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# Face2Emoji: Using Facial Emotional Expressions to Filter Emojis

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**Abstract**

One way to indicate nonverbal cues is by sending emoji (e.g., 🤔), which requires users to make a selection from large lists. Given the growing number of emojis, this can incur user frustration, and instead we propose Face2Emoji, where we use a user's facial emotional expression to filter out the relevant set of emoji by emotion category. To validate our method, we crowdsourced 15,155 emoji to emotion labels across 308 website visitors, and found that our 202 tested emojis can indeed be classified into seven basic (including Neutral) emotion categories. To recognize facial emotional expressions, we use deep convolutional neural networks, where early experiments show an overall accuracy of 65% on the FER-2013 dataset. We discuss our future research on Face2Emoji, addressing how to improve our model performance, what type of usability test to run with users, and what measures best capture the usefulness and playfulness of our system.

**Author Keywords**

Face2Emoji; emoji; crowdsourcing; emotion recognition; facial expression; input; keyboard; text entry

**ACM Classification Keywords**

H.5.m [Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI)]: Miscellaneous



**Figure 1:** Apple® iOS 10 emoji keyboard within iMessage.

## Introduction

Nonverbal behavior conveys affective and emotional information, to communicate ideas, manage interactions, and disambiguate meaning to improve the efficiency of conversations [14, 25]. One way to indicate nonverbal cues is by sending emoji, which are graphic icons (e.g., 🐱, 😊, 🎄) managed by the Unicode Consortium<sup>1</sup> that are identified by unicode characters and rendered according to a platform’s font package.

Emojis enable people to express themselves richly, and while shown as screen graphics, they can be manipulated as text structures. Besides Pohl et al.’s EmojiZoom [22] who propose a zooming-based interface, entering emoji on smartphone keyboards currently requires users to make a selection from large lists (one list per category of emoji) (e.g., Apple® iOS 10 emoji keyboard<sup>2</sup> in Fig. 1). This makes emoji entry “a linear search task” [22], and given the growing number of emojis, we assume can incur user frustration. While no prior work explicitly addresses this, efforts such as Emojipedia<sup>3</sup> highlight the need for better emoji search.

To address this, we propose Face2Emoji, a system and method to use users’ facial emotional expressions as system input to filter emojis by emotional category. Despite that emojis can represent actions, objects, nature, and other symbols, the most commonly used emojis are faces which express emotion [3, 17, 24]. Moreover, previous work has shown that emojis can be ranked by sentiment (cf., Emoji Sentiment Ranking by Novak et al. [15]), textual notifications containing emojis exhibit differences in 3-valued sentiment across platforms [23], and for faces, emojis can be ranked by valence and arousal [24].

<sup>1</sup><http://unicode.org/emoji/> ; last retrieved: 14-02-2017

<sup>2</sup>Source: <https://support.apple.com/en-us/HT202332> ; last retrieved: 14-02-2017

<sup>3</sup><http://emojipedia.org/> ; last retrieved: 14-02-2017

## Motivation & Research Questions

Face2Emoji is motivated by two findings from the literature: that a primary function of emojis is to express emotion, and that most emojis used are face emojis. Cramer et al. [3] found that 60% (139/228) of their analyzed message by US participants were emoji used for expressing emotion. In an Instagram emoji study<sup>4</sup>, faces accounted for 6 of the top 10 emojis used, providing further evidence that people frequently use emoji to express emotion. Furthermore, according to a 2015 SwiftKey report<sup>5</sup>, faces accounted for close to 60 percent of emoji use in their analysis of billions of messages. Finally, in a qualitative study from Lee et al. [17] on emoticon sticker usage, they found that these stickers were used mainly for expressing emotions.

The study of nonverbal communication via emotions originated with Darwin’s claim that emotion expressions evolved in humans from pre-human nonverbal displays [4]. Furthermore, according to Ekman [6, 7], there are six basic emotions which have acquired a special status among the scientific community: Anger, Disgust, Fear, Happiness, Sadness, and Surprise. Here, we draw on these six basic emotions, and additionally include the Neutral facial expression. By using computer vision and machine learning techniques for analyzing and recognizing emotional expressions, the user’s face can be used as a natural interaction filter<sup>6</sup>. To test the validity of our proposed method, we used crowdsourcing to firstly identify whether a natural mapping be-

<sup>4</sup><https://www.tumblr.com/dashboard/blog/instagram-engineering/117889701472> ; last retrieved: 14-02-2017

<sup>5</sup><https://blog.swiftkey.com/americans-love-skulls-brazilians-love-cats-swiftkey-emoji-meanings-report/> ; last retrieved: 14-02-2017

<sup>6</sup>A filter according to Wikipedia ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Filter\\_\(higher-order\\_function\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Filter_(higher-order_function))) is defined as “a higher-order function that processes a data structure (usually a list) in some order to produce a new data structure containing exactly those elements of the original data structure for which a given predicate returns the boolean value true.”

tween emojis and the seven facial expressions exists, and if so, what this mapping distribution looks like.

We address the following questions: Do the most frequently used emojis naturally map to the six basic (+ Neutral) facial emotional expressions? Can we achieve reasonable facial emotional expression recognition for these emotions using deep convolutional neural networks? The rest of the paper will address related work on natural, multimodal user interfaces and emoji communication, provide our crowdsourcing approach and results, our early emotion recognition experiments using deep convolutional neural networks, and sketch our future research steps and open questions.

## Related Work

### *Multimodal User Interfaces and Emoji Entry*

Related to our approach, Filho et al. [8] augmented text chatting in mobile phones by adding automatically detected facial expression reactions using computer vision techniques, resulting in an emotion enhanced mobile chat. For using the user's face as input, Anand et al. [1] explored a use-case of an eBook reader application wherein the user performs certain facial expressions naturally to control the device. With respect to emoji entry, Pohl et al. [22] proposed a new zooming keyboard for emoji entry, EmojiZoom, where users can see all emoji at once. Their technique, which was tested in a usability study against the Google keyboard, showed 18% faster emoji entry.

### *Emoji and Emotion Communication*

The compactness of emojis reduces the effort of input to express not only emotions, but also serves to adjust message tone, increase message engagement, manage conversations and maintain social relationships [3]. Moreover, emojis do not have language barriers, making it possible for users across countries and cultural backgrounds to com-

municate [18]. In a study by Barbieri et al. [2], they found that the overall semantics of the subset of the emojis they studied is preserved across US English, UK English, Spanish, and Italian. As validation of the usefulness of mapping emojis to emotions, preliminary investigations reported by Jaeger et al. [13] suggest that emoji may have potential as a method for direct measurement of emotional associations to foods and beverages.

### *Emoji (Mis-)interpretation*

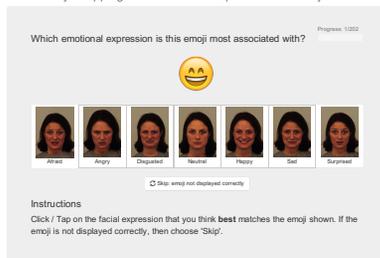
Recently, Miller et al. [20] demonstrated how same emoji look differently across devices (iPhone, Android, Samsung) and is therefore differently interpreted across users. Even when participants were exposed to the same emoji rendering, they disagreed on whether the sentiment was positive, neutral, or negative around 25% of the time. In a related preliminary study, Tigwell et al. [24] found clear differences in emoji valence and arousal ratings between platform pairs due to differences in their design, as well as variations in ratings for emoji within a platform. In the context of our work, this highlights the need to account for multiple interpretations, where an emoji (as we show later) can be classified as belonging to one or more emotion categories.

## Crowdsourcing Emoji to Emotion Mappings

### *Approach*

To validate whether emojis, irrespective of function, can be categorized into one of the six basic emotional expressions (+ Neutral), and what such a mapping looks like, we adopted a crowdsourcing approach. Since currently as of Unicode 9.0, there are 1,394 emojis (not including modified emojis, or sequences)<sup>7</sup>, we decided to test only a subset. We selected emojis with greater than 100 occurrences from the Emoji Sentiment Ranking V1 [15] dataset, which resulted in a total of 202 emojis.

Face2Emoji: Mapping facial emotional expressions to Emoji

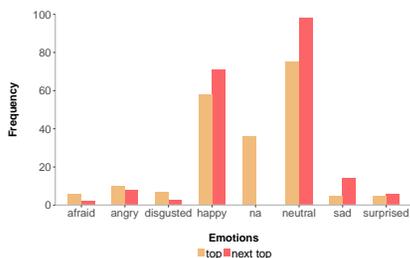


**Figure 2:** Snapshot of the Face2Emoji crowdsourcing website (showing female faces here).

<sup>7</sup><http://emojipedia.org/stats/>; last retrieved: 14-02-2017

Operating System	Labels
Win32	7113
MacIntel	3033
iPhone	2347
Android	1269
Linux	517
iPad	449
Win64	427

**Table 1:** OS’s used to access the Face2Emoji website across all visitors (N=15,155)



**Figure 3:** Distribution of top and next top crowdsourced majority voting of 202 emojis across emotion categories, including NAs.

We built a website to crowdsource emoji to emotion labels (shown in Fig. 2). On the website, an emoji would be shown and a visitor has to choose one of seven emotion faces<sup>8</sup>: Afraid, Angry, Disgusted, Neutral, Happy, Sad, Surprised. Additionally, a ‘Skip’ option was provided in case the emoji was not displayed correctly. We tracked emojis and emotion labels using cookie session IDs, where the emoji index and associated unicode were used for all subsequent analysis. We additionally tracked a visitors’ Operating System, however not the browser type (which can be a limitation). IP addresses were not tracked to avoid data privacy issues. Furthermore, we chose to render the unicode and not create images from them, in order to ensure users across platforms can provide emotion labels, irrespective of rendering. The website was distributed via online forums (e.g., Reddit) and the authors’ social networks. Our datasets (raw and ranked) are publicly available<sup>9</sup> for research purposes here: [https://github.com/abdoelali/f2e\\_dataset](https://github.com/abdoelali/f2e_dataset)

### Descriptive Statistics

We collected a total of 15,155 labels, across 308 unique website visitors. Each emoji received an average of 75.0 labels ( $Md=74.5$ ,  $s=5.3$ ). From the total set, 1,621 (10.7 %) were ‘skipped’ (or labeled as NA’s), where 10% of respondents who labeled NA made up 73.3% (1188/1621) of all NAs in our dataset. The distribution of operating systems used to access the website are shown in Table 1.

### Annotation Quality

As a test for annotation quality, we independently (N=2) rated each emoji by classifying into one of the emotion categories, and computed unweighted Cohen’s Kappa. Our ratings reached moderate agreement on classifying emojis

into emotions ( $\kappa=0.55$ , CI: [0.46,0.65]), where we agreed on 71.3% (144/202) of emojis. These joint labels were then compared with the top ranked (majority voted) emojis from the crowd, which gave an almost perfect agreement ( $\kappa=0.85$ , CI: [0.77,0.93]).

### Classification Results

The distribution of the top most frequent (by majority vote) emotion labels, as well as the next top labels, across the 202 tested emojis are shown in Fig. 3. Interesting to observe here that for the majority of labels, none of the emojis tested were skipped due to unicode rendering. From our labeled data, it became clear that an emoji can be classified under two emojis (following a bimodal or at times multimodal distribution). For example, 🏆 was nearly equally labeled as Happy (N=32) (since a trophy, a sign of achievement can evoke happiness) and Neutral (N=34), since it is an object with no direct mapping to a facial expression. Therefore, to account for this variability, we classified whether an emoji belongs to an emotion label using our Emotion Class (EC) function:

$$EC = \frac{x_{ij}}{\max(x_i)} = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if } EC > 0.5 \\ 0 & \text{if } EC \leq 0.5 \end{cases} \quad (1)$$

where:  $x_i \in [1, 202]$ ,  $x_j \in [1, 8]$ . We chose a cutoff threshold of 0.5, where an emoji is classified as belonging to an emotion class if  $EC > 0.5$ . The result of applying our EC function to our data is shown in Table 2, where the emojis per emotion category are sorted by label count in ascending order.

<sup>8</sup>Female or male faces randomly chosen on page refresh.

<sup>9</sup>Our datasets contain no sensitive information and therefore comply with user privacy.



neutral	0.03	0.01	0.02	0.04	0.10	0.02	0.78
surprised	0.01	0.01	0.08	0.03	0.03	0.81	0.04
sad	0.03	0.04	0.05	0.06	0.43	0.04	0.34
happy	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.86	0.03	0.03	0.07
afraid	0.11	0.04	0.43	0.01	0.12	0.12	0.17
disgusted	0.09	0.74	0.03	0.00	0.11	0.00	0.03
angry	0.46	0.05	0.08	0.03	0.16	0.03	0.20
	angry	disgusted	afraid	happy	sad	surprised	neutral

**Figure 6:** Performance matrix for our deep CNN model.

decay=0.0005) where loss was computed using categorical cross-entropy, and run on an NVIDIA GeForce GTX 970 GPU for 100 epochs.

### Early Experiments & Results

Accuracy and validation accuracy plots across 100 epochs for our CNN model are shown in Fig. 5. Our network converged on a validation accuracy of 65%, which is comparable to human level performance on this dataset [9]. To evaluate our network performance, we tested our predictions on 1,523 FER-2013 test images. Additionally, we used the Radboud Faces Database (RaFD) [16], which consists of 8000 high resolution faces, as well as the Karolinska Directed Emotional Faces (KDEF) [19], which consists of 4900 pictures of human facial expressions of emotion.

The datasets differ on quantity, quality, and how much posing is involved. In this respect, the FER-2013 dataset shows emotions ‘in the wild’. We took only the frontal images of the RaFD, and after face detection, we had a test set of 1,407 images. For the KDEF dataset, after preprocessing, we had 980 images. The performance of our network on the FER-2013 test set is 68%, 55% on the RaFD, and 46% on KDEF. We additionally experimented with a ResNet-32 [11] deep residual network (which have recently shown great promise on image recognition tasks), where we achieved up to 70% validation accuracy, however the network appeared to overfit and performed poorly on our FER-2013 test set (32.5%). For this reason, we left further experiments with this type of network for future work.

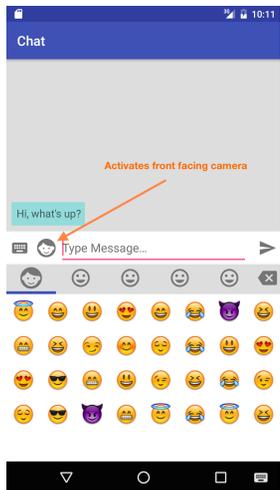
Our model prediction performance matrix is shown in Fig. 6. Best results were for Happy, Surprised, and Neutral emotions. This is in part due to the amount of training data used, but also to the difficulty in detecting certain emotions (e.g., surprise and fear are easily conflated due to similar coarse facial features). Given this, in our future work we

tend to test our Face2Emoji app with users for only those three emotions: Happy, Surprised, and Neutral.

### Next Steps & Research Agenda

Our next steps are to experiment further with deep learning approaches for emotion recognition (e.g., using transfer-based learning to deal with our small dataset [21]). Furthermore, we are currently completing development of the Face2Emoji keyboard prototype for Android (shown in Fig. 7), and planning a usability test with users. In this usability test, we want to test Face2Emoji against a baseline custom keyboard we call EmoTabs, where the emojis are organized according to emotion labels (instead of the default categories). Our current plan is to evaluate Face2Emoji on selection time performance for individual emojis, but more importantly on whether emoji filtering using one’s own emotional facial expressions is fun and natural.

For this work in progress, many open questions remain which steer our future work: how would users perceive such a system (i.e., does it raise social acceptability issues)? How to give feedback to the user on their current detected emotion? Should activating face recognition remain user-driven, or should it be system-driven (i.e., continuous recognition)? How would they react to such machine learning predictions, especially when they are incorrect or exhibit bias? How should misclassifications be explained and visualized to users? Since we have shown that emojis can be classified into emotion categories, can NLP methods be used to automate classification of new emojis? Finally, what other smartphone applications can benefit from facial emotional expression shortcuts? For distant future work, we intend on exploring a personalized form of Face2Emoji, where we would integrate contextual cues using word embedding models (including emoji2vec [5] emoji pre-trained embeddings) for personalized ranking and filtering.



**Figure 7:** Early Android-based Face2Emoji prototype showing emojis (with Apple’s® unicode rendering).

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