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Language in the Mind

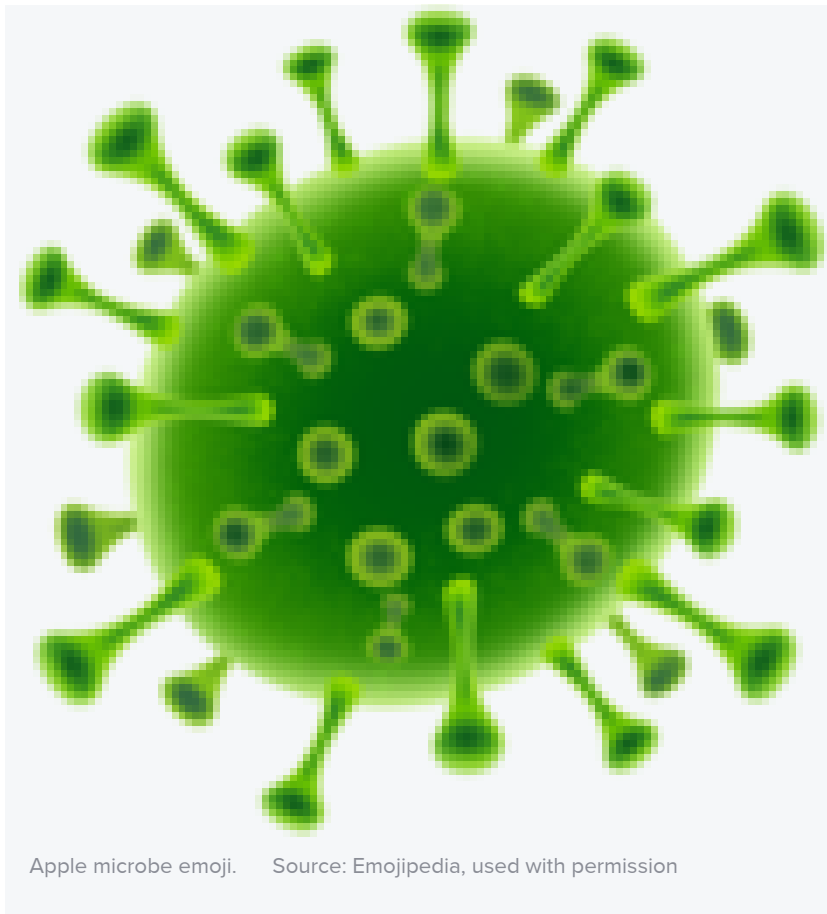
Coronavirus Emojis

Conveying compassion and humour with a face mask.

Posted July 14, 2020



In digital communication, where visual information often conveys key ideas in memorable, pithy, and fun ways, emoji is king. The new normal of social-distancing has further accelerated patterns of virtual communication. And as our world has changed due to COVID-19, new ways of deploying emojis have sprung up in response.



Apple microbe emoji. Source: Emojipedia, used with permission

and more generally the face with medical mask emoji.

While the microbe emoji was first approved in 2018, different technology providers render it in strikingly different ways.

For instance, the Apple version most clearly resembles a virus, while the Microsoft version is blue and resembles a bacterium.

The top five coronavirus emojis

A sample of nearly 50,000 tweets from early March 2020, analysed by Emojipedia, revealed that the top five emojis most strongly associated with COVID-19 were:

1. Microbe: used 42% of the time
2. Face wearing the medical mask: used 36% of the time
3. Nauseated face: used 5% of the time
4. Sneezing face: also used 5% of the time
5. Bar of soap: used 4% of the time

 Emojipedia, used with permission

The 12 most popular emojis for expressing COVID-19.

Source: Emojipedia, used with permission

In addition, some platforms have even created their own bespoke COVID-19 emojis. For instance, Twitter users can use the hashtag [#SafeHandsChallenge](#) to display a custom hand-washing emoji.

 Twitter, used with permission

Safe hands challenge. Source: Twitter, used with permission

There is also evidence of combinations of emojis being deployed. For instance, Spanish speakers have created an emoji compound for coronavirus using the crown and microbe emojis, as corona is the Spanish word for crown.

This ingenious use of the crown emoji is not just an example of human creative smarts. It also illustrates an ancient and



The Rebus Principle


This also illustrates an ancient and well-worn principle in the formation of visual representation, one that goes back over 5,000 years. The world's earliest writing systems were pioneered by the Sumerians closely followed by the ancient Egyptians. The basic idea is this: to create a pictogram of something abstract—early words were pictograms, such as hieroglyphs—use an image of something concrete that sounds like the abstract idea. This is known as the rebus principle.

In terms of emoji, the rebus principle was recently in evidence when the sexy peach emoji was repurposed, by some, during the second half of 2019 as a call to arms to impeach the 45th President of the United States—a topic I have written

Communicating fears and advice

But why are emojis an apt way of communicating our fears, advice on hygiene, and even reminders on social distancing protocols in a time of crisis? Digital communication, even in written form, is inherently visual, and we are fundamentally **visual creatures**—it's our dominant sense.

Around **two-thirds** of the brain's neural activity relates to vision (when our eyes are open). Around 40% of the brain's nerve fibres are connected to the retina. And it takes an adult human just 100 milliseconds to recognise an object.

 Emojipedia, used with permission

Hand sanitizer emoji. Source: Emojipedia, used with permission

In the arena of digital communication, emojis represent a “visual gestalt” (shape), a term I used in my book, *The Emoji Code*. An emoji provides an instantly recognisable visual icon, that represents a relatively complex idea, one which can sometimes be conveyed more quickly and effectively than in words.

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Of course, abstract ideas typically defy “emojification”—hence the need for repurposing existing emojis. But creative communicative smarts can often find novel ways of conveying important ideas in the service of digital communication.

offline, face-to-face spoken interaction. And this is as true when communicating using emojis in the COVID-19 pandemic as at any other time.

The functions of emoji

Specifically, the primary function of emojis is not to usurp language, but to provide the non-verbal cues essential to effective communication, enhancing textspeak often with a splash of humour. But, as I explain in *The Emoji Code*, emojis have a number of related functions. For example, they can substitute or replace whole words. In response to an especially hilarious remark, sometimes nothing more is required than the face with tears of joy emoji, which speaks volumes.

Emojis can reinforce someone's point, as when someone declares their love for you followed by a line of emoji love hearts. This provides a multimodal declaration of true love. Reminding someone to wash their hands can be effectively and humorously reinforced by inserting the bar of soap emoji. And the fact that emojis are cartoon-like softens the tone of the request.

Emojis also convey contradiction. Imagine attempting to get irony across in textspeak without an emoji. For instance, the rolling eyes emoji often signals that the meaning of a message is the opposite of what the words actually say. In line with this, emojis explain how our textspeak should be interpreted, serving to complement or nuance the meaning. For instance, a wink can tone down words that might otherwise be misinterpreted negatively.

Podcast

In a recent [podcast](#), on the use of emoji, discuss the use of emoji and how it can fill the gap between text and face-to-face communication. In a single picture, emoji can express complex ideas that would otherwise require many words to

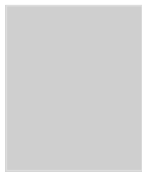
Takeaway message

Above all, in all these ways, our online communication using emojis can reveal much about our response to the COVID-19 pandemic—and ourselves.



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About the Author



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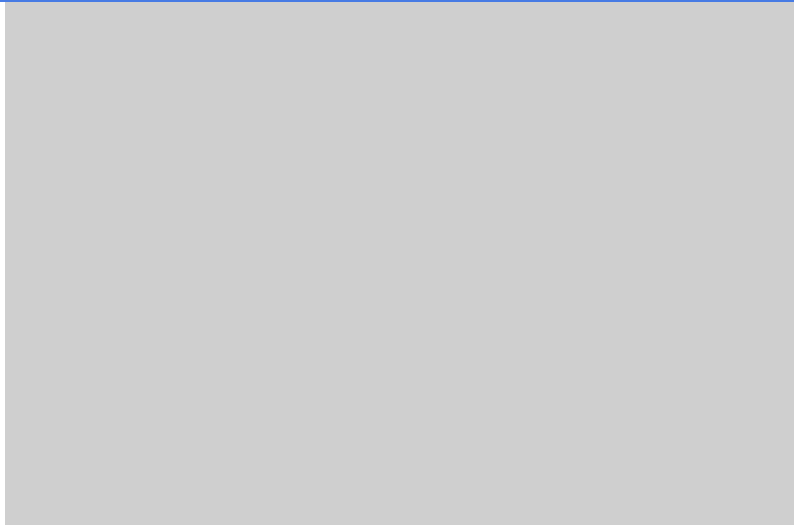
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