

A Comparison Study of Emoji Use among High School Students and Adults

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Abstract: Text messages often contain more than words, such as emojis, to convey one's feelings and thoughts. These small, digital images have made a major impact on the way individuals communicate by providing a visual aid to convey emotions and expressions that were only possible through face-to-face communication. In the past, communications research has been primarily focused on in-person interactions, but now in the digital age, interpersonal relationships are examined and measured on a wide variety of online platforms. This allows for online communicative behaviours to be observed and recorded for data analysis. The focus of this study is to observe how emojis are used in the context of text messages. Most high school students have grown up with instant messaging and are comfortable using emojis to convey their thoughts and feelings. Although adults have access to the same technology, we hypothesised that they would be less likely to use emojis in comparison to high school students. Emoji usage among high school students and adults were analyzed to understand the differences of emoji text usage between each group. The communicative intent behind emojis and the frequency of how emojis were used are examined and compared among the two age groups. Consistent with our initial hypotheses, the surveys showed that high school students used a higher frequency of emojis per conversation in comparison to older age groups and that they were more likely to use emojis regardless of the relationship they have with the other person. The data also revealed that high schoolers used emojis for a wider variety of purposes, not simply to emphasize an emotion.

Keywords: emojis, communications, text messages, social media.

I. INTRODUCTION

With the rise of social media beginning in the early 2000s, emojis have also gained popularity among digital platforms for online communication. Prior to the proliferation of social media platforms, emojis were primarily used in text messages. In 1999, they were more widely known as emoticons developed by Shigetaka Kurita, an artist who worked for the mobile carrier DOCOMO.¹ His goal was to simplify the exchange of messages in an efficient and clear manner, and to include images beyond the traditional smiley face. Kurita created 176 emojis that included weather, traffic, technology, and nature symbols to broaden the amount of ideas and objects that could be expressed with a single icon.

The smiley face, however, existed even prior to the emojis that Kurita created. In 1963, Harvey Ball created the smiley face for the State Mutual Life Assurance Company.² Although it was initially intended as a symbol to uplift and encourage employees, it quickly rose in fame and eventually became used by many companies as a representation of positivity. The use of the smiley face in an industrial and economic perspective, was a form of affect labor, or emotional labor. Affect labor is work that is done with the intent to appeal to the emotional experiences of consumers and is used to increase economic gains and encourage consumerism.²

With the rise of social media, prominent celebrities and influencers joined popular social media platforms, such as Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook, many used emojis in their posts to show personality or add depth and clarity to the meaning behind their messages, encouraging fans to follow suit.² Due to the attention that emojis receive, its popularity has spread across millions of online users worldwide and has become an integral part of popular culture.

II. INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

In essence, emojis allow individuals to express themselves in a fluid manner that words alone cannot provide. It is nuanced and immediate, even completely taking the place of words. It is also an opportunity to almost decorate one's message to the users' desire. One important function of emojis is to clarify the intended tone of messages. In this way, emoticons serve as a new nonverbal method of communication, which can reveal new insights and allow for nuanced interpretations compared to a message with just text. Emojis can serve as both an interpersonal and an intrapersonal function to establish an "emotional tone" in the absence of face-to-face communication.³

Nina Barudzic, a graduate student from the University of South Dakota, surveyed 50 students using a rhetorical approach and a cluster criticism technique to group emojis that shared similar traits.⁴ The cluster of emojis representing happiness were distinguished by a smile. The cluster of emojis displaying excitement portrayed motion, as well as smileys. The last cluster showing support not only included faces and motion, but also non-verbal gestures. Overall, the results showed that a majority of the emojis were used to create a more intimate relationship between the sender and the recipient due to a shared knowledge and understanding of the meaning of these emojis.⁴ The correlation between emojis and the meaning they are constructing makes communication easier and helps clarify the emotional meaning behind the message.

III. THE HYPOTHESIS

Adults over the age of 30 are not unfamiliar with messaging online whether through social media platforms or through email, therefore it can be inferred that compared to high school students they are not as adept or likely to use emojis while conversing online. In one study, Herring and Ashley examined the gender differences in attitudes towards emojis between the sexes. Their study revealed that there were no gender differences in the way emojis were used. The group that differed the most were the "other" gender group. One thing to note from this study is that respondents over 30 were more likely to not understand the function of emojis or interpret them literally while younger users were able to interpret the same emojis in a more conventional way.⁵

In another study comparing the differences of emoji usage by age, Prada et al. examined the visual paralinguistic cues (ie. emojis) among college students and older working professionals via a web survey among 474 Portuguese participants. The younger participants showed more positive attitudes towards using emojis, including emoticons, and used it with more frequency than the older participants.⁶ The older participants stuck to emojis and did not use emoticons as often. The motives for emoji usage were similar in reasoning as well.

Therefore, there are two hypotheses that we intend to test in this study:

HYPOTHESIS I:

The first hypothesis connotes that high school students will text using a wider variety of emojis at a higher frequency than adults regardless of who they are contacting.

HYPOTHESIS II:

The second hypothesis is that high school students will use emojis more frequently to express their emotions while texting compared to adults.

IV. MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to test these hypotheses we gathered data by surveying 100 high school students and 100 adults on their intentions while using emojis and the frequency in which they use emojis to communicate. A survey of 18 questions was administered to the participants covering topics such as frequency of use, types of emojis and emoticons, motives, relationship context, and more. In total, 18 questions were administered. All of the results from this survey were compiled into one study and compared to examine and observe recurring trends in the usage of emojis and what effect this had on the relationships and communication among online users.

V. RESULTS

A cross reference analysis was performed by age group to determine how emoji use compared between high school students and adults. To begin, participants were asked how many emojis each individual used in one conversation. Figure 1 shows that adults (college or older) used 0 to 5 emojis in one conversation while a majority of high school students answered 6 to 10 emojis. The high school group also had the most participants using 6 or more emojis in one conversation. When asked how many different emojis each group used in one conversation, the majority of participants no

longer in high school responded that they used around 1 to 4 different emojis while in comparison the high school students used 3 to 6 different emojis in one conversation. Furthermore, Figure 2 shows that adults (no longer in high school) selected the least amount of emojis (1 to 2), while the high school group had the most responses of 5 to 6 different emojis, with 10 out of 24 high school participants choosing this answer. The survey also asked participants to answer with whom they were most likely to use emojis in a conversation. In addition, we can see in Figure 3 that almost all age groups are comfortable using emojis in texts to acquaintances. However, the data also shows that high school students in comparison to the other age groups were more likely to use emojis regardless of their relationship to them (ie: parents, significant other, friends, teachers, etc.).

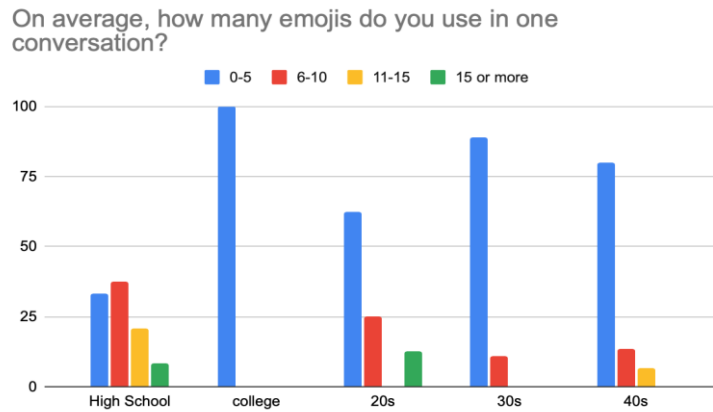


Figure 1. Emoji Count: How many emojis each individual used in one conversation

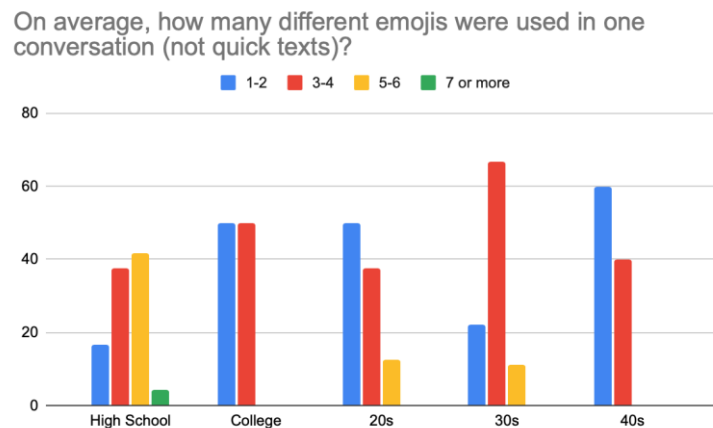


Figure 2. How many different emojis each group used in one conversation

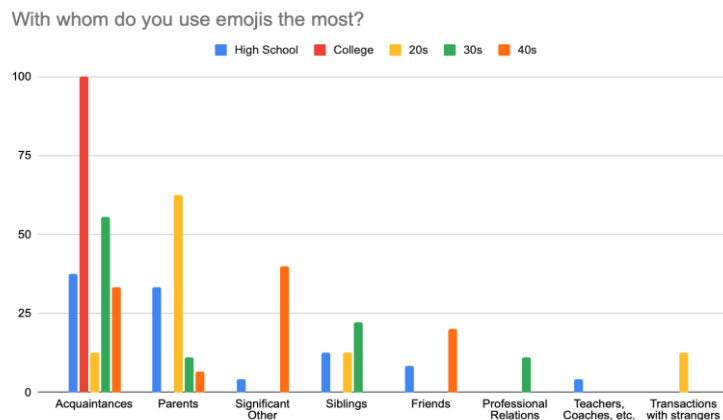


Figure 3. With whom do you use emojis the most?

Based on the survey data we can see that Hypothesis I was correct in that on average, high school students are more inclined to use a wider variety of emojis in one conversation than adults. In addition to high school students using emojis at higher frequency than adults they were also more likely to use emojis regardless of the relationship they had with the person they are contacting.

Furthermore, when individuals were asked for what reason they tend to use emojis the most, the most prevalent response in every age group was to emphasize a feeling that they had. Figure 4 shows that 31 out of 58 participants answered that they used emojis mostly to emphasize a feeling. In contrast, the choice for “to express anger” had no votes from any of the age groups. Although the data reflects that all the age groups were inclined to use emojis to emphasize a feeling, the results were consistent with our hypothesis in suggesting that high schoolers are more likely to use emojis in a variety of situations such as to encourage or end a conversation in comparison to the other age groups. Therefore, our Hypothesis II was supported by the data in that high school students did use emojis more frequently to express their emotions while texting compared to adults.

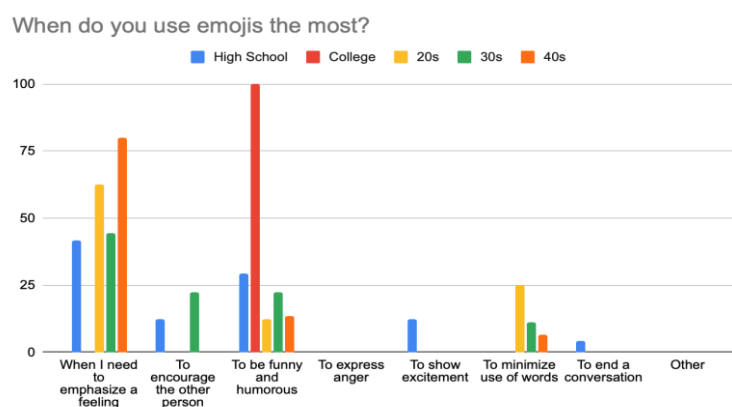


Figure 4. When do you use emojis the most?

VI. DISCUSSION

Through this survey we were able to find that there is a significant difference in emoji usage across age groups. Not in just the volume of emojis used per conversation but also in which situations high school students chose to use them. The survey showed that high school students were much more likely to use more than 5 emojis in a conversation compared to the older participants. In addition to using a larger number of emojis during a conversation the data showed that they were also more likely to use emojis in a variety of situations.

It should be noted that among the adult group, the data examined by each decade. Therefore, among the adults there were differences in the way and with whom emojis were used. For instance, people in their 30s noted that they use emojis even with colleagues in the workplace. People in their 20s were more likely to use emojis with strangers than any other age group. Also, more people in their 20s used 3-4 emojis per conversation whereas people in their 30s used 5-6 emojis per conversation. Therefore, it would be interesting to administer a study with a larger pool of participants between the ages group instead of simply comparing high school students to adults.

The research could attempt to see the effectiveness of emojis as a means of communication- if the use of emojis hinder more complex conversations and thoughts or if they enhance communication especially across language barriers. The results documented in this study reflect the differences in the use of and intentions behind emoji use in digital communication.

VII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings of this study was consistent with previous findings about the frequency and reason for emoji usage among youth people. However, when it comes to adults, the results varied based on age group. In the future, whether or not emojis have staying power remains to be seen. However, visual modes of communication are definitely a communication tool that people of all ages find useful. Emojis made be replaced by other emoticons but for now, emojis have a strong presence in the world of online communication that aid in conveying one’s message.

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