

Research Article

With or without Emoji? Perceptions about Emoji Use in Different Brand-Consumer Communication Contexts

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Brands are increasingly using emoji in their computer-mediated communication (CMC). However, research on how consumers perceive such use, and the determinants of those perceptions, is scarce and results may be inconsistent. In a cross-sectional study ($N = 540$) we examined how appropriate participants considered to be the use of emoji by brands, across five brand-consumer communication contexts. We additionally examined whether these perceptions were determined by demographic and individual variables (e.g., gender and frequency of emoji use), as well as individual views about emoji use in written CMC. Overall, perceptions toward the use of emoji by brands depended on the context, with participants considering more appropriate for brands to use emoji when publicizing on social media and less appropriate when making callbacks of defective products. Results further showed that such perceptions were more favorable among younger participants and those who used emoji more frequently, but also among those who considered emoji use more useful and formal. These findings contribute to the CMC field by highlighting how perceptions of emoji use by brands are shaped, while also informing how brands can enhance CMC with consumers.

1. Introduction

The development of internet services and technology has provided new ways for people to communicate, including instant messaging (e.g., Gmail and WhatsApp), social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter), discussion platforms (e.g., Reddit), and video hosting and live streaming services (e.g., Youtube and Twitch). These platforms rely on computer-mediated communication (CMC; [1]) and allow users to communicate using different formats (e.g., video, image, and text). The use of these platforms is not limited to communicating with close others [2, 3], but also with work colleagues or supervisors (e.g., managers; [4]), and even by companies or brands [5, 6]. Hence, these communication platforms have changed not only the way people interact with each other but also with brands or service providers.

Because some of these platforms rely solely on text-based communication, the availability of (conventional) nonverbal cues may be limited [7]. This may hinder communication outcomes, making it difficult to understand the emotion and/or intention of a written message (see [8, 9]). To overcome this potential limitation, paralinguistic cues such as emoji may be used (e.g., 😊; [10]).

Emoji depicts a myriad of contents (e.g., facial expressions; [11, 12]) and can help enhance communication by increasing the expressiveness of written messages [11, 13, 14]. Indeed, research suggests that emoji may serve different functions, such as to disambiguate or enrich a message [15], convey emotions [16, 17], promote playful interactions [18], soften the negativity of a message [3], or even help the sender to interpret the meaning of the message [19, 20]. Emoji use frequently occurs when reacting to social media

content [21] on platforms such as Instagram [13], Facebook [22], and Twitter [23]. However, emoji use is not always perceived as appropriate or suitable across contexts [24, 25]. For example, Vareberg and Westerman [26] have shown instructors may be evaluated as more caring, but as less competent, by students when they use emoji. Similarly, Glikson and colleagues [27] showed that the sender of a message that included (vs. did not include) an emoji in a formal (vs. informal) setting was perceived as less competent. This effect was partially mediated by the perception that emoji use was inappropriate in that specific setting. In the context of brand communication, researchers found that service providers were perceived as less competent when their online communication included emoji [6]. However, research also showed that emoji use by brands could have positive outcomes, helping to increase the intention to buy specific products [5]. Thus, although brands frequently include emoji in their communication with consumers [15], the implications of such use are not straightforward and can be deemed inappropriate by consumers. Therefore, we examined how appropriate people perceive emoji use across different contexts of brand-consumer communication and explored the determinants of such perceptions.

2. Brands on Social Media: Engagement and Emoji Use

The online presence of brands has increased in recent years, allowing consumers not only to access information about products more easily but also to purchase them (e.g., e-commerce platforms such as Amazon). Moreover, brands make direct online advertisements (e.g., ads on Facebook) and are frequently present on social media platforms (e.g., branded-owned pages and digital influencers promoting products). Such presence is aimed at enhancing consumer relationship and involvement with the brand and building or sustaining emotional and social ties [28]. Specifically, social media allows brands to reach a wider audience [29], facilitates the interaction with actual and prospective consumers (e.g., advertising and promotion), and enables consumers to easily access consumer support and interaction with the brand [28].

Brands frequently include emoji in marketing activities aimed at increasing consumer involvement. Including emoji in marketing communication might help brands and organizations to be perceived as more innovative [15, 29] and make their messages clearer [15], thus promoting consumer attachment to their products or messages [30]. For example, brands have developed custom emoji (e.g., Starbucks Emoji Keyboard; [31]) so that their emoji, and the brand itself, becomes part of everyday conversations [32]. Some brands have even requested the approval of specific emoji to the Unicode Consortium (e.g., condom emoji by Durex; [33]). Brands can also promote new products using emoji (e.g., the advertisement for the new Deadpool movie; [32]), create keyboards that invite individuals to explore and discover new emoji related to their products (e.g., Disney Emoji Blitz; [34]), or even use emoji as add-on elements in users' experience (e.g., Netflix Spain; [35]).

Consumers may develop more positive attitudes toward brands that use emoji and have stronger purchase intentions of their products [36]. However, the findings regarding the impact of emoji use by brands are inconsistent. For example, studies showed that participants had more positive attitudes toward an advertisement campaign that included emoji in comparison to a campaign that only included text and that emoji use was perceived as signaling more creativity and innovation [29]. Subsequently, the same authors found that participants reported more positive attitudes toward emotional advertising messages (e.g., highlighting a hedonic claim) that included (vs. did not include) emoji [37]. However, no differences were found for rational advertising messages (e.g., highlighting a feature of the product). These findings suggest that not all contexts/types of messages benefit from emoji use. For example, the presence (vs. absence) of emoji in an advertisement presenting technical characteristics of a product (i.e., camera) had a positive impact on brand/product perception and increased purchase intentions [5]. In contrast, other studies showed that employees were perceived as less competent when their replies to consumer inquiries via Facebook included emoji, but only when there was a transactional (vs. friendship-like) relationship with the service provider [6]. Overall, these findings highlight the need to further examine which contexts are perceived as appropriate for brands to use emoji. Moreover, a deeper understanding of these perceptions should also be informed by evidence suggesting that emoji use can be determined not only by individual characteristics such as age or gender [38] but also by the way people perceive and use emoji in their daily CMC.

2.1. Patterns of Emoji Use. Previous research showed age differences in emoji use frequency, with younger people using emoji more frequently than older people [22, 38, 39]. There are also gender differences in emoji perception and use. For example, research showed that women (vs. men) evaluate emoji as more familiar, meaningful, and clearer [12], and use them more frequently [22, 38]. A recent study further showed an interplay between gender and age in emoji use, with women reporting more positive attitudes toward emoji use and more frequent emoji use than men, but only if they were younger [38]. No gender differences emerged for older respondents.

Previous studies also showed that people who perceive emoji as more useful, interesting, fun, easy, informal, and good (i.e., positive attitudes toward emoji use) are more likely to use emoji more frequently in their CMC [3, 38] and to perceive a message with emoji as more efficient [3]. Taken together, these findings indicate that individual variables (i.e., age and gender), frequency of emoji use in CMC, and the attributions people make to emoji (e.g., usefulness) might shape the perceptions and patterns of emoji use. Therefore, these variables are also likely to shape specific perceptions, such as the appropriateness of brands using emoji in their communication with consumers.

2.2. Study Overview. Previous studies presented mixed findings regarding the impact of using emoji in brand-consumer

communication outcomes. Whereas some studies showed that the use of emoji might exert positive effects [5], other studies showed a detrimental effect of such use [6]. The current study examined if some of these inconsistencies could be related to the context in which brands communicate with consumers. Specifically, we explored participants' perceptions of how appropriate it was for brands to use emoji across five different contexts (e.g., answer to a consumer comment on social media; communicating the callback of a defective product). Additionally, we explored if the perceived appropriateness of emoji use by brands was determined by individual variables (i.e., age and gender), by the frequency of emoji use, and by the participants' views about emoji use (e.g., interesting, fun) in daily CMC.

3. Method

3.1. Participants. The sample included 540 participants (70.4% women) aged between 18 and 49 years ($M = 27.29$, $SD = 7.04$) who voluntarily participated in a web survey. Most participants had a university degree (80.9%) and were either workers (55.3%) or students (34.9%).

3.2. Procedure and Measures. This study was conducted following the ethical guidelines issued by Iscte-Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were invited through social media and mailing services to collaborate on a web survey (Qualtrics web platform) about emoji use. Instructions stated that all data collected would be treated anonymously and that participants could abandon the study at any point by closing the browser without their responses being considered for the analysis.

After providing sociodemographic information (i.e., age, gender, education level, and current occupation), participants were presented with a set of questions regarding emoji use and emoji perception. We asked participants to indicate how frequently they use emoji in their daily CMC using a single item (1 = *Rarely* to 7 = *Frequently*) and to rate emoji in seven dichotomous items (1 = *Useless* to 7 = *Useful*; 1 = *Uninteresting* to 7 = *Interesting*; 1 = *Boring* to 7 = *Fun*; 1 = *Hard* to 7 = *Easy*; 1 = *Formal* to 7 = *Informal*; 1 = *Bad* to 7 = *Good*; 1 = *Inadequate* to 7 = *Adequate*, retrieved from [3, 38]). Participants were then asked to indicate how appropriate (1 = *Not appropriate at all* to 7 = *Very appropriate*, retrieved from [24]) was the use of emoji by brands in each of the five communication contexts: (1) advertising social media posts (Facebook, Instagram, etc.); (2) directly replying to a consumer's comment on social media; (3) directly answering a consumer's service request; (4) communicating about the disclosure of a new product; and (5) communicating the callback of a defective product. In the end, participants were thanked and debriefed. The survey took, on average, 12 minutes to complete.

3.3. Data Analytic Plan. Only completed surveys were retained for analysis, and therefore there were no missing cases. In the preliminary analyses, we present descriptive information regarding the frequency of emoji use and views about emoji use in daily CMC. We also correlated these

variables with age, tested for gender differences using independent samples *t*-tests, and tested possible interactions between age and gender. Then, we examined participants' perceptions regarding the appropriateness of emoji use by brands for each of the five contexts. Lastly, we computed a hierarchical linear regression with individual variables (i.e., age, gender, and their interaction) (Step 1), frequency of emoji use (Step 2), and views about emoji (Step 3) as predictor variables. The outcome variable resulted from computing the ratings of appropriateness across the five contexts into a single index ($\alpha = .81$).

4. Results

4.1. Preliminary Analyses. Descriptive statistics and overall correlations are shown in Table 1. Participants reported using emoji frequently and considered emoji to be useful, interesting, fun, easy, informal, good, and adequate. Participants who reported using emoji more frequently also perceived emoji as more useful, interesting, fun, easy, good, and adequate, all $p < .001$. Moreover, younger participants reported using emoji more frequently, $p < .001$, and perceived emoji as more useful, interesting, easy to use, good, and adequate, all $p \leq .021$. In contrast, age was not significantly correlated with the perceptions of emoji as more fun or informal, all $p \geq .089$.

Gender differences are also presented in Table 1. As can be seen, women (vs. men) reported using emoji more frequently and perceived emoji to be more useful, fun, and easy to use, all $p \leq .035$. No other differences reached significance, all $p \geq .077$. Moreover, no significant interactions between gender and age emerged for the frequency of emoji use, $p = .307$, or for any of the views about emoji, all $p \geq .136$.

4.2. Appropriateness of Emoji Use by Brands. Figure 1 presents a detailed analysis regarding the appropriateness of emoji use by brands for each of the five contexts. Overall, perceived appropriateness was moderate when contexts were examined together ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 1.30$, 95% CI [3.88, 4.09]). However, a closer inspection of each context separately showed that participants considered emoji use more appropriate when brands publicize on social media posts ($M = 5.46$, $SD = 1.39$, 95% CI [5.35, 5.58]), directly reply to a consumer's comment on a social media platform ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 1.80$, 95% CI [4.17, 4.47]), and disclose new products ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.76$, 95% CI [4.20, 4.50]). In contrast, participants perceived emoji use as less appropriate when brands directly answer a consumer's service request ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.82$, 95% CI [3.31, 3.62]) or make the callback of defective products ($M = 2.73$, $SD = 1.76$, 95% CI [2.58, 2.88]).

4.3. Determinants of Appropriateness of Emoji Use by Brands. The results of the hierarchical linear regression are summarized in Table 2. Including the predictors in each step significantly increased the explained variance of the model, all $p < .001$, therefore indicating the relevance of each block of variables to the model. Results showed that emoji use by brands was perceived as more adequate among younger

TABLE 1: Descriptive statistics and correlations.

Measure	Descriptive statistics			Gender differences		Correlations								
	Overall M (SD)	95% CI	Women M (SD)	Men M (SD)	t (538)	p	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Frequency using emoji	5.73 (1.70)	[5.59, 5.87]	5.91 (1.61)	5.31 (1.81)	3.83	.001	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
2. Useful	5.28 (1.53)	[5.15, 5.41]	5.38 (1.53)	5.06 (1.51)	2.25	.025	.48***	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
3. Interesting	5.25 (1.48)	[5.13, 5.38]	5.29 (1.51)	5.16 (1.40)	0.99	.321	.44***	.70***	—	—	—	—	—	—
4. Fun	5.85 (1.37)	[5.74, 5.97]	5.93 (1.37)	5.66 (1.35)	2.11	.035	.45***	.58***	.64***	—	—	—	—	—
5. Easy	5.95 (1.36)	[5.84, 6.06]	6.04 (1.36)	5.74 (1.32)	2.30	.022	.35***	.53***	.53***	.63***	—	—	—	—
6. Informal	2.32 (1.51)	[2.19, 2.44]	5.69 (1.44)	5.68 (1.54)	0.04	.967	-.04	.12**	.13**	-.01	-.05	—	—	—
7. Good	5.35 (1.48)	[5.22, 5.47]	5.42 (1.50)	5.18 (1.40)	1.77	.077	.48***	.67***	.72***	.65***	.55***	.11**	—	—
8. Adequate	4.95 (1.40)	[4.83, 5.07]	4.97 (1.44)	4.89 (1.30)	0.65	.513	.42***	.64***	.65***	.54***	.48***	.19***	.70***	—
9. Age	27.29 (7.04)		27.08 (7.14)	27.79 (6.81)			-.31***	-.17***	-.13**	-.07	-.12**	.07	-.17***	-.10*

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .010$, and * $p < .050$.

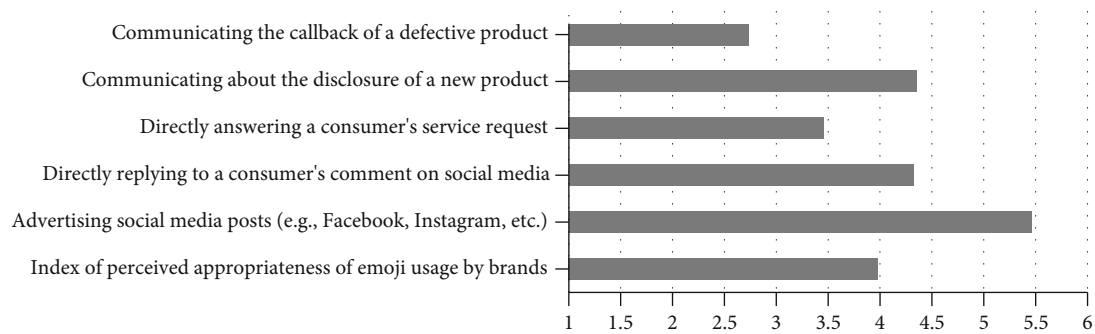


FIGURE 1: Appropriateness of emoji use by brands across different contexts.

TABLE 2: Determinants of perceived appropriateness of emoji use by brands (standardized regression coefficients and significance).

	Perceived appropriateness of emoji use by brands ^a		
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Individual variables			
Age	-.178***	-.090	-.119**
Gender	.132	.136	-.010
Age × gender	-.112	-.158	-.142
Emoji use			
Frequency of using emoji		.269***	.123*
Views about emoji			
Useful			.131*
Interesting			.097
Fun			-.030
Easy			-.063
Informal			-.194***
Good			.079
Adequate			.098
Adjusted R ²	.033	.095	.217
ΔR ²	.038	.063	.131
ΔF	7.15***	37.82***	12.86***

^aHigher scores denote greater perceived appropriateness for brands to use emoji. Gender coded as -1 = men and 1 = women. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .010$, and * $p < .050$.

participants, $p = .024$, those who use emoji more frequently in their CMC, $p = .010$, and those who consider emoji more useful, $p = .030$, and formal, $p < .001$. No other results reached significance, all $p \geq .062$).

5. Discussion

The increased popularity of emoji prompted brands to include them in their communication with consumers [15, 29]. We examined how potential consumers perceive this strategy in different brand-consumer communication contexts and investigated potential determinants of such perceptions.

Our findings emphasize the importance of the specific context in which brands communicate with consumers using emoji. Specifically, results indicated that emoji use by brands on social media advertisements, replies to consumers' social media posts, and announcement of new prod-

ucts was perceived as more appropriate. In contrast, emoji use by brands when answering a consumer's request for a service or announcing the callback of defective products was perceived as less appropriate. This suggests a greater acceptance of brands using emoji when the presence of emoji is more familiar or typical (e.g., on social media ads) or when the brand makes positive announcements (e.g., the launch of new products). However, people may be less receptive to emoji use in situations that involve greater seriousness or responsibility from a brand (e.g., the callback of defective products). This converged with previous research suggesting that using emoji when dealing with certain relationship conflicts has negative consequences for communication [3, 27]. In the context of brand-consumer communication, such use also seems to have negative consequences for the brand (e.g., perceiving a consumer representative as less competent, [6]). Our findings also support the idea that,

although emoji may convey positivity to a message [5], this is not always the case and the success of using emoji may depend on the context or strategy of communication [40].

Our results also showed that people who use emoji more frequently in their daily CMC were also more likely to perceive emoji use by brands as more appropriate. This finding is not entirely surprising and may result from a greater familiarity with the use of these paralinguistic cues in their daily communication [9]. Replicating past research, our findings further show that emoji use in daily CMC was more frequent among younger people and women [22, 38, 41], despite the absence of an interaction effect. Extending the link between age and emoji use to marketing communication, younger participants perceived brand emoji use as more appropriate. Arguably, younger people are more likely to be exposed to emoji because they use them more frequently in their daily CMC [42]. Such perceptions, however, did not vary according to gender. Although women arguably rely more on CMC to communicate for interpersonal motives (e.g., to contact someone) and men use CMC for more functional purposes (e.g., to convey concrete information; [43]), these differences do not seem to extend to the consumer context.

Importantly, our study revealed the importance of the views about emoji use in daily CMC for marketing communication. Brands' emoji use was perceived as more appropriate when participants considered overall emoji use as more useful and formal. In line with past research, our findings indicate that people prefer emoji use in a consumer context when the emoji can help clarify a message [44] and serve a functional purpose of adding relevant (i.e., useful) information to marketing communication [40, 45]. In contrast, people who consider emoji use informal do not perceive their use as appropriate in a brand communication context. These findings parallel the outcomes of a marketing campaign by Chevrolet in 2015, in which the brand revealed their new car using a press release entirely composed of emoji. Because people struggled to understand the message, a subsequent press release translated the emoji message [46]. Although the brand may have used emoji to portray an image of innovation (e.g., [15, 29]), the message failed its intent by not adding (any) useful information and for its (unexpected) informality and overuse of emoji [32]. This also aligns with the findings reported by Casado-Molina et al. [40], who showed that brands with clearer and more defined strategies when using emoji had a better brand engagement.

The current study has limitations that must be acknowledged. For example, our sample comprised predominantly women, participants with a relatively narrow age range (i.e., 18-49), who use emoji frequently, and with high levels of education, therefore limiting the generalizability of our results. Thus, future studies should seek a more diverse sample of participants. We also explored a limited number of contexts, and future research could seek to expand the contexts in which emoji may be used, specifically for brands and organizations. Future studies could also seek to extend our findings by examining if emoji use by brands is perceived as appropriate across different brands (e.g., supermarket vs. bank), product types (e.g., hedonic vs. utilitarian; [5]), and

emoji types (e.g., objects to convey specific information vs. face-like emoji to convey emotions) that can vary in usefulness and formality. Aside from perceptions about emoji use, future studies could also seek to understand how different communications from brands (e.g., highlighting sales, disclaiming a new product) may influence actual consumers' attitudes (e.g., brand image) and behaviors toward the brand (e.g., purchase intentions).

In a nutshell, this study suggests that the use of emoji by brands is not necessarily associated with positive outcomes [6], despite its prevalent use nowadays [5, 40]. By examining which contexts are deemed more appropriate for using emoji and the determinants of such perceptions, our findings provide relevant information regarding how brands might enhance brand-consumer communication.

Data Availability

Data will be available by e-mailing the main author and after anonymization.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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