Student Use of Facebook Messenger in St Andrews: Cultural Symbolism, Language and Image

By Kristen Castro

I am sitting in my flat's lounge, at the large table across from two of my flat mates. The sunshine gleams in and out through the clouds and our large bay windows, reflecting off our computer screens as Ella stands up to close the drapes. This is a familiar scene in my flat: a few of us gathered around the wooden table that has become our designated shared space to do coursework whilst engaging each other socially every now and then. Julia begins to talk about how she needs to message someone about an upcoming event that she been promoting, and then complains at their response to her message with a "heart react".

Julia: *"I don't understand, why is he heart reacting this message? I'm just asking about extra tickets and it doesn't make sense. Why doesn't he just like it?"* (Julia shows table her phone), *"Look!"*
Ella: *"Yeah, I don't get that either, maybe he just wanted to respond quickly or mis-reacted?"*
Julia: *"Ugh, it's confusing when someone uses reacts in, like, the non-assumed way."*

This brief exchange displays the presence and existence of media ideologies and Messenger "react" etiquette. In St Andrews, the use of "reacts" has developed into a specific phenomenon and culture. "React" etiquette will be further analysed in this ethnography in the frame of media ideologies, culture, and assumed perceptions of its use. Beyond the local realm of St Andrews social media and communication applications have become an integrated part of the contemporary Western world. Constant online presence and contact have become essential, and my informants reported that a person is expected to always be accessible through online platforms and apps. This development and expansion of online and virtual worlds have led the anthropological pursuit into the digital realm. Dalsgard (2016) remarks, in consideration of Boyd (2006), Gershon (2010) and Miller (2011), that "'Scholars theorising about social media have convincingly argued that online sites are by now so integrated into many people's everyday lives that it makes little sense to maintain a clear-cut distinction between online and offline'" (Dalsgard, 2016: 96). The presence of online sites and virtual worlds in people's everyday lives and combining virtual and offline worlds is thereby essential to digital anthropologists. Significant attention has been drawn towards Facebook and its realm of kinship and social interactions through online profiles and presences. n other words, "'Facebook is to most users 'simply' a part of their lives, which sets a specific framework for interaction through the means of communication embedded in the template (chat and messages; posting

on walls …)"(Dalsgard, 2016: 98). In this way, Facebook has become an integral part of everyday interactions and is a source of social and cultural information for an individual or group. With that being said, not much research has been conducted on Facebook Messenger, the complimentary instant messaging platform. Messenger was launched in August of 2011 as an add-on, yet separate platform that allowed one to one communication to groups and friends (Zhang, 2011), and Messenger reactions or more commonly known as "reacts" was launched in March of 2017 and so comprises a relatively recent phenomenon (Moxon, 2017).

Methodology

I conducted my fieldwork through a combination of participant observation in group chats, in-person group interviews and group and individual interviews conducted online over Facebook Messenger itself. I used my existing social connections and inclusion in various group chats to investigate the use of reacts within Messenger. My in-person interviews usually began as conversations surrounding messages people received and expanded into a consideration of personal use of reacts. Participant observation was conducted mostly by examining conversations in a social group chat of the University Trampoline and Gymnastics Club, which includeds twenty-nine members at the time of research. I further used my flat group chat to evaluate the usage of reacts and possible semantics behind them. My online interviews were much more scripted and direct, as I asked for permission to interview and had to prompt responses by direct questions on personal usage and beliefs about reacts. The use of participant observation, combined with directed interviews has thus allowed for, a more holistic approach to the use of "reacts".

Why Messenger?

Personal communication platforms have continuously grown and expanded across the globe. The adoption of these new communication technologies does not follow a linear sequence, as different countries uptake different communication channels following different routes (Broadbent, 2012: 127). Through my observations, it was apparent that Facebook Messenger had become an essential form of communication among students at St Andrews. As St Andrews is a highly international community, Messenger allows for easy communication as it only requires a Facebook account and internet connection to operate, rather than dealing with the effort of obtaining someone's actual phone number and encountering possible barriers that result from international phone courier charges. To message someone on Facebook, you either need to be friends with them , or they must accept your message request. This entails that pre-existing relationships typically need to exist in order to comfortably communicate with someone ver Messenger. In this way, Messenger lies within the previous social structures of Facebook and is a further expansion into the personal and individual online world. One of my flat mates remarked that "'I never use Facebook Messenger at home [USA], or I'll use it to talk to people

from Uni. When I'm here, Messenger is my primary form of communication."' It is evident that this easily accessible platform has garnered appeal among St Andrews students, becoming an essential part of the social and cultural life of St Andrews. The use of reacts drew my immediate interest when considering the specific culture and social interactions on Messenger. Similar to emojis, reacts are described by Facebook as: 'the ability to react to an individual message with a specific emotion, quickly showing acknowledgement or expressing how you feel in a lightweight way. For example, if someone messages a photo of their cute pet, you could respond with the love reaction' (Moxon, 2017). I have found that reacts are omnipresent in Messenger chats in my personal usage and observations. They have become a completely distinct way to communicate and are used in a way that interplays with text communication. Below is an image of the possible reacts to images or messages sent within Messenger, to provide context and visual aid:

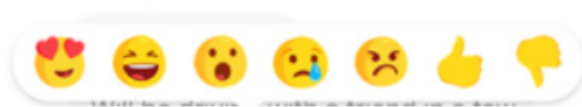From left to right, each one is typically referred to as a "'heart react"', "'laugh react"',

Figure A: Image of "reacts" options

"'wow react"', "'sad react"', "'thumbs up"' or "'like"', and "'thumbs down"' or "'down react"'. by students within St Andrews. The last symbol, dislike, is rarely ever used The "reacts" are described within their emotional context as they are often used in this frame. "Reacts" are similar to emojis in

their appearance, and Danesi (2017) notes that "'emoji writing allows for an easy way to add emotional tones, from happiness and laughter, to irony and critique, to messages". Reacts may appear similar to emojis yet their usage is completely different, as they are only used to react to one specific message. Emojis can be sent along with text or alone, while reacts are only able to be used to comment/respond on a sent image or message. Ilana Gershon reasons that "'just as people's ideas about language and how language functions shape the ways they speak, people's ideas about different communicative media and how different media function shape the ways they use these media (2010: 290). Media ideologies are culturally specific, and the perceived intended function of reacts is crucial to consider within this frame, as they are a relatively new method of communication and interaction. "The ways in which reacts " operate in specific cultural and media forms will now be investigated in their sense within student culture in St Andrews.

Student Use of "Reacts"

The correct way to use a "react" continues to be debated. With some slight prompting, I realized during a conversation with my flatmate that I had come across the scenario I was looking for (excerpt on page 74). Ella's response to her use of an angry "react" displays the layers of sarcasm and humour that can be entangled withinto a single "react." The "reacts" are facial expressions that exist to convey one's reaction to a message or image. Similar to the emoji in that they can convey basic emotions, reacts can seem like a further

So, what is the assumed way for "reacts"?

Ella: *ponders for a second and says: '"Well, I'm not gonna use a dislike react because it's not the same as a sad or angry react. I wouldn't use a react to actually express an emotion. The down react is actually more of an emotion and actually angry, comparatively to the angry react.'."*

Julia: *"Yeah, a down react is much more harsh."*
Then what would you use and angry "react" for?

Ella: *"If it was someone roasting me, so if I was [air quotes] 'angry' but not actually angry. I find that it's used more in group chats." (roasting is equivalent to teasing or playful insult in most scenarios).*

function that communicates feelings of sadness, anger, or happiness. However, Ella's consideration that she would never use a react to actually suggest her actual emotions implies a wider and more complex social meaning behind "reacts". So then, how should "reacts" be defined? As an image? As a cultural symbol? Or even as its own language? "Reacts" are versatile in their usages and reflect the individual's notions and intentions while contributing to the culture established within the circle of their usage. A "react" may even, to an extent, fall into all three categories. The image is a product of a given medium, yet is also a product of ourselves, "'for we generate images of our own (dreams, imaginings, personal perceptions) that we play out against the other images in the visual world". (Belting, 2011: 2). The "react" is most definitely a product of "ourselves," as the given image of the "react" is taken and often ascribed more meaning than is assumed. In a group interview I conducted on Messenger, I began:

In this interaction, it was once again agreed upon that a thumbs up or thumbs down "react" is assumed as being more serious and straight-forward, yet sad and angry "reacts" often causes some confusion.

Facial "reacts" are much more debated in their meaning, yet there is still a base cultural assumption surrounding their use. Angry "reacts" as being "'silly,'" or for comedic use, is often assumed among student use of Messenger, and yet if used in a different cultural setting may upset someone or not be interpreted in the "'correct'" intended way. However, a thumbs up is straight forward and much more serious: "Reacts, in this sense," exist as images that often straddle the boundary between mental and physical existence (Belting, 2011:2). Belting goes further
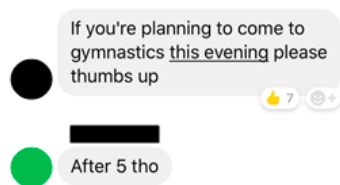

Figure B: Thumbs up use in Trampoline group chat

In what capacity do you think the use of 'reacts' is showing what you're actually meaning to say?

Sophie: *'hmm… think it depends on the react, like a thumbs up or thumbs down is quite good at showing what I'm actually meaning to say cause it's just a yeah cool thanks or no I don't like… but then I use angry reacts as a joke?'*

Iona: *'Yeah, like it's hard to tell whether people are being sarcastic through them or not. T e others seem to be used more seriously.'*

Gavin: *'I use the sad react to be sad more often than I use it to be silly… I would be more serious with my reacts if there were more applicable ones.'*

to note that images "'are produced and transmitted by the media current in their own times. The interplay between image and technology, old and new, constitutes a symbolic act. The response, the audience's perception of the image, is also a symbolic act" (2011:15). "Reacts therefore" exist as a symbolic act through their existence as an image and assigned value.

"Reacts" are furthermore most often used in group chats. Miller states that "'Facebook is a virtual place where you discover who you are by seeing a visible objectification of yourself'" (2011:179).' This visual objectification of yourself is continued or transferred from Facebook into the use of Messenger, especially in group chats, where use of "reacts" makes one's presence known yet not obnoxious. Student group chat use usually exists as social use, flat group chat use, or for more "'professional'" committee or society use. My flat group chat is a mix of serious toned things about emailing our agency and fixing flat problems as well as operating as a social chat. A few weeks ago, the flat Wi-Fi was not working, and so this discussion ensued in the group chat:

In this case, the sad "reacts" are being used to express feelings of annoyance and sadness at the fact that the Wi-Fi was not working, and when the box indicates that it is fine happy emotion is expressed , without any use of words. No one replies that they are upset by this, but this is automatically assumed in the sad "react" response. This automatic cultural assumption, to some extent, can classify the usage of "reacts" as a language. Language acts as a cultural function and is considered a "'purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols'" (Sapir, 1970:8). It should be noted, however, that the only possible symbols to use within "reacts" are not voluntarily produced but given as an option. This has led to a culture within St Andrews of assigning voluntary meaning to "reacts", in an attempt to create a common and intelligible language. In this way, "reacts" act as symbols with intrinsic meaning. Although seven simple "reacts" hardly composes the true complexities and possibilities of a full language, "reacts" act within the frame of language and transmit cultural and semantic value. Therefore, I would like to recognize "reacts" as containing elements of language, as a sort of *quasi-language* not yet recognizable as a completely constructed language. It should be further noted that language cannot exist apart from culture (Sapir, 1970:207). Language and culture act tindependently yet give each other meaning and value within society. Essential to the word "culture " is the idea of values revered as normative action (Miller, 2011:186). There is an expectation that users should already be aware of various codes of language as the structure of Facebook creates normativity (Miller, 2011:186). Messenger is thus a
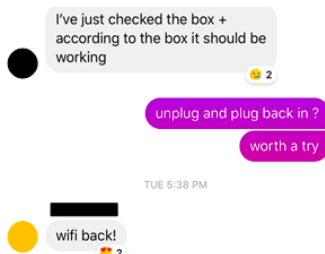

Figure C: Flat group chat "react" use

separate yet fundamental aspect of current Facebook use. It cannot be completely separated from the original or "'public'" Facebook, as Messenger was born from it and has brought previously established cultural normativity while establishing new norms. "Reacts" have therefore become a cultural icon themselves:

The use of "'saddest of reacts'" implies the symbolism and media assumptions behind "reacts", while signifying its further
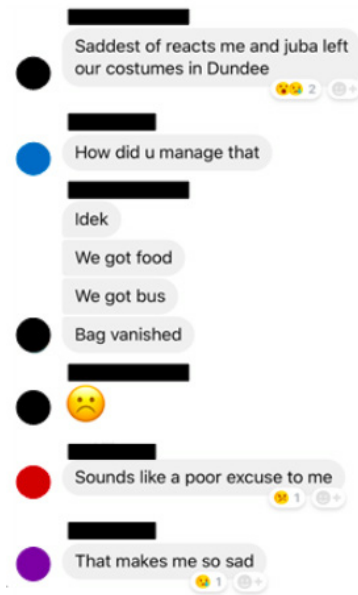

Figure D: Trampoline group chat use of "reacts"

development and evolvement into a cultural symbol. This also implies a bleeding of the online world into offline language, and within St Andrews, I have heard "'saddest of reacts'" or "'sad reacts only'" used in face to face conversation. The use of an "angry"

react when someone is joking and as a response to the joke is also present. The cultural assumption of a sad "react" and its reference within a group setting to communicate a specific meaning separate from simply stating an emotion signifies the complexity of "reacts" as cultural symbols and as a quasi-language. It is noted that "'the most astonishing feature of digital culture is not this speed of technical innovation but rather the speed by which society takes all of these for granted and creates normative conditions for their use'" (Miller and Horst, 2012: 28). The speed of this normativity is reflected in the quick uptake of "reacts" as cultural symbols, an expansion of their original purpose. "Reacts" exist as an image, a cultural symbol and in the frame of language. Their interpretations and semantics are not universal, yet there is an assumed cultural and symbolic value assigned to "reacts" within their student use in St Andrews.

It should be recognized that this ethnography is limited in its scope and has only involved members within my own social circle and those with whom I have personal relations. There may be differences with "react" use within students at St Andrews. This study is also only focused on students and their formation of the culture around "reacts", and it cannot be applied to a larger group. My own preconceived notions of normativity surrounding the usage of "reacts" should also be recognized as I am a member of the group I studied, and my preconceived notions may have affected outsider's would not. However, my already accessible relations and "'native-ness'"

can also be seen as beneficial to already situating me within the social circles who make reacts and messenger a part of their daily interactions at St Andrews.

Conclusion

Digital anthropology has grown as a sub-discipline within social anthropology, and has been recognized that our online and digital life reveals much about the cultural and social self, and that "'digital anthropology will be insightful to the degree that it reveals the mediated and framed nature of the non-digital world'" (Miller and Horst, 2012). The mediated and framed nature of the non-digital world is revealed in the normativity and culture established in the digital world. The use of Facebook Messenger "reacts" indicates the rapid development of media and online culture through communication and social platforms. "Reacts" contain cultural assumptions of meaning that is not directly obvious, creating the "react" as a cultural symbol and form of language or "quasi-language". Their use in group chats is particularly relevant as group chats reveal their assumed culture and assigned value in a group or collective setting. "Reacts" are crucial to the understanding of digital culture and how it forms. Facebook reactions were only released two years ago. The intricate cultural meanings behind them that have eveloped so rapidly attempt at staying relevant within a constantly changing and emerging digital world. It is suggested by Miller and Horst (2011) that the key to digital anthropology, and even possibly to the future of anthropology itself, is the study of how things become rapidly mundane. The constant reveal and development of new social digital platforms allows the constant cultural development and cultural re-evaluation within these updated platforms or opens the possibility of switching to new ones, and creating new cultures by comparison, as seen in Gershon (2011). "Reacts" have thus manifested into cultural symbols and actants of language in their use by students in St Andrews. The possibilities of social anthropology to further examine "react" use globally or to consider the reactions present in the extremely popular iMessage, leaves consideration and investigation of reaction use within communication platforms with an incredibly large potential.

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