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How "Male Default" Has Impeded Gender Equality through the Emojis

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Abstract: Living in a digital age, people conduct the majority of their communication online. Online communication is not only an outlet for expression but a vessel for different ways of expression. One such tool for expression is emojis. However, this type of online communication does not exclude the fact there is default male bias that before 2016 excluded women. The paper seeks to help readers understand the male bias and how it has impacted internet users, especially women. This paper investigates gender inequality in the form of digital communication. This research was conducted through reading other research papers and information regarding the history of emoji communication and making a recommendation for the next steps by compiling all existing data for emojis. It can be concluded that the idea of "male default" has been demonstrated in the design of emoji expression and has impeded the advancement of gender equality.

Keywords: emojis, digital communication, default male bias

1. Introduction

There is an "inherent male bias" that exists in language, the workplace, healthcare, and the economy [1]. This male bias exists because we live in a world designed for men, which are assumed to represent all people. This paper will first examine the idea of the "male default" and how it influences digital culture, particularly emoji expression which is currently the fastest growing language. Then, this paper will explain how emoji sexism impacts women in their daily communication with others. The process of writing this paper was through analyzing and comparing existing information and data. The findings of this paper will help readers understand how bias exists not only in personal communications but online communication in an age where the internet has become the center of exchanges.

2. The Male Default

The primary definition of "male defaults" is when characteristics linked with the male gender are considered as the model in certain cultural contexts [2]. The perspective of the male default can also be understood through Androcentrism, a tendency to make men's needs, priorities, and values the main focus of society [3]. A simple example of Androcentrism is in language how male terms are used to portray every person [3] and using men's physical bodies to assess symptoms of illness and medical dosing [4]. An illustration of Androcentrism in a language is in gender-inflected languages

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(French Spanish, and German). The German word used to refer to a lawyer is Anwalt, but the literal translation of the German word is male lawyer [1]. The word itself is used as a default to refer to both men and women. Other languages such as English are not gendered; however, it is also influenced by the male default [1]. The image that the general public often associates with athletes or professors is still male, even though there is no word to refer to default word to refer to athletes or professors. Furthermore, there are also practical examples of the male default in labels and advertising. In toys, the male version is often used as the default while the female version is highlighted specifically for girls. In sports, the same language is practiced as Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN) still separates women's basketball from collegiate basketball [5]. These are just a few of the examples in society that establishes the male default and uses women as the exception.

3. The Language of Emojis

Emojis have gained popularity since their debut on Japanese cell phones in the late 90s. Furthermore, they have integrated into people's daily online communications. Adopted by 90% of the world's online population, the language of Emojis is the world's "fastest growing language". However, until 2016, the emojis were entirely male. This is largely due to the male-dominated culture in the technology industry that created this inherent bias. The emojis are chosen by a group of Silicon Valley-based organizations, "The Unicode Consortium". Users saw a frequently observed pattern where emoji characters in active or professional roles were shown as men and those in passive or frivolous roles were portrayed as women, whether this was intended or not. [6]. The Unicode did not specify the gender for emoji characters but the gender-neutral terms were interpreted as male.

In 2014, the Great Emoji Politicization movement began. It started with emojis representing food, flags, and families, where there was no traditional African cuisine represented, no Palestinian flag while the Israeli flag existed, and no icons for same-sex parents or single-parent family units. The list goes on. The language lacked representations of the minorities— "women with jobs" or "people of color". Yet, it had developed to be an essential language of the digital era. All in all, the purpose of emojis is not just having the appropriate icon to show what one had for lunch or what mood one is currently in, but more importantly, having an acknowledgment of one's culture and identity.

4. Emoji Sexism and the Impact on Women

Women already face challenges in society due to male defaults. A simple analogy can be made with people with disabilities. Before the Americans with Disabilities Act, male defaults are viewed analogously to "heavy doors, or stairs and curbs without ramps." These architectural features may have seemed like the standard, but they limit access to and usage of facilities by people with disabilities. Similar to the way these buildings impeded the disabled, many women's entry and success are hindered by masculine defaults. Simone de Beauvoir stated that, while the terms, masculine and feminine, are used symmetrically on legal papers, in actual practice, however, men represent both the positive and the neutral— "the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles." [7].

Emojis are an important and central part of communication and especially for the female demographic. Of the 92% of online consumers that use emojis, 78% of women are frequent emoji users; that of men is 60%. Given women use emojis more often in online environments, it makes female representation more important. In fact, lack of representation is often internalized. On March 2, 2016, the female facing consumer product company, Always, released an article, noting that 54% of girls surveyed found feminine emojis are stereotypical, and 75% of them would like to see more progressively portrayed female emojis. In addition, the article points out, "As the first truly global

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language, emojis are relied upon in daily social communication, especially among girls, who send over a billion emojis every day”.

The article discusses the significance of the message that emojis sends as a form of non-verbal communication. While people may not directly observe the negative impact of emojis on women, the non-verbal message the emoji convey is real. When a 12-year-old girl can’t find a female athlete’s emoji, she made a choice that boys of her age don’t need to make. The potential thinking process of settling for a male athlete emoji could give her the connotation that being an athlete isn’t a choice girls would have. There is a female gymnast in the latest iteration, and yet no male counterpart. And as we all know, there are significant gender differences in gymnastics. The most apparent choice for a female athlete seems to be a girl performing a cartwheel rather than an image that truly represents inclusivity. In fact, one study attempts to find a considerable difference in emoji usage between female and male users. The finding is that the difference is sizeable not just statistically, but also enough for a machine learning algorithm to correctly identify a user’s gender based on the emojis they used in their chat messages [8].

5. Future Steps Regarding Biased Communication Tools

Currently, there are changes to the emoji culture. In the last several years, there are emojis representing people with disabilities, gender-inclusive couples, gender-neutral individuals and etc. However, there is still room for improvement. The first consideration is whether there is equal representation for male and female members. Currently, there is still shortcomings in these areas. A proposal is made in this area to have equal representation in the current emojis.

Emoji Type:	Female	Male	Gender Fluid/Inclusive
Royalty			✗
Pregnancy		✗	✗
Dancing			✗
Levitating in business suit	✗		✗
Chinese Character	✗		✗
Skier	✗		✗
Snowboarder	✗		✗
Jockey/ Horse racer	✗		✗

Figure 1: Examples of certain emojis that demonstrate “male default”.

As it can be seen from this chart, emojis still have an overwhelmingly male construction. Furthermore, it is also based on a gender binary construction which exclusive gender inclusive emojis.

6. Conclusion

This paper investigates gender inequality in the form of digital communication. The idea of "male default" has been demonstrated in the design of emoji expressions and has impeded the advancement of gender equality. Emojis indeed have become more inclusive since the Great Emoji Politicization

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movement began in 2014. Yet there is still room for improvement due to the male-dominated culture in the technology industry and the "inherent male bias" that male represents all people. Nevertheless, the discussion of biased emojis communication in this paper is still stuck on preliminary analysis. Also, there are many other forms of communication in the digital world that contains "male default". For the next step, the paper could investigate and compare more biased communication forms to dive deeper into the underlying causes of forming a male-dominated society from the perspectives of economics, history, culture, and politics. Moreover, the approaches and the related challenges of overcoming them to avoid incidents like biased emojis from happening could also be researched and examined.

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