

[Case Study]

Use of Emoji as a Marketing Tool: An Exploratory Content Analysis

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Abstract

The purpose of this exploratory study was to enhance the understanding of how brands utilize emojis in their marketing practices. A content analysis was conducted utilizing Google News as a search tool to access articles containing information pertaining to the use of emojis by brands. The combination of keywords used for the search were “emoji”, “business”, and “marketing”. The search was narrowed down to the period of January 1st, 2014 – November 29th, 2017. This method generated a total of 604 trade publications with 55 of them providing information pertaining to specific brands and their use of emojis in their marketing strategies. A content analysis of trade publications has revealed that a variety of marketers have utilized emojis in their brand marketing practices. The entertainment, service, and food/drink industries have predominantly utilized emojis in their marketing practices, and their primary purpose for using emojis was to increase consumer engagement. Brands applied most of these emoji marketing strategies to an online or digital setting, whether it was social media pages, mobile applications, or any other form of computer-based marketing. Although there are limitations to this exploratory research in terms of its methodology, the findings of this study provide interesting insights into the potential of emojis as a marketing tool.

Keywords: brand, content analysis, emoji, marketing

I. Introduction

Smart phones have become a social norm and they have given people access to multiple ways to communicate through mobile messaging apps (applications) such as Kik, WhatsApp, and Facebook Messenger. By 2018, it is predicted that the number of consumers using mobile messaging apps is predicted to reach 2 billion (Dua, 2017). With this increased use of mobile messaging apps, the number of emojis used by consumers has also increased. Every day on mobile messaging apps, people send at least 6 billion emojis and 41.5 billion messages all around the world (Monllos, 2015). Additionally, a recent survey conducted with 1,000 Americans indicated that 86% use emojis regularly in their digital communication (Darrow, 2017). This evolution in the way people communicate has begun to impact the way marketers communicate their

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brands to their consumers. Emojis have become part of consumers' vocabulary, and marketers are beginning to learn to speak the language (Walgrove, 2016).

Emojis are intended to illustrate or, in some cases, replace words that are sent digitally, and they provide electronic gestures and convey the warmth of face-to-face communications, while adding depth to the message. Today, more than 2,600 emoji characters include not only facial expressions (😊, 😞), but also concepts and objects such as weather (☁️, ⚡️) and food (🍕, 🍔) and activities such as running (🏃) and dancing (💃). These emoji characters are actually pictures that have been standardized across the Internet by a nonprofit governing body called the Unicode Consortium, which includes as its members such as Apple, Google, and Microsoft. They are available to users on such platforms as Facebook and Twitter as well as on Android and iOS devices (Unicode, 2017).

Emojis have served as a successful strategy for the branding and marketing of businesses, and they have also been incorporated into various promotional methods, including branding of celebrities, books, music videos, and movies (Lee & Ko, 2017). Retail marketers are also embracing emojis as a new way to engage potential and repeat customers to increase sales (Altman, 2016). Emojis can provide brands with unique ways to enhance their images and personalities, which should increase consumer preference for these brands (Leung & Chan, 2017). Because consumers are spending more and more time on their mobile devices, marketers are developing new campaigns to build their presence and effectively engage consumers. Therefore, the purpose of this exploratory study was to enhance the understanding of how brands utilize emojis in their marketing practices. Specific objectives were to (a) identify brands that have adopted emojis as their marketing tool, (b) address their primary objectives for using emojis, and (c) identify how they have implemented emojis.

II. Literature Review

1. Emojis as a Language

In 2015 the *Oxford Dictionary's* "Word of the Year" was an emoji – specifically, the emoji face with tears of joy (Danesi, 2017). The justification behind this selection is that emoji is one of the most used new words. It changed how words are viewed in digital forms of communication. The emoji language consists of universal concepts, which means it has the potential to create wider comprehension among different cultures (Alshenqeeti, 2016). In digital communication such as text messages and tweets, emojis often replace alphabetic words with pictograms that display the same or similar meanings, but they are generally used in tandem with alphabetical words to create hybrid messages (Danesi, 2017). Emojis can also be grouped to better highlight the sender's message, and they allow for greater creativity and imagination for message development than words alone. With that being said, emojis are demonstrating their connection to earlier language forms, such as Egyptian hieroglyphics, but in a more sophisticated, technological manner (Alshenqeeti, 2016).

Emojis provide digital text communication through visual imagery that adds emotional tones and semantic nuances (Danesi, 2017) that are otherwise absent. Additionally, emojis have two advantages over alphabetic words: they are based on visual signs that have a significantly better chance of being interpreted consistently between cultures, and they add tones and moods, such as happiness, to the textuality of a message. Emojis offer ways to enhance the written word rather than completely replace it (Alshenqeeti, 2016). There are three functions for systematic emoji usage (Danesi, 2017):

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1. **Utterance opener.** An emoji such as a smiley face is used in place of opening greetings such as “Hello,” providing the sender with a way to establish friendly connections with the receiver even when a message may include some negative contents.
2. **Utterance ending.** Sentiment emojis such as hearts or smiley faces are commonly used as a goodbye function in a message.
3. **Silence avoidance.** Silence gaps are a common occurrence in written messages when the receiver expects more information about something the sender wishes to avoid. Placing an emoji in these gaps counteracts the awkwardness that results from silence gaps. Positive and neutral face emojis work well in these situations because they allow the sender to easily change the subject or ignore the request for additional information.

Emoji is continuously evolving as a language by providing people with a simple way to deliver emotions in their messages on computer mediated communication platforms (Laferney, 2016; Lee & Ko, 2017). However, research has suggested that emojis have the potential to be more than simply a means to communicate emotions over a technological platform (Alshenqeeti, 2016; Willoughby & Liu, 2018). Another layer of this unique language is the creativity and engagement users have when communicating with emojis. Emojis are opening up new possibilities for innovative communication, making information more engaging and playful. For example, some classic books such as *Alice in Wonderland* and *Moby Dick* have been translated into emojis. Emojis have also revealed their usefulness in communicating with patients in medical settings and the distribution of health information (Willoughby & Liu, 2018). Emojis hold a wide range of implications for not only the future of writing and language itself but also for the ways brand marketers interact and communicate with their consumers (Danesi, 2017).

2. Emojis as a Marketing Tool

There are three types of emojis that can be utilized as marketing tools. The Unicode Consortium, a nonprofit corporation, has standardized emojis so that they are readily available and represented in all modern software (Unicode, 2017). Custom emojis that are usually developed by brands are also available to users as stickers. Unlike the standard emojis, stickers function more as pictures that are sent in a message that does not include alphabetical text (Gorev, n.d.). For example, Appmoji is a company that has created a business model that aids in the development of these custom emojis for big name brands (Henry, 2016). By using custom sticker emojis, the brand can ensure that only its desired image and personality are communicated (Gorev, n.d.). Alternatively, users can only access the stickers through an application that must be downloaded and, in most cases, paid for. Brand marketers who develop sticker emojis, whether to promote specific product or a sale, must also choose the proper method of releasing the application to the public. Lastly, Twitter provides brands with an option to develop uniquely branded emojis that are activated by using the corresponding hashtag; these emojis are only available on Twitter (Farkas, 2016).

Emojis are becoming a prevalent trend, and they have developed into a language that is understood worldwide (Laferney, 2016). The rapid growth in popularity of emojis represents a significant opportunity for all marketers to incorporate them into their current and future marketing campaigns and to increase consumer engagement with their online marketing strategies (Grennan, 2016). They inherently provide marketers with an effective way to differentiate themselves from their competitors. Regardless of brand marketers' goals for digital marketing, their message content must be relevant to the consumer, and emojis seem to be one of the most relevant responses (Ashley & Tuten, 2015).

III. Method

For the purpose of this study, a content analysis was conducted utilizing Google News as a search tool to access articles containing information pertaining to the use of emojis by brands. The combination of keywords used for the search were “emoji”, “business”, and “marketing. The search was narrowed down to the period of January 1st, 2014 – November 29th, 2017. This method generated a total of 604 trade publications with 55 of them providing information pertaining to specific businesses and brands and their use of emojis in their marketing strategies. Information collected through the analysis was then organized into a series of categories. These included the name of the brand, the product category (Food/Drink, Fashion, Entertainment, Technology, Service, Home, Consumables, Automobile, Health/Beauty, and Non-Profit), how the brand utilized emojis (Online and/or Offline), the year (2014, 2015, 2016, or 2017) in which the use of emojis began, and the type of emojis used (Unicode, Stickers, Twitter Emojis).

Based on previous research (Dessart, Veloutsou, & Morgan-Thomas, 2015; Jordan, 2009; Olson & Thjomoe, 2003), the brands’ purpose of implementing emojis into their marketing strategies was also recorded whether it was to increase consumer engagement by interactive and co-creative experiences shared by the consumer and the brand, increase brand exposure which aims to increase consumer preference towards the brand, raise the moral awareness by providing a better understanding of certain morality issues (e.g., environmentalism, women’s suffrage, equality) and to drive activism of a specific social issue, to educate users, to increase selling, or as advertising.

IV. Results

1. Brands that Adopted Emojis as a Marketing Tool

A total of 55 different brands were reported in the trade literature that began using or developing a marketing strategy that utilized emojis (see Table 1). Among them, 9.1% of the brands released their emoji marketing strategy in 2014, followed by 34.5% in 2015 and 2016, and 21.9% in 2017. The results showed that a variety of brands utilized emojis as their marketing tool. The industries that used emojis the most in their marketing strategies were the service industry (27.3%; e.g., Uber, Yelp, and JPMorgan Chase) and the entertainment industry (27.3%; e.g., NASCAR, Disney, Lady Gaga, and Justin Bieber). Ten food/drink brands (18.2%; e.g., Oreo, Burger King, and Budweiser), five fashion brands (9.1%; e.g., Iris Apfel, Moda Operandi, and Nordstrom) and three health/beauty brands (5.5%; e.g., Dove and L’Oreal) also adopted emojis as their marketing tool.

2. Primary Objectives for Using Emojis

The most frequently mentioned objective for using emojis as their marketing tool was to increase customer engagement (89.1%). Dove, for example, developed the #loveyourcurls campaign which allowed users to engage with the brand through the activation of one of their custom emojis by using the hashtag #loveyourcurls (Rosenthal, 2016). Additionally, the travel service app, Kayak, allowed users to utilize emojis in the search engine to find travel locations (Strange, 2017). The use of emojis for educational purposes was also identified (9.1%) including Bill Nye the Science Guy who began using emojis to explain scientific concepts (Ramsey, 2015). Other objectives for using emojis were to increase brand exposure (7.3%) and to increase awareness of a specific social issue (3.6%). For example, Burger King created a custom emoji keyboard that brought exposure to their reintroduced chicken fries

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(Rosenthal, 2016). Peta launched an emoji campaign that aimed to increase awareness of animal cruelty (Brenner, 2015). Additionally, Pepsi was the only brand that used emojis for advertising (1.8%). This was done by recreating their infamous Cindy Crawford commercial to feature emojis (Zarya, 2016). Domino's was the only brand that utilized emojis for selling (1.8%). They achieved this by giving their consumers an option to tweet the pizza emoji to automatically order their favorite Domino's pizza (Chemi & Wells, 2017).

3. How Emojis were Implemented

The majority of the brands (85.5%) applied emojis in an online setting utilizing social media platforms, mobile applications, and digital messaging. Only 15% of the brands used emojis in an offline setting. Chevrolet, for instance, issued a press release written entirely with emojis. Moda Operandi also developed an exclusive collection that featured emojis on the products (Green, 2014). In addition, Pepsi developed custom emoji stickers that were physically printed onto their bottles and cans (Zarya, 2016).

Regarding the type of emojis used, 44% of the brands used Unicode emojis, followed by 40% of the brands that created their own branded stickers, and 16 % of the brands that utilized Twitter to develop their own custom emojis. When Unicode emojis were being utilized, the brands used them to highlight specific message content or in ways that highlight their brands. For example, Yelp provided their users with a creative way to search for restaurants or services by only typing emojis into the search bar (Levy, 2014). Some brands also used the Unicode emojis as design inspirations for their products. For example, Squatty Potty created a toilet plunger that features the smiling poo emoji (Stay, 2017).

Many brands developed their own custom emoji keyboards that appear as stickers when consumers use them. The keyboards contain emojis that are specific to the brand's identity and personality. These brands include Kim Kardashian (Blair, 2015), NASCAR (Moeller, 2017), Snapchat (Chemi & Wells, 2017) and a co-branded keyboard developed by Topshop and Nordstrom (Easy & Allodi, 2016). Many celebrity brands, including Kim Kardashian, Amber Rose, and Justin Bieber, have partnered with Appmoji to aid in the development of their custom emoji keyboards (Adamczyk, 2016).

Table 1. Emoji usages by brands

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
<u>Product Categories</u>		
Entertainment	15	27.3%
Service	15	27.3%
Food/Drink	10	18.2%
Fashion	5	9.1%
Health/Beauty	3	5.5%
Non-Profit	2	3.6%
Automobile	2	3.6%
Technology	1	1.8%
Consumables	1	1.8%
Home	1	1.8%
<u>Year</u>		
2014	5	9.1%

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
2015	19	34.5%
2016	19	34.5%
2017	12	21.9%
<u>Purpose</u>		
Engagement	49	89.1%
Education	5	9.1%
Exposure	4	7.3%
Awareness of social issue	2	3.6%
Selling	1	1.8%
Advertising	1	1.8%
<u>Environment</u>		
Online	47	85.5%
Offline	8	14.5%
<u>Emoji Type</u>		
Unicode	24	43.6%
Sticker	22	40.0%
Twitter	9	16.4%

(N =55)

V. Conclusion and Implications

A content analysis of trade publications has revealed that a variety of marketers have utilized emojis in their brand marketing practices. The entertainment, service, and food/drink industries have predominantly utilized emojis in their marketing practices, and their primary purpose for using emojis was to increase consumer engagement. The researchers found both Unicode emojis and custom stickers as the frequent types of emojis that brands utilized. Additionally, supporting the fact that 86% of Americans are using emojis in their digital communication on a regular basis (Darrow, 2017), brands applied most of these emoji marketing strategies to an online or digital setting, whether it was social media pages, mobile applications, or any other form of computer-based marketing.

The findings of this study suggest that the use of emojis can offer a number of benefits to brands. First, emojis offer an effective way for brands to become part of everyday conversations (Monllos, 2015). For example, Dove introduced a complete emoji keyboard to support its “Love Your Curls” campaign on Twitter. Users were given the option to access these emojis by utilizing the hashtag #loveyourcurls. Second, emojis provide brands with a new way to engage their consumers to increase sales. For example, Dominos announced that consumers could order their favorite pizza by using a pizza emoji (Altman, 2016). Aloft Hotel in downtown Manhattan was the first hotel group that enabled guests to order snacks or hangover cures by texting an emoji combination to the front desk. Marketers also used emojis to increase brand exposure and to resonate with their consumers. For example, Tim Hortons launched an “EhMoji” keyboard to tap into the national pride of Canada Day. There were also Starbucks and Pepsi emoji keyboards available for Canadian residents. Additionally, for some brands, the addition of emojis into the subject lines of emails has increased their open rates of those emails by consumers (Caffyn, 2016).

Clearly, the implementation of emojis into a marketing campaign or strategy has its benefits, but it also has its challenges. For example, brands might run the risk of creating misinterpretations of brand purpose or suffering rejection by consumers. Before utilizing emojis, marketers must first study the foundation of their consumer’s culture (Altman, 2016). They also have to decipher image-based communication to determine the meanings of emojis and to

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ensure their relevancy to the brand. In this study, we found Clorox as an example of a brand that failed to do its research. After the release of the new multicultural emojis, Clorox created the Tweet, “where’s the bleach?” The message consisted of emojis that focused on diversity and demonstrated how people would use bleach to clean such items as a toilet or a bathtub (CBC, 2015). Numerous online discussions questioned whether Clorox tweet was racially insensitive. There is little research on how consumers interpret emojis and the different meanings they associate with each emoji (Jaeger & Ares, 2017) and future researchers need to investigate this issue to identify an effective way of using emojis as a marketing tool. Further study of consumer use of emojis could also provide helpful insights into the unique social media communication of each target market (e.g., millennials vs. Generation X) and how brands can connect with different target audiences to increase engagement with their marketing contents.

Although we found that a limited number of fashion brands used emojis in their marketing strategies, a variety of unique visual elements associated with fashion brands (e.g., color, logo, design, and pattern) could identify high potentials for applying emojis in their business. For example, the iconic fashion designer Karl Lagerfeld was one of the first to create a custom emoji keyboard (Hoff, 2014). His keyboard includes emojis of himself, equipped with sunglasses and his signature ponytail, and of his famous cat, Choupette, as well as of the product the emoji promoted (e.g., Karl Lagerfeld’s new fragrance). In this study, Kim Kardashian (Blair, 2015), Iris Apfel (Mau, 2016), and Topshop (Easy & Allodi, 2016) were among the few fashion brands that have created their own custom emoji keyboard to increase engagement with their consumers. Other uses of emojis by fashion brands include Adidas’s use of emojis on its Instagram page in response to consumer comments (O’Reilly, 2016) and the use of emojis as inspiration for an exclusive designer collection sold by Moda Operandi (Green, 2014).

Although the findings of this study provide interesting insights into the potential of emojis as a marketing tool, there are limitations to this exploratory study in terms of its methodology (e.g., limited search on years, keywords, and search tool). Future researchers should conduct an empirical study to examine how different applications of emojis result in positive and negative outcomes. We also encourage future researchers to investigate how different fashion brands (e.g., luxury vs. mass fashion) utilize emojis in different settings (online/offline) and contexts (promotion, advertising, and product development). Specifically, development of a custom emoji keyboard for fashion brands should be further studied to determine how different design elements of emojis can be associated with their brand elements and personality and how consumers perceive them accordingly.

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