

Emoticons 'r' us

 By [Matt Rose](#)

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The smiley was the original. :-) The text symbol expressing approval, happiness, or humor was invented 30-odd years ago. It was used as a tool to avoid misunderstanding of text-based online communication within emails and online forums by ensuring that the writer meant his or her digital message to be a joke or ironic.

Considering the amount of instant messaging (IM) we do today, emoticons have 'exploded' and, whether used in Skype, BBM, MXit or WhatsApp, they have become a distinct style of expression and form a vital part of casual/digital vernacular punctuation.

Beyond words

A new app for Apple products called the *Emoji EmoTexts Emoticons: All-in-1 Text Messaging Tool 1.0* retails for US\$.99 and is available worldwide via the Apple app store. The tool produces more than 1800 unique animated emoticons, and seems to offer a level of communicating that is beyond words, literally.

I like to think of them as "neo-hieroglyphic glitter stamps", and they seem to be spreading... They will not be fading away anytime soon in our age of multimedia digital expression. They remain a central component of clear communication, not just for email, chat rooms, and instant messaging, but also increasingly within social networking lexicons.

What are the implications of these obscure little visages? A simple and direct form of communication that removes the need for words but serves to imbue messages with additional layers of meaning? Are they merely a superficial system or deceptively complex?

Growing mobile trend

How can we as marketers incorporate them into brand strategies? How can South Africa, as one of the digital 'lighthouses' of the African continent, capitalise on this growing mobile trend?

In Turkey, Pepsi-Cola ran a campaign to encourage consumers to express their emotions by "[Pepsi Emoticons](#)". Participation reached far beyond expectations, with almost 8.5 million active involvements .which has never been reached before in a text-and-win campaign in an emerging market like Turkey.

I would love to see brands in SA take ownership of a specific emoticon that becomes entrenched in the rich archaeology of internet pop-culture:

- How about a Wimpy Burger emoticon to denote a hunger/fun expression?
- A 'swishing' DHL emoticon, that signifies a fast delivery of something, could be used in a broader context as a metaphor within a completely unrelated topic.
- What about a Capitec Bank face/handshake that signifies a savvy business deal?
- Or a Viagra emoticon, anyone? *use your imagination*

South African context

In a South African context, wouldn't it be great to see Brand South Africa or South African Tourism develop an animated BBM/WhatsApp iconography that people could use cross-platform on any message that users wish to sign off with - a shiny animated Brand SA digital 'stamp' or digital watermark?

I see a tremendous opportunity for brands to entrench themselves in the symbolic vocabulary that is characterised by the growing emoticon trend. Especially as different platforms become more and more integrated.

Brands which can infiltrate a cross-platform IM ecosystem with an emoticon element that has mass appeal stand to be adopted for better (or perhaps worse), into a broader cultural communication space.

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ABOUT MATT ROSE

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