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Vyvyan Evans Ph.D.
Language in the Mind

COGNITION

What's the Problem With Using the Thumbs-Up Emoji?

Emojis, like words, can quickly go out of style.

Posted November 22, 2022

Reviewed by Gary Drevitch



KEY POINTS

- Gen Z-ers tend to perceive some of the most common "positive" emojis as old-fashioned or even hostile.
- The meanings of emoji are changing across generations, surprisingly quickly.
- Emojis often follow the same mechanisms of semantic change seen in language, and behave in language-like ways.

Question: Which emoji best signifies approval, and represents ideas such as “yes,” “like,” or “that’s great”?

The answer, it turns out depends on how old you are. If you were born before the mid-1990s, the answer is likely to be the good old thumbs-up emoji.

as signaling sarcasm or being downright rude, according to self-reports on social media. One representative user on a

Reddit discussion forum, on this subject, posts:

“For younger people (I’m 24 for reference) the thumbs up emoji is used to be really passive aggressive. It’s super rude if someone just sends you a thumbs up.”

Similar representative comments can be found on Twitter.



Screengrab of tweet discussion on thumbs-up emoji

Source: Twitter

These discussions of changing attitudes about what some well-established emojis mean among younger people have even caught the attention of the international press.

Headlines range from:

“**Gen Z canceled the ‘hostile’ thumbs-up emoji**” in the *New York Post* to “**Why nothing betrays your age like an emoji: From an ‘aggressive’ thumbs-up to ‘insulting’ avocado**” in *The Daily Mail*.

The Changing Face (Literally) of Emoji Usage

Academic research published in **March 2022**, demonstrates that it is certainly true that attitudes toward emoji usage among young people are changing.

And there are reports that some of the most frequently-used emojis among younger users are considered old-fashioned and to be avoided. Based on **consumer research** in 2021 on

Top 10 emojis that make you look 'old'

1. Thumbs up 👍
2. Red heart ❤️
3. Ok hand 🙆
4. Check mark ✔️
5. Poo 💩
6. Loudly Crying Face 😭
7. Monkey eye cover 🙈
8. Clapping hands 🙌
9. Kiss mark 💋
10. Grimacing Face 😬

The Top ten emojis that make you look old

Source: Vyvyan Evans

what's up with the thumbs up?

But it's not just about taste. According to some reports, the meanings of emojis have even changed. While for millennials or Gen Y (people born in the 1980s), the thinking-face emoji means just that, thinking, for zoomers, it seems, the emoji expresses worry or consternation.

So how do we explain just how and why emojis are changing their meaning? And more specifically,

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The Language-Like Behaviour of Emoji

may look like **the emoji**. **Each**, for instance, emoji performs communicative functions that are similar to those deployed by language. For instance, emojis can be used to make, or give the perception of making **threats**.

Emojis can also make use of principles from writing systems to extend their range of use. A famous case is the use of the **peach emoji** as a symbol of support to impeach former US President Donald Trump. A second, recent example of this was when the **crown emoji** was used in Spanish-language contexts to refer to the Coronavirus—in Spanish, the word for crown is *corona*.

Finally, emojis can sometimes behave in **word-like ways**. For instance, emojis can be used to replace or substitute for a word, in digital communication. Indeed, in 2015, Oxford University Press Dictionaries made headlines when it anointed an emoji as its Word of the Year.

So, can the way in which words change over time shed insight into how the meaning of the thumbs-up emoji may be becoming a marker of hostility for zoomers?

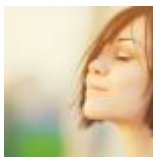
The Case of "Have a Nice Day"

The short answer is yes. Take the hackneyed expression *have a nice day*. The modern prevalence of this term can be traced to the use by truck drivers in the United States, who would end calls over CB radios using the expression. During the 1970s, the expression became a standard form of ending a service encounter for serving staff and retail clerks, especially in the United States.

losing its meaning. This is in fact an established psychological phenomenon known as *semantic satiation*.

Moreover, the use of *have a nice day* as the standard way of ending a service encounter led to the expression being perceived as insincere. Its blanket use, especially as a mechanism to end a service encounter, has come, over time, to seem impersonal, and even lacking in interest.

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From there, when an expression that signals something ostensibly positive but is used in what is perceived to be an insincere way, the phrase starts to dial into sarcasm territory. After all, using a positive expression whose original meaning has been lost in a new insincere manner results in the expression being reanalyzed as having a new meaning—namely, as a marker of sarcasm and even hostility.

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mean, and this demonstrates how the process of semantic change can lead a previously positive expression to take on a negative meaning: a marker of insincerity or sarcasm.

A Slippery Slope to the Passive-Aggressive

A journalist asked me recently in an interview whether zoomers were rejecting the thumbs-up because that's what their parents use? The person asking was a parent, so you might suspect that's what they would think, right?

But that's not what's really up with the thumbs-up emoji. Due to its ubiquity of use, the original positive meaning has increasingly become lost. And ironically, when a positive emoji is used to death, it starts feeling and sounding insincere. Not everything can be "great," and not everything deserves a thumbs-up emoji.

And so, the loss of the positive meaning (semantic satiation) has led to a reanalysis of what the emoji means. And what remains is the insincerity of use. Zoomers perceive the thumbs-up emoji as a hostile gesture because overuse of a positive tends to lead to insincerity, which becomes a negative.

A Final Thought

Of course, this process of semantic change is not conscious. It's an unconscious process that happens gradually and across generations. And we only notice it when it's staring us in the face. But given that zoomers are the world's first generation to have been "born digital," growing up in a digital landscape of smartphones, social media, and, yes, emoji, it

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About the Author



Vyvyan Evans, Ph.D., is a language and communication consultant. He received his Ph.D. from Georgetown University.

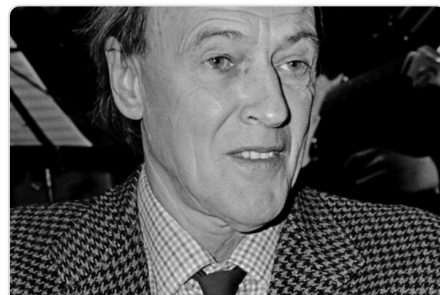
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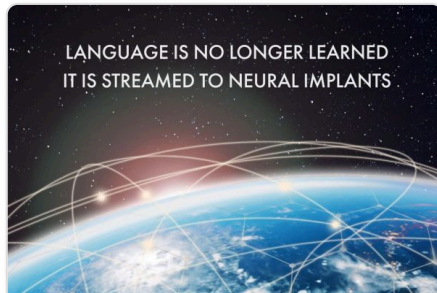
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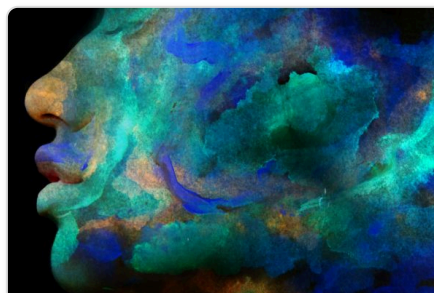


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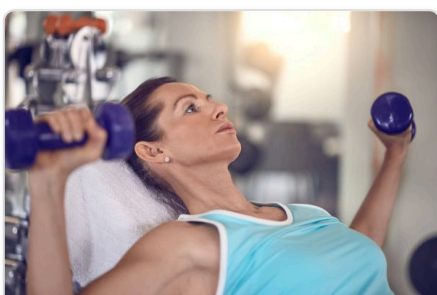


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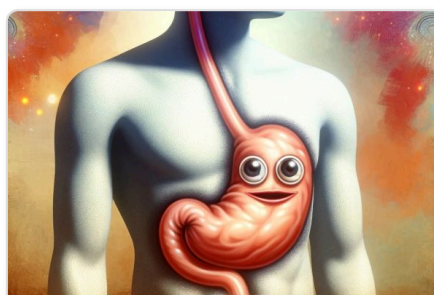


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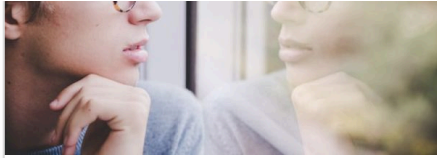


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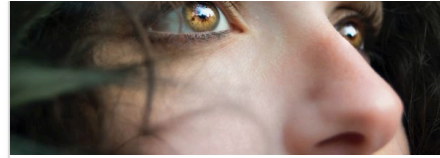


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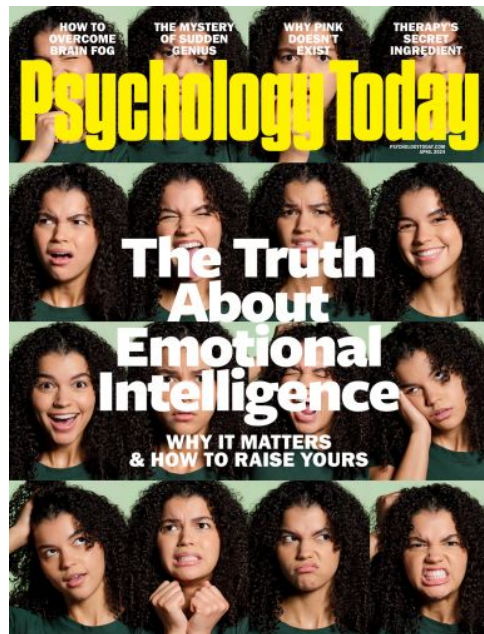
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