An emoji is worth a thousand words — and they can all be misinterpreted
adapted by the Newsela staff from The Star Tribune (Minneapolis), 4/27/16

This is what the “grinning face with smiling eyes” emoji looks like on devices for each of these platforms. Photo: GroupLens Research at the University of Minnesota

Smiling eyes might be lying eyes.

University of Minnesota researchers have found that humanlike emojis can get lost in translation, causing significant misunderstandings.

This happens two ways.

There's the technical translation glitch. What's sent as a smiling face from a Google Nexus would appear as a frown on the receiver’s Apple iPhone and vice versa.

Then there’s the human factor: People interpret emojis differently.

Hannah Miller, a third-year doctoral student, is part of the university’s GroupLens research lab and posted the findings on the GroupLens blog, an online journal. Miller researches relationships between humans and computers. She studies how to design technology to improve quality of life and socializing.

What I Send May Not Be What You Receive
To demonstrate the study’s findings, Miller’s blog post showed how the “grinning face with smiling eyes” appears across 10 different types of phones. The same emoji appears different, depending on the phone. Some show teeth. Some mouths are open while others are just a straight line. Some have open eyes while others are closed. The corners of the lips are turned up on some while others are turned downward.

To study how emoji diversity can cause miscommunication, Miller and the researchers used five of the 22 most popular human-appearing emojis. They asked participants to describe the emoji in words and their personal emotional response as well.

"We found that in many cases, there is quite a bit of potential for miscommunication," Miller wrote.

When Emoji Eyes Are Smiling
For example, the grinning face with smiling eyes is sent from Apple’s iPhone as a somewhat sad emoji. However, the study found it will be received as a relatively happy one on a Windows phone, Samsung, LG or Nexus.

Researchers had people rank the emojis on a scale of negative 5 to positive 5 in terms of emotional response.
For nine of the 22 emojis tested, the average difference in emotional rating between two phone systems was greater than two points.

People also described emojis differently.

**Is That A Clap Or A Slap?**
When seeing an Apple emoji of a person raising both hands in celebration, people described it as “stop” and “clap.” When describing Google’s version of the same emoji, people used “praise” and “hand,” Miller wrote.

Miller said the biggest surprise was that much of the misunderstanding may come from different interpretations of the same emoji.

In other words, people see things differently.

Here’s the kicker: Whether people use the same phone system and see the same emoji, or whether they see different emojis, the differences in their emotions are almost the same.

On the ratings scale, researchers found that the sender and receiver will differ an average of 2.04 points in terms of response to the emoji. This is when the image is translated across phone systems.

However, even within the same phone system, say comparing Apple to Apple responses, the average difference is 1.88 points.

**Translating Changes Into Future Technology**
In her comments, Miller mentioned that some scholars argue that emoji use represents a seismic shift in language. Understanding its part in human communication is important in developing the next generation of technology, they believe.

The idea for the study came to Miller when she noticed that an emoji she saw on Facebook wasn’t the same as what she saw on her phone.

“That’s kind of an important thing,” she said. “I think people aren’t aware of it and now they can realize someone on the other side isn’t seeing what they’re seeing.”

Co-author Isaac Johnson said the students had fun with the study. "It really caught our imagination," he said.

**Preparing For More Emoji Studies**
The study involved 304 people in various pairings. By putting them in pairs, the researchers could replicate how responses would differ in two-way conversations.

Miller posted on the blog April 5 and saw interest slowly expand. “I honestly had no clue it was gonna catch fire like this,” she said. “People are really reacting and some people are taking it very seriously. We do think that it could cause miscommunication but we don’t think ... (emoji interpretations) will cause World War III.”

She and her co-workers already are preparing more studies. Areas of interest include cultural interpretations of emoji as well as how emojis are interpreted along with language and messages. She thinks that might clear up the emoji communication problem.

The main goal is to make life better for humans, Miller said.

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**Possible response options:**
- Do you agree that emoji use represents a seismic shift in language and communication? Explain.
- Given the potential for misunderstanding, should emojis be eliminated from digital communication? Explain.