to express themselves in meaningful ways when educators are in the dialogue. Students, while they overtly value the expanded discourse enabled by emoticons, are hesitant to use emoticons in academic discussions when the teacher is ‘present’. Studies showed that students use emoticons as part of horizontal (equal-equal) or student to student, but are more reluctant to use emoticons when in vertical relationships (superior-inferior) [1]. Results from online discourse and from studies in Instant Messaging on a smart phone are similar, but more research can add to this discussion. Emoticon use is increased in communication between friends [5]. Also, emoticon frequency and specific emoticon use are perceived to function differently based on relationship type. Most people want to be sincere and professional when dealing in a vertical exchange, and emoticons are still considered informal and unprofessional by many.

Students who had emoticon symbols available in PeppeR, an online learning environment, expressed they were initially hesitant to use emoticons in their online notes: “they were not sure they were appropriate in an academic course, even if they added clarity to their emotions and tone” [1]. Students worried that the instructor might disapprove of them. They felt caught between the pressure to produce “objective, non-emotional, academic writing” and the pressure to “build a collaborative learning community” [1].

Teachers who understand the varied levels of strategic use by students of emoticons as a form of paralanguage, can model and encourage emoticon use. In general, many studies show that some instructors are not necessarily taking full advantage of other means of enhancing social presence or using immediacy cues to full potential. One suggestion was that in the traditional classroom, immediacy is created with “very little effort” so the instructor “may not see the parallel need in online classrooms” [7]. Non-verbal behaviours such as smiling or even changing vocal tones which add to a positive atmosphere in a traditional classroom are absent or negligible online. However, the effect of figurative language, emoticons and even fun fonts that are more responsive and present, while it may not directly impact immediacy, could “have a positive impact on student engagement” [7]. A warmer, more productive and engaging space can be part of creating a vibrant knowledge community. An approachable course environment can use design elements, including emoticons for use. Teacher modelling within student-teacher conversation can add to the perceived warmth in the environment or ecology of the course. Educators can take the lead in modelling to students how to fill in the gaps between verbal and non-verbal exchanges, enabling a more vibrant collaboration within the online community of knowledge.

3 CONCLUSION

Emoticons are more than words alone. The use of emotions by students in online academic discussion is strategic and deliberate with marked academic and social functions. Emoticons, which increase comfort level, engagement and participation online, are part of a social constructivist framework to encourage knowledge building. Emoticons are part of the expressive and figurative exchange which makes learning more vibrant and dynamic. Teachers should not only approve of emoticon use, but should model use of paralanguage such as emoticons so students are at ease using this vehicle. In this way, educators help students fill the gaps between verbal and non-verbal exchanges and enable a more vibrant exchange within the online community of knowledge.
REFERENCES


