

How the emoji could help democratise online science dialogue

By [Marina Joubert](#)

15 Feb 2021

As communication about science and health increasingly moves online, new ways are emerging for people to participate in public dialogue about advances in science.



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One of these is the use of emojis – ‘picture characters’, from the Japanese ‘e’ (picture) and ‘moji’ (character). These have, in the last decade, become increasingly popular as a form of visual communication that indicates specific reactions and emotional responses.

The popularity of the genre was highlighted in 2015 when the Oxford Dictionary [chose](#) the popular ‘face with tears of joy’ emoji as its ‘Word of the Year’. Linguistics professor Marcel Danesi [argued that](#) this choice signalled a world in which language and communication had moved beyond written or verbal alphabets.

Emojis [are used](#) to clarify facial expressions and other non-verbal emotional cues in online spaces. They’re also [associated with](#) a playful and informal tone. [Research also suggests](#) that these universal characters fill a need for adding non-verbal cues about emotion, tone, intent and feelings in online communication.

Linguistics professor Vyv Evans has [argued](#) that emojis are to online communication what body language and gestures are to in-person speech. And scholars have found that people who use emojis in online communication tend [to be](#) more agreeable, approachable and socially receptive.

In recent years, a growing body of academic research has emerged that outlines how emojis can be used in all forms of communication.

[One paper](#), from 2018, focused on the potential of emojis to express complex ideas. This is valuable for science communicators, given that the concepts and content they must explain is often very complex and can be tough for non-expert audiences to understand. Another [piece of research](#), from the same year, highlighted the value of emojis as a universal form of non-verbal communication that can overcome language and literacy barriers. Again, this is a valuable way to aid science communicators. [Language barriers](#) can often hinder understanding.

Researchers have also [explored](#) how emojis can help to overcome the differences between intended and interpreted meanings.

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All of this suggests that emojis may offer science communicators a means to make their online communication less ambiguous, more user or reader friendly – and more open to public participation and engagement.

How emojis work

Emojis were [first proposed](#) by Shigetaka Kurita, who worked for a Japanese mobile phone operator, during the late 1990s. Since their global debut in 2011, collections of emojis have become standard across all mobile and computer operating systems. By March 2020 there were 3 304 emojis in the [Unicode Standard](#), a coding system that enables emojis to be designed and translated onto different platforms.

Today, emojis are ubiquitous. There's even a dedicated emoji search engine – [Emojipedia](#).

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Even though they are simple images, emojis have been shown to pack a powerful punch. They can represent and encapsulate complex socio-political and scientific contexts and meanings.

In a time of global social distancing dominated by online social interactions, emojis have shown that they can convey emotions and visually represent empathy. Research shows that these 'picture-characters' can also [trigger emotional responses](#) in people.

It is clear that emojis can be an easily accessible, egalitarian visual language. They can enhance communication, adding emotional tone and nuances by visual means. In the world of science communication, they may help to engage digital publics and maintain those relationships on an informal level while establishing scientific information in a casual sphere removed from 'highbrow' intellectualism and an elitist tone of voice.

Emojis in the time of Covid

Of course, communicating science content via social media platforms – and with emojis – isn't a straightforward endeavour. Although emojis were first developed to [aid email and professional communication](#), using them may be deemed [unprofessional](#) in business communication and out of place in fields like science, journalism and law.

Using emojis in online science dialogue would entail a delicate balancing act: supplementing scientific communication with these visual tools, but not relying solely on them to convey meaning.

Science communicators will also need to thoroughly understand their target audiences. This will ensure that specific emojis are interpreted as the writer intends – and that readers understand why emojis are being used.

This is already beginning to happen. Science writer Alice Flerackers [found](#) that the use of emojis in communicating academic information via social media sites increased from 0.02% in 2013 to 1.57% in 2017.

It is likely that Covid-19 has pushed these numbers higher in the past year.

In March 2020, Emojipedia released the results of two studies it conducted. [The first](#) was based on 49 621 unique tweets that included explicit reference to either 'coronavirus' or 'Covid'. It aimed to understand trends in communication, particularly the visuals, that came to represent these two phrases on Twitter.

Emojipedia used the 12 emojis commonly accepted as health-related as a foundation for this first evaluation. The results showed that five were most commonly used to visually represent the novel coronavirus. These included 'microbe' (used 42% of the time) and 'face wearing a medical mask' (used 36% of the time).

[The second analysis](#) examined over 200 000 tweets across multiple languages that included explicit reference to either 'coronavirus', 'Covid19', or 'Covid-19'.

Emojipedia now offers people open access emoji combinations to help science-based health communication of Covid-19 messaging.

[This platform](#) offers sequences to visually communicate hand-washing, types of hand-washing, behavioural changes, tracing and testing, and safe alternative greetings.

A developing space

It's time that scientists and science communicators applied their minds to the effective use of emojis. The challenge is to use emojis strategically as a way to improve public dialogue and participation in online science platforms and channels.

At the same time, as more science-themed emojis are created, it is important for science communicators to make sure that readers across different contexts understand their intended meaning. If not, emojis may become a form of visual jargon that may be misinterpreted or exclude some readers.

This article was co-authored with Marnell Kirsten, a masters student in Science and Technology Studies at the Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science and Technology (CREST) at Stellenbosch University.

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