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»I'm so Pogged I've Got Pog-Juice Seeping out of My Eyes!«

The Affective and Communal Language of Emoji on Twitch and Discord

Abstract

The present article explores the affective and communal dimensions of emoji as semiotic resources in digital communication. From a media studies perspective, the author analyzes the usage of emoji on the live streaming platform Twitch and the community chat platform Discord. In exploring the specific affordances these media platforms provide, a comprehensive framework for examining the usage of emoji within these and related contexts is established. The framework takes into consideration emoji's pictorial qualities, their role as signs, and their intersemiotic embeddedness within digital platforms. Additionally, the article emphasizes the importance of cultural and contextual knowledge in understanding emoji usage. By integrating these elements, the article aims to shed light on the multifaceted nature of emoji and their significance in fostering affective and communal interactions within online communities. It also points toward a broader transdisciplinary perspective that could further enrich an understanding of the social/communal functions of emoji, such as research on internet memes and fandom.

Introduction[1]

Visual glyphs have been an integral part of digital communication for almost thirty years and are, by now, heavily ingrained into everyday messaging with the advent of smartphones in the 2010s as so-called emoji.[2] Unlike text proper, these kinds of glyphs have a pictorial quality, opening them up to an interpretative vagueness that can only partially be alleviated by the multimodal arrangements they are embedded in, i.e., typographical co- and context in the most literal sense. The meaning of visual glyphs is more so dependent on broader contexts; their academic analysis is, therefore, reliant on taking social, communal, cultural, and especially medial factors into account. This article tries to offer insight into how such a context-dependent understanding can be documented by focusing on two particular digital platforms where communication with glyphs occurs regularly: Twitch and Discord. By providing a detailed explanation of how these platforms create a technological framework for using customized glyphs, how they manage the possibility of social interactions, and what other affordances for the communal language they offer, a foundation for a more detailed case study will be given. Firstly, however, a central terminological question must be discussed: what kinds of visual glyphs can we find in the area of digital communications? This issue can be approached from two different directions: What terms and differences are usually employed by regular users and participants? And how do we tailor-fit these into concepts that satisfy academic rigor?

Emoji, emoticons, and emotes – What's the difference, anyways?

While emoji are widely adopted nowadays, it is neither the first nor the only term for and phenomenon of visual glyphs as part of digital textual communication. In this section, a short overview of some of the most commonly used terms in the digital world will be given. While these short paragraphs will not necessarily offer all-encompassing definitions (which are hard to come by), they are intended to highlight different areas of distinction that will be of importance later on.

1 The author thanks Klaus Sachs-Hombach and Lukas R.A. Wilde for their support throughout the publication process. Special appreciation to Lukas for his helpful critical comments, which significantly improved the paper and helped me present my thoughts more concisely.

2 The title quote goes back to a live stream of the streamer »Northernlion« playing the game *Super Mario Maker 2*, describing the nature of comments made by his viewers on YouTube. The archived clip can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bRDK6JVyu0s&t=1689s [accessed May 10, 2023]

Emoji are considered digital pictograms or ideograms (cf., e.g., GIANNOULIS/WILDE 2020: 2). While we as consumers only get to see ›them‹ in their pictorial form, on a machine level they are referenced and created by, as well as actually composed of by specific lines of code. Although the ways these code macros are resolved as images vary slightly from device to device, the level of standardization of emoji is highly noteworthy. To ensure that emoji can be rendered on virtually every modern device, they have been implemented as part of the so-called »Unicode« which is managed by the Unicode Consortium, a non-profit organization that aims »to standardize [and] maintain [...] a standard character encoding that provides for an allocation for more than a million characters« (UNICODE CONSORTIUM 2021: n. pag.). In a very basic understanding, the Unicode standard can be thought of as a ›dictionary‹ between pictorial signs and textual typography legible by humans on the one hand and machine code in bits and bytes on the other. Being more ambitious in scope and direction, it allows for encompassing most if not all the world's living languages and can thus be considered an extension of the also widely known ASCII-Standard. To ensure cross-compatibility between platforms and software, most commercial companies rely on Unicode. Only some big vendors and manufacturers like Microsoft or Samsung implement additional emoji that only work in the respective vendor's digital ecosystem (yet, technologically, are handled in a similar matter to the Unicode ones). In this sense, the term »emoji« is – from the point of view of precise terminology – rather problematic. It invokes the notion of the ›official‹, mostly platform-agnostic emoji managed by the Unicode Consortium, yet it is also used to refer to other small pictures of faces and objects that are used together with regular text – not just by companies (like Discord, as we'll see later), but also by scholars alike (cf., e.g., DANESI 2017). This article thus understands the term in its broadest sense, otherwise referring specifically to »Unicode emoji«. As a general phenomenon,

> [emoji] can (and do) replace words and phrases. Their main function seems to be that of providing nuances in meaning [...]. So, they are not completely substitutive of traditional written forms; rather, they reinforce, expand, and annotate the meaning of a written communication,

as Marcel Danesi (2017: 41) puts it. He continues: »The [linguistic] emoji code is a kind of visual alphabet code providing characters that can be used [...] (1) adjunctively within a written text; or (2) substitutively of such a text« (DANESI 2017: 36). Danesi also refers to three »generic features that define the emoji code« (DANESI 2017: 41): »representationality« (›the picture can stand for something‹), »interpretability« (›the picture can be meaningfully interpreted – even without any prior knowledge‹), and »contextualization« (›context affects the interpretation of the picture‹). This description loosely fits the definition of a sign after Charles S. Peirce, who considers those in the sense of a triadic relation between a

physical form (representamen), a real-world entity/phenomenon the sign carries a meaning about (semiotic object), and a context in which interpretation occurs (interpretant) (cf., e.g., NÖTH 2000: 62; ECO 1972: 76f.). For emoji as signs, at first glance one could assume that the relationship between the image (*representamen*) and that which the image ›shows‹ (semiotic object) is not entirely based on social convention as is the case with words, given that a visual similarity could be presumed. However, as, for example, Lukas R.A. Wilde (2021) has argued, this generalized intuitive assumption of referential meaning is flawed. While emoji certainly can be used as representations of ›that which they show‹ (or rather, in a more generalized and abstract way, ›all of that which they show‹ instead of a singular object), this visual ›immediacy‹ may also be employed to use them symbolically, i.e., ›standing for‹ something completely different. A prominent example of this is the usage of fruit and vegetable emoji for sexual organs; another is the way different hand gestures are perceived as either friendly or highly offensive in different cultural contexts – sometimes being unrecognizable to people of a certain culture. This vertical differentiation of meaning also has to be expanded by a horizontal dimension; the meaning of emoji may change over time within a given cultural context. An example of this would be the ›OK‹ hand gesture emoji which came to a secondary meaning of representing the letters ›WP‹ as an abbreviation for ›white power‹ – originally created as a hoax by users of the infamous image and messaging board 4Chan but eventually employed by real white supremacists in the USA. As we can see from just these few examples, the realm of non-iconic interpretation is of immediate concern when looking into the meaning-making of emoji. Section 5 below will outline these notions more thoroughly from a semiotic point of view.

What we nowadays consider as »emoji«, however, was not the first phenomenon of visual glyphs as part of digital textual communication. Their predecessors (not implying that they have been fully replaced by them), emoticons, are typographic approximations of (mostly) facial expressions. Using letters, punctuation marks, parentheses – i.e., typography that can be represented by the more simplistic ASCII-Standard – emoticons try to mimic certain emotions, objects, or actions, making them less nuanced and expressive than the visual glyphs that are an integral part of emoji. As they only rely on ASCII, emoticons can (or rather: technically could) be used/incorporated in some form or another on any digital device and platform with a screen to show text (e.g., early mobile phones). These Western-style emoticons, in turn, have been precedented in Japan by the so-called *kaomoji*, which additionally feature Japanese typography and usually focus more on the eyes of the represented facial expressions (cf., e.g., GIANNOULIS/WILDE 2020: 3).

A third term »emote«, which is also part of the title of this article, originated from online gaming practices. In a very similar manner to emoji, emotes

in online gaming could be evoked by typing a set of pre-defined code macros (which, of course, could differ from game to game) within the in-game chats. Typing a command like »/dance«, for example, would make the player's in-game avatar do dancing motions in the in-game world, to be seen and observed by other players. These kinds of emotes, which would be just loosely connected to the phenomenon that is contoured by emoji, are still present in modern online games, albeit mostly activated by keyboard/gamepad shortcuts or clickable buttons rather than by textual commands. However, at least with the advent of the live streaming platform Twitch, the term has been more widely used in the online gaming sphere to also refer to code macros that reference small graphics with expressive actions or faces to be incorporated into textual messages. Yet, in this sense, »emotes« refers to a set of pictograms that are bound to a certain digital ecosystem rather than being (mostly) platform-agnostic like Unicode emoji. In the present article, the term »emote« thus refers to a special set of emoji used only on Twitch. One could wonder why we should use the term »emote« instead of something like »Twitch emoji« for a more consistent terminology. There are three main reasons for doing so and thus keeping the category distinct: firstly, these special sets of emoji used by viewers and streamers on Twitch have always been referred to as »emotes« by users. They are perceived as a highly distinct phenomenon compared to the Unicode emoji – so much so that, in the very early days of Twitch (perhaps around 2011/12), users that employed Unicode emoji in their messages sometimes were mocked and ridiculed by other viewers or even auto-banned by streamers according to my own observation. Secondly, unlike emoji whose medial context consists of text-based communication, emotes are embedded in more complex dynamics of live video and -chatting. To keep up with the high speed of textual communication required in these live settings, substitutive emotes tend to be visually more complex and more specialized to the communicative needs of a given digital community. In the terms of Danesi (2017) mentioned earlier, they are less ›interpretable‹ by outsiders and contextually more complex than Unicode emoji tend to be. Thirdly, they constitute a very different relationship between text and image. The Unicode for the smiling emoji 😀 »U+1F600« is not at all related to the visual glyph. Users need a special kind of emoji keyboard, a digital interface where they can click on/touch the likeness of the desired emoji, to insert them comfortably into their writing. Remembering and typing the different Unicodes is way too complicated for everyday use. On the other hand, a smiling face represented through an emoticon – as in :) – is literally typography and can be typed out on any keyboard easily. Emotes, in turn, function entirely differently. On Twitch, they are invoked by certain codewords that usually hints towards an intended meaning or usage. A commonly used emote in messages to express fun or laughter is »LUL« (cf. fig. 1), a spoonerism to the abbreviation »lol« standing for »laughing out loud«. Another poignant

example would be »BabyRage« (cf. figure 2), which is used to refer to child-like, uncalled-for anger. Table 1 summarizes all the differences that have been outlined in this section.

Figure 1: The Twitch emote »LUL«

Figure 2: The Twitch emote »babyrage

emoji	broad, generic term	pictures of faces/objects used in combination with/as a substitute for written language
Unicode emoji	(mostly) platform-agnostic	a special set of emoji managed by the Unicode Consortium
emoticon	platform-agnostic	simple approximations of facial expressions by means of typography
emote	platform-bound	here: custom emoji on Twitch

Figure 3: Differences between terms used in the present article

A short introduction to Twitch and Discord

Next, I would like to give a quick introduction and overview of the live streaming platform Twitch and the messaging and voice chat service Discord. While both have started with a primary focus on gaming and gaming communities, nowadays they have developed into important sites for communication and networking in a range of digital fan communities.[3] By providing extensive tools for moderation and community management, both platforms offer a great amount of freedom for creating, maintaining, and transforming communal communication patterns. One of the most important tools for this purpose is the ability to integrate custom emoji which can be far more stylized as well as specialized and poignant in meaning accordingly – always tailored to the specific needs of their communities.

3 Their importance for non-gaming related community-building and communication soared even further throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

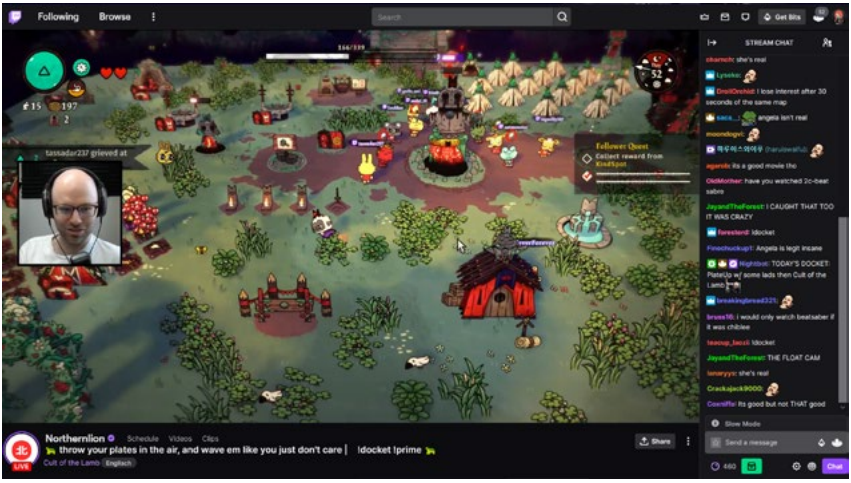

Figure 4: The interface of a typical Twitch live stream. The channel depicted is https://www.twitch.tv/northernlion [accessed May 10, 2023]

As a live streaming platform with chat functionality, Twitch's interface consists of two basic areas: the video area and the chat area (cf. fig. 3). The chat area is where emoji and emotes can be shared by viewers via messages. There is a set of global Twitch emotes as well as the standard Unicode emoji, available to all users of the platform alike. The chatting experience of users can also be enhanced by individualized (additional) custom emotes. Customized emotes must be activated by a streamer and can come through three different ways: either by means of the official Twitch partner program or by using one of two (currently available and most popular) third-party add-ons, BetterTwitchTV [4] and FrankerFaceZ [5]. Twitch Partner emotes can be submitted (both, their text code and image) by so-called Twitch Partners, i.e., live streamers who reach a certain size of audience and apply for this status, turning them eligible to make money from advertising on their live streams and via subscriptions by viewers. After a reviewing process by Twitch for undesired imagery, these emotes are then available for all ongoing subscribers of the live streamer's channel who can use them on *every* Twitch live stream. The process for third-party emotes is more complicated yet does not require any payment or audience size at all. A streamer can connect their channel with either (or both) a BetterTwitchTV account and a FrankerFaceZ account. On the respective websites, they can then again either choose from a vast pool

4 Official website: https://betterttv.com/ [accessed May 10, 2023]
5 Official website: https://www.frankerfacez.com/ [accessed May 10, 2023]

of emotes (which may also be created by fans/viewers of the respective channel for this very purpose) or submit an emote of their own and enable these for their channel. Henceforth, the emote can be used on the channel by all viewers who did install a browser add-on by BetterTwitchTV and/or by FrankerFaceZ, respectively. To emphasize this point: without the respective browser extension, the text code for a custom third-party emote does not resolve to an image in the chat window. Having them installed is thus mandatory to share the experience of using these emotes with other viewers. Therefore, less tech-savvy users or those on one of the official Twitch apps (where the extensions are not available) have what the communities would consider a diminished viewing experience. Albeit this process seems more complicated and requires more involvement by viewers, the third-party add-ons and their emotes are an integral part of communicative culture on Twitch: they are widely adopted among the audiences, and Twitch even integrated one of the most used third-party emotes officially – the aforementioned »LUL«.[6] Table 2 summarizes the differences between the types of custom Twitch emotes:

	streamer	viewer	visibility
Twitch Partner	may upload custom partner emotes for subscribers of their channel to use	has to subscribe ($) to use a channel's custom partner emotes	partner emotes work on every Twitch channel and can be seen by anyone
BetterTwitchTV	must register, install add-on, and enable/upload custom emotes for their channel	must install add-on; may upload custom emotes for their streamer to enable	BTTV emotes work only on channels they are enabled on and can only be seen by BTTV users
FrankerFaceZ	must register, install add-on, and enable/upload custom emotes for their channel	must install add-on; may upload custom emotes for their streamer to enable	FFZ emotes work only on channels they are enabled on and can only be seen by FFZ users

Figure 5: Overview of different sub-types of customized emotes on Twitch

Unlike Unicode emoji, which are encoded incomprehensibly for humans and thus have to be selected from a digital emoji keyboard with preview images, the code macros for emotes consist of regular text (although there is also a digital preview keyboard available). By memorizing the spoken-language-like text pattern of an emote, one can spell them without one's hands ever leaving the keyboard. This is helpful for a live-chat scenario, as this may increase the messaging speed of an avid viewer/chatter.

6 Cf., e.g., this tweet from the official Twitch Twitter account: https://twitter.com/Twitch/status/903701450618011649 [accessed May 10, 2023]

Interface-wise, Discord resembles something more akin to a regular messaging service (cf. figure 4). On the very left you have a list of all servers that you as a user have successfully joined. There are lots of different servers about different topics and connected to various fandoms, servers publicly available via search/lists on third-party websites as well as private ones that you must get invited to. When you click on a server, you will find a list of all users on this server, sorted by customizable roles and activity status. On the left, you can see all »channels« within the server you are currently viewing. Every channel is basically an individual chatroom, usually focused on a certain topic. Finally, the chatting area is positioned in the center of the interface – i.e., the chatroom of the channel you have currently selected. This is where custom emoji can be posted.

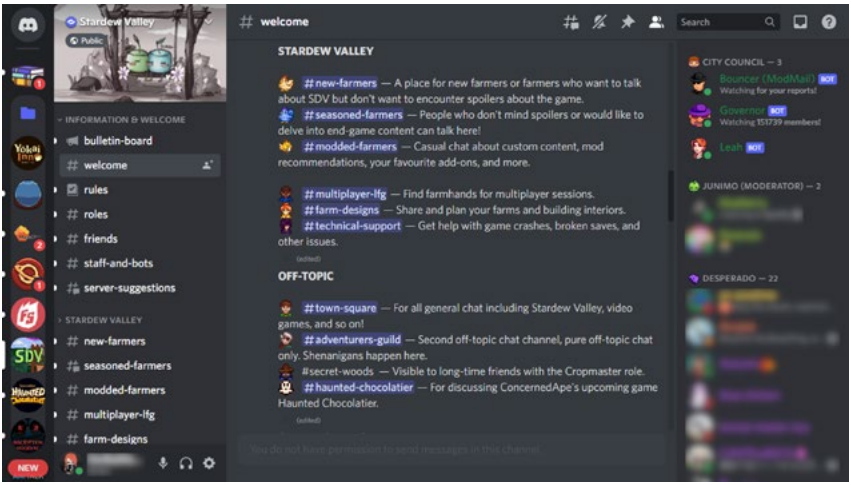

Figure 6: The interface of Discord (slightly edited for visual clarity and blurred for privacy by the author – M.L.). The depicted server is the unofficial Stardew Valley server, hosted by and for fans of the game by the same name and can be found via public search [accessed May 10, 2023]

On Discord, customized emoji must be implemented by the owners of a server.[7] Code-macro-wise, they are represented by plain text enclosed between two colons – »:SDVthinking:«, for example, invokes the image seen in figure 5. Much like Twitch emotes, custom Discord emoji tend to only work on a single server and hint towards a possible meaning. However, there is also a premium feature available, so-called »Nitro« emoji which are available for paying users to post on

7 Interestingly, while this procedure is enabled and endorsed by Discord, there is no reviewing process for these custom emoji in place. Instead, Discord seems to only rely on a reporting system and places a lot of trust in the respective moderators of public servers. Cf., e.g., https://discord.com/safety/360043709612-our-policies [accessed May 10, 2023]

any server of their choosing; they can also be animated graphics instead of still images.

Figure 7: The Discord emoji »:SDVthinking:« available on the Stardew Valley Discord server

Customizing language – How affect and community are shaped by emoji

There have been several works on the semiotic capabilities of meaning-making created or modified through the pictorial components (i.e., an additional semiotic mode) that emoji add to textual communication. Stefania Spina (2018) proposes an interesting set of functions of how emoticons are used in textual communication on Twitter. Her categorization also fits nicely with what we can expect of the usage of emoji in written text:

- *As emotion icons:* emoji can be used to express currently felt emotions.
- As social markers of familiarity: When addressing others, the usage of emoji may imply a sense of closeness.
- *As pragmatic markers:* emoji allow for marking certain tonalities, humor, and irony concisely.
- *As structural markers:* emoji may be used to partition semantic units in a single text.
- *As creative resources:* Being visually appealing and ›eye-catching‹, emoji may be used to make one's message ›stand out‹.

To add to their function as pragmatic markers, emoticons (and thus, most likely, emoji as well) may be used as a means to weaken so-called »face-threatening acts« (THALER 2012: 171), i.e., they can bridge perceived social gaps and borders between communicators, especially when giving advice or criticizing, which may be important on a platform like Twitch where the streamer-viewer relationship is clearly hierarchical.

In a recent literature review, Michael Beißwenger and Steffen Pappert (2019: 26) propose nine communicative functions of emoji (translations mine):

1. framing (i.e., phatic function; how a text is to be interpreted);
2. economization (i.e., enabling low-effort communication);
3. relationship shaping (i.e., managing tonality and preventing misunderstandings);
4. modalization (i.e., extension, repetition, ambiguity);

5. commenting/evaluation (i.e., expressing opinions and affective interpretations);
6. structuring (i.e., a semantic function to make a text more easily readable);
7. representation (i.e., replacing words);
8. ludic function (i.e., closeness and playfulness in social interaction);
9. embellishment (i.e., being eye-catching and making a message ›stand out‹);

These categories of functionality can be aligned on a two-pole-spectrum between social functions on the one hand and structural or semantic ones on the other.

From this perspective, we can strongly assume that emoji generally have capabilities to help create a sense of community: Firstly, they facilitate clear and concise expressions of feelings, thus promoting immediacy in digital interactions and minimizing misunderstandings. Secondly, by softening tonality, they may help in bridging perceived differences in social standing. And thirdly, in these very acts of community building, certain emoji may become part of the vernacular of a certain digital community. Knowing when to use which emoji thus helps to distinguish the ›in-group‹ from the ›out-group‹ (cf. also LJUBEŠIĆ/FIŠER 2016). This is especially true for custom emoji on both Discord and Twitch. On the one hand, the usage and popularity of these emoji may be shifting over time. An example of this is the Twitch emote »KEKW« (cf. figure 6). On many channels, it has basically replaced the earlier mentioned »LUL« (cf. figure 1) as the main way of expressing a sense of entertainment and laughter, albeit also invoking a certain notion of schadenfreude. As this differs from channel to channel, and thus from community to community, newer users may be easily identified as not belonging to the ›in-group‹ (for example, if they use »LUL« when »KEKW« would be more apt); they are not in the knowing about the contemporary vernacular. Given that such jargon changes over time and that new/different emoji may be added at any given time, knowing about the history of a certain emoji adds another dimension to the ›in-group‹ knowledge. As custom emoji are often suggested by the community in reference to certain events (e.g., a spectacular failure during a Twitch live stream) or sometimes democratically decided upon via polling (which is quite common on Discord), a feeling of ›I was there‹ may at times be integral to the ›in-group's‹ identity.

Figure 8: The third-party Twitch emote »KEKW«

In the realm of digital communication, not just emoji but also so-called memes play a significant role in shaping online communities, especially with regards to creating ›in-groups‹, which Limor Shifman (2014) has prominently argued for. Given their connection to the intricate mechanism of ›prosumption‹,

these digital tokens of information and knowledge vary in significance and popularity across communities. A possible perspective as to how these differences may arise is offered by Grant Kien (2013, 2019). He has extensively explored how memes shape community and audience behavior by using the Baudrillardian concept of »simulacra«, which refers to signs detached from any physical referents. Kien suggests that the success of memes is tied to their aesthetic appeal to individuals online. This notion extends to emoji, as they help shape and shed light on a shared knowledge base.

In creating a sense of ›belonging‹ and ›not-belonging‹, emoji are closely linked to the discursive process inherent in building memetic communities. Klaus Krippendorf proposes that discourse »creates its own reality« (2009: 289) through their objects constantly being (re)elaborated by their corresponding community. For emoji, we can observe this process in the slow and iterative back-and-forth by which a community-specific vernacular is negotiated and finally becomes dominant or accepted. For example, from the usually rather big pool of custom emoji on a Discord server only some will ›stick‹ and be regularly used. This ›organic‹ practice involves a flat hierarchy where every user contributes to the formation of communal speech patterns. On Twitch, however, due to the hierarchical nature between streamer and viewer, the negotiation of jargon can function quite differently. The emergence of a stream's vernacular is often a reciprocal process involving both viewers and streamers. On the one hand – with regards to custom emotes –, viewers on Twitch (especially those from bigger channels) tend to be especially vocal about wanting the streamer to ›activate‹ a cool, new, or otherwise desired emote from BTTV or FrankerFaceZ by ›spamming‹ and arguing in a streamer's chat. In the most extreme scenarios, this almost amounts to bullying. On the other hand, by ›spamming‹ certain emotes (or combinations of emotes and phrases) in a ›hive mind‹ process that is very hard to analyze or reconstruct from a scholarly perspective, viewers may get a streamer to acknowledge a certain emote in a certain way, for example, by reacting with anger or frustration. Conversely, as streamers tend to *talk* rather than *type*, speaking the textual code of an emote out aloud may entice emote-based textual reactions in the chat. The frequency of such interactions contributes to the integration of specific emotes within a digital community surrounding a streamer. The quote by streamer Northernlion that has been integrated into the title of this article, »I'm so pogged I've got pog-juice seeping out of my eyes!«, may be considered as a – kind of hyperbolic – penultimate example of how intensely a certain emote, »Pog« and its derivates, can become incorporated into a streamer's (and their viewers') language. Exploring this process through the lens of Fan Studies might offer additional insights. For example, drawing from the work of Paul Booth, we could describe this interplay between fans, streamers, and the adoption of emotes as a »multivocal media ›game‹«, reflecting a »philosophy of playfulness« (BOOTH 2017: 8) at the core of fanish

practice. Examining the complex dynamics at play here, this avenue of inquiry presents a promising direction for further exploration and understanding.

Toward a semiotics of emoji

A semiotic analysis provides a background for analyzing semiotic signs and symbols of different modalities to uncover their underlying meanings, their cultural embeddedness, and how they shape communication and (social) representation. Building on the understanding prominently outlined by Ferdinand de Saussure (cf., e.g., 2011) that the relation between the *signifiant* (the physical form of a sign) and the *signifié* (the concept or meaning associated with the sign) is an arbitrary one, questions on how these relationships are created arise. Building on Peirce's work, whose triadic understanding has already been shortly mentioned in section 2, we can differentiate three types of signs (cf., e.g., DANESI 2004 who outlines this nicely): *icons* that visually resemble their referents (e.g., a photograph of a tree), *indexes* that have a causal connection or correlation with their referents (e.g., smoke indicating a fire), and *symbols* that rely on conventions and cultural codes for their meaning (e.g., words or flags). However, it has to be noted that the relationship between signs and culture is by no means unidirectional. Signs are influenced by culture and society just as much as they, in turn, shape them by constructing ideologies or what Roland Barthes (cf., e.g., 2010: 253-261), who most prominently underlined this notion, would call cultural »myths«.

Briefly put, a semiotic analysis aims to examine signs within their broader cultural and social contexts, looking at the various relationships between signs and their meanings, the associations/connotations they evoke, and the codes and conventions that influence their interpretation while also trying to argue for the cultural impact of a given sign in a given community. By employing a semiotic analysis in the study of emoji, we can delve beyond surface-level interpretations and explore the deeper layers of meaning embedded in emoji and their uses. In the following paragraphs, I will demonstrate this approach by taking a closer look at how emoji contribute to community formation, shared understanding, and the negotiation of meaning on Twitch and Discord.

a) Pictorial and symbolic semiotics of emoji:

As has been established and is eminently plausible, the pictorial nature of emoji (including their shape, color, and facial expression/object resemblance) contributes to their communicative capabilities. Through a semiotic analysis, one can explore how specific pictorial features of emoji align with specific emotions or concepts. For instance, while also keeping cultural codes in mind,

a smiling face emoji with heart-shaped eyes may connote extreme happiness or affection as has traditionally been established in Western cartoon and comic media. Analyzing the pictorial characteristics of emoji, i.e., their likeness to a referenced object, can reveal the underlying codes and conventions that influence their interpretation within a community: How important is, e.g., the likeness of custom emoji on Twitch to the streamer? How does closeness to other memetic content from different platforms mediate the popularity of certain emotes? One example of this kind of popularity that goes beyond the scope of a single streamer's community is the widely embraced usage of emotes featuring the cartoon character Pepe the Frog, who has been popularized through memetic spread as early as 2008, featuring various facial expressions, actions, and moods.[8] Inversely, some streamers adapt these popular Pepe emotes by creating similar emotes featuring their face in the very same, cartoonized pose or with the same expression. Referentiality in the sense of ›looking similar to something‹, here bordering between both an iconic and a symbolic notion, can thusly be considered a factor for stimulating community interaction that must not be neglected.

Preceding a proper embedding in socio-cultural contexts, a short classification of individual emoji in Peircean terms, i.e., identifying their iconical, indexical, or symbolic dimensions can further help to guide the following steps of analysis and may offer new understandings and update preconceived notions during research. Given that the aforementioned example of Pepe emotes may nowadays invoke the notion of a symbolic sign due to the controversy surrounding the cartoon frog, there are also iconic or indexical dimensions to be considered when looking at concrete examples. An emoji of a laughing Pepe the Frog – aside from its symbolic nuances due to any cultural/discoursive context – also has the iconic characteristic of representing a laughing face. Such iconicity can guide assumptions on how these emoji may be used, as the relation between iconicity (›what it shows‹) and meaning must not necessarily be (or rather: seldom is) entirely based on conventions. Furthermore, the live nature of streams on Twitch is essential to the communicative process and stimulates a rather indexical relationship between what is seen on stream and what viewers chat about; this also translates directly to an indexical function of emote. A popular third-party emote, »KEKW« (cf. fig. 6), is exemplary of this, featuring the likeness of Juan Joya who became memetically popular through a video of him as a guest on a Spanish live talk show laughing

8 It has to be noted here that, while Pepe the Frog is nowadays often considered a hate symbol often used by various alt-right movements and actors, his usage in Twitch emotes has been well established long before this appropriation.

hysterically whilst trying to tell a story.[9] This emote is frequently used by chatters to both express laughter at jokes made by the streamer and, more prominently, to ironically make fun of the streamer for failing or dying in a video game, i.e., to express a certain tongue-in-cheek *schadenfreude*. In this sense, the emote can be read as an index of what is happening during the stream while also giving insight into how the audience perceives the current content (which is also an important function for streamers to realize at a glance how engaged their viewers are at any given moment).

b) Cultural semiotics of emoji:

As has just been exemplified by Pepe emotes, emoji are not devoid of cultural influence; they reflect and embody cultural values, norms, and the memetic practice of referentiality (i.e., invoking frameworks of understanding by bringing up knowledge/information that is assumed to be communally shared). In the case of Twitch and Discord, these are closely related to subcultures surrounding fandom and memes. A semiotic analysis allows researchers to delve into the cultural connotations attached to emoji within specific communities. Certain emoji may be more directly associated with specific subcultures or online communities, carrying nuanced meanings understood only by the members of those in-groups. Some emoji have a certain meaning attached to them that goes beyond any immediate preconceptions, e.g., referencing inside jokes only understood by community members. An example of this is the animated custom BTTV emote »hesBALD« implemented on the channel of streamer Northernlion, showing a short animation of the streamer shouting energetically in disbelief. The text code for invoking this emote points toward an ongoing inside joke in the Northernlion community, randomly asking in disbelief via comments or messages the question »Wait, he's bald?!« (directed at no one in particular), as if they were just noticing the hairstyle of the streamer (who is, very obviously, bald). By looking into the cultural semiotics of emoji on this micro level, researchers can uncover shared cultural knowledge, identity markers, and social norms within a community.

c) Situational semiotics of emoji:

The meaning of an emoji is not fixed; it can change depending on the situational context in which it is used (the just mentioned »KEKW« being an example of this). A semiotic analysis should consider how emoji function within

9 The original clip from the talk show is available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WDiB4rtp1qw [accessed May 10, 2023]

specific communicative contexts and how their meaning is negotiated and interpreted by community members. For instance, a particular emoji may be used sarcastically in one community/situation, while conveying genuine enthusiasm in another. This can be seen in the Stardew Valley Discord, where the emoji »:SDVpuffercoolest:« (cf. figure 7) is used both when celebrating a personal achievement and in ironic contexts, pointing toward the notion of covering up one's failures by just ›looking cooly‹ over it. By examining the contextual semiotics of emoji, an understanding of the complex interplay between community-specific norms, intentions, and their usage patterns can be further deepened; or rather: a contextual understanding is the very necessity for any plausible assumptions about the communal functions of emoji. Without a minimum of participant observation, a semiotic analysis of emoji is bound to fail.

Figure 9: The Discord emoji »:SDVpuffercoolest:« available on the Stardew Valley Discord server

d) Intersemiotic analysis:

Emoji are not confined to their pictorial form but can also be interpreted in relation to the modes of communication they interplay with. Intersemiotic analysis can show how emoji interact with text, speech, or other modes of expression within a community. For instance, understanding how emoji are combined with specific words or phrases can shed light on how they enhance or alter the intended meaning of a message. This seems easier with regards to Twitch, where the high speed of live chat nudges viewers towards short-form messages that sometimes follow certain memetic patterns. On the other hand, the communicative patterns in Discord communities seem more complex to conceptualize. Even in a single chat channel, different interactional patterns may emerge consecutively. For example, in the channel »#new-farmers« in the Stardew Valley Discord (cf. fig. 4), new community members may introduce themselves by writing a short profile about themselves, which may or may not entice further communication. Other community members use this channel as a public chatroom where sometimes one-to-one communication in a public space may emerge (i.e., an exchange of messages uninterrupted by other user messages). Here, different ways of addressing a (potential) other can be observed: Users express themselves quite differently when they ›speak to the void‹

by addressing no one in particular compared to answering each other directly, which also directly influences their usage of emoji.

Final remarks

Finally, I would like to condense the many thoughts established in this article and offer some concluding reflections. Firstly, terminologically speaking, while this article has offered a perspective on how to properly address these tiny little pictures that are so commonly used as part of or instead of textual cues, when trying to establish »emoji« as an overarching general term there are many other avenues of inquiry one could take. It might be more proper, academically speaking, to avoid these kinds of terms that are part of everyday language alltogether and, for example, adopt a more technical term like »visual glyph«, which Unicode emoji, emoticons, and emotes then would be subcategories of. This terminological debate remains open for discussion. Secondly, my demonstrated approach to outline the affective and communal dimensions of emoji usage on Twitch and Discord is by no means exhaustive, neither for these platforms in particular nor for emoji in general. The ideas discussed serve as initial steps to triangulate these phenomena, leaving ample room for further exploration. There are various unexplored avenues to be pursued, including the study of internet memes and the application of frameworks provided by Fan Studies that have been partially hinted at here. Thirdly, the same limitation applies to the semiotic framework suggested in this article. While it proved useful as a guideline to my own understanding of emoji usage, adjustments and adaptions may be required when applied to different medial environments such as one-to-one chatting on messaging apps. However, what has been established in this article is that understanding the (sub)cultural significance of emoji within a community can shed light on shared values, identity markers, and insider knowledge, which are used by community members to strengthen communal ties. Employing a semiotic approach following the guiding rails of a semiotic analysis enables the exploration of how emoji are interpreted, negotiated, and assigned meaning within different communities.

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