Full length article

"Turn that frown upside-down": A contextual account of emoticon usage on different virtual platforms

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Linda K. Kaye [a, *], Helen J. Wall [a], Stephanie A. Malone [b]

[a] Edge Hill University, UK
[b] Australian Catholic University, Australia

ABSTRACT

Evidence highlights the prevalent usage of emoticons within digital forms of textual communication and the impact on the recipient. However, little evidence demonstrates the interpersonal functions for the user and whether this varies as a product of virtual platform. This formed the basis for the current study in which participants ($N = 92$) provided open-ended accounts of their reasons for using emoticons across three virtual platforms (email, text message, and social networking site), and their general emoticon usage across these. Responses revealed a number of themes on reasons for emoticon usage. The first was; "aiding personal expression", with sub-themes of; "establishing emotional tone"; and "to lighten the mood". Other themes were "reducing ambiguity of discourse" and "appropriateness of context". Overall, there was consistency across platforms, on both the personal and interpersonal functions which emoticons served. However, some disparity was identified as email platforms were deemed inappropriate for emoticon use, regardless of the fact that emoticons were recognised as important emotional aids for communication. Taken together these findings highlight the importance of emoticon usage for the user, through a contextual lens to recognise the influential factors upon these behaviours and the implications this has for digital text-based communication. In this regard, this contributes further conceptualisation of one aspect of hyperpersonal communication within virtual interactions, and how different platforms may permit these self-presentational efforts to a greater or lesser extent.

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1. Introduction

The role of context in emotional expression is by no means a new phenomenon. Indeed, previous research highlights the role of social contexts on expressive emotional behaviours (Friedman & Miller-Herringer, 1991), particularly for portraying positive emotions (Chapman & Wright, 1976; Kraut & Johnston, 1979). A more recent enquiry however, is the extent to which emotional expression through text-based communication, typically via digital platforms, may function on both an individual and interpersonal level (Derks, Arjan, & von Grumbkow, 2007; Huang, Yen, & Zhang, 2008). One means of conveying emotional expression within text-based communication is through the use of emoticons or "emojis." These offer the user an opportunity to portray emotional information that may otherwise be restricted in contexts beyond traditional face-to-face interactions.

The increase in textual forms of communication such as emails and social networking sites (SNSs) has led researchers to compare the different ways people communicate and express emotion on virtual platforms compared to face-to-face interactions (Mark, Iqbal, Czerwinski, & Johns, 2014; Wall, Taylor, Dixon, Conchie, & Ellis, 2013). Of particular interest are the behaviours that are unique to text-based communication such as emoticons. Previous evidence, for example illustrates how emoticon usage enhances relationship development with others (Utz, 2000), varies across culture (Park, Barash, Fink, & Cha, 2013, June) and enhances recipients' positive affect (Gacey & Richard, 2013). Within this research enquiry, a great deal of focus has been on understanding how such emotional cues impact the recipient of the message. More recently Skovholt, Grønning, and Kankaanranta (2014) found that emoticon usage enhances recipients' positive affect. However it remains less clear how emoticons may function for the *user*. That is, why do people use emoticons? As noted by Walther and D'Addario (2001; see also Walther & Parks, 2002) emoticon use may support the user in expressing themselves as they intended, similar to the

* Corresponding author. Department of Psychology, Edge Hill University, St Helens Road, Ormskirk, Lancashire, L39 4QP, UK.
   E-mail address: Linda.Kaye@edgehill.ac.uk (L.K. Kaye).

role of nonverbal cues in face-to-face interactions. The present study considered a key factor that may increase our understanding of why people use emoticons: namely the role of the specific virtual platforms (e.g., text, email, social networking sites) on usage behaviour.

Within the context of text-based communication, scholars have previously identified two key functions of emoticons; to portray emotional or social intent (Derks, Bos, & von Grumbkow, 2008; Kruger, Epley, Parker, & Ng, 2005) and to reduce any potential ambiguity associated with the transmitted discourse (Ganster, Eimler, & Kramer, 2012). In this way, it could be argued these digital manifestations of emotions serve largely equivalent functions to those of facial expression within face-to-face interactions (Derks et al., 2007). However, it is of interest to consider the extent to which digital forms of text based communication serve a function for the user beyond that of traditional emotional expression. Indeed it has been argued that emotional "facial" displays, in the form of traditional non-verbal communication, go beyond manifestations of underlying motivational-emotional states (Buck, 1994) and serve an important function for the user that may vary in context-specific ways. In support, previous research has identified the role of different levels of social analysis (e.g., dyadic, group, individual) on the displays of emotion (Keltner & Haidt, 1999), and that people tend to display more positive facial expressions when engaging in a joint task with peers than when solitary (Fridlund, 1991). Therefore the nature of different social affordances across contexts may result in there being distinct individual functions for emoticon usage which vary across digital platforms.

Moreover, numerous studies have asserted that context shapes behaviour in important ways (Funder & Colvin, 1991; Wall, Taylor, & Campbell, 2016); thus, the impact of variations in online platform on emoticon usage is worthy of examination. Importantly, the extent to which emoticons are used in "simple" text-based platforms such as text messages (SMS), compared to those with more diverse and complex variants, such as social networking sites (SNSs) remains open to question. These platforms differ along numerous dimensions, for example privacy of interactions and complexity of features. Taken together, the current study aims to enhance our theoretical understanding of individual emotion usage and how this varies across the digital platforms of text messages (specifically, SMS), email and SNS (Facebook). Accordingly, we adopted a contextual lens to address the following research questions:

1. To what extent does emoticon usage vary across text-based communication?
2. Why do individuals use emoticons within text-based communication?

2. Method

Participants ($N = 92$), were first year undergraduate psychology students taking part for course credit, and were asked to complete an online questionnaire for a study interested in "The relationship between the self and online presentation[1]" which took place between March and November 2014. Participants were directed via a web-link to an online questionnaire, in which one section included questions asking them to indicate the extent to which they used emoticons on each of the different virtual platforms (e.g., "Using the rating scale, please indicate the extent to which you use emoticons on email/text messages/Facebook"). After self-reported

scores in emoticon usage were obtained on a 5-point scale (1 = never, 5 = almost always), additional open-ended responses were gathered. This specifically asked participants to explain why they used emoticons on these platforms. Therefore participants provided three separate accounts for the three virtual platforms.

3. Results/discussion

To examine the impact of virtual platform on differences in the amount of emoticon usage, a one way repeated measures ANOVA was performed using self-reported scores in emoticon usage as the DV. A main effect of platform was found, $F_{(2, 160)} = 125.16$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .96$ in which a greater use of emoticons were used in text messages ($M = 4.30$, SE = .09) than email ($M = 2.12$, SE = .13) and in the social networking site ($M = 4.00$, SE = .16).

Analysis of the open-ended responses pertaining the reasons for emoticon usage was undertaken using thematic analysis. In line with Braun and Clarke (2006) analytic strategy the written responses were repeatedly read by two naïve coders to enable familiarity with the responses. Subsequently, each coder independently identified initial themes, which were then scrutinised by identifying codes within the data. A theme was determined as characterising a response pattern in which the phenomena of interest is at least described within the narratives (Boyatzis, 1998). From this, it is possible to gain an insight into the extent of frequency of each theme, to enable additional quantitative analysis. Following this, the data was reviewed again in line with these themes to increase the validity of the coding procedure. This review process was undertaken concurrently with the development of a "codebook" as a means of organising the narratives for a more full interpretation (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Finally, relevant extracts were selected to represent these. The first main theme to be identified was "aiding personal expression", with sub-themes of; "establishing emotional tone"; and "to lighten the mood". The second main theme was "reducing ambiguity of discourse." The final main theme was "appropriateness of context". Table 1 below shows the frequency in which each of these themes were discussed within the three virtual platforms.

Most noteworthy, "appropriateness of context" was identified substantially more within participants' accounts of emoticon use in emails relative to the other platforms. A discussion of the key themes is considered in the subsequent sections.

3.1. Aiding personal expression

Emoticons within all three virtual platforms were discussed in reference to their interpersonal function for aiding emotional expression. However, this appeared to operate in distinct ways; firstly through providing a personal function for establishing an emotional tone but also for creating a positive or "lighter" mood.

3.1.1. Establishing emotional tone
A commonly identified theme in all platforms was the extent to which emoticons could promote a relevant emotional tone to the

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[1] The results reported here represent one part of a larger research project.

Table 1
Frequency of themes and sub-themes between virtual platforms.

Theme	Sub-theme	Virtual platform		
		Text	SNS	Email
Aiding personal expression	Establishing emotional tone	31	36	12
	Lighten mood	20	23	13
Reducing ambiguity		31	21	5
Appropriateness of context		0	2	16