

IMPROVING STUDENT-FACULTY VIRTUAL CONNECTIONS VIA EMOJIS IN ONLINE CLASSES

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ABSTRACT

College online classes often lack the interpersonal connections found in traditional classrooms, mainly because of the absence of non-verbal communication cues. This paper explores the potential of emojis to bridge this gap in virtual learning environments. Emojis, graphical representations of emotions, expressions, and gestures, have become part of digital communication, especially among college students. However, their place in academic settings remains a question. This paper addresses the hesitation of both students and faculty to use emojis in educational communication caused by concerns about maintaining professionalism and perceived credibility in an educational relationship with asymmetric power.

Research reveals that, despite these reservations, emojis can enhance the emotional quality of messages, clarify intentions, prevent miscommunications, and create a sense of connection in the digital realm. Findings indicate that emojis, when used appropriately, do not undermine the credibility of faculty. Instead, emojis can humanize educators, enhance student engagement, and build a warmer online classroom community. This paper explores the possibility that integrating emojis into online educational communications, with mindful consideration of context and professional boundaries, can be an effective strategy to enrich the virtual learning experience, resulting in more engaged and empathetic student-faculty interactions.

INTRODUCTION

In online classes, college students and faculty often struggle to establish the same level of connection they would experience in face-to-face classes. This issue can be caused by the lack of physical interaction and non-verbal expressions in virtual communications. The disconnection in online classes can lead to a sense of isolation and worsen the student learning experience, making it more challenging for them to actively engage with the material and for instructors to assess their students' comprehension. In traditional in-person classrooms, spontaneous interactions, such as asking questions, seeking clarification, or sharing personal experiences, happen in a more natural way. These interactions create a sense of involvement and encourage open dialogue, which can be challenging to replicate in the digital environment. The absence of non-verbal cues, like facial expressions and body language, can also inhibit effective communication and lead to misunderstandings. Therefore, finding ways to bridge this gap is essential in enhancing the overall educational experience for both the students and faculty in the online environment.

The primary purpose of this paper is to explore the use of emojis as a means to enhance remote contact and communication between faculty and students in the context of virtual classrooms and online learning. Emojis, frequently utilized in informal contexts and particularly popular among college students, present an opportunity to increase the emotional expressiveness of digital text by adding a variety of emotions and tones to an electronic text, having the potential to decrease the emotional disconnect often experienced in online educational environments.

In this way, this paper will explore the use of emojis as a tool for virtual interaction seeking to create a sense of connection and understanding between students and faculty, contributing to a more productive and inclusive online learning experience. Instructors can use emojis to convey friendliness, encouragement, or even appreciation, which can be particularly beneficial when providing feedback or addressing questions. By utilizing this tool in a proper way, professors can make their digital interactions warmer and more approachable without minimizing the professionalism of the educational environment. On the other hand, emojis can also assist students in expressing their thoughts and reactions more effectively, reducing the chances of miscommunication or misinterpretation in text-based interactions.

DIGITAL DISCONNECT IN ONLINE LEARNING

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the whole world went through a transition that led to an acceleration of the use of the Internet in the learning environment, increasing the offering of online classes. However, the use of the Internet in the school environment can create a less engaging environment for students and faculty. One of the reasons for that is the diminished presence of non-verbal communication, which plays a pivotal role in conventional classroom dynamics. The spontaneous and intuitive understanding created by in-person interactions in a traditional classroom is often lost in virtual learning platforms, creating a more static and less responsive educational experience (Holtgraves et al., 2020).

Non-verbal communication is part of human interaction, serving functions such as expressing emotions, and shaping the overall context of interpersonal exchanges (Burgoon et al., 2021). This type of communication consists of body language, tone, and facial expressions, elements that are essential in understanding and interpreting messages. In digital written communication, however, traditional face-to-face elements are absent and messages do not convey facial expressions and body language (Holtgraves et al., 2020). Without these non-verbal cues, there's a higher chance of misunderstanding the sender's intentions and the emotional context of the message, leading to potential disconnects and misinterpretations (Holtgraves et al., 2020). Consequently, the lack of non-verbal elements in digital communication indicates the importance of these cues in maintaining the clarity and depth of interpersonal interactions.

EMOJIS

Emojis, pictorial symbols or ideograms used in electronic messages and web pages, can represent a wide range of emotions, expressions, and even gestures, serving as the non-verbal communication of online written communication. Human faces and emojis are processed by the brain in a similar way, which explains why they are effective in expressing human emotions and minimizing the communication gap caused by the lack of non-verbal cues in digital communication (Moffitt et al., 2020).

Emojis' ability to express emotions, concepts, and reactions in a simple image allows for concise and visually engaging communication, which is particularly appealing to digital users (Danesi, 2021). More than 90% of online users utilize emojis, signifying their popularity and the widespread acknowledgment of their efficacy in enhancing digital conversations (Kim et al., 2022). Therefore, emojis are a component of virtual modern communication, especially among those who have grown up in the digital age. They enable users to express their feelings, ideas, and concepts in an effective way, thereby enriching online communication and adding a layer of emotional depth often absent in typed text.

Emojis are mostly used in social media and messaging apps by college students between the ages of 18 and 30 (Moffitt et al., 2020). From the student's perspective, therefore, emojis represent a familiar, informal mode of communication, reflective of the social media culture prevalent in their everyday interactions. They are often perceived as tools that enhance the expressiveness and emotional quality of communication, providing a means to convey tone and sentiment with greater clarity than words alone (Novak et al., 2021).

STUDENT-FACULTY COMMUNICATION

In online courses, 73% of college students use emojis when interacting with other students in order to set the tone of the message, encourage classmates, and enhance disagreements (Moffitt et al., 2020). Between students and faculty, however, there is minimized use of emojis (Moffitt et al., 2020). This can be a result of an underlying perception among students that formal educational settings require more formal language, and using emojis might be seen as unprofessional or casual by their professors. Students might also feel that using emojis with peers, in an equal relationship, is acceptable, but they may be more reserved with authority figures.

Faculty, on the other hand, often believe that using emojis in the educational setting can harm their perceived competence and credibility (Marder et al, 2020; Moffitt et al., 2020). While some educators readily adopt emojis, recognizing their potential to humanize the virtual space, others have reservations, often caused by uncertainties about professionalism or a lack of confidence in their digital communication skills. Despite these conceptions, the use of these small images rarely diminishes the perception of professors' competence by students (Marder et al, 2020). The use of this tool by faculty can assist in establishing a positive relationship with students and improve their learning motivation (Kim et al., 2022; Marder et al, 2020). In an online learning environment, emojis can also increase the sense of warmth and authenticity between sender and receiver (Kim et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

The rapid transition to online learning emphasized the lack of meaningful face-to-face interaction between faculty and students. The reliance on solely digital interaction in the classroom limits the aspects of non-verbal communication, and impedes emotional expressions which can lead to misinterpretation of one's intentions. Aspects of verbal communication, such as body language and facial expressions, can factor in the interpretation of a message and are essential to creating a smooth communication. To close the gap the lack of non-verbal cues leaves, emojis may be used to facilitate the interpretation of content. As the human brain processes emojis similar to the way it processes human facial expressions, and as emojis are widely used and accepted by society, their use may mitigate misunderstandings in interaction between faculty and students. Even though most students interact with each other using emojis, the interaction with faculty is perceived as too formal to permit the usage of emojis within messages. However, the use of emojis and the ability to make content clearer and create more effective communication may help students to excel in the academic environment.

Therefore, using emojis can help create a positive and warm relationship that can benefit students and faculty. However, while this research addresses the potential benefits of emojis in online educational settings, it also exposes limitations and areas necessitating further study. The study predominantly focuses on general perceptions and uses of emojis, with less emphasis on the diversity of cultural interpretations of these symbols, which can vary significantly and thus affect communication clarity.

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