

ART & DESIGN

Hands Off My Smiley Face: Emoji Become Corporate Tools

By AMANDA HESS JUNE 20, 2016

At last week's Worldwide Developers Conference, Apple's annual showcase of new tech, the company announced a special texting feature coming soon to iPhones near you.

"You know, sometimes you've typed a whole message and you realize at the end that you're entirely lacking in emojification," said Craig Federighi, Apple's senior vice president for software engineering. "So we provided the solution: When you tap on the emoji button, we'll highlight all the emojifiable words there, and you can just tap, tap, tap, tap and emojify."

On a screen behind Mr. Federighi, a simulated message underwent the process: The word "basketball" transformed into a little black and orange cartoon image of the ball itself. "Pizza" flipped into a glistening pepperoni slice. "Movie" turned into an old-school film camera. A collective "Ooh" wafted up from the technorati gathered in the crowd.

"Children of tomorrow will have no understanding of the English language," Mr. Federighi said jokingly.

But Apple's new emoji feature seems more likely to impede a different kind of skill: creating surprising, figurative and subversive forms of individual expression out of

the digital ephemera that populate our devices. In a rush to harness the power of the web's most evocative cultural units — emoji and their hyperactive cousins, GIFs — tech companies, corporate brands and entrepreneurial social media stars could risk inadvertently flattening the creative world that's sprung up around them.

“There is a constant push and pull between people finding new ways to express themselves online, and companies trying to make money off that expression,” said Luke Stark, who studies digital communication and psychology.

Emoji have emerged as cultural forces in and of themselves. The crisp, candy-colored glyphs form a modern emotional palette. And it's growing: On Tuesday, the Unicode Consortium, the body that standardizes emoji, will release 72 new ones that will soon make their way to our fingertips, including a black heart, a wilted flower and a pregnant woman.

Emoji began as colorful icons loaded into Japanese pagers in the 1990s. When they first migrated to American devices several years ago, discovering emoji felt like opening a grab bag of Japanese curios: smiley faces, yes, but also a buffet of Japanese foods (a cut of sashimi, a fish cake, a bottle of sake) and a host of untranslatable images.

But the emoji soon took on new meanings as they made their way to new countries and subcultures — like the information desk person emoji (recast as a sassy retort), or the eggplant emoji (which usurped the banana to become the internet's favorite phallic symbol). In a group chat, adding emoji can feel like tacking up posters on the walls of a virtual clubhouse. A lively sequence can stoke flirtatious undertones or show off sparkling wit. One perfectly chosen emoji could suspend a mood in time, like an '80s movie that ends on an exultant freeze frame.

If emoji encourage visual puns and whimsical juxtapositions, GIFs inspire a sharp curatorial sensibility. The art lies in detecting the richest slices of popular media — film, TV or amateur video — and punctuating their greatness by setting them on infinite repeat. The best “reaction” GIFs — those chosen to inject human expression in online conversation — feel both emotionally familiar and visually

surprising.

But when emojis and GIFs are filtered through the interests of tech companies, they often become slickly automated. In addition to Apple's "emojification" feature, there is Twitter's new GIF keyboard (a partnership with the GIF company Giphy, which has been pumped with \$78.95 million worth of funding since 2013). It directs Twitter users to choose from a suite of emotional reactions, including "Agree," "Applause," "Aww" and "Eww," which conjures a set of appropriate GIFs, front-loaded with those featuring the internet's most GIFable celebrities, like Beyoncé and Oprah.

Searching for a delicious bite of pop culture once took on the contours of a treasure hunt. A GIF keyboard feels like a shortcut: Click "GIF," find an emotional state ("Agree"), then filter it through your cultural lens of choice (like Jerry Seinfeld saying "riiiiiight right right right right right."). Tap, tap, tap: GIF-ify.

It all feels simpatico with Facebook's new "reactions," released in February, which offer users a slim range of human experiences — *Anger, Sad, Wow, Haha* and *Love* — with which to react to news on their feed.

Buying into these features means giving tech companies the power to shape our creative expressions in ways that further enrich the companies themselves. A limited emotional range helps collect data on users' states of mind. Twitter advertisers can now target users based on the emoji they tweet.

The commodification of digital culture has engendered more explicit corporate branding, too. On Snapchat, where users embellish their selfies with emoji, crayon scribbles, and elaborate "lenses" that cover their faces with virtual masks, marketers like McDonalds are seizing the opportunity to write their messages across people's faces.

Even celebrities have tried to encode themselves. In December, Kim Kardashian-West released her latest pioneering app, *Kimoji*, which serves up an alternative emoji set (and a suite of GIFs) designed around her own image. It inspired a boomlet of celebrity emoji offerings, including Stephen Curry's

StephMoji app, Amber Rose's MuvaMoji, Justin Bieber's Justmoji and the actor Ansel Elgort's Anselfie. Even Drake's dad has emoji now.

With Kimoji, and its micro images of breasts and butts, Kim Kardashian isn't just sexy: She represents sex itself. But as more stars jump on the bandwagon, these apps begin to represent little more than a branding opportunity: Ansel Elgort sticking out his tongue; Ansel Elgort pouting; Ansel Elgort wearing headphones.

Meanwhile, as traditional emoji expand beyond their Japanese roots, tech companies like Apple, Microsoft and Google (all are voting members of Unicode) have become responsible for making cultural, and sometimes political, choices in determining which new emoji will make the cut.

Some additions to the emoji repertoire are informed by experts: Unicode has consulted the Cornell Lab of Ornithology for bird emoji advice. Others are culled from "popular requests from online communities" and proposals submitted by the public.

Companies have also made bids to influence the result, though Unicode says it rejects emojis "strongly associated with a particular brand." Last year, the ad agency Havas London started a campaign on behalf of Durex, calling for a condom emoji. Cerveza Indio wants a dark beer emoji. Ballantine's has championed a glass of whiskey. The rice company La Fallera suggested a paella emoji. (The whiskey and paella made the cut; both are coming on Tuesday.)

For the Olympics, Unicode recently considered encoding a rifle emoji alongside other sport-themed glyphs, but members voted it down. "When vendors looked at it, they didn't see a lot of additional value in adding it," said Mark Davis, a Unicode spokesman. "There's already a firearm in Unicode."

That decision has helped stoke concerns that modern visual language is being shaped by the political or financial priorities of gigantic tech companies. While many don't see the advantage of emojifying another gun, others wonder whether heightened scrutiny could lead to less idiosyncratic, less interesting characters.

“One of the things that make emoji fun is this quirky weird list that came about through accidents of history,” said Jeremy Burge, the founder of Emojipedia and a member of Unicode’s emoji subcommittee. “The bomb, the cigarette, the dripping syringe — it’s crazy to think that all of those would make it in today.”

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The Opinion Pages | OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Apple's Emoji Gun Control

By JONATHAN ZITTRAIN AUG. 16, 2016

Cambridge, Mass. — This month, Apple previewed some changes to its next generation of iPhones and iPads with the promise that “all the things you love to do are more expressive, more dynamic and more fun than ever.” That especially includes emojis, those little icons that, according to one study, 92 percent of the online population now make part of their everyday communication.

One change in particular, though, is not delighting everyone. Apple's new suite of operating systems appears to replace its pistol emoji, which was an image of a six-shooter, with a squirt gun.

Apple hasn't said why it would be making this change, but this summer, along with Microsoft, the company lobbied Unicode, the nonprofit consortium that decides which emojis should exist, against adding a separate rifle. For those emojis Unicode has already approved, like gun, it's up to each company to create a picture for it.

It's possible that the company's decision on the pistol resulted from a #DisarmTheiPhone campaign by a public relations firm working with New Yorkers Against Gun Violence. “There is a gun we all carry that we can all give up,” explains a video on the campaign's website — meaning the iPhone's picture of a gun. But the campaign was not asking individual people to abstain from using the emoji; it aimed at persuading Apple to prevent, in one swoop, anyone from sending or receiving that cartoon image of a handgun.

Apple's change is ill considered because it breaks the conceptual compatibility that Unicode is meant to establish. Anyone with an iPhone ought to be able to send a message to someone with another company's products — like Google or Microsoft or Samsung — and have what's delivered communicate the same idea as what's sent. But with this change, a squirt gun sent from an iPhone will turn into a handgun when received by an Android device, and vice versa.

So what could justify a retroactive change by Apple that breaks compatibility among phones? One theory, perhaps derived from notions that toy guns are inappropriate for kids, could be that children's exposure to gun imagery might encourage violence. By changing the picture into something harmless, children will be protected. If that is the concern, Apple could address the issue by simply enabling parental controls for some emojis.

The thrust of our digital infrastructure should allow us to be, in Apple's words, more expressive. That's why last year's change to allow people to select emoji skin-tone shading was good news. When it comes to restrictions, technology companies should limit only speech that breaks clearly stated and openly applied rules, not deprive us of entire tools and means of expression.

To take a related example, some have demanded that Facebook actively monitor live feeds — whether through a squad of customer service reps or through artificial intelligence methods — and cut off those that might be threats to public safety or merely considered inappropriate. This is a dangerous path to tread when there are only a handful of private gatekeepers.

To eliminate an elemental concept from a language's vocabulary is to reflect a sweeping view of how availability of language can control behavior, as well as a strange desire for companies — and inevitably, governments — to police our behavior through that language. In the United States, this confuses taking a particular position on the Second Amendment, concerning the right to bear arms, with the First, which guarantees freedom of speech, including speech *about* arms.

Those behind the campaign to remove the gun from the phone do not appear

to be relying on arguments about kids', or everyone else's, malleability. Rather, they have portrayed it as a traditional grass-roots messaging campaign: "By removing the gun emoji," they write, "we'll show America wants stricter access to real guns." Apple is surely free to favor gun control as a matter of corporate policy — but it should not be tinkering with our right to express either that or a contrary view on worldwide platforms.

With emojis so popular, the Unicode Consortium now requires those who want to propose new emojis for standardization to take a ticket and join a queue, laying out a two-year process for people to suggest things like dumplings, sleds and robots and await the consortium's judgment.

It need not be this way. Rather, our devices already enable tech-savvy individuals to invent new emoji-like graphics to send their friends — and that their friends in turn can pass on to others. Those that attain extensive use could then be standardized in a routine way through Unicode and made available to everyone.

Some will be skeptical that emojis represent a profound expression of speech the way that more traditional languages do, but even the skeptics should worry about private companies' intervening in what their users can say before they even try to say it. Today, users of the Chinese version of Skype simply cannot type to one another certain words, including "truthfulness," "campus upheaval" and "Amnesty International."

Apple, Microsoft, Google and other "big tech" companies should not be placed in a position, which they themselves do not want, of having to decide which words or emojis do and don't represent their brand. Apple should be no more responsible if someone uses a gun image in the abstract than if someone happens to type the word "gun."

As free citizens, we acquiesce to infantilizing digital infrastructure at our peril.

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