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EXPERT COMMENT: Emoji are becoming more inclusive, but not necessarily more representative

Selina Jeanne Sutton, PhD Researcher at Northumbria University, explores the latest emoji list released this year, and the social and cultural impact of their usage.

At least 230 new emoji, when different skin tones and genders are included, are due to be released this year. That's a leap on 2018 when only 157 emoji were added to the Unicode Standard – the code used to support emoji on different platforms.

In addition to a sloth, skunk, banjo, yo-yo, and waffles, this latest set represents another move towards more diverse, inclusive characters. Since 2015, when new skin tones were built into the Unicode, emoji have become more representative of their users. And now, 17 of the new emoji will represent people who experience disabilities, as well as items associated with disability – such as canes, wheelchairs and mechanical arms.

Gender neutral faces and figures are also included in this new version of the Unicode (although the disability related emoji only come in man and woman versions). And users will be able to maximally configure the “people holding hands” emoji with skin tone and gender options, allowing for couples of varying ethnicities that are same gender, mixed gender, or have one or both partners who identify as non-binary, to configure an emoji that is more representative of them.

An estimated 92% of the world’s online population use the characters. In addition to these emoji acknowledging and, hopefully, empowering people through a greater ability to represent one’s self, the inclusion of more diverse emoji is important in terms of communication. These new emoji can be used as a resource when discussing the topics they are associated with. The same can be said for any emoji, but how useful or effective are most emoji really? I can’t remember the last time I engaged in a text conversation about dinosaurs, and certainly not a conversation that required me to differentiate a T-Rex from a Diplodocus. And even if these conversations were happening regularly, how important are they to society? Surely our communicative resources should reflect the things that are important to us, before we even start to think about long extinct creatures. And yet, these animals were deemed important enough to be represented in emoji.

So does this apparent shift in Unicode’s approach indicate it is waking up to how emoji are used as a communicative tool, as well as the social and cultural implications of what they choose to include? Could it be that gone are the days where groups that felt overlooked by emoji had to set up petitions to argue their case?

But there’s a twist here. The accessibility emoji were proposed by international technology giant Apple. First, this raises the question as to whether emoji users and what they want is really being listened to by Unicode. Or whether the voices of powerful technology companies who have a seat at the Unicode table are prioritised.

Some may question why anyone would see this as a problem. Apple has done a good thing by campaigning on behalf of an underrepresented social group. And you can argue that it doesn't really matter who pushes for change to happen, as long as that change happens. However, representation is a sensitive topic, and in attempting to effectively represent a group of people, and the diversity within that group, a very fine line is being tread.

For example, many would argue the inclusion of the “deaf person/man/woman” emoji is wonderful. But the meaning of this emoji is communicated by the figure signing the word “deaf” in American Sign Language. It is currently thought that there are up to 300 different sign languages around the world today. I wonder to what degree Apple engaged the deaf and hard of hearing community in the design of this emoji? And, if it did, how biased towards the US that sample was? I am interested to see how deaf and hard of hearing communities that do not use American Sign Language will react to this emoji.

In fact, the discussions already beginning to emerge around these new emoji are reminiscent of those that were had in 2015 when the skin tone options were released. The point was raised that skin tone is not synonymous with ethnicity. What about eye, ear, lip, and nose shapes, and hair type? How representative can layering the “standard” emoji face with a skin tone be?

Similarly, how representative is an emoji of an American Sign Language user of the whole deaf and hard of hearing community? Furthermore, are people with disabilities that use emoji now somehow obliged to represent themselves in this way? And finally, will there be instances of these emoji being used in unintentionally offensive ways? Although, it must be noted that recent research suggests that the current diverse emoji are used positively.

This article was originally written for The Conversation. You can read it [here](#)

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