Chapter 48
Emoji in Advertising

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ABSTRACT

Emoji have become an ipso facto universal language that fit in perfectly with informal routine digital communications, especially on mobile devices and on social media. Marketers and advertisers have taken notice of this communicative phenomenon and have started tapping into the emotive power of the emoji code since at least 2010. But is emoji advertising truly effective? Almost no study exists to examine this question. This article thus has a two-fold purpose. First, it looks at the use of emoji in advertising generally and then it presents a pilot study that aims to assay if such advertising is indeed effective. The overall conclusion is that effectiveness relates to the increase in interpretations, or connotations, that emoji ads seem to generate. The use of emoji in advertising is, thus, a field laboratory for gauging where emoji writing is heading and what it entails more broadly for communication.

INTRODUCTION

It is now a well-known, but still remarkable, fact that in 2015 The Oxford Dictionary's "Word of the Year" was an emoji (in this paper this term is used both as a singular and plural noun)—the "face with tears emoji." The rationale for this selection was, simply, that the emoji was one of the most used new "words," and thus meritorious of its word-of-the-year status (see Figure 1).

This event signaled that a shift in how we view what a word is had taken place, at least in digital forms of communication. A word written with alphabet characters is designed to represent its phonemic structure, so as to match the spoken word. On the other hand, emoji are essentially pictograms that stand for referents directly, often replacing alphabetic words. In most informal written texts, such as tweets and text messages, emoji are used in tandem with the alphabet, producing what can be called a "hybrid writing code," which allows interlocutors to use both the traditional alphabet and emoji symbols to create messages that effectively blend phonemic with iconic-pictographic referential systems.

Since 2010, Unicode has made a large repertory of emoji signs available for installation on mobile device keyboards and on apps, making emoji use a matter of routine. Unicode is an international encoding standard for use with different scripts.

Figure 1. Face with tears emoji

Emoji now constitute a pictographic writing system, complementing alphabetic writing and, in some contexts, substituting it completely. This new kind of hybrid writing system harbors a broad range of implications within it for the future of writing and even language, which are beyond the purpose of the present study (Danesi, 2016). For the present purposes, it is sufficient to focus on the use of emoji in advertising. As argued elsewhere (Danesi, 2006), advertisers are always at the avant-garde when it comes to understanding the role of new sign systems in evolving social contexts. The question becomes: Is the incorporation of emoji in advertising truly effective psychologically, or is it just an example of a cooption strategy that may have minimal psychological force? This paper thus has two purposes: (1) to take an overall look at the use of emoji in advertising, and then (2) to attempt an initial answer to this question by presenting the results of an informal study with 100 undergraduate students at the University of Toronto who were asked to evaluate the appeal of 3 ads with emoji and 3 without them on a scale of 1 to 7. They were also asked to interpret each ad in their own words. The ideas was to measure the so-called connotative index of the ads, a model which suggests that the more connotations that are embedded into an ad text the more likely it is to be effective (Beasley & Danesi, 2002). The underlying subtext of this paper is that advertising is a guide to trends in sign systems and thus a gauge of how these are evolving generally.

THE EMOJI CODE

To use David Olson's (1977) terminology, there is a difference between "utterance meaning," which is comprehensible only in the context where the utterance occurs, and "text meaning," which entails dislocation from the context and greater control of language and content. Today's text messages, tweets, and ads have essentially an utterance function. The textual functions of writing are still realized through traditional writing styles, as can be seen in all kinds of formal texts, such as scientific papers, essays, and the like,

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