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TO USE EMOJIS OR NOT 🤔

CNU TEXTING RESEARCH GAINS NATIONAL ATTENTION.

by [Kelli Caplan](#) | April 17, 2024*Read time: about 4 min*

A Christopher Newport alumna and dean have worked together to create a timely and novel study that answers the lingering question texters ask themselves: emoji or no emoji?

When you receive a text laden with emojis, should it be reciprocated with a message punctuated by the colorful mood-projecting icons? Do you meet a heart with a heart? Or do you instead rely solely on words to make your point?

According to the study, the answer is go with the emoji you want to be perceived in a positive light.

The research, conducted by Brooke Nixon, '22 [Information Science](#) and [Psychology](#), and Dr. Nicole Guajardo, Dean of the [College of Natural and Behavioral Sciences](#) and Professor of Psychology, reveals that texters who opt to match emoji for emoji in text dialogue are perceived as considerably more likable than those who choose to respond with text only.

It turns out there's a lot of psychology at play when it comes to text messaging. Nixon and Guajardo's study, published in the peer-reviewed Journal of Language and Social Psychology, is at the forefront of analyzing the social implications of digital communication and all of its different forms. It is believed to be the first deep dive into the subject, Guajardo said. "The study has caught a lot of attention," she said. "It's a very current topic."

The study's findings are rooted in the chameleon effect, the human tendency to mimic others during interactions. It comes into play during digital interactions when a text message recipient sends a text with an emoji and then the

recipient mimics the sender's behavior by sending an emoji back. By exchanging emojis, the texters develop a smiley face-to smiley face rapport, despite not being physically face to face.

"Our study results showed that senders of messages with mimicked linguistic styles were rated as significantly more likable than those of non-mimicked messages," Nixon said.

Emojis flying in both directions in the world of texting go a long way toward developing empathy toward one another and fostering a connection between the people communicating. By mimicking the conversational cues, texters come across as nicer humans.

The study was born out of Nixon's curiosity about how the huge amount of texting people do was affecting their communication and the potential it had for social collateral damage.

"As COVID evolved, I became particularly attentive to the potential ramifications of digital communication replacing face-to-face conversations," Nixon said. "I also noticed myself giving more attention to the way I read and replied to messages since they were often in place of in-person interactions. It got me interested in understanding how people may deploy traditionally in-person social cues, like mimicry, within digital settings."

Nixon approached Guajardo about her research proposal. The concept resonated with Guajardo, and they decided to embark on the study together.

"Publishing regularly is part of faculty life, but it is unique for an undergraduate student to be able to conduct a study and have it published," Guajardo said. "I am thankful for Brooke coming to me when she did. It created an opportunity for us to conduct interesting research. I attribute a lot of its success to her skill and perseverance."

Nixon did the research as a [Summer Scholar](#), which is a program unique to CNU that gives undergraduates the chance to live on campus for the summer and work with a faculty member on a research project.

"Summer Scholars played a huge role in fostering my research interests and allowed me to see what it's like to fully create, develop, and complete each stage of a research study," Nixon said.

"Dr. Guajardo and I spent the summer creating the stimuli, collecting data, analyzing the findings, and beginning to write the manuscript. We continued refining it through my senior year and it was accepted for publication a few months after I graduated."

Nixon never expected to do research as an underclassman. However, the opportunity developed into a key component of her CNU experience, and helped advance her career and academic trajectory.

Nixon, now a graduate student at Wake Forest University, will graduate this spring with a master's degree in experimental psychology and then begin working as an analyst for the U.S. Department of Justice.

"I describe getting involved in research as a 'happy accident.' When I came to CNU, I had no background or interest in it, but thanks to Dr. Guajardo's mentorship and CNU's support of undergraduate research programs, I discovered new interests and questions I never knew I had," she said. "Aside from the ability to pursue interesting questions, it has taught me strong analytical and critical thinking skills, how to pick out and follow interesting patterns in data, and the ability to communicate my ideas to others. All of these have benefitted me outside of the classroom just as much as they have inside of it."

For the project, Nixon and Guajardo designed a series of fictitious text message screenshots between two senders. Half of them featured a mimicked linguistic cue, such as person A sending an emoji in their message and Person B replying also using an emoji. The other half were opposing, meaning Person A sent a message with an exclamation point at the end, but Person B responded without one.

"Upon viewing each screenshot, participants rated how likable Person B (the one replying) was. They also completed an empathy measure. We then analyzed if the senders of mimicked messages were rated as more likable than those sending the non-mimicked and if the empathy level of the participant played a role in how they rated the message senders," Nixon said.

Likability soared when the recipient shot back a message that mimicked the communication tools, like an emoji, used in the original text. Empathetic individuals also were more likely to rate those who mimicked as more likable.

“There was a correlation,” Nixon said.

The study participants viewed conversations between two strangers.

“This means the participant did not know the people sending the messages or have any stake in their conversation, yet the presence or absence of mimicry in the message was so salient that there was still a meaningful difference in how likable they were perceived to be,” Nixon said.

Mimicry in communication often happens during face-to-face conversations, such as when someone gestures with their hands a lot and then the person to whom they are speaking does the same thing.

The takeaway from the study is that the impact of mimicry is just as significant during digital conversations.

“This research underscores the impact of seemingly minor digital behaviors on social perceptions and connections and highlights the importance of understanding digital communication nuances in our increasingly online world,” Nixon said. “Though digital interaction may not fully replicate the nuances of in-person connections, leveraging insights from psychology can result in technology that more closely mimics human-like interactions and helps us feel closer to those we are communicating with.

“Humans are social beings, and whether sending emojis or talking face-to-face, we want to feel connected to others,” she said.
