

# EMOJIS IN MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this research paper is to analyze, through an easy and visualized approach, the use of emojis in marketing communications. This would enable companies to connect with their target audience on a deeper level and develop winning communication campaigns.

The structure and tasks of the paper are predetermined by its aim - to prove that companies use emojis in communicating with their customers. This paper focuses on the definition and classification of emojis, characteristics of the most used ones, and analysis of their use in various marketing communications. The method of analysis is semiotic analysis. It reveals the opportunities that lie before companies to communicate with their audience in a new and interesting way.

The paper gives examples how companies and users communicate through emojis. Understanding the role of emojis presents opportunities for innovation in communication. Through certain examples we would see how analyzing them reveals more information about users' personalities. The analysis aims at revealing the opportunities that this relatively new type of communication gives companies on the one hand and users, on the other.

**Keywords:** *emojis, marketing communications, digital communications, sales promotion, social media, Twitter*

## **1. Introduction**

The significance of the paper is raised by the challenges that specialists in the area of marketing and advertising face in today's developing markets, where creativity and flexibility are of utmost importance. Today's economy sees an abundance of products and services, and users seem to be immune to the advertising messages. This calls for much more aggressive and innovative approaches on behalf of the companies.

Communication is becoming more and more diverse, and companies should spend more efforts than ever to create better marketing communications through flexibility, individuality and creativity. The paper reveals the opportunities that lie before us by analyzing the use of emojis. It focuses on defining and classifying the various emojis; characterizing the most used ones; analyzing various marketing communications; using semiotic analysis to analyze the role of emojis in companies' and users' communication.

The practical implications are that the research is to be of value to all specialists in the area of communications, marketing and advertising, since the main goal for each company is profit and it is a consequence of multiple factors, where having a distinguished and working brand is key.

## **2. Emoticons and emojis – definition and classification**

“Emoticons are representations of body language in text-based messages, where the communication channel is limited to transmission of letters and punctuation marks.” (Ptaszynski, 2011, p. 1159). History is not really sure when the first emoticon was used since different sources point to different discoveries. “A historical newspaper specialist at the digital archival company Proquest believes he has found an example of a sideways winking smiley face embedded in The New York Times transcript of an 1862 speech given by President Lincoln. Other historians are not so sure, saying the semicolon alongside a closed parenthesis is either a mistake or a misinterpretation of something that is perfectly grammatical for that era.” (“Is That an Emoticon in 1862?”. *The New York Times*. 2009.)

The President's speech reads “...there is no precedent for your being here yourselves, (applause and laughter ;) and I offer, in justification of myself and you, that I have found nothing in the Constitution against.” Emoticons that we know in modern times were first used in 1982 by Scott Fahlman at Carnegie Mellon University. Then they spread to the general public through the Internet.

Emoticons have developed depending on the language of use, letter input system or the kind of community that uses them. They can roughly be divided

into three basic types: Western one-line type; Eastern one-line type; and Multi-line ASCII art type. “Western emoticons are known for being rotated by 90 degrees, such as “:-)” (smiling face), or “:-D” (laughing face). They are usually made of two to four characters and are of a relatively small number. Multi-line ASCII art type emoticons, on the other hand, consist of a number of characters written in several, or even up to several dozens of lines. When looked at from a distance, they make up a picture, often representing a face or a posture. Finally, Eastern emoticons, in contrast to the Western ones are usually unrotated and represent faces or gestures from a point of view easily comprehensible to the reader.” (Ptaszynski, 2011, p. 1160).

Moving further into the evolution of the simpler language and expressions, we see the rise of emojis. “An emoji is a step further, developed with modern communication technologies that facilitate more expressive messages. An emoji is a graphic symbol, ideogram that represents not only facial expressions, but also concepts and ideas, such as celebration, weather, vehicles and buildings, food and drink, animals and plants, or emotions, feelings, and activities.” (Novak et. al., 2015, p. 2). Emojis have been used more and more especially in mobile communications and social media. They are Unicode (one code for all devices) graphic symbols that are used as a shorthand to express feelings, concepts and ideas. Compared to emoticons, emojis are a lot more in number.

The importance of emojis in communication was further acknowledged by Oxford Dictionaries as word of the year 2015. Figure 1 was chosen for being the most used emoji for that year. “Oxford University Press have partnered with leading mobile technology business SwiftKey to explore frequency and usage statistics for some of the most popular emoji across the world.



Face with tears of joy (figure 1)

The “face with tears of joy” emoji was chosen because it was the most used emoji globally in 2015. SwiftKey identified that it made up 20% of all the emojis used in the UK in 2015, and 17% of those in the US: a sharp rise from

4% and 9% respectively in 2014. The word emoji has seen a similar surge: although it has been found in English since 1997, usage more than tripled in 2015 over the previous year according to data from the Oxford Dictionaries Corpus. (Oxford Dictionaries Corpus. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2015> Retrieved November 15, 2017.)

### **3. Semiotic characteristics of emojis**

Semiotics, the science of signs and their meaning, gives us an excellent base when it comes to analyze emojis and their meaning. There are three basic types of semiotic signs: symbols, icons and indices. Semiotics defines the symbol as a sign that has nothing in common with the object it represents. The connection between the signified and the signifier is accidental. Such signs are the words, the numbers, the signs of Physics and Chemistry. There is a difference between what a symbol means in Semiotics and literature, where it is a word or expression with a figurative meaning that is permanently and strongly based in peoples' conscious and unconscious level. "The index is a sign that represents a cause-effect connection. The signifier is a result of the signified. The smoke means fire; the sore throat means illness; the step in the sand means that someone has passed, etc. The icon is a sign that is the same as the object it represents." (Kaftandzhiev, 2008, pp 57-58) The term comes from ancient Greek and means an image, an effigy. This means that the signified and the signifier resemble one another. This leads to the conclusion that they are motivated. Examples of typical iconic signs include pictures, photos, drawings, paintings, schemes. Since emojis look exactly like the object they represent, we can safely deduct that as far as Semiotics is concerned, they are iconic signs.

The functions of images and in this respect icons are communication. Researchers offer various classifications and communicative functions. Strahm defines the communicative functions as: informational, educational, persuasive and entertaining. One of the most prominent classifications however was made by Levin, who specifies five functions

- Decorative: the images are of no specific regard to the verbal text. We use them only to add more allure to the text, without giving additional information about it.
- Representative: this function comes into realization when we understand the text with the help of the images. They, through their means, tells us the content that is revealed through the verbal text.
- Organizational: here the images may be "used as an organizational structure of the text, thus giving it better coherence...the illustrative images are often used to make geographical relations clearer...the

texts, in which mainly basic characteristics of various signs and objects are numbered, also build a more coherent organization through image representation...

- Interpretative: we use images with interpretative functions to clarify the more complex passages. In most cases these are the more abstract images, schemes, diagrams, etc.
- Transformative: this function is a bit different from the other ones since here the images are with a figurative meaning, metaphors, metonymies, etc. The main advantage of these images is that they are original and thus more attractive (Levin, 1987, p. 56).

In our further analysis, we will study examples of the use of emojis, being primarily an example of the first three communicative functions: the decorative, the representative and the organizational.

#### **4. Use of emojis in marketing communications**

Perhaps the most significant contribution of emojis in marketing communications is their brevity and clarity. Advertising, being part of marketing communications, is the most expensive form of marketing communications. This is where semiotics and signs in particular come to play an important role. Knowing how expensive advertising space is, one would always consider new, interesting and succinct forms of expression. It is through the use of signs and their meaning that we are able to do so.

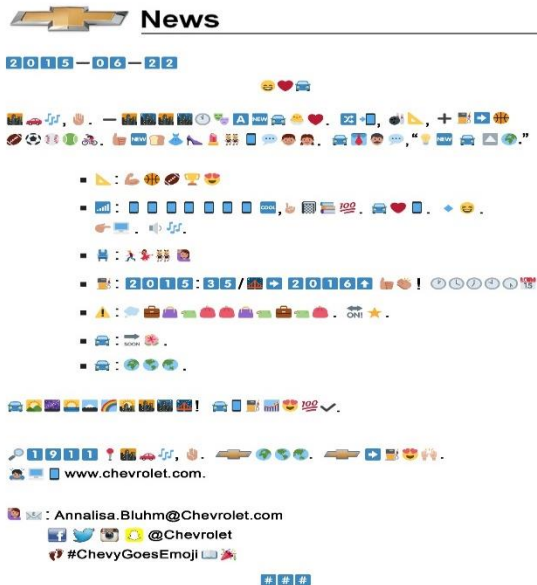
Having found the answer to clarity and brevity of expression, companies have been using signs as means of communication for a long time. The results are always fascinating when the right appeal is mediated through the right sign, so that the right target audience is reached.

One such example of brevity through the use of emojis is the Mercedes-Benz India Twitter post for the win of Nico Rosberg in Bahrain. Through the representative function, two emojis give further understanding of the text. The tweet reveals a chequered flag (Figure 2), which is waved at the finish line of Formula 1 and the flag of Bahrain. The message itself is typical for the spirit of Twitter and reads “Cheers @nico rosberg and @MercedesAMGF1 on the incredible finish at the #BahrainGP emojis 1 and 2 #BestKeepWinning”. The advertising title reads “Good seasons start with good beginnings” and continues with “congrats Nico Rosberg on the fantastic win”.



Mercedes-Benz India Twitter post (Figure 2).

Emojis are a great means of communication, especially when smartphones are the mediators. This is why these pictographs are extremely popular with millennials, since they tend to use more mobiles as a communication device more than the desktop computer. Due to the desire to reach younger audiences, companies have started to use emojis as means of communication more and more. Some of them go as far as crowding the entire message with emoji icons. Such one example is the Chevrolet Cruze 2016 launch press release (figure 3).



Chevrolet Cruze 2016 launch press release (Figure 3).

It was intended to be a puzzle and make their audience interested into solving the riddle, i.e. decoding the message. In semiotic terms this is a perfect example of redundancy, oversaturating the space with signs. This abundance of signs may also be interpreted as Chevrolet having so many and diverse services and products to offer. Later, the decoded message was presented to the public. Although the efforts of the company might be interpreted as futile, they show a growing interest in the emoji marketing communication.

Emojis not only let us express our feelings or ideas with less effort, they have made their way into pizza delivery and made the ordering much more fun and easy. In 2015 Domino's allowed customers to order pizza by simply tweeting



Pizza slice emoji (Figure 4).

First the user had to his Twitter handle in Domino's Easy Order System and then specify the topping preferences, payment information, and so on. After the emoji tweet, Domino's would send a direct message to confirm his order.

This is a good example of involving communications, where users are involved, they have to do something in order to communicate. The whole experience is more interactive and interesting. This especially appeals to the younger audience. In this case the pizza slice consists of many smaller slices of pizza that form the bigger one.

Domino's went even further into connecting with their target audience by joining the idea of the life span and their product (figure 5). They have managed to build a continuum, an extension through which we express the different states of a sign, different signs of one and the same term (synonyms) or signs as transition between opposite terms. The continuum is life itself. The

message conveyed is that people change but the communicated product stays the same. And it is always by our side.



Lifespan Domino's emoji (Figure 5).

Some companies are so driven to have an emoji icon that they file a petition to ask the Unicode Consortium (a non-profit organization devoted to developing, maintaining and promoting software internationalization standards and data) to introduce an emoji. Taco Bell's petition read "America wants a Taco emoji". Thus, using the nationality appeal (in advertising the appeal is the major driver that makes consumers choose a specific merchandise) their campaign reaped success and now consumers can enjoy a tasty Taco just with the click of the Taco emoji (figure 6).



The Taco emoji icon (Figure 6).



Other top brands followed the example and released their own custom emojis. Burger King created its own Chicken Fries emojis (figure 7) to celebrate its offerings. From semiotic standpoint, it shows the diversity of chicken or rather customer emotions that the tasty food brings up. Whenever a customer eats the delicious fries he would fall in love, cry with tears of joy, be cool, find his soul mate, become a sports fan, etc.



Chicken Fries emojis (Figure 7).

Bud Light used Americans' patriotism to further connect with their target audience on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2014 (figure 8). The company posted on twitter the iconic signs of celebration, national pride and the advertised drink. Thus, the American flag is once more created by the used iconic signs, but this time instead of white stripes we have white beer froth. This communication is an excellent example of real-time engagement. It was retweeted more than 140 000 times.



Bud Light's tweet (Figure 8).

### **5. Emotional impact of emoji usage**

“The use of emoticons in literary criticism has numerous advantages. As the days of critical wine and roses dwindle down to a precious few, critical emoticons provide a cheap and easy (substitute if you must, quick and dirty) means for streamlining critical commentary. This economical expression and delivery of emotional judgment allows us critics to finally dare to say what we really mean in contexts hitherto dominated by indirection and obfuscation.” (Bloom, 2010). Since emoticons have long ago found their way into literature critique one can rest assured that emojis have done so in lives of ordinary people as well.

A recent study conducted in the public and private work and educational institutes of Rawalpindi Islamabad, reveals the impact of emojis on people’s lives. A questionnaire pertaining to psychological dependence related to the usage of emojis was designed. Percentage response of the participants to the questionnaire was compared. Chi square test was applied to analyze the association of time, gender, and age to the participants' response.

Results show that “ninety percent of the participants rated emoji message more meaningful as compared to traditional texting. Forty-two percent considered emojis as strong, 17.5% as a very strong measure for emotion expression. Reflecting the psycho emotional dependency on emojis, 46% reported moderate, 21% strong and 18.5 very strong effects of mere presence or absence of emojis in digital messages. On missing an expected emoji from a sender, 47% claimed to suffer moderate level of negative mood effects while 6% reported very strong level of negative effect. Most of assessed responses in the study were independent of age, time spent on digital messaging and gender influence.” (Zareen, et. al., 2016, p. 257). The conclusion was that “Digital emojis can render adverse psycho emotional effects on the users.” (Zareen, et. al., 2016, p. 258).

### **6. Emojis in integrated marketing communications**

So far we have studied through visual examples the communication through emojis in messaging and social networks. However, this is not the only medium where emojis play a vital role for communication.

In recent years we have seen a rise in animation based children’s movies and this is no coincidence. Our little precious ones play an important part when it comes to spending the family budget. “Although the kinds of products marketed to children have remained much the same, the buying power of children and adolescents has increased exponentially over time. The affluence

of today's children and adolescents has made youth a market eminently worthy of pursuit by businesses. Youths now have influence over billions of dollars in spending each year." (Calvert, 2008, p. 206).

Late July 2017 saw the release of *The Emoji Movie* (Figure 9). The animation was presented by Columbia Pictures in association with LStar Capital and Sony Pictures Animation.



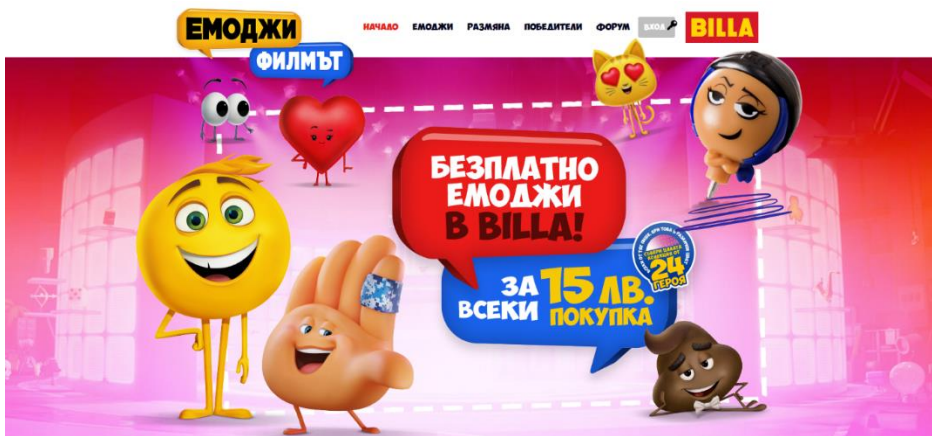
The Emoji movie poster (Figure 9).

It is the first animation movie where emojis conquer the wide screen. Basically it is a story of a multi-emotional emoji, called Gene, who sets out on a journey to become a normal emoji. For the first time in history emojis convey not only single human emotions but personify humans. Personification is a figure of style and plays an important role in semiotics. It is a special type of metaphor where human characteristics are attributed to animals, natural phenomena or objects. Thus, the otherwise static pictograms become alive.

Although, according to user and critics reviews it was not an emanation of success (it received only 2.7 user rating in IMDB), the movie triggered the so called avalanche effect in terms of marketing communications. This certainly is not the first or would not be the last movie for successful toy marketing.

The following case study involves this article's author home country Bulgaria. It is an example of Integrated Marketing Communications, since it involves Advertising, Public Relations and Sales Promotion.

The organizer of the campaign was Billa Bulgaria Ltd. in cooperation with UNGA B.V. (a Netherlands based company that produces soft toys, dolls, puppets, games, electric, electronic and for computers, etc.). The campaign (figure 10) was organized and conducted in all Billa supermarkets on the territory of Bulgaria. Initially the duration was from 07.09.2017 till 04.10.2017 but it was soon prolonged till 11.10.2017 or until depletion of all figures or figure bags.



Billa supermarket campaign (Figure 10).

The mechanism of the campaign is as follows:

1. For each fifteen leva that a customer has spent in purchasing he would receive one emoji toy figure from The Emoji Movie; he would receive two figures for having purchased products for over thirty leva and so forth.
2. For each emoji bag purchased, which was worth three leva, a customer would receive one emoji figure, for two bags he would receive two figures and so forth.
3. For purchases over fifteen leva and a purchased emoji bag the customer would receive two emoji figures, for purchases over fifteen leva and two purchased emoji bags, the customer would receive three emoji figures and so forth.

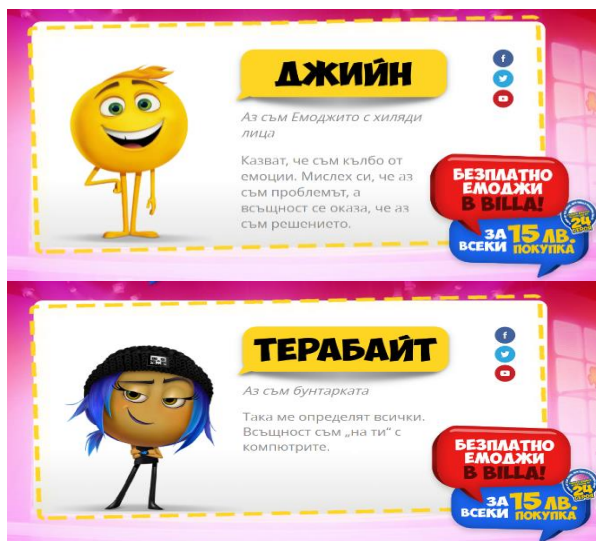
The collection of emoji toy figures consists of twenty four in number personifying the different characters from the movie (figure 11). There was a

mini pen inserted in the plastic toy figures and each figure could write in a different colour.



Billa supermarket campaign (Figure 11).

Each emoji character was described in a different webpage, so that consumer engagement would become higher (figure 12, 13).



Billa supermarket campaign (Figures 12 and 13).

A study found a causal relationship between children’s viewing television and their pestering parents in groceries stores (McDermott, 2006, pp. 513-539). The term “pester power” plays a key role here. It is the ability of children to constantly nag their parents about something they want until they receive it. It would seem only obvious that marketers have since long been aware of this specific child trait and would take advantage whenever possible. In the case of the Billa campaign we are able to observe a sales promotion campaign – the more parents purchase, the more emoji toy figures they would receive and the happier their children would be. Of course, the figures are not simply some plastic toys but rather means of becoming an artist, since they are mini pens, as well.

If a child has not been able to collect all twenty four toy figures, Billa would come to the rescue with an interactive outdoor campaign. The supermarket organized emoji exchange dates for all those who wished to exchange their toy figures with someone else’s (figure 14).



Billa exchange market (Figure 14).

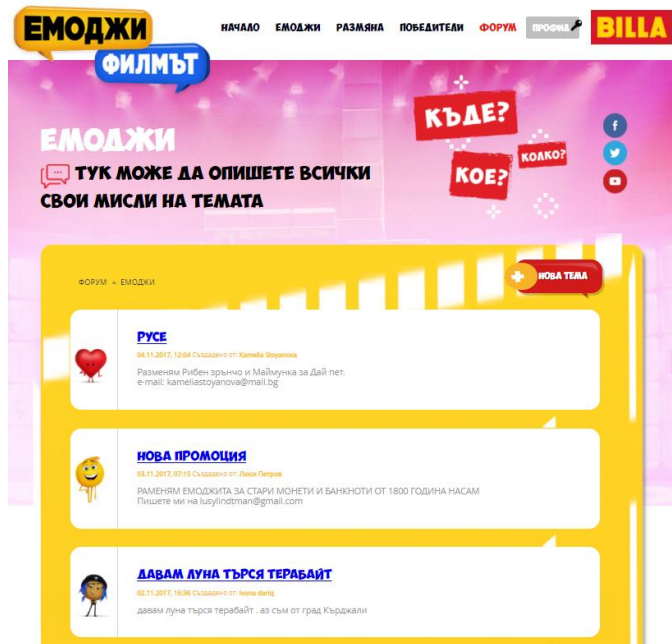
In addition everyone interested had to create a personal profile in the specified part of the website (figure 15).



Billa emoji sticker market (Figure 15).

After that he would need to fill in those emojis that he had and those that he was looking for. Of course, the campaign was connected with the social networks (Facebook, Twitter and Youtube). After the emojis have been marked the customer could attend the exchange event and seek his missing figures. Billa organized these events at some of its car parking spaces throughout Bulgaria. This special event is part of the PR communications and thus the third communication in Billa's IMC campaign. At the event there were many other surprises – music, dancing, playing, making new friends, taking pictures with their favourite emoji, etc. All children's favourite activities. All designed for transforming them and their parents into Billa's loyal customers.

Some customers event went as far as trading emojis for valuable coins and banknotes from 19 century (figure 16). This is visible in Billa's fan social webpage.








Billa supermarket emoji social page (Figure 16).

The process would spread even to Bulgaria's number one free announcement website OLX. It offers most various products for sale and purchase. So, there people would trade or even sell their emojis or emoji collections (figure 17). Some emoji collections would be sold for

approximately 50 euros. This is an example of viral communication – one where customers would get involved into sharing the communication for free until it goes viral, i.e. spreads to other users as a virus would spread.

Намерени 135 обяви  
Твоята обява най-горе в списъка Виж как да промотираш

	<b>Емоджи</b> Играчки » Други	5 лв.
	<b>Висулка, обичи, чокър Емоджи, емотиконче</b> Бижутерия » Кошетица, санджирки и медальони	0.60 лв.
	<b>Емоджи-замяна</b> Играчки » Образователи, занимателни играчки	Безплатно
	<b>Плюшени Емоджи / Emojis</b> Играчки » Плюшени играчки	7 лв.
	<b>Емоджи - Две пълни колекции!!!</b> Антими и колекции » Детски колекции	90 лв.

OLX emoji webpage (Figure 17).

## 7. Conclusion

Emoji data and information analysis is not only reduced to analyzing users' text messages or a company's tweets. The usage of the emojis in marketing communications gives companies a new, unorthodox and more involving way of approaching their target audience. This paper reached its goal, i.e. proving that companies are actively using emojis in their communication with customers. The study analyzed in the last section shows how people react emotionally toward emoji communication. The case study of Billa supermarket's campaign reveals the integrated marketing approach. Understanding the role of emojis in our daily life and how they come to manifest themselves in integrated marketing communications is important to all who look for more creative and profitable communication.



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