

The Emoji and the Management of Social Boundaries

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ABSTRACT

The emoji offers a rich repertoire of communication via texting and beyond. From ever-expanding varieties of emojis to the stickers available on social media apps, the emoji and its “relatives” have gained a significant status in our everyday communication and relational life. Drawing on qualitative data from interviews of female university students conducted between 2015 and 2017, the present paper identifies and exemplifies three social boundaries concerning emoji use that shape the interviewees’ experiences and interactions with others: that is, relational boundaries, gender boundaries, and generational boundaries, all of which lead to various semantic boundaries that co-operate with other relevant boundaries that create subtle differences of meaning attached to a given emoji and the way the emoji is used overall. The paper discusses how female university students demarcate and manage these fluid boundaries that surround the emoji in the emoji borderland where numerous boundaries are intricately fused. The paper seeks to highlight the playful yet powerful role the emoji has in constructing meanings and managing relationships in contemporary everyday life to which mobile communication has introduced numerous remarkable possibilities that were previously unimaginable, as well as new complications.

KEY WORDS

Emoji, Mobile Communication, Mobile Culture, Relationships, Networked Individualism, Semantic Boundaries, Social Boundaries

INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of digital media has facilitated our interpersonal communication in becoming increasingly mediated. The International Telecommunication Union reported that 70% of the world's youth are online as of 2017,¹ which suggests the importance of examining how young people are developing and maintaining their interpersonal relationships using digital media. While early research on computer-mediated communication questioned whether this form of communication is suitable for interpersonal communication because of the limited communication cues that the computer affords, researchers demonstrated how people develop and manage interpersonal relationships with technological mediation (see Walther, 1996, Walther & Parks, 2002). Furthermore, the affordance of digital media continues to evolve giving it the capacity of utilizing a variety of communication cues: mediated communication is no longer just the text-based interactions with which it originally began, but can utilize different modalities including visuals and sound.

The emoji, along with its older and younger “relatives” such as emoticons (e.g., smileys like :) or ☺), *kaomoji* (which literally means “face character” in Japanese, e.g. (>_<)) and stickers, serves as an example of this evolution. The emoji that developed as a part of mobile culture is particularly noteworthy here. Contrary to the computer, the mobile phone has always been considered as a medium for interpersonal communication, being as it is a telephone on the move. Yet the mobile phone has developed into a medium with a much greater role than just a telephone that allows us to talk over distance on the move. Texting has become an enormously important function of the mobile phone, relying on the same communication modality as the early computer-mediated communication. As Rainie and Wellman (2012) have stated, the triple revolutions, namely, the Internet revolution, the social network revolution, and the mobile revolution, exert a considerable influence on the way we interact and relate with others. In the current media environment, the emoji is used across different media platforms and devices, playing a pivotal role in our everyday communication.

This paper draws on the qualitative data collected as a part of an on-going project on the emoji. So far, four group interviews have been conducted between 2015 and 2017, involving 14 female university students. The sample size is admittedly small, yet each interview session lasted 75-90 minutes, yielding rich data to aid in understanding the way these students use the emoji, their sentiments toward it, and their observations about the way others use the emoji. What emerges from the data so far is the norms and expectations that surround the emoji in these students' everyday interpersonal interactions. In this paper, the notion of social boundaries frames the discussion of the data. Fearon (2004) explains Georg Simmel's notion of the social boundary as a sociological fact that shapes experience and interaction. The present paper identifies and exemplifies three social boundaries regarding emoji use that shape the interviewees' experiences and interactions with others, namely relational boundaries, gender boundaries, and generational boundaries. These sociological boundaries are increasingly blurred in the contemporary world, and media technologies play an important role in the boundary blurring process, yet the emoji, as a communication repertoire that came into our life relatively recently, appears to be creating new communication patterns and associated meanings along the lines of these boundaries. That is, these age-old sociological boundaries are being blurred in a certain way, while they are simultaneously “demarcated” and “managed” (Newman 2011) in another way. Furthermore, the interview data suggests that the vast array of associated meanings for a given emoji exist for different individuals and peer/social groups in precisely the same spaces from which the notion of subtle and opaque “semantic boundaries” emerges, that is to say, in boundary areas that are lacking in clear lines.

¹ See: <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/ICTFactsFigures2017.pdf>.

In the following sections, the paper first discusses mobile communication and boundaries as well as the relational implications of mobile communication, and briefly introduces how the emoji came into being as a part of the mobile culture. It then develops the notions of relational, gender, generational, and semantic boundaries, and discusses how these boundaries are managed using the interview quotes. Through the lens of these boundaries, the paper seeks to highlight the playful, yet powerful and significant role the emoji has in constructing meanings and managing diverse relationships in the media-saturated interpersonal communication of contemporary everyday life, particularly for young women.

MOBILE COMMUNICATION AND BOUNDARIES

From early on, mobile communication researchers have explored the notion of boundaries as a focal point of analysis. When private telephone conversations became possible on the go, enabling us to always be connected with others, many social boundaries started to blur. One of these boundaries is that between the public and private spheres in our everyday life. Perpetual contact (Katz and Aakhus 2002) blurred the boundary between the front stage and the back stage that Goffman (1959) spoke of, bringing our private conversations to the front stage, where we make an effort to create an appropriate impression on those engaging in direct face-to-face interactions with us, as well as on onlookers who are physically present. Nowadays, it is not so rare to overhear someone having a business conversation, making a dinner plan, or even talking about private health matters on the train. This often-discussed example among mobile communication researchers indicates how the nature of a given social setting has changed on a broader scale; that is, the way that the norms of interactions in various social and relational settings have been altered. As Meyrowitz puts it, “(a) seemingly clear definition of an interaction can instantly be altered by the ring of even one participant’s mobile phone or by a news bulletin on a radio or TV station that pulls everyone’s thoughts in a new direction” (2003, p.96). Here, Meyrowitz points out numerous “blurrings” of boundaries such as those of here and there, now and then, public and private, the male and the female sphere, child and adult realms of experience, office and home, work and leisure, simulated and real, direct and indirect experience, and biology and technology (2003, p.98). For instance, when a study abroad university student receives a text message from her mother during the class, she can be immediately brought back home experientially, blurring the boundary of here and there, as well as that of public and private. This also changes the definition of a social context; in this case, a classroom space, where learning with a professor and classmates is taking place, is altered by introducing the presence of her mother, home, and private life.

These blurred boundaries facilitated by mobile communication have brought about some important relational implications. One of the most important of these is the way in which we can now feel the presence of our relational partners when they are not physically with us, as exemplified above. Such an absent presence (Fortunati 2002, Gergen 2002) or connected presence (Licoppe 2004) can help us maintain our relationships and make them stronger, yet it can also pose new challenges and complications. For instance, young people report their experience of feeling stressed and frustrated because they feel pressured to reply to their friend’s late night text messages, become anxious about not hearing back from a friend or crush soon enough, or worry that a malfunction of their mobile phone would cause misunderstandings and relational conflicts (Sugiyama 2013). The absent presence and connected presence also create the situation of a present absence, which means that we are physically present but our mind is elsewhere, devoted to others who are physically absent. This state of “alone together” (Turkle 2011) highlights another dimension of the relational implications of the boundary blurring.

The age of networked individualism (Rainie and Wellman 2012) is characterized by the internet revolution, the social network revolution, and the mobile revolution, as mentioned above. Rainie and Wellman describe this networked individualism as a new operating system for the way in which we connect and develop our social reality. As Rainie and Wellman explain, under

networked individualism, for which mobile communication is critical, people function as individuals who are connected to many diverse networks rather than embedded into groups and communities of belonging. As mobile technology continues to become more powerful, with increased functionality and connectivity, the social and relational implications of mobile communication merit constant examination. With the prevalence of the smart phone, people's mobile communication involves much more than texting and talking on the move. Social media use on a mobile is the everyday practice of many, suggesting that people manage not only dyadic interpersonal interactions but also interaction with groups of different sizes and audiences. They also follow news, celebrities, and favorite brands and stores, among other connections, via their mobiles. The "telecocoon" that Habuchi (2005) describes refers to the bubble that mobile users create in physical space, for example in the way users can be absorbed in their own world of the mobile in a crowded Tokyo metro, but such a cocoon metaphor can be extended to include the informational and experiential cocoon that connects to the aforementioned blurring of boundaries that Meyrowitz referenced. The telecocoon is an invisible boundary that emerges when people are immersed in the digital space that the mobile phone, or rather, these days, the smart phone, offers. Depending on the specific activity in which they are engaging, from texting, to posting a story on Instagram, to reading what a favorite influencer wore and ate, to reading news on Facebook, the telecocoon can set numerous informational and experiential boundaries shaped by the people and the information a given individual is interacting with and following, and also by the so-called "filter bubble" facilitated by algorithmic biases. The telecocoon as a boundary is something that individuals carry with their own mobile, where they are the center of the demarcation and management of boundaries. As Rainie and Wellman (2012) put it, the user is the portal, and a networked individual navigates disparate social connections using their mobile. Interestingly, the locus of power in the demarcation and management of a telecocoon is not all in the hands of the social elites, as is often the case in the examples Newman (2011) discusses, although the power that major technology companies exert cannot be ignored.

EMOJIS AND MOBILE CULTURE

As discussed above, mobile communication has made various social boundaries blurred and fluid. To some extent, this seems to have created a need to clarify, re-establish, and negotiate these boundaries. One of the significant means of satisfying this need is the use of emojis. The emoji has proliferated in our everyday mediated communication, and has developed not only into a new repertoire of communication but also into a cultural icon. As such, the emoji has started to carry symbolic meanings at the single emoji level (e.g. the "fire" emoji signals both literal fire and that someone is attractive or excellent), as well as at the collective emoji level (e.g. as a symbol of youth culture, fun, etc.), and, by extension, has started to play a recognizable role in the management of social boundaries.

The emergence of emojis can be traced back to the work of Shigetaka Kurita at NTT DoCoMo, a major Japanese mobile communication provider.² A team led by Kiichi Enoki, Mari Matsunaga, and Takeshi Natsuno started to work on the development of an innovative mobile service called *i-mode* that allowed users to connect to the Internet from their mobile phone in the late 90s: this service aimed to appeal not only to the existing business users but also to young users (Moggridge 2007). As a member of the *i-mode* development team, Kurita developed the first set of 176 emojis with 12*12 dots limitations (Kurita 2017, p.205). Kurita (2017) explains that his motivation for developing emojis was to be able to express emotions to convey an intended tone for short text messages. To highlight the importance of the heart symbol, he recalls how young

² The first emoji appeared on a mobile device offered by J-PHONE in 1997, but it did not catch on because the emoji worked only between the devices and the device itself did not sell very well (Kurita 2007).

people, including himself back then, were using a pager to communicate with friends and romantic partners in the 90s. On pagers, young users were encoding their messages as numbers due to the technical limitations of the device (e.g., 724106, meaning “what are you doing” in Japanese), and a heart symbol was thus highly valued by them: as Kurita puts it, it made the message composed solely of numbers “warm” (Kurita 2017, p.202). Furthermore, in launching the *i-mode* service, DoCoMo needed features that would make it appealing to users, particularly young users, despite further technical limitations such as the display size and the number of characters per message.

The emojis Kurita developed were simple and low definition due to the aforementioned technical limitations that he needed to work with, yet they were nonetheless quite expressive, conforming to Japanese contemporary aesthetics. Kurita states that it was important for him to keep them simple in design so that they would appeal to everyone’s taste, unlike the emoji that other mobile providers developed later on, and furthermore, it was important that they functioned as characters/letters (“moji” in Japanese) rather than pictures (“e” in Japanese). The emoji at this time worked only within the boundary of a given service provider and was used as a competitive marketing tool to appeal to a certain segment of users, such as teenage girls.

Now that the emoji has become standardized as Unicode, and has become accessible to people around the world, it has started to take on its own life, just as the mobile phone is seen to carry the *apparatgeist*, namely, the spirit of the machine (Katz and Aakhus 2002). The emoji’s presence has become paramount in our everyday interpersonal interactions, to the extent that people notice the “lack of emojis” in messages exchanged. Its presence as a cultural artifact has also certainly increased, as we can see in popular cultural references, such as in music videos, movies, fashion and other consumer products, “emoji art history,” and so on. It has gained a certain status in our everyday communication, whether it be for interpersonal communication or in the realm of popular culture. From the news of the Oxford Dictionary selecting the “face with tears of joy”³ emoji as the word of the year in 2015, to that of MOMA acquiring the first emoji set that Kurita developed, it is clear that the emoji plays an important role in our communication and culture in the early 21st century. As such, it has itself started to permeate, and simultaneously establish various social boundaries.

EMOJIS AND THE MANAGEMENT OF SOCIAL BOUNDARIES

Although past research has identified some basic functions of emoticons, which have been extended to the study of emojis (e.g. the expression of emotions, the clarification of meanings, the management of the communication climate, etc., see Sugiyama 2015), the functions of emojis appear to become more complex as the variety of emojis and their related visual icons (such as stickers, GIFs, and the kind of emojis that incorporate one’s own face, e.g. Bitmoji and Memoji) become more diverse, and also, as they are used in numerous contexts across different media platforms. Furthermore, the increased varieties of emojis may appear to give users more precise expressive capacity, but the meaning expressed with emoji in everyday social interactions remains quite ambiguous. Although a resource such as the emojiopedia offers an impressive list of emoji with their original and intended meanings, such denotative meanings do not necessarily reflect their connotations. Just like the way that a given word and expression could carry a different meaning depending on the relational, cultural and historical context, the meaning that a given emoji carries also differs across contexts. In fact, the emojiopedia also has a blog section that includes entries about how a certain emoji is used. The “fire” emoji is a good example, as briefly mentioned earlier: it could refer to a fire literally, as in providing a way to say that you started a fire in the fireplace in winter, but many use it to say that someone is attractive, or that a sports player is

³ Also known as “laughing crying”, “laughing tears” and so on, according to emojiopedia. See: <https://emojiopedia.org/face-with-tears-of-joy/>.

playing really well, and so on.⁴ The meaning varies and needs to be interpreted based on the context, but the social meaning of a given context is not so clear-cut as discussed earlier. These seemingly bounded contexts are fluid indeed, yet they simultaneously highlight the significance of this playful yet powerful communication repertoire, as the interview data collected between 2015 and 2017 suggests.

Relational Boundaries

One of the boundary categories that affects the meanings and usage of emojis is that of *relational boundaries*, whether they refer to dyadic interpersonal relationships or to small group relationships. In other words, people use emojis differently depending on the nature of the relationship they have with the interactant(s). For instance, group interview participants in 2015 commented on how they use emojis with their close friends, while they tend to use fewer emojis, or use only some basic ones, such as a smiley face, with their acquaintances, colleagues, or classmates with whom they do not share a personal relationship. This being said, an interview participant in 2017 commented that she also makes sure to use emojis when texting acquaintances such as her classmates with whom she works on group projects. She reported that she had never reflected on why this was, but she explained that emojis are useful to create a positive impression for those who do not know her well, and she wants to come off as nice and cute. She commented, “I feel like we are more approachable when we send emojis,” a point on which other participants agreed.

Although participants all acknowledged that the nature of a given relationship guides the way they use emojis, the nature of a relationship and the level of relational closeness are not always so clear. Some commented on how they need to figure out if and how much they can use emojis as they exchange texts. One said, “I always use them when someone else starts off with them first. Someone will send like a winking face or whatever and you’re just like, ok we can use emojis” (Interview session 1, 2015). Another participant compared emoji use with cursing by stating, “Well, it’s like, [...] would I curse in front of my parents? I might say one or two words so maybe, like, a smile or a frown is ok, but my friends and the people I live with hear me curse all the time so I can send them whatever I want and it’s fine. My boss? I would never curse in front of my boss, so I would never send him an emoticon. That’s a no” (Interview session 2, 2015). These comments explain how the interview participants assess and negotiate a sort of “emoji-readiness” and “emoji-appropriateness” with their interactants.

Within close relational networks of partners and group members, specific norms of emoji use emerge. This also means that these norms resultantly vary across different instances of dyadic relationships and groups. For instance, an interview participant reported how the face with tears of joy emoji, the aforementioned Oxford dictionary word of the year in 2015, was an emoji to avoid in her high school, as shown below:

Moderator: So it sounds like you just know when to use which emoji.

Both: Yeah.

Moderator: With whom or what context. But that’s... how do you know?
[All giggle and pause]

Participant 2: That’s a good question. I... I don’t think there’s a universal, like, key to it, I really do think as she was saying it depends where you’re from. Cuz like, um, in my grade my senior year, it was, like, for some reason everyone hated the crying laughing emoji, so, like, if you sent it, like, people just completely made fun of you but as a joke. No one took

⁴ Available at: <https://blog.emojipedia.org/emojiology-fire/>.

it personally, but it was super weird, like, that was one I never touched because there was a stigma against it in my high school.

Participant 2: That's funny because that's the one that I always use.

Moderator: [laughs]

Participant 2: But, like, I did before, all these girls were like 'oh my god that one is so cringy' so, like, it really depends. So I personally use that.

Moderator: How many years ago?

Participant 2: Oh it was, like, last year.

Moderator: Last year, right, ok.

Participant 2: Yeah but, like, sometimes I'll send it to my friends from home, like, as a joke, and they'll be, like, "oh my god what are you doing", but, like, I don't know it's just, like... and, uh, I send it to my friends because we have certain emojis that we use and I'll randomly send it to them with a different meaning, so again I think it just depends.

Moderator: Mhm, yeah.

Participant 1: Yeah, I agree with that.

[...]

Participant 2: Yeah, that's just, like, from my high school, like, my friends who went to the public school near me, they like had no idea what I was talking about. So again, it's only within, like, sixty girls, but, like, that was the thing but, like, no one else understood.

(Interview session 1, 2017)

These exchanges highlight how a widely used emoji carries some group-specific meanings, which guides the use of this emoji within a group, in this case, the group composed of students in this specific small high school in the U.S.. The interview quotes also suggest that such a group-specific meaning creates a relational boundary between those who understand it and those who do not, that is, insiders and outsiders, demarcating the relational boundary. An emoji's meaning is much more than its originally intended meaning and full of subtle differences and nuances that can be discerned only within a specific relational boundary. That is, an emoji is polysemic, open to various meanings, personal and group associations, and ambiguity.

Yet our everyday interpersonal interactions are not confined within the same relational boundaries. Instead, we navigate numerous mediated interactions, from texting with old and familiar friends, to a new friend that we recently made on a night out, to a potential date. One of the highly discussed emojis that creates ambiguous interactions is the emoji of the winking face:

Participant 1: I think the winking face is super confusing and you should never use them. I guess unless you really get each other.

Participant 5: I send a winking face all the time.

Moderator: Is this intentional?

Participant 5: Ya, I guess it's, like, I don't know, I'm being silly right now and I send the winking face with the tongue out and the big eyes.

Participant 2: I always send the little one that's the happy face that's winking. Just, like, the little cute winking face.

Participant 1: But those are weird. If you send just the winking face alone without a message it can get weird. It depends on what you're sending it with but other times it's confusing.

Moderator: What's confusing?

Participant 1: Because it makes so many sentences just different. I hate when I'm talking to someone normally but after everything, they say they add a winking face and it's just weird because it's not like they're being funny or like they just said something sexual or something. They just add it on the end and I'm, like, I don't want to talk to you.

Participant 2: In person that would be a very flirtatious thing to do. It depends on who it is.

Participant 3: Imagine if your boss sent you a winking face.

Participant 2: Ya, if my boss sent me a winking face, I would be very suspicious, but if you send me a winking face it would still be ok.

(Interview session 1, 2015)

The comments show how these female students try to make sense of the confusing and ambiguous meaning associated with the winking emoji, particularly when they are interacting with those who are not relationally close, that is, outsiders. Interview participants in 2017 also commented how the winking face emoji should be used with care. They agreed that sending a winking face to a boy they are "talking" to is too aggressive. When the moderator asked if it means "I'm interested," they giggled saying "No, no! Too aggressive!" indicating that they all know what it means (Interview session 2, 2017). This suggests that they have their own agreed-upon meaning for the winking face emoji in a given relational context, although whether a boy receiving it perceives it as aggressive and understands the other meanings hinted at by these female students is unknown.

Such ambiguity of a given emoji also leads the interview participants to decide which emojis to use with whom: explaining why, they report that they use emojis more often and in a greater variety with their close friends. It is harder to figure out emoji-readiness and emoji-appropriateness when interacting with those they don't know well, or with whom the relational nature is unclear. In a sense, relational boundaries that concern the emoji are intertwined with distinct meanings and associations that shift with the more specific relational context and other social boundaries; these boundaries of meaning can be called *semantic boundaries*. Semantic boundaries, without clear lines as they are, are hard to pin point, yet appear to be an important byproduct that co-operates with other relevant social boundaries that surround emoji use. The semantic boundaries that define relationships can operate at the level of dyads, peer groups, or social categories such as gender and generation, but semantic boundaries and other social boundaries do not necessarily align, because various social boundaries intersect in a given exchange of emojis, yielding different possibilities of meaning.

Gender Boundaries

As briefly touched upon in the previous section, gender is another factor that demarcates social boundaries in the use of emojis. In fact, there appear to be certain gender norms and expectations in the way emojis are used. Many interview participants commented on how boys use emojis differently from them in terms of both the amount and the kind of emojis. For instance:

Participant 2: I think it's a gender thing. Like, guys I know don't really use emojis.

Participant 4: Unless they're flirting with you. The only time I've ever encountered them is flirting.

Participant 1: Or, like, the simple thumbs up. That's, like, the guys' emoji. Cuz it's just the easiest.

Participant 4: A lot of my guy friends really like the GIFs.

Participant 1: Ya, I feel like guys are more likely to use the GIFs.

(Interview session 1, 2015)

In addition to the “thumbs-up” emoji, the “smirk face” emoji was associated with male friends, while the Bitmoji was considered as a “more girly thing”, used among close friends, and the interviewees stated that they normally do not send it to male friends, even to their boyfriends, nor do they receive it from them (Interview session 2, 2017). The point here is not to say that these particular emoji instances are associated with a particular gender as a fact, but to show how these female students talk about such gender associations based on their own experiences, demonstrating the way they seek to demarcate a boundary.

The interview participants' perceived gendered ways of using emojis guide their own emoji use. For instance, they report that the way they use emojis with female friends is different from the way they use emojis with male friends.

Participant 2: I don't really use emojis with guys.

Moderator: With guys, no?

Participant 2: No.

Moderator: Mmm, how about you?

Participant 1: Umm it would depend on, like, the conversation, I guess.

Moderator: Mhm, yeah, depends on the conversation, yeah. And you said you don't use much with guys.

Participant 2: Mhmm.

Moderator: Why do you think that?

Participant 2: I don't know... But usually they don't use it, so I won't use it.

Moderator: Ahh, ok, they don't use it.

Participant 1: Yeah, or, like, if they start using it, if they started first, I would definitely use it more than, like, just doing it alone.

[Inaudible agreement from participant 2]

Moderator: [Laughs] so if they're using it, you also use it.

Both: Yeah.

Moderator: But you use more with female friends, or your parents?

Both: Yeah, yeah.

(Interview session 1, 2017)

As we can see in the interview extracts, these female students manage the gender boundaries in their everyday emoji use to meet the emoji-readiness and emoji-appropriateness that they set by themselves and with their peers.

A participant in another interview session in 2017 explained how she never uses the face with tears of joy emoji when texting male friends, and does not like to receive it from them either, but she uses it with her female friends. She commented that if a male friend texts her saying “you were so funny the other night, haha”, and the face with tears of joy emoji is attached, she tends to take it as a sarcastic remark, although she understands that he is probably just trying to be light-hearted and wants to start a conversation with her. All of these comments highlight the *gender boundaries* of emoji use, which guide not only the interview participants' understanding of how they are supposed to use emojis based on their own gender identification, but also suggest what they expect from others and how they interpret the meanings of emojis.

It should be noted, however, that such expectations and interpretations of meanings are contextual and gender is merely a potential factor, therefore multiple social boundaries are at stake in the creation and negotiation of meanings in interpersonal communication that involves emojis. For instance, the interview comments suggested that the way the interview participants use emojis with their fathers and brothers is different from the way they use emojis with their male friends, and the way they use emojis with their male friends is different from the way they use emojis with their boyfriends. An interview participant also noted that her male friend started to use more emojis because he started to use emojis with his girlfriend. These comments show how gender boundaries are fused with relational boundaries, suggesting that these social boundaries are not static and clear-cut, instead, they are fluid and changeable, affected by numerous factors. This exemplifies what was discussed about semantic boundaries earlier: because of the complex nature of the way these boundaries cross and change, semantic boundaries emerge.

Generational Boundaries

Not only the gender boundary, but the generation, or age difference in general, also contributes to the boundaries that shape the way we use emojis. Most of the discussion regarding emojis and the interview participants' families focused on the way that their parents and other family members use emojis differently from them. A particularly interesting trend was the repeated comment that their parents love to use emojis, alongside their repeated claim that their parents don't know how to use them. For instance, an interview participant in 2017 said that her father is “really into it” and he loves using emojis, but “he doesn't know what he's doing.” The same interviewee stated that her mother is good at using emojis, and “it is a way for them to try and connect with us. They think it's super hip and whatever.” Participants in another interview session in 2017 agreed that

their mothers send a lot of emojis. A participant also commented about her grandmother, saying how the iPhone “introduced her to the world of emojis” and there are emojis that she never uses and none of her friends use, but only her grandmother uses. These comments illustrate how these female university students see generational boundaries existing, clearly differentiating their use and understanding of emojis and those of their parents and grandparents.

The interview participants’ comments about generational differences are not only about older family members. For instance, an interview participant reported the way her former high school teacher posts about her personal life, specifically about her weight loss effort, on Facebook, and uses “random emojis” (Participant in 2017). Furthermore, one of the interview participants in 2017 commented about the way that those younger than her use emojis:

Participant 2: [...] Like, the kids I babysit who are a lot younger, like, in their Instagram bio or in the caption of their photos, they’ll have, like, five hundred hearts and I’m, like, oh my god, and they’re all, like, different colors, and, like, random things, and it’s just, like, they’re little kids and, like [...] they’re having fun with it and probably love scrolling through and just picking it, so it’s not like there’s a wrong way of using it, but it’s just, like, again a generational thing.

Moderator: Mhm, generational, and also just very young?

Participant 2: Yeah, yeah, and they’re little so they’re just having fun and no one really cares. I mean I didn’t even think twice about it, because if you think about their age it’s, like, harmless but it would kind of be weird if an 18-year-old girl had, like, five hundred hearts and, like, random things floating around their social media.

Participant 1: Yeah and the same thing on Facebook, like, older people post emojis with their posts and you’ll kind of question why they chose those ones particularly because they have, like, nothing to do with the post so, like, it’s kind of the same thing.

What is interesting in the way these female university students talk about the emoji use of those outside their own age groups is that they claim a kind of authority: they are the ones who know how emojis should be used. Newman discusses how the social elites tend to establish and manage borders in general, but in the case of the emoji as a part of mobile culture, with numerous references and applications in contemporary popular culture, the youth is in charge of the emoji boundaries, or at least so it appears. This self-claimed authority is demonstrated in the way the interview participants say those of different generations use emojis “randomly,” suggesting that emoji use outside of their own demarcated border does not make sense to them. The seemingly random emojis that are not clearly connected to the social media post could make complete sense to others who are relationally close to the older person who posted, or those who identify with the person in terms of gender, age group, or other relevant factors. This demonstrates, once again, the importance of considering semantic boundaries when analyzing the complex border demarcation and management that concerns the emoji.

Staying on the Right Side in the Emoji Borderland

As much as the interview participants notice when some use emojis in the “wrong way,” they are self-conscious about the way they themselves use emojis, particularly when these emojis are exposed to a large audience, such as in the case of Instagram posts:

Moderator: Are there any situations that you think a lot about which emoji to add?

Participant 2: Uhhh, if I’m writing a caption for a photo.

Participant 1: [laughs] yeah.

Moderator: Ohh, ok, Instagram.

Both: Yeah.

Participant 2: Cuz I don't know if it's, like, the wrong one, cuz, like, a lot of people see it, so, yeah, I mean that's usually the only time I think about it. But I'm kind of careless when I text.

Moderator: Texting you don't care, yeah, yeah, so you don't want to do it wrong if it's on Instagram.

Participant 2: Yeah or, like, on some form of social media, just cuz, like, more people are seeing it that I'm not as close to.

Moderator: But it's also interesting because there's like a wrong way of using it too.

Participant 1: Yeah.

Participant 2: Or, like, over using it.

(Interview session 1, 2017)

The interview participants' comments reveal that since they establish various boundaries of emoji use and meanings based on relationships and other social categories, leaving "outsiders" in confusion and unaware of their connotations, they also need to make sure that they themselves stay within the appropriate boundary. Furthermore, the emoji use that is appropriate in texting is not always appropriate on social media such as Instagram. Many commented on how they use emojis to decorate their posts on Instagram to create a certain self-image that they project to a larger and more diverse audience. An interview participant in 2017, who is quite savvy with social media use, commented on how the Instagram bio got her to start thinking about the aesthetics of emojis. She explained some aesthetically pleasing emoji combinations, such as the yellow smiley face and a pink heart, a star with a pink heart, the moon and a purple heart, and so on. They all "look really cute together", she stated. She further explained how she uses emojis of stars, snowflakes, champagne glasses, butterflies and the likes for Instagram for a more poised and curated image, and never uses the emoji of a kissing face, while the kissing face emoji is a part of her texting repertoire with her female friends. Not only is there a distinction between Instagram and texting, but, apparently, there are also different ways that emojis are used for Instagram and Finstagram, a "fake Instagram" that is shared and followed among very close friends. Relational boundaries are more tightly controlled in the Finstagram world, making more casual and relaxed use of emojis possible, or rather, more appropriate and desirable for less poised and more "authentic" self-presentation.

The interview participants consider Instagram posts as the front stage where they manage the impressions they create on numerous interactants and onlookers, and the emojis become an important communication repertoire for making "suitable" impressions. As a part of the group with the authority to demarcate and manage emoji boundaries, they have to use emojis flawlessly, staying on the "right side" of the boundaries that are relevant in a given moment. The right and appropriate emoji use for the impression that the interview participants seek to create differs depending on the different media contexts, whether it be the Instagram, Finstagram, texting, or

numerous others, and in particular depending on the publicness of the emoji, which is intertwined with the media context, because this shapes the complex matrix where relational, gender, and generational boundaries intersect and create semantic boundaries.

In a sense, many of the interactions that these female university students reported occur in the borderland, that is, in a hybrid zone where two “sides” of the border present (Newman 2011). This borderland, however, is not a zone where two areas that are separated by a border simply “meet”, instead, it is where multiple boundaries, such as relational, gender, and generational boundaries crisscross, as explored above, further complicating the nature of the *emoji borderland*. Referring back to the earlier interview discussion, whether a boy receiving the winking face emoji understands it as aggressive, a sort of sexual invitation, or a simple friendliness depends on numerous factors, but the way these female students spoke about this suggests that the emoji borderland is like a wonderland, a space in which they and others wonder, analyze, and assess the meanings of emojis.

CONCLUSION

In an age of perpetual contact and networked individualism, these female students are constantly navigating diverse multiple social connections simultaneously. In many of these connections, the nature of relationships is ambiguous and in flux. In managing mediated relationships, these students have to discern the continuously shifting social boundaries that define the meanings of a given relationship, and the connected presence of their relational partners, whether it be their family, friends, or their significant others. The boundaries of here and there are blurred, affecting the way they interact with those absently present, as well as with those physically co-present. That is, mobile communication complicates the management of personal relationships, although it undeniably offers remarkable benefits for relating with others that were unimaginable in the past. In the same way, the emoji, as a part of mobile culture, both facilitates and complicates mediated relationships, as illustrated by the interview participants’ identification that they need to use emojis in a way that fits with a given relational, social, and media context. These female students perceive themselves as the ones who are savvy with digital and mobile culture, and indeed as the ones who are in the know of exactly how the emojis should be used, unlike those who use emojis “randomly.” As effortless as they make themselves sound in their comments on their use of the emoji because they are “in,” they also have to make an effort not to use the “wrong emojis” as exemplified in their interview comments, so that they will not accidentally cross relational and other relevant social boundaries in the emoji borderland.

As Baron (2010) stated in her study of university students, they are “control freaks.” They can read and re-read their own messages, posts, and replies. They can read them as many times as they like in order to perfect their messages to their friends, crushes, and significant others, and make sense of replies from all of these, as if they pause, edit, and replay their interactions at their convenience. The emoji certainly contributes to this process. The constructed idea of a proper way of using emojis for a given interactant or social media audience contributes to the students’ ability to maximize their control of their self-definition, self-expression, and relations with others. The emoji aids them in adding some warmth of their presence to the messages sent to others who are physically absent, as Kurita originally envisioned, but the warmth needs to be controlled and perfected at just the right level and just the right nature. Resultantly, this “right” level of warmth and other related connotations needs to be assessed based on the norms within a relevant boundary, whether it be a relational or a social group defined by gender or generation, or both. Many boundaries that mobile communication has started to blur become relevant as these female students seek to demarcate and manage.

Some emojis’ meanings specific to a dyad or a group are like secret codes, giving them a kind of informational and experiential cocoon that those who are outside of the boundary cannot fully access. The interviews reported here show how these young female students seek to establish

and maintain such cocoons to differentiate the way that they wittingly and playfully use a variety of emojis from the way that others use them. At the same time, they also need to negotiate relational boundaries, namely the level of intimacy and formality, as well as the nature of the relationship, because the kind and amount of emojis that they are supposed to use and the associated meanings differ. Emoji-readiness and emoji-appropriateness need to be assessed relationally and contextually, and this assessment in turn gives these students implicit guidance on how emojis are used.

The telecocoon metaphor, as originally conceived, however, underlines another interesting aspect about boundaries: their potential individualism. The telecocoon is an invisible and transient boundary that mobile users create not only physically, but also informationally and experientially, and they bring their own cocoon to the emoji borderland where they manage boundaries and meanings of emojis. In the emoji borderland, where numerous social boundaries intersect, yielding semantic boundaries, the idea of an individualized boundary that appears and disappears is noteworthy. Although the present analysis of interviews focused on the loosely defined sense of “us versus them,” this individualized boundary is quite fitting to the idea of networked individualism, which posits that people function as individuals connected to multiple diverse networks, rather than as individuals who are embedded in traditional groups and communities. Such an individualized, transient boundary that we carry around with us could be making a significant impact on the formation of semantic boundaries that further diversify the already fluid meanings of emojis in the emoji borderland. It could be argued that when enough information and experiences are shared with others, a shared cocoon can emerge in a given moment. This point is a theoretical extension rather than a finding from the interviews, and deserves further exploration with an empirical study.

The present paper has merely scratched the surface of the way some social boundaries operate in the use of emojis, and there are other boundaries that the parameters of the paper were not able to address. Yet the analysis is nonetheless able to illustrate that all of these social boundaries matter despite their fluidity, identifying the emergence of semantic boundaries that co-operate with other relevant boundaries, that together create subtle differences of meaning attached to a given emoji and the way the emoji is used overall. Furthermore, such social boundaries are not static, but rather fluid, and several social boundaries are fused in each given interaction. The role the emoji plays in establishing and negotiating social boundaries in the everyday interpersonal interactions of these female university students is paramount, requiring a notable effort that stands in contrast to the emoji’s light-hearted and playful appearance.

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