

MY GRANDCHILDREN WOULD KNOW THAT... SENIORS INTERPRETING EMOTICONS

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Abstract. *The article is an attempt of presenting didactic experience related to workshops conducted with several groups of seniors in the frame of the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn (Poland) project. The main aim of the survey presented in this manuscript was to show University of Third Age students' interpretations of emoticons and to analyse forms of communication preferred by them. The data was collected through open-ended discussions and a few tasks farmed out to seniors during the workshops. These tasks were: i) choosing the form of communication (face-to-face or mediated by a mobile device), and ii) indicating emotions, attitudes or associations related to emoticons that had been handed out to them earlier. The analysis testifies that the researched Third Age University students definitely preferred traditional, analogue forms of communication. In their opinion, face-to-face interaction surpasses daily communication processes. Surprisingly, however they were good readers of emoticons, which they owed to their grandchildren, who were perceived by them as specialists in this area.*

Keywords: *communication-mediated communication, emoticons, emotions, seniors, Third Age University students.*

Introduction

The title of the article suggests that a reader will be involved in a story. This story begins in a lecture room where most academics gather didactic experiences. That specific one was worthy of noticing also in view of explorative purposes.

The research was conducted as a part of the project, granted aid from the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education. The title may be translated as *University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn opens knowledge gates for Universities of the Third Age*¹. There were 11 Universities of the Third Age (U3A) from Warmia and Mazury Province (northeastern Poland) involved in the project. Seniors participated in plenty of workshops and lectures prepared and delivered by University academics. Several Faculty of Social Sciences employees were asked to lecture seniors on relations' area. The presentation was divided into three parts. These were: intimate and partnership relations,

¹ See more at: <http://www.uwm.edu.pl/egazeta/uwm-wspiera-seniorow>

familyhood (grandchildren-grandparents relationships, specifically), and social interactions regarding new media and current, new forms of communication.

In this paper, the part related to the communication forms and new media is presented. The story is narrated in a manner that didactic threads intertwine with scientific explorations.

Local seniors – activities, foregoing research

Local Universities of the Third Age (U3A), especially those located in rural areas, have been a matter of concern of several researchers, representing the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn (UWM). For instance, K. Białobrzaska, C. Kurkowski, and M. Maciejewska observed that seniors, living in rural areas (Warmia and Mazury Province), presented upward tendencies of: taking actions on behalf of people in need, doing activities in seniors clubs, participating in U3A classes as a form of spending their free time, and finally opening-up for using new media and technologies (Białobrzaska, Kurkowski, & Maciejewska, 2017).

In addition, 43% of the researched seniors (aged 60-69) declared using the Internet. In their opinion, computer-mediated communication (CMC) offers them a possibility of maintaining contact with their relatives as well as access to information (Białobrzaska et al., 2017).

In contrast, A. Omelan, R. Podstawski, and M. Raczkowski who were interested in touristic activity of seniors (aged 60+), living in Warmia and Mazury Province, reported difficulties with contacting seniors by the Internet and other mobile devices (Omelan, Podstawski, & Raczkowski, 2017). This testifies that some of the seniors, living in rural areas, in the province, are representatives of digital immigrants (Prensky, 2001) or even that they experience a discrepancy between them and young people, conceptualized as digital divide (Lagacé, Charmarkeh, Laptante, & Tanguay, 2015).

Good practices in terms of working with seniors being residents of rural areas in the Province were presented by K. Białobrzaska, B. Głuszak, C. Kurkowski, & M. Maciejewska (2016). In respect of CMC and of using the Internet, seven interviews carried out by the researchers with chairpersons of different associations, U3As, and other non-governmental organisations were analysed. Only three of them did not include any information about developing ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) usage competencies for seniors. Four of them reported some activities undertaken in terms of having access to the information and communication technologies on behalf of seniors. These were, for example, organising periodically ICT workshops, running an internet café in a village clubhouse or extending and maintaining a computer network with the access to the Internet (Białobrzaska et al., 2016).

It is difficult to say explicitly to what extent local seniors are involved in using modern technology devices and CMC. However, it can surely be admitted that emoticons are a part of computer-mediated communication and have been used more commonly in recent years.

Eyes, nose, and mouth...

Computer-mediated communication literature and research overview

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is a subject to controversy among researchers. There is no common agreement on this issue. Results of research conducted at the end of the 20th century indicates that frequent usage of the Internet weakens interpersonal relationships (Nie, 2001) and leads to social isolation and depression (Kraut, Kiesler, Mukhopadhyay, Scherlis, & Patterson, 1998). Researchers observed also that it creates conditions for establishing anonymous and impersonal relations (Nie & Erbring, 2002). However, at the beginning of the 21st century, in-depth investigations showed that CMC and the Internet may strengthen community bonds and support the process of establishing relations (Hampton & Wellman, 2002), even when we consider friends living close to each other (Quan-Haase, Wellman, Witte, & Hampton, 2002; Chen, Boase, & Wellman, 2002). Additionally, these interactions may spread to the real world (Katz & Rice, 2002).

As researchers argue, a communication process in the electronic or virtual environment is more difficult to coordinate than face-to-face interactions. This is justified by specific forms of verbal communication used by electronic community participants. They employ text, which is visible on screens of their devices, forms of asynchronous interactions as well as a quasi-language that may be represented by emoticons (van Dijk, 2010).

Emoticons, 'smileys' or 'relational icons' are being described in many research papers related to CMC. In general, they are graphic representations of emotions portrayed on somebody's face. However, as CMC limits face-to-face interactions, their main task is to substitute them. J.B. Walther and K.P. D'addario discovered that verbal message content prevails over the relational icon contributions and that this is probably related to the more effort invested in typing the text than sending a message with the emoticon which may be recognized as requiring less effort (Walther & D'addario, 2001). Moreover, D. Derks, A.E. Bos, and J. von Grumbkow argue that emoticons are generally used to express humor and emotions as well as that they are more often chosen to communicate with people we know than with strangers (Derks, Bos, & von Grumbkow, 2008). It is also noteworthy to mention A.H. Huang, D.C. Yen, and X. Zhang explorations. According to them using emoticons give both enjoyment

(while using them) and valuable benefits to a communication process (Huang, Yen, & Zhang, 2008).

D.W. Sanderson (1993) argues that these are ordinary characters, available on our computer keyboards. He also explains how to read the most common 'smiley', which is :-)

He describes it as follows:

If you don't see that it represents a smiling face, tip your head to the left and look at it again. The colon represents the eyes, the dash represents the nose, and the right parenthesis represents the (smiling) mouth. There are smileys for sadness as well as delight (Sanderson, 1993, 1).

Also J. van Dijk supports D. Sanderson's concept of emoticons and admits that these smileys represent symbols of emotions, entered by keyboards of our devices (van Dijk, 2010). The reason for using them is to send electronic messages, communicate on electronic forums and computer networks, which are spread worldwide (Sanderson, 1993).

Nowadays, emoticons are commonly employed by social media users. However seniors are not 'the first out of the gate' in that area. Moreover, there were any documented studies found, in which researchers would focus their interests on interpretations given to emoticons by elder members of populations. Due to this fact, the exploration of this area was assumed worthy of further investigations.

Methods

This study sought to analyse meanings and senses that were ascribed by seniors to particular emoticons presented to them during the workshops as well as to determine the preferred form of communication (face-to-face or mediated by computer) indicated by participants.

Participants were recruited from the project, mentioned above. There were eleven U3As from the Warmia and Mazury Province that visited the University library class for learning purposes. Each group had around twenty participants (mostly women) who randomly and totally freely could choose the part of relations workshop they wanted to participate in. Generally, they could be divided into three groups (intimate relations interested; grandchildren-grandparents oriented; and social, new media relations). In total, there were around eighty seniors who decided to take part in new media and new forms of communication workshop. Each group of a few seniors was involved in two different tasks.

First of all, they were asked to pair up and turn sideways to each other. Then, they were asked to bring their mobile phones out and send a short message to her or his partner, saying: 'Thank you for a delicious cake you brought me last time'. A partner was asked to send a message back. There was

no specified reply prepared for partners. The participants were also requested not to turn around, touch other members, and definitely not to look in each other's eyes. The second part of this task was to repeat exactly the same thing, however, this time without using mobile devices. The participants could look at each other, touch their hands, hug each other and do whatever they wanted to. Right after this, the pairs could share their experience gathered during both forms of communication and choose the preferred one.

Secondly, the same pairs were given a packet of eleven emoticons. Their task was to indicate emotions, attitudes or associations related to each icon. The pairs got around seven minutes to discuss the emoticons. Right afterwards, flashcards presenting all of icons, were showed them sequentially. Seniors were asked to discuss all ideas at a forum. All ideas were noted down on the other side of flashcards. This allowed achieving data that were used for further analysis.

The experiment sought to search answers to the three research questions. These were: 1/ What type of communication is preferred by seniors (face-to-face or mediated by a mobile device?). It was assumed that some of them would choose CMC, however most of them would prefer traditional, analogue forms of communication. 2/ How do seniors interpret the emoticons? 3/ What kind of meaning do they ascribe to them?

Below, there are presented all relational icons used in the experiment.

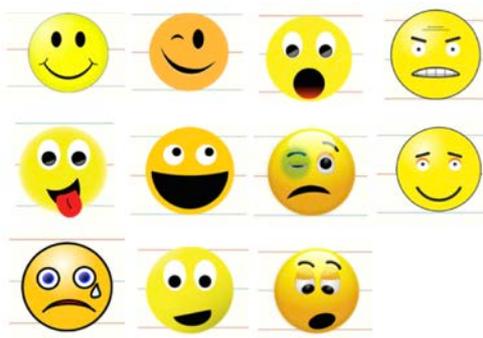


Figure 1 *Emoticons used in the experiment* (source: <https://kreatywnapedagogika.wordpress.com/2017/02/25/emocje/>)

Data analysis was mainly based on consistency criterion, which is understood as referring associations and interpretations given by participants to emoticons to the navigated explanations of emoticons that were found in literature or electronic resources. The second criterion was based on reaching a consensus in senior groups during open-ended discussions or on controversies appearing during the process of emoticons interpretation. That kind of procedure allowed creating panoplies of meanings or emotions they ascribed to particular emoticons.

My grandchildren know much more than me...

CMC or F2F? All of the researched seniors declared that they prefer face-to-face communication. This confirms the thesis that they are the representatives of Baby Boomers generation (Cantelmi, 2015), born right after the Second World War, which is commonly defined as a generation of digital immigrants (Prensky, 2001). They are much more accustomed to direct meetings and are more likely to look at each other's eyes when they interact. The results disaffirmed the part of the hypothesis where it was assumed that some of the seniors would prefer computer-mediated communication, in respect to dynamic technological development and the same time easy access to the newest technological devices, and the Internet.

Tough row to hoe – ‘my grandchildren know much more...’ The analysis of seniors' interpretations given to emoticons allowed dividing the collected data into four groups. The division may be presented by the following terms: data meeting consistency criterion (group 1), data meeting consensus criterion (group 2), data partially consistent or consentaneous (group 3), and controversies (group 4). Some of the emoticons were related to more than one group. Explanations of the emoticons were searched in three resources, including: Wikipedia List of Emoticons², Emoji Dictionary³ (both found in the Internet resources), and D.W. Sanderson's book titled 'Smileys' (1993). All analysed emoticons were presented in single tables. Each table included explanations of the icon from the three resources, however some icons were not found in all resources (n/a) or did not exist in any of them.

Four of sequentially presented emoticons definitely met the consistency and consensus criterion (group 1 and group 2), which means that the participants referred correctly to explanations found in literature and internet resources and that there was a consensus in large part of the researched seniors. These emoticons were given a comment below.

Table 1 Emoticon no. 1

	List of emoticons (Wikipedia)	wink, smirk
	D.W. Sanderson	The winking smiley, 'You know what I mean', 'you are being sardonic'
	Emoji Dictionary	winking face

² See more: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_emoticons

³ See more: <https://emojidictionary.emoji.foundation.com/people>

On the one hand, the emoticon was interpreted as a ‘tongue in cheek’ one. Phrases and associations related to it were, for instance: wink at somebody (7 times), tongue in cheek (7 times), a prank, a joke, a trick, mischievous, humorous, cheeky, and easily. It was also described by the following statements: *Do you dig it?*, *Do you gather this?* On the other hand, seniors indicated amorous advances associations, e.g.: a wooer, a lady-killer, the Romeo, a chat-up line. Only three of eleven groups discussed this icon as a sardonic, smirking one: a jibe, a little jibe, and derision. Additionally, this emoticon was easily identified by respondents. They declared that it is generally known to everybody.

Table 2 *Emoticon no. 2*

	List of emoticons (Wikipedia)	crying, sad
	D.W. Sanderson	‘you are actually shedding tears’
	Emoji Dictionary	crying face, sad person, unhappy

The analysis of interpretations made by groups of seniors indicated that this emoticon was easy to decipher. First of all, all participants undiscovered the correct meaning of it proposed in the found resources. Additionally, there was a general agreement in respect of understanding the emoticon. Most emotions ascribed to it were related to: sadness, grief, crying, sorrow, alarm, and worry. The mentioned associations may be exemplified by the following statements that were added by participants during discussions: *You disagreeably surprised me*, *You did a number on me*, *I am sad*, *It is so hard today*. There is one remark that should be made in this part of the text. It can be assumed that seniors need unequivocal pictures to interpret emoticon. This one had shedding tears, sad mouth as well as eyes. If an emoticon presents a clear message/statement (convergent eyes and mouth), there should be no problem with finding the right meaning of it. Many of the emoticons were problematic in interpretation. The readers will have a chance to experience that in the further analysis.

Table 3 *Emoticon no. 3*

	List of emoticons (Wikipedia)	a smiling humanoid
	D.W. Sanderson	the standard smiley, ‘you are joking’, ‘you are satisfied’, ‘this is the only smiley you know’
	Emoji Dictionary	n/a

The standard smiley emoticon is being used very often by seniors. There were no difficulties noticed during the process of interpreting this one. The participants generally agreed and indicated the following words: happy, glad, a nice smile, nice, joy, happiness, optimism, sunshine, a smile, jollification, positive emotions, pleasant, vitality, and frivolous. The above were complemented with some positive statements: *I like you, It is nice to see you, I am happy, I had a good day, Greetings, and I am satisfied.*

Interesting findings related to that icon were presented by E. Glikson, A. Cheshin, and G.A. van Kleef who examined its impact on the first impressions in work-related places. It turned out that the smiley icon was not interpreted as a warm one or a real smile. According to them, it actually reduced perceptions of competence and was perceived as inappropriate in formal conditions. Reversely, informal environment favoured interpreting the smiley icon as a positive one (Glikson, Cheshin, & van Kleef, 2017).

Table 4 Emoticon no. 4

	List of emoticons (Wikipedia)	laughing, big green, joyful, happy
	D.W. Sanderson	n/a
	Emoji Dictionary	joyful, happy

Also this emoticon met the high level of consensus between seniors. They had no problems with interpreting it. They mainly admitted that it is a joyful, laughing emoticon. The consistency criterion was fulfilled as well. It should be added that this is a quite popular or common icon even among seniors. Moreover, the eyes and mouth seem to be presented as integrated. Both smiling and happy. If these two elements are integrated and consistent, seniors have no difficulties with recognising the message hidden in an icon.

On the other hand, the following emoticons partially met the consistency or consensus criterion (group 3).

Table 5 Emoticon no. 5

	List of emoticons (Wikipedia)	worried, dissatisfied
	D.W. Sanderson	n/a
	Emoji Dictionary	grimacing face

Some of the seniors got a fix on the interpretation presented in dictionaries and indicated: great dissatisfaction or being dissatisfied. However, the vast majority ascribed stronger emotions to the icon. Their indications were mainly related to: anger, fury or malignancy. The gritted teeth were associated with being: angry, nervous, madcap or furious by them. They also supported their associations with some statements, for instance: *I will be biting, Buzz off, I will get my own back, Don't close on me, It is difficult to cool out right now.* The consensus criterion was not met either in view of the following words indicated by the seniors: sneer, city slicker, cynicism, astonishment, astonished, worried, and mournfully.

Table 6 Emoticon no. 6

	List of emoticons (Wikipedia)	cheeky, playful
	D.W. Sanderson	n/a
	Emoji Dictionary	stuck-out tongue, 'shows that you are not serious and kidding'

The consistency criterion was met only to a little extent in that case. Only some of the participants recognised the icon as a playful, stuck-out-tongue or kidding. The seniors did not recognise it, their associations varied greatly. There was definitely a lack of consensus amongst groups. They had food associations, for instance: he/she is mouth-watering, gourmand as well as cynical related indications (jibe, make mock of somebody, disrespectful), weather associations (hot, breathless, breathlessness, exhausted), rudeness connotations (rude, lack of good manners), deprecation associations (resistance, rebellion, anger), and finally intimate related thoughts, like: a deep kiss or eroticism. The researched seniors definitely did not know the icon.

Table 7 Emoticon no. 7

	List of emoticons (Wikipedia)	surprised, shocked
	D.W. Sanderson	shocked, amazed, 'you don't believe you said that'
	Emoji Dictionary	surprised

There was no common agreement on that icon interpretation amongst the seniors. Most groups noticed a shock, amazement, and a surprise when looking

at the icon. However, at the same time, some of them interpreted it as fear, anxiety, fright, and scream. Surprisingly, one group indicated this one as sneaky, sly, and manipulative. This proves what was already mentioned in the text. If an icon does not clearly show, for example, sad mouth and sad eyes, the seniors had difficulties with consensus in respect of interpreting an emoticon. It is assumed that they need a clear message contained to understand the meaning of smileys.

Moreover, when the emoticons sent seniors into some kind of confusion, they often referred to their grandchildren. They believed that younger generation definitely would know the icons and would have no problems with interpreting them. Some seniors said: *'My granddaughter / grandson would know that'*. This testifies that the elder generation perceives their grandchildren as specialists in today's, digital communication area. This also refers to M. Mead's prefigurative culture concept, which is future oriented and allows the young generation to transfer trends, knowledge and other things to the elder generation (Mead, 1970).

There were also four controversial emoticons, which were ascribed only to group number four (controversies). These were analysed below.

Table 8 Emoticon no. 8

	List of emoticons (Wikipedia)	n/a
	D.W. Sanderson	n/a
	Emoji Dictionary	n/a

The emoticon was very difficult to consider in relation to the consistency criterion. None of the resources included any similar icon. For this reason, the analyses were focused only on interpretations given by the seniors to the emoticon and a consensus criterion. Due to the lack of consensus between participants, finally the icon was analysed from the perspective of controversies related to it. The icon's mouth indicated a smile, however its eyes looked a little bit tired, also the eyebrows were turned down. Its associations were disintegrated between two opposing emotions: joyful-related, like: gladness, satisfied with life, joy, happy, nice, a smile, cheers, and sadness-related: sad, a sad smile, a set smile. The participants saw mainly sadness (probably visible in the emoticon's eyes) and happiness ascribed due to the smile on the emoticon's mouth. On the other hand, in the minority, there were two other distinct groups of indications. First, were related to amusement, while the other one represented

musings states of mind, for instance: head in the clouds, dream fully, thoughtful, moony etc. It is quite certain that the researched seniors were only able to interpret clearly the expressed emotions. They probably divided the icon into two, distinct parts: a happy, smiley mouth and sad, tired eyes.

Table 9 Emoticon no. 9

	List of emoticons (Wikipedia)	tired, sleeping
	D.W. Sanderson	n/a
	Emoji Dictionary	tired, sad, sleepy

None of the researched seniors interpreted the emoticon as tired or sleepy. Similar states of mind (sadness and depression) were used only twice. Considering great controversies, which appeared among the seniors, their associations might be divided into four groups. They were presented on the pie chart below with some statements that were articulated by the seniors.

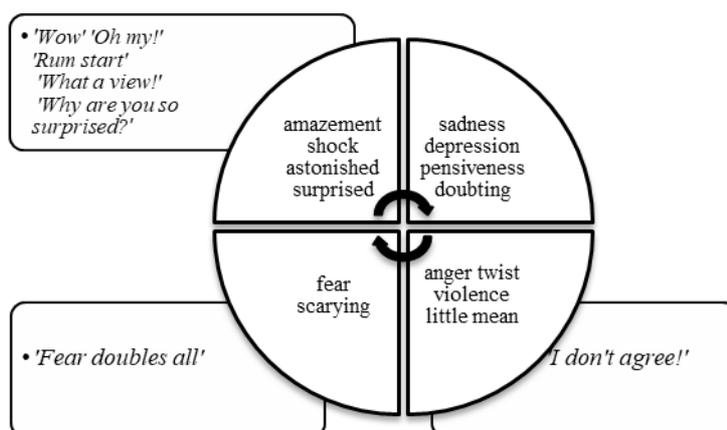


Figure 2 Controversies in participants' associations related to the sleepy, tired icon (source: own research)

Table 10 Emoticon no. 10

	List of emoticons (Wikipedia)	n/a
	D.W. Sanderson	n/a
	Emoji Dictionary	 feeling hurt, injured, sick or in pain

The emoticon is similar to a woozy face, found in the Emoji Dictionary. However, it is not the same. ‘The woozy face’ was not presented in the text. During the analysis process it was decided to look for a different, interesting emoticon. This was a ‘face with head-bandage’ emoticon (included in the table), which means (acc. to Emoji Dictionary): feeling hurt, injured, sick or in pain. It was assumed that all injured icons might represent similar associations. In this case, it would be feeling hurt (both: physically or mentally). In spite of lack of the exact equivalent presented in all resource materials, during the process of exploration it was presumed that this emoticon would be understood with pain-related associations. Some seniors solved this icon quite well. Most of them noticed: pain, suffering, and injury. However, there was no common agreement to the meaning of the icon. All interpretations were presented on the chart below.

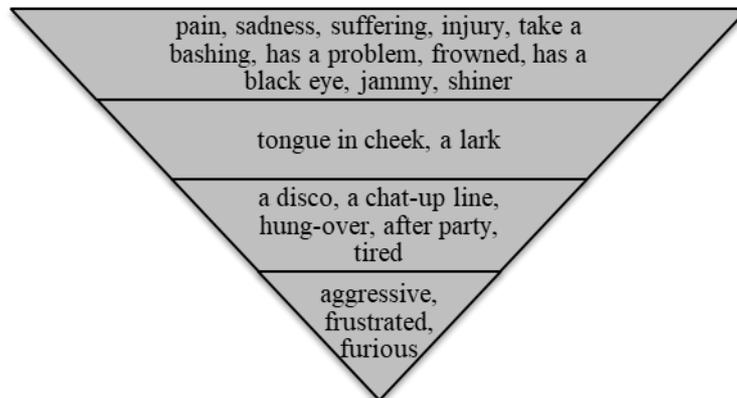


Figure 3 Controversies in participants’ associations related to the feeling hurt icon (source: own research)

The biggest group of interpretations was related to pain, and as it was mentioned above, this seems to be accurate understanding. Surprisingly, however, the second group of associations were related to ‘tongue in cheek’ meanings. This one was definitely not a correct interpretation. Nevertheless, four groups of seniors ascribed that meaning to this icon.

Table 11 Emoticon no. 11

	List of emoticons (Wikipedia)	joyful
	D.W. Sanderson	n/a
	Emoji Dictionary	n/a

This emoticon was very difficult to analyse due to the fact of not finding its right equivalent in the list of Emoji dictionary and in the D.W. Sanderson’s book. Only Wikipedia list of emoticons included this one and indicated it as a joyful one. Consequently, the consistency criterion could not be regarded herein. The second criterion – the group consensus, was not met in regard to the icon. There was no common agreement amongst seniors either. Their associations may be divided into four groups.

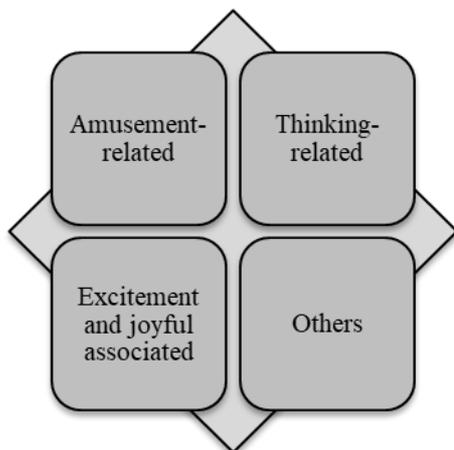


Figure 4 Controversies in participants’ associations related to the joyful icon (source: own research)

The four groups of associations presented on the above chart may testify that controversies appear when the older generation interpret totally new graphic icons, which are unknown to them. This may also indicate that they are much better in expressing feelings or emotions through verbal communication. However, it is noteworthy that the first task given to the seniors during the workshops was related to choosing between face-to-face or computer-mediated communication. Seniors generally chose f-2-f communication, which confirms the mentioned assumption. They generally preferred verbal communication, and moreover they definitely preferred direct interactions, without using any devices to communicate.

Discussion

The readers were promised that they would be involved in a story about the didactic experience related to interpreting emoticons by older people. This story transformed into a research exploration that finally led to some noteworthy, substantive conclusions. These conclusions were closely related to educational and communicational issues, extremely important in a dynamically changing reality. Emoticons have been very well known recently and their popularity

seems to grow up very fast these days. However, when they are considered, they generally are related to computer-mediated communication, which is close to the generation of digital natives (Prensky, 2001), who prefer graphics than texts and meet no difficulties in using computer, games, and Internet language.

The conducted research revealed that seniors are not the worst interpreters of emoticons, however they recognise only some of them effortlessly. The study allowed determining that these were four emoticons: :-), ;-), :'-(), and :-D. Their graphic representations were presented in the first part of the analysis. The research also enabled to observe that if the message/statement contained in the icon was highly integrated, which means that an emoticon had similarly expressed eyes, eyebrows, and mouth, the seniors recognised them effortlessly. The situation looks a little bit different when the information contained in the icon is neither integrated nor clear. The workshop participants invoked their grandchildren, who are perceived by them as specialists in modern communication areas. Additionally, it was noticed that the older generation uncompromisingly chose verbal forms of communication, especially these forms, which are based on direct interactions. They feel much more safe if they can look at each other's eyes than when they are forced to text each other through the agency of various devices.

The thread related to prefigurative culture, introduced by M. Mead was also very explorative from the perspective of the undertaken subject-area. Due to that finding, the observation allowed noticing that the researched seniors, who participate in U3A classes, represent a group of older people, ready and entirely open for learning from younger people – their grandchildren. By reason of this, it seems interesting to reconduct a similar research amongst other representatives of a late elderly stage of human development as well as representatives of digital natives generation and to pose a question, which might resound as: How can we nowadays communicate, in terms of significant intergenerational differences? The process of searching for answers to the mentioned question seems to be very important from the perspective of contemporary educational purposes.

It is a limitation of the presented study that some of the analysed emoticons were not found in the literature or Internet resources, hence sometimes it was difficult to refer to a correct emoticon meaning. It also should be admitted that the presented study had just an explorative character and requires further comparative analysis, which might be supportive in searching for answers related to the intergenerational communication processes.

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