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A Study on Gender Differences in Emoji Usage

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ABSTRACT

With the growing use of text messaging systems and the Internet, there is a steady increase in the number of new emojis. The absence of verbal cues makes the emojis open to various interpretations depending on the thread of discussion. When it is used in messages, users normally assumed that the receivers understand the message in the same way. This study is done to investigate what a user is conveying when using an emoji. It focuses on what the male and female users are trying to convey when selecting the emojis. There were a total of 81 participants in the study. The findings indicate that a few have misunderstood what the emoji is conveying. The results of the study reflect that most of the answers given carry the same connotation as what the emoji is conveying. Generally, there was no real difference between the male and female respondents in what they are conveying when using the emojis.

Keywords: emoji, non-verbal cues, online communication

INTRODUCTION

Emojis have been developed to address the need for non-verbal cues in online communication (Adams, 2017). Emojis are “picture characters” or pictographs that are used in text-based communication (Miller, Thebault-Spieker, Chang, Johnson, Terveen, & Hecht, 2015). They are normally used in mobile texting and social networking sites. According to Adams (2017), “emojis are easier, faster, and feels less ‘weird’ than expressing emotions in words” (p. 37). Emojis have been widely used in modern communications. They are easy to use as they are available on social media sites (Adams, 2017). However, not everybody could interpret emojis easily. Emojis could also mean differently and are interpreted differently by different people (Rawlings, 2018).

Emojis appear differently on different types of viewing platforms on different social networking sites. For instance, the emoji 😊 on Apple iPhone is absent in Google Nexus phone. Usually the symbol 😊 is used to express the same thing. The creation of emojis facilitated exchanges on social networks.

Statement of Problem

There are many studies done on the role (Chairunnisa & Benedictus, 2017) and meaning of emojis in context (Miller, Kluver, Thebault-Spieker, Terveen, & Hecht, 2017). Most of the previous

research on emojis focused on the importance of understanding the meaning of emojis (Hakami, 2017) and how the nonverbal cues in emojis are being interpreted by people of different cultures (Adams, 2017; Bosch & Revilla, 2018; Park, Baek, & Cha, 2014; Stark & Crawford, 2015).

Studies on how high and low context culture are affected by the use of emojis/emoticons have also been carried out by other researchers (Li, Rau, & Hohmann, 2011). Studies have also been conducted by researchers on how emojis render differently on different social sites (Miller et al., 2015; Chairunnisa & Benedictus, 2017).

Though studies have been carried out on emojis/emoticons, studies done on the ‘smiley face’ emojis in particular are scarce. This is surprising given the popularity and variety of smiley face emojis available to smartphone users. Most of the time, the receiver assumed that their interpretation of the message is the same as what the sender intended to mean. A study on the Malaysian users is yet to be conducted to see if both the receiver and the sender meant the same thing. This study is thus conducted to investigate whether the ‘smiley faces’ particularly those with smiling and laughing looks are used to express the same thing by its users. This focus is on whether there are differences in what the male and female users of emojis are conveying when using the ‘smiling and laughing’ emojis.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The objective of this study is to:

1. investigate whether there are differences in what the male and female users of emojis are conveying when using the ‘smiling and laughing’ emojis

LITERATURE REVIEW

Emojis

The word emoji is the combination of ‘e’ and ‘moji’, which roughly means pictograph (Hern, 2015; Adams, 2017). Hern explained that unlike emoticons, “Emojis are actual pictures, of everything from a set of painted nails (👉) to a slightly whimsical ghost (👻)” (Adams, 2017, p.11). As the technology developed emojis are replacing emoticons to express emotions (Hern, 2015; Adams, 2017). Emojis are available in many Computer-mediated communication (CMC) applications such as Instagram, Facebook and Instant Messaging. Through emojis, users can express emotions, ideas or concepts more easily (Huang, Yen & Zhang, 2008).

Emojis have somehow become part of language as a “living organism” (Meyerhoff, 2011, p. 56) and a necessary means for human communication. They have led to a change in social trends, lifestyles, and technology (see Alshenqeeti, 2016) among Internet users who constantly have to adapt to a new lifestyle in order to survive in this era of globalization.

The use of emojis has been increasing in the last few years (Barbieri, Kruszewski, Ronzano, & Saggion, 2016). This is because of the increasing number of social networking sites (SNS) which needed a tool to express nonverbal information in text-based forms (Lo, 2008). The virtual keyboards have incorporated a standard international emoji keyboard to facilitate social networkers who use emoji quite frequently.

A wide variety of emojis including new emojis are being developed for users on a daily basis (Bosch & Revilla, 2018), and up to six billion emojis every day according to one study (see Swiftkey, 2015). Apple for example, was the first mainstream company which created an emoji menu for IOS 5 (Riordan, 2017).

In February 2018, there were 2,784 emojis in the Unicode Standard. Though the number of emojis is increasing, studies have shown only a few of them are used for communication (An, Li, Teng, & Zhang, 2018; Park, Baek, & Cha, 2014; Stark & Crawford, 2015; Bosch & Revilla, 2018). Added to that, studies on its usage is relatively new (Bosch & Revilla, 2018). Jaeger & Ares (2017) highlight that not much information is available on how emojis are interpreted.

Gender Differences in Expressions When Using Emojis

Studies have found that there are differences in the way females and males use non-verbal cues in face-to-face offline communication (Steven, Daniel, Edward, & John, 2013; Briton & Hall, 1995; LaFrance & Banaji, 1992), and online activities (Hwang Ha Sung, 2014; Tossell, Kortum, Shepard, Barg-walkow, Rahmati, & Zhong, 2012; Wolf, 2000).

Chen et al. (2018) highlighted that, failing to consider the differences could affect the quality of interaction as many information systems have given gender-customized services to their users. The study also found that there was a large contrast between male and female users in the use of emojis. Women were most likely to use emojis compared to men. Both genders have also demonstrated different preferences for emojis, especially when expressing sentiments. In recent studies, females were found to show more facial activities compared to males (Buck, Baron, Goodman, & Shapiro, 1980 ; Buck, Baron & Barrette, 1982). Studies have also found that a larger number of females used emoticons compared to males (Wolf, 2000; Tossell et al., 2012; Hwang Ha Sung, 2014).

Chen et al. (2018) stated that 7.02 % of male users used at least one emoji in their messages while 7.96% of female users were likely to use more emojis. In addition, women preferred to show more facial-related activities than men (LaFrance & Banaji, 1992; Buck et al., 1980; Buck, Baron & Barrette, 1982). On the other hand, Herring & Dainas (2018) studies have found that females and males have the same mental representations of emojis. They also found that female social media users have similar interpretations as the male users of emoji in Facebook messages. It is clear that there need to be more studies conducted to better understand the nature of gender mental representations and interpretations with regards to facial expressions, emotions, and emojis.

METHODOLOGY

Respondents

This research attempts to explore what users mean when they use emojis. As there are many emojis, this study will focus on four selected smiley faces - 'laughing and smiling'. Information on the background of respondents was sought for this study and summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Participants' Gender

Gender	Responses	Percentage (%)
Male	25	30.8
Female	56	69.1
Total	81	100

Table 1 shows that a total of 81 respondents who responded to and answered the questionnaire. There were 81 participants in total, 30.8% of them were males ($N=25$) and 69.1% were females ($N=56$).

Design of the Study

In this research, the respondents were given a set of questionnaires to express their meanings of the selected 'laughing and smiling' faces. Convenience sampling or also known as a non-probability sampling was adopted in this study. It is a selection of whichever individuals are easiest to reach. The respondents are selected based on their accessibility, geographical proximity, availability at a given time, or their willingness to participate in the study (Dörnyei, 2007). This sampling is easy, affordable and makes use of participants who are readily available (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016).

The survey was sent via WhatsApp to members of the researcher's family's WhatsApp groups to get input from various age groups and from different gender. The assumption is that they have the same understanding of the emojis, and interpret them in the same way since they belong to the same community. Members of the WhatsApp group are also easier to reach.

Items on emojis were open-ended to allow the respondents to give their own meaning of the emojis. Open ended questions are used in this survey as they allow respondents to express an opinion spontaneously without the researchers' input (Reja, Manfreda, Hlebec, Vehovar, 2003 & Foddy, 1993).

FINDINGS

The first emoji in the survey was 😊 which shows a grinning face. This emoji is used to convey "general pleasure and good cheer or humor" (Emojipedia, n.d.). The answers given by the respondents are tabulated in Table 2:

Table 2: What 😊 Conveys According to Respondents

	ITEMS	MALE	FEMALE
SMILE	Smile while taking picture	0	1
	Forced smile	0	1
	Wide Smile	1	3
	Awkward Smile	0	2
	Bright Smile	0	2
	Smile showing teeth	0	1
	Smiling face and open mouth	0	1
	Smiley to someone whom I'm not so close to ease out the awkwardness	0	1
	Smile	3	3
	I'm so happy, I smile showing my teeth	0	1
	Senyum Kambing	0	1
	Grin	0	1
Total		4 (17.3%)	18 (35.2%)

HAPPY	Happy	8	16
	Casual Happy Mood	0	1
	Happy Blush	0	1
	Cheerful	1	1
	Partially excited	0	1
	Excited	4	0
	Happiness	0	2
	Super Happy	0	2
	how happy-go-lucky I am. I use it as a response to when I get ridiculed for my foolish behaviour which I do on purpose	0	1
	Riang	1	0
Total		14 (60.8%)	25 (49%)
LAUGH	ha.ha.ha.ha	1	0
	ketawa kecil	0	1
Total		1 (4.3%)	1 (1.9%)
PROUD	Proud	0	1
Total		0 (0%)	1 (1.9%)
SURPRISE	Terkejut dan inginkan kepastian/cuba menafikan 'Betulke ni?' /'ok'	0	1
	Surprise	1	0
Total		1 (4.3%)	1 (1.9%)
THANK YOU	Thank you	0	1
Total		0 (0%)	1 (1.9%)
LOOKING FORWARD TO	Looking forward to	0	1
Total		0 (0%)	1 (1.9%)
LIKE IT	Like it	3	1
Total		3 (13%)	1 (1.9%)
HI	Hi	0	1
Total		0 (0%)	1 (1.9%)
NEUTRAL	Neutral tetapi bernada mesra	0	1
Total		0 (0%)	1 (1.9%)
Total for All Responses		23 (100%)	51 (100%)

Table 2 lists what the respondents meant when they used the emoji 😊. Overall, only 23 out of 25 males responded, and 51 out of 56 female respondents gave the meaning of this emoji. This

emoji did not appear on a platform that was not compatible with the platform used by the researcher. This could be the reason why two of the male and five of the female respondents did not answer the question given in the survey as what they saw was a blank.

The emoji 😊 is used to express pleasure, and many of the words given are relevant depending on the context of expression. Among the respondents who answered, four (17.3 %) males and 18 (35.2%) females conveyed this emoji as representing a 'smile', and they came up with different types of smiles. Most males (60.8%) and 49% females denoted that the emoji represents happiness, and like smiling, they gave many different words to express this feeling. Another meaning for this emoji is laughing and two of them gave these denotations for the emoji 😄. Other words that can also indicate 'general pleasure and good cheer or humor' are 'proud' and 'like it'. Altogether 21 (91.3 %) males and 46 (90.2%) females gave the appropriate denotations for the emoji 😊. This reflects that there was an almost equal percentage of male and female respondents who used the emoji appropriately. Based on the responses by gender, there was no obvious difference between the males and females where this emoji is concerned.

Other than the above, there were those who conveyed the emoji differently. One male and one female respondent stated that they meant 'surprise' when they used this emoji. The other meanings given were: 'thank you', 'looking forward to', 'hi' and *neutral tetapi bernada mesra* (neutral but sounded friendly).

Next is the emoji 😁 which shows a beaming face with smiling eyes. This emoji "expresses a radiant, gratified happiness. Tone varies, including warm, silly, amused, or proud" (Emojipedia, n.d.). The respondents' answers are tabulated in Table 3:

Table 3: What 😁 Conveys According to Respondents

	ITEMS	MALE	FEMALE	
HAPPY	Happy	2	6	
	generic happy	0	1	
	Excited	1	2	
	Very Happy	3	7	
	happily laughing	0	1	
	sincerely happy	0	1	
	Extremely happy but slightly cute	0	1	
	excited, joy but a little embarrassed.	1	0	
	Teruja	1	0	
	Setuju dan gembira dengan sesuatu keputusan	1	0	
	To express happiness while smiling until your teeth appear	0	1	
	Total		9 (40.9%)	20 (36.3%)
	SMILE	Smile with showing your teeth	0	1
Senyum bahagia		0	2	
Sengih (grin)		1	1	
Grin		0	4	

	naughty smile	0	1
	Smirk	1	0
	Big Smile	0	1
	tersengih	1	1
	Smiling	0	1
	Grin but more ikhlas	0	1
	Cheeky Smile	0	1
Total		3 (13.6%)	14 (25.4%)
SHY	Malu sipi sipi	1	0
Total		1 (4.5%)	0 (0%)
FUNNY	Geli hati	1	2
	funny	0	2
	hehe	0	3
	laugh	1	1
	ketawa penuh makna	0	1
	ketawa main-main	0	1
	To someone whom im not close when relaying funny info	0	1
Total		2 (9%)	11 (20%)
GLAD	Glad	2	1
Total		2 (9%)	1 (1.8%)
SERVE YOU RIGHT	Serve you right	1	0
Total		1 (4.5%)	0 (0%)
ADORABLE	Adorable	1	0
Total		1 (4.5%)	0 (0%)
OKAY FACE	Okay face	0	1
Total		0 (0%)	1 (1.8%)
LIKE IT	Like it	1	2
	Really like it	1	1
Total		2 (9%)	3 (5.4%)
AGREED	Agreed	0	1
Total		0 (0%)	1 (1.8%)
ANGRY	Grind teeth	1	0
	Grimace face	0	1
Total		1 (4.5%)	1 (1.8%)
FRIENDLY	Friendly	0	1
Total		0 (0%)	1 (1.8%)
YOU ARE WELCOME	You are welcome	0	1

Total		0 (0%)	1 (1.8%)
JUST TO BE POLITE	Use this emoji to people I'm not really close to and just to be polite	0	1
Total		0 (0%)	1 (1.8%)
Total for All Responses		22 (100%)	55 (100%)

Twenty-two out of twenty-five male respondents provided the meaning while only one female did not give an answer. Most of them used this emoji to indicate that they were happy, though they came up with many different ways of describing happiness. Nine males (40.9%) and twenty female (36.3%) respondents used this emoji to indicate happiness. Another denotation that could fall under the emoji 😊 is 'smile', and three of the males (13.6%) and fourteen females (25.4%) wrote that this emoji indicates a 'smile' albeit with different ways of smiling. 'Funny' could also be one of the denotations for the emoji 😊, and two males (9%) and eleven females (20%) wrote that they used this emoji to indicate that it was funny, and among the words used were *geli hati* (funny), funny, hehe, laugh, *ketawa penuh makna* (meaningful laugh), *ketawa main-main* (playful laugh).

Other meanings that were given and could fall under this emoji include 'glad', 'adorable', 'okay face', 'like it', 'agreed', 'friendly' and 'you are welcome'. Altogether, 19 (86.36%) male and 52 (94.54%) female respondents gave the appropriate denotations for this emoji. In terms of the number, an equal number of male and female respondents gave a different meaning from the ones given in Emojipedia. One male mentioned that it is used to say *malu sipi-sipi* (a bit shy), another said it means 'serve[sic] you right', and the other meaning given was 'grind teeth'. On the other hand, one female said that it was used to represent 'grimace face', another interpreted it as 'You are welcome' and one of them used it just to be polite with those that she was not close with. This reflects that there was no marked difference between male and female respondents in their usage of the emoji 😊.

Next is the emoji 😄 which shows a face with tears of joy. This emoji is "widely used to show something is funny or pleasing" (Emojipedia, n.d.). The answers given by the respondents are tabulated in Table 4:

Table 4: What 😄 Conveys According to Respondents

	ITEMS	MALE	FEMALE
LAUGH/FUNNY	Laugh out loud	3	9
	Ketawa terbahak-bahak	1	2
	Senyum lawak (funny smile)	0	1
	kelakar la kau (you are funny)	0	1
	laughing	4	6
	Funniest thing I've heard all day	1	0
	funny	4	12
	Hilarious	1	1

	ketawa sampai meninggal (laugh till die)	1	0
	Laughing with tears	2	4
	ketawa berdekah-dekah (laugh loudly)	1	0
	too funny	1	5
	Laughing My Arse Off LMAO	0	1
	Sth funny and only use it w my really close ones	0	1
	Funny/Silly	0	1
	Something that is funny	1	0
	Lawaknya (so funny)	0	1
	So funny	0	1
	Lebih kurang macam LOL atau "apakah??"	0	1
	Joyful laughed until I cried.	1	0
	LMAO	0	1
Total		21 (87.5%)	48 (88.9%)
HAPPY	Extra Happy	0	1
	Joy	1	0
	Happy News	0	1
	with tears of joy	1	1
	happy	0	1
	Too Happy	0	1
Total		2 (8.3%)	5 (9.3%)
SAD	Sad	0	1
Total		0 (0%)	1 (1.8%)
Mengejek	Mengejek (teasing)	1	0
Total		1 (4.1%)	0 (0%)
Total for All Responses		24 (100%)	54 (100%)

Table 4 shows the respondents' meanings of the emoji 😄. However, there were only 24 out of 25 males and 54 out of 56 females who provided the meaning of this emoji. This means that one from each gender did not answer the question given in the survey. Almost all of them, 21 males (87.5%) and 48 females (88.9%) indicated that this emoji shows something is funny or pleasing. They also came up with different ways of describing the action. For example, for the word funny, among the answers given by the respondents were *senyum lawak* (funny smile), *kelakar la kau* (you are funny), funniest thing I've heard all day, funny, so funny, too funny and hilarious.

Out of the responses given, only one word was not suitable for this emoji, and that was ‘sad’. The respondent who answered this was a 56 year-old female. Since only one said this, it could be concluded that there was no difference between males and females in what they wanted to convey when using this emoji.

The emoji 🤪 shows rolling on the floor laughing. This emoji “often conveys hysterical laughter more intense than 😄 Face With Tears of Joy” (Emojipedia, n.d.). The answers given by the respondents are tabulated in Table 5:

Table 5: What 🤪 Conveys According to Respondents

	ITEMS	MALE	FEMALE
LAUGH/FUNNY	Senyum paling lawak	0	1
	laughing very hard	0	3
	Pecah perut	1	1
	too funny	1	4
	Lol my stomach is bursting	1	0
	Very Funny	0	9
	Way too funny that I cannot handle	0	2
	Die of Laughter	1	0
	Laughing	1	0
	Crazily Laughing	2	0
	Laughter but with the eyes smile	0	1
	Laughing Hysterically	0	1
	Laughing Out Loud LOL	0	1
	LMFAO Laughing My Freaking Ass Off	0	1
	Beyond hilarious	0	1
	Laughing on the Floor Laughing ROFL	2	0
	prankster funny	1	0
	Ini lagi terbahak-bahak	1	0
	ROFL	0	4
	Way too funny	0	1
	Lawak gila	0	2
	kelakar tahap gaban (very funny)	1	0
	Happy laugh laugh laugh	0	1
so funny I can't stop laughing	0	1	
Slanting smiley face with tears of joy		1	
Just cannot stand the funny thing	0	1	
Total		12 (66.7%)	36 (83.7%)
EXTREMELY HAPPY	Extremely Happy	0	2

Total		0 (0%)	2 (4.65%)
EXCITED	Excited emojis only used with my close friends/fam	0	1
Total		0 (0%)	1 (2.3%)
HAPPY/FUNNY	Funny	2	2
	Happy	1	0
Total		3 (16.7%)	2 (4.65%)
SMILES	A girl who smiles	1	0
Total		1 (5.5%)	0 (0%)
CHEEKY	Cheeky	0	1
Total		0 (0%)	1 (2.3%)
SURPRISED	Surprised	1	0
Total		1 (5.5%)	0 (0%)
LIKE IT	Like It	0	1
Total		0 (0%)	1 (2.3%)
SPIT	Spit	1	0
Total		1 (5.5%)	0 (0%)
Total for All Responses		18 (100%)	43 (100%)

Table 5 illustrates the definition of emoji ☺. Only 18 out of 25 males and 43 out of 56 females gave the denotations for this emoji. Twelve of the males (66.7%) and 36 females (83.7%) said that this emoji represents intense laughter. An answer that is close to hysterical laughter was ‘extremely happy’ which was given by two females. Similar words given were ‘funny’ and ‘happy’ but without the intensity that this emoji is representing. These two words and the word ‘laughing’ were regarded as inappropriate for this emoji. When the mistakes made by the male and female respondents were analysed, there was no real difference in terms of their gender. One male and two females mentioned ‘happy’ and ‘extremely happy’ respectively. Two males and two females mentioned the word ‘funny’. One male said it represents ‘a girl who smiles’, another mentioned ‘surprised’ and ‘spit’ is another denotation given by a male. A female wrote that the emoji represents ‘cheeky’ and another stated that it means ‘like it’.

DISCUSSION

Emojis are used to express emotions and represent one of the most convenient and efficient ways to communicate what users are trying to express rather than using words. However, emojis could be interpreted differently depending on the users’ understanding of what the emojis are conveying and also the context in which they occur and this may pose a problem especially in a scenario where users are interacting across gender, age, culture and linguistic environment. Specifically, this study has shown that generally there was no marked difference in what the users are trying to convey in

terms of their gender in the context of Malaysian emoji users. This is contrary to the findings made by Chen et al. 2018; Hwang Ha Sung, 2014; Tossell et al., 2012; Wolf, 2000 who found that there were differences between male and female users when using non-verbal cues online. However, Chen et al. 2018 was looking at who would like to use emojis, and they found that females were more likely to use emojis than males. Females were found to show more facial activities compared to males. Buck et al., 1980; Buck, Baron & Barrette, 1982 focuses on who used facial activities more, and they also found that females did so more.

Although there were no stark differences found, the researcher felt that there was variation in the degree of users' intended meaning that they were conveying and this was observable among some of the users. For example, where laughing was concerned, there were many types and degrees of laughter mentioned, as if on a spectrum of least to most funny. It was also found that there were those who used and interpreted the emojis wrongly and this could well be a personal view of how facial expressions appear to different people. Hence, when interpreting emojis we need to be cautious that the sender might be conveying a different message from what the recipient is expecting unless the recipient is of a similar wavelength as the sender.

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