

Who Are We in the World of GIFs? - Mapping GIF Users

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Abstract. In online communication, the effective transmission of emotions, reactions, and states is becoming increasingly important, and creative solutions such as emojis, GIFs, and memes, which are capable of reflecting an individual's feelings, reactions, or even digital identity. Since their return, reaction GIFs have become increasingly popular as a means of expressing nonverbal cues in the online space. These animated reaction GIFs are not only capable of expressing a single emotion or set of gestures, but often carry pop culture references, knowledge from meme culture, or even inside jokes, making them multifaceted and adding color to online communication. The use and interpretation of GIFs can be considered a complex process that involves different skills, motivations, background knowledge, or even literacy, and based on these, similar to previous media such as television or even radio, we can identify different user groups for GIFs.

The present research is based on the study by Church, King et al. *“Relating, searching, and referencing: Assessing the appeal of using GIFs to Communicate”*, which identifies three main categories of GIF users: enthusiasts, searchers, and referentialists. These general categories help us understand the purposes and motivations behind people's use of GIFs in online communication. The purpose of the research is to examine GIF users among Generation Z university students. More specifically, it examines the frequency with which these “pure” categories appear, the possible transitions between them, and whether there are any additional categories beyond those mentioned. The methodology is based on a survey questionnaire, the main purpose of which is to collect structured data on views and attitudes related to GIFs, using the categorizations and statements of the underlying research study.

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GIF (Graphic Interchange Format)

GIF, or Graphic Interchange Format, is a file type that was primarily used as a web design element for unfinished websites in the early days of the internet. At the time, it was useful because it displayed images efficiently and quickly in an online environment. The original concept was to allow graphic elements to be shared easily, which contributed significantly to the rise of interactive and interactive content in the online world (Eppink, 2014). After that, the popularity of GIFs declined until 2006, when they returned to public consciousness on Tumblr, serving an illustrative and aesthetic function in various posts, adding to various Tumblr blog posts (Coen, 2016). From then on, the popularity of GIFs in the digital environment has only grown. To the point that today, GIFs are not considered a file format, but are known as looped animations that are an essential part of online communication.

According to Ágnes Veszelszki's definition, "GIFs are short moving images that can be sent in response to various conversational situations in digital communication, serve to express emotions, can be considered a more intense form of emotional expression than emoticons, mostly show scenes extracted from well-known films, one of their main components is humor, and in stylistic terms, they use exaggeration as a device" (Veszelszki, 2015:79). In his work *The brief history of GIFs*, American author Jason Eppink states that sending a GIF is a reaction that shows HIFW how I feel when, or MRW, what my reaction is in a given situation (Eppink, 2014: 303).

The success of GIFs lies not only in their ability to capture iconic moments in pop culture, but also in their ability to effectively express emotions (Highfield, 2017). GIFs are able to transmit emotions more intensely than other screen-based emoticons. While an emoticon usually expresses facial expressions, GIFs are capable of displaying gestures, body movements, and even eye movements in addition to facial expressions, and the dynamic sequence of movements presents the given state or reaction in a more intense and illustrative way. The looped motion allows the GIF to be more emphatic and memorable, highlighting important details. Due to their dynamic nature, GIFs also introduce the dimension of temporality into the repertoire of emotional expression (Veszelszki, 2015).

The looped motion of GIFs removes the sense of finality and transience from the act of communication. In addition to expressing emotions, an important feature of GIFs is their ambiguity. Unlike emojis, GIFs do not have

a specific meaning, which allows for free interpretation. In addition, the repetitive motion also carries with it the possibility of open and continuous interpretation (Highfield, 2017). This enable the process of decontextualization, as a result of which the GIF stands on its own, even if the user is not familiar with the original context of the GIF, the user can easily recognize and interpret the message they communicate, as the sequence of movements and their ambiguity allow them to be interpreted and used independently in a digital environment.

Recently, the role and importance of GIFs in internet communication has steadily increased. Their function today differs from their original purpose, and they are now suitable for expressing more complex feelings and states (Eppink, 2014). The success of GIFs depended in large part on their adaptability. These moving images were able to keep up with changes in the Internet environment and continuously developed and expanded their functionality. Among these developments, the emergence of GIF galleries in 2013, such as Giphy and Tenor, was of particular importance, as they allowed users to easily browse and search for GIFs based on keywords. However, the real breakthrough came in 2016 when these GIF search engine galleries were integrated into social media platforms and various communication applications. This step significantly improved the accessibility and usability of GIFs, promoting the development of user-friendly GIF usage. Currently, GIFs can be found on almost every online platform, whether it's social media sites like Facebook or X, or even communication apps like WhatsApp and Messenger, and they even appear in specific apps such as dating apps like Tinder (Meier, 2018). This general presence means that GIFs are an integral part of users' online experience, closely intertwined with their everyday digital communication and entertainment. Digitalization has not only changed the forms and tools of communication, but also transformed language itself, creating a unique linguistic system that many have called net language (Curry, 2008), digilect (Veszelszki, 2010), or written chat (Wirth, 2000). In this new linguistic environment, visual emoticons such as GIFs also have their place. As a result, GIFs can even function as a language, as they have been able to integrate into the keyboards of our digital devices and carry specific cultural codes in digital communication, serving as a kind of digital emoticon. At the same time, they embody one of the most important characteristics of digital language, namely technological determinism, which means that the possibilities and limitations of the technology or medium determine linguistic

behavior, and therefore it must constantly keep pace with innovations (Veszelszki, 2017). This means that digital language is constantly changing and adapting to new technological possibilities and developments.

Moreover, GIFs offer users the opportunity to express their feelings and moods in a personalized way in the online space. In this way, they play an important role in both the creation and shaping of users' online identities (Wang et al., 2024). Choosing a GIF not only expresses emotions, but can also reflect the user's unique style, interests, and even cultural references. GIFs allow users to express themselves in a unique way and identify with online communities, enhancing their online presence and connections.

The use of GIFs has become particularly important in expressing emotions and nonverbal cues, similar to other tools spreading on the internet, such as emojis, stickers, and memes. GIFs are able to go beyond emojis because they offer a more dynamic form of expression. While emojis can only depict a limited number of facial expressions and objects, GIFs show entire sequences of movements (Veszelszki, 2015). These captured animations not only depict facial expressions realistically, but also body language, gestures, and other signals. In addition, their repetitive, looped movement often serves to emphasize the most memorable parts of scenes, thus GIFs offer a much richer set of communication tools that can be used to express emotions and thoughts much more accurately and colorfully than simpler, static emojis.

At the same time, GIFs also show similarities to internet memes. There is often a GIF version of a meme, or we can talk about memed GIFs, but it is important to note that although both are part of internet folklore and reflect the creativity of users (Wagener, 2021). While memes focus on recreation, GIFs focus on reuse. There are also similarities in terms of their success factors, but while internet memes can convey humor and related emotions and states, such as sarcasm, cynicism, etc., GIFs have a wider palette and, in addition to basic emotions, are capable of expressing feelings such as empathy, closeness, sympathy, etc.

Previous research

With the growing popularity of GIFs, researchers are becoming more interested in various aspects of these small moving images. Research on GIFs mostly examines their technical properties, production, and website

compatibility. However, qualitative research also covers their interpretation (Brubaker, 2017), methods for finding the perfect GIF (Jiang, 2018), and their cultural significance (Highfield, 2017). From the perspective of communication science, it is also interesting to examine the communicative properties of GIFs and how they return to the public consciousness, even at the lowest point of their popularity. Because of their complexity, the interpretation of GIFs cannot be separated from their use. The relationship between the interpretation and use of GIFs is analyzed in a study by Church, King, and colleagues entitled “*Relating, searching, and referencing: Assessing the appeal of using GIFs to communicate.*” The study's main goal was to examine GIFs from a communication perspective and understand user behavior. The research identified three main groups: GIF enthusiasts, GIF searches, and GIF referentialists. These groups were categorized based on factors such as the technical characteristics of GIFs, the search process, emotional expression, cultural significance, expression of humor, linguistic significance, and the importance of relationships.

The table below summarizes the typology of GIF users and their main motivations:

Table 1. GIF user typologies and their most important characteristics
(Own editing)

GIF characteristics	Enthusiasts	Searchers	Referentialists
<i>Technical properties</i>		x	x
<i>Language</i>	x		
<i>Expression of affect</i>	x		
<i>Culture</i>			x
<i>Humor</i>	x	x	
<i>Searching</i>	x	x	
<i>Importance of relationships</i>	x		x

The research used Q methodology from a methodological point of view, using the usage and satisfaction model as a starting point. This approach allowed them to conduct the research in two phases. In the first phase, the researchers measured attitudes toward GIFs. In this part, participants were asked to rank 32 statements using a survey. The purpose of this was to identify different views and attitudes towards GIFs based on attitudes, thereby enabling the separation of larger categories. Statistical

analysis was used to associate different statements with each user group. In the multi-scale attitude measurement, the statements and values with high positive values from the 32 statements helped to outline the most important motivations and characteristics, and similarly, the statements with predominantly or significantly negative values highlighted the biggest differences between the three categories.

In the second phase, the participants were interviewed, which helped to create and more precisely define the different categories. This methodological approach allowed the researchers to examine attitudes and user behavior related to GIFs in a comprehensive and detailed way, as well as the motivations and considerations that participants used to categorize GIFs.

Characteristics of the different groups, based on the research results:

1. **Enthusiasts:** Enthusiasts mainly see the emotional richness, humor, and communicative power of GIFs. For them, GIFs are expressive tools that can transmit more emotion than emojis. They do not focus on searching, but rather on obtaining the desired result, for example making their friends laugh. These people primarily use GIFs in their social interactions, as they find them to be highly effective on an emotional and communicative level. For them, GIFs serve to express emotions, especially humor, helping to strengthen relationships and add dynamism to conversations. The visual nature of GIFs brings them closer to face-to-face communication, and they believe that these moving images satisfy needs that text messages can't, such as expressing feelings or displaying metacommunicative signals.

2. **Searchers** The main motivation for searchers is their interest in the technical possibilities of GIFs and the humor of GIFs. They enjoy the process of finding the perfect GIF, although more for personal entertainment than for connecting with others. They feel uncomfortable using GIFs in romantic situations. For them, GIFs are useful only for their playful tone, not for serious topics. As searchers, they enjoy the challenge, but prefer GIFs that are quick and easy to share. GIF use among this group is highly situation-dependent and is mainly associated with humorous contexts.

3. **Referentialists:** The main motivations for referentialists are technical possibilities, cultural connection, and the humor of GIFs. For them, GIFs were used as an easily accessible way to reference popular culture. Although

they did not like the process of searching for GIFs, they often used them to connect with friends and were particularly interested in the pop culture of movies and television shows. They knew all the characters in these shows and felt that GIFs were funnier because they were related to these TV shows. For referentialist users, finding the perfect GIF was similar to avoiding awkward situations, as not having one could create socially awkward situations for them.

Research

The focus of the research was to identify user groups related to GIFs, determine the characteristics that separate these groups from each other, and identify any sub-categories that may exist. The study focused on getting a deeper insight into the behavior, attitudes, and motivations of GIF users, with a special focus on the enthusiast, searcher, and referentialist categories mentioned by Church, King, and their colleagues in their study *“Relating, searching, and referencing: Assessing the appeal of using GIFs to Communicate.”*

From a methodological perspective, I used a survey in which I took and used statements belonging to different categories. I took these statements from the research mentioned above, based on what statements were associated with the different categories. The preliminary research assigned 12 statements to each group, which could be either positive or negative. These statements focused on different aspects, such as the motivations for using GIFs, such as emotional expression, search mechanism, or even humor.

The purpose of the survey was to assess participants attitudes toward GIFs and to enable me to identify and understand users belonging to different categories, as well as the visible differences between groups. In the survey, I examined participants' attitudes on a two-point scale of positive and negative attitudes. According to the instructions, participants had to answer “yes” if the statement described them and “no” if it did not.

Analyzing the proportion of positive and negative responses helped me to group and differentiate the attitudes and preferences of different user groups.

For the research, I selected the sample using expert sampling. The individuals in the sample had to meet several criteria. First and most importantly, they belonged to the same age group, were university students

aged 19-21, and were studying communication. There was no difference between the genders, both women and men could be included in the sample. In addition, it was important that the participants had prior knowledge of visual emoticons, with particular regard to GIFs, learned at university, and were familiar with their role in identity, their communication functions, etc. In addition, I also put together a negative group with similar characteristics to the main sample, but without previous knowledge of GIFs. I also selected 19-21-year-old university students from the communication department for the negative group, and there was no difference in the gender distribution. The purpose of the negative group was to allow the research to compare the reactions and attitudes of the two groups towards GIFs and to assess the impact of prior knowledge on the phenomena under investigation.

A total of 80 participants completed the survey, of whom two-thirds had prior knowledge of GIFs, while one-third did not. This information proved particularly useful as it allowed the participants to be divided into groups, which could then be compared during the analysis. The survey was not anonymous, as I will use the categorization to select interviewees for the next phase of my larger research. The lack of anonymity allowed me to identify and compare these groups.

During the analysis, I analyzed in detail the yes/no responses to the statements assigned to the GIF user categories defined by Church. For each statement with a positive value, I added a point for a yes response and ignored a no response. I used the same method for statements with a negative value. I added up these points for each participant to see how close they were to each category. I took different criteria into account when analyzing the results. The maximum possible score for each category was 12, and I only considered scores above 7 in my analysis. This helped me to exclude lower scores that may be less relevant to the analysis and to consider only outstanding or strong characteristics. If there were similar scores across multiple categories, but one category was at least 3 points higher than the other, I considered that category to be dominant, while I considered the lower value to be secondary. This approach allowed me to highlight the categories that were most characteristic or decisive for the participants.

Analysis

During the analysis, I first identified two main categories: active and passive GIF users. I considered active users to be those who met the criteria I had set, that is, those with a value higher than 7, while I considered passive users to be those who did not meet the specified criteria. At this stage of the research, I did not find any significant differences between the different groups participating in the sample. During the analysis, I found identical categories in both groups. However, in the course of further research, the most significant difference in the sample will be explored, namely that one group has prior theoretical knowledge of visual emoticons, especially GIFs, and is aware of their role in identity, their communicative functions, etc.

However, the analysis required a more refined resolution, so I took into account the enthusiastic, referentialist, and searching categories known from Church's research. Of these, the enthusiastic category was predominantly present in the analysis, followed by the searching category, and finally, to a small extent, the referentialist group.

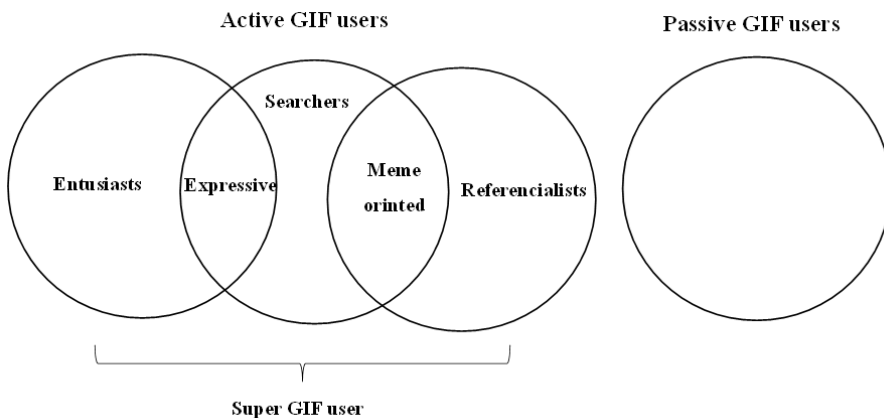


Figure 1. GIF user categories (based on research results – Own editing)

Based on the results, in addition to the pure categories, some combinations were also observed. There were few cases where the values of one category were dominant, it was much more common for two or possibly all three values to exceed the specified criterion of 7, or for there to be no greater difference between the values than 3.

1. Expressive

One such category mix was between the enthusiastic and searching categories. I identified these cases as the expressive category and defined them as individuals who use GIFs not only as a digital accessory but also as an important element of communication, which allows them to show their mood, reaction, and style. The defining statements of this category show that for users, the use of GIFs is not a functional but an expressive act that serves to represent themselves and display emotional intensity. Positive statements from the enthusiastic category mainly focus on the role of emotional expression and connection. Among the statements is the following *“I like to use GIFs to show my 'reaction when...' in hypothetical situations.”* describes the performative nature of expressive GIF use. The user represents their own personal responses, feelings, or attitudes through visual reactions, thereby constructing an emotional narrative. This statement also appears among the statements in the search category, but here it is more of a tool for connecting visual flexibility and personal creativity. In addition to expressing emotions, there is also a partner-oriented nature, which is mainly used to communicate humour, this is reflected in the statement *“I love finding the perfect GIF to make my friends laugh,”* which appeared at a high rate in the expressive category, showing that humor and laughter strengthen bonds. The third statement from the enthusiastic category that achieved a high percentage is *“I like GIFs because they can convey much more emotion than emojis,”* which shows that those in the expressive category are aware that there are still visual expressions of emotion in the online environment, yet they consider GIFs to be more expressive. The statements in the enthusiastic category are complemented by positive statements from the searcher type, which achieved high scores. One of these statements is *“I like that GIFs are fast and don't take too much time to view,”* which refers to the speed and ease of use of digital communication, as GIFs are instant, short, and easily interpretable visual units.

In profiling the expressive category, the values of negative statements also help, pointing to the conscious use of GIFs. Negative statements should be interpreted in reverse, as in these cases the “no” answer was the correct one. In this reverse interpretation, users see not limitations but possibilities in GIFs. Statements such as *“I don't think GIFs are useful for expressing my emotions in text conversations”* indicate that the expressive category attributes

emotional value to GIFs and sees potential in GIFs to respond more playfully and quickly in emotional situations. GIFs thus become not a sign of a lack of authenticity, but a form of digital authenticity, that is, a natural means of expressing emotions in the online space. In this case, the statement *“I don’t like GIFs because they are part of internet culture”* indicates that this group is not bothered by the fact that GIFs are part of mainstream culture. The user does not reject the social codes of internet culture, but identifies with them and values GIFs as a cultural phenomenon. This attitude reflects a sense of belonging to digital communities and an embrace of collective identity. Similarly, *“I feel like I have to use GIFs because everyone else is using them”* also refers to belonging to a community or the opportunity to connect. Thus, GIF use becomes a natural part of social interactions, in which the individual does not lose themselves but expresses themselves through shared codes.

2. Meme oriented

Another interesting combination that appeared during the analysis is between the searcher and referentialist categories, which I have named the “meme oriented” category. Its most important characteristic is that this category does not use GIFs to express emotions, but rather as a cultural and intertextual communication tool. The name of this category was inspired by memes, as GIFs are interpreted as carriers of shared knowledge, pop culture references, and irony. For them, GIFs are not an expressive medium in themselves, but a conveyor of layers of meaning, in which familiar references to films, TV series, or memes form the basis of collective understanding.

One of the key characteristics of meme GIF users, which can be identified from the positive statements in the results, is that this category values the technological and visual effectiveness of the GIF format. The popularity of the statement *“I like that GIFs are fast and don’t take too long to view”* shows that for meme creators, the brevity and dynamism of GIFs make them suitable for use as instant reactions, similar to the quick spread of memes. Another search term that appears is *“I like how GIFs act out what I want to say,”* which emphasizes the expressive function of GIFs, that is, GIFs help users express their gestures or reactions. This includes statements from the reference category, such as *“I love GIFs for their pop culture references,”* highlighting that users choose GIFs not only for their visual effectiveness, but also for their familiarity and shared coding. Pop culture references from

GIFs become social reference points that create a kind of an “inside joke.” Closely related to this is *“I use GIFs as inside jokes between myself and my friends,”* which, on the one hand, points to this shared knowledge and, on the other hand, highlights that it becomes a cultural language for the group of meme GIF users. This is reinforced by the statement *“I mainly use GIFs from movies or TV shows that my friends and I are fans of,”* which reflects shared fandom and the visual expression of online community identity.

Negative statements also point to important characteristics of the category. The statement *“I don't think GIFs are useful for expressing my emotions in text-based conversations”* points to the fact that meme creators also see potential in GIFs as expressions of emotion in the online environment. Another statement, the reverse of *“Using GIFs is an easy way out for me when I don't know what else to say,”* shows that this category is not used to maintain conversation, so they are characterized by a kind of isolation.

When analyzing the mixed categories, interesting observations were made about how certain categories mix or do not mix with each other. Analysis of the data revealed that there is no significant mixing between the enthusiastic and referentialist categories. This may be explained by the fact that these two categories have extremely different characteristics in terms of factors such as motivation, communication functions, and cultural connections.

For enthusiastic GIFs are used because of their strong emotional and communicative potential, helping to make their nonverbal cues in conversation similar to those in face-to-face situations. On the other hand, the main characteristic of the referentialist group is that they pay special attention to background knowledge and use GIFs primarily for the easily accessible display of references to popular culture. This difference may explain why there is no significant overlap between the two categories. Enthusiastic and referentialists use GIFs for different purposes and motivations, so the differences between the two groups outweigh the possibility of mixing.

Super GIF User

Although not all categories were mixed during double mixing, the analysis revealed that there were participants who scored high in all three categories, meaning they were enthusiastic, searchers, and referentialists at the same time. I considered them to be the “super GIF user” category, users who consciously use GIFs and have advanced digital literacy and digital

competencies. For this category, GIFs are not just an accessory, but rather a multimodal means of expression that serves to express emotional identification, humorous interaction, and pop culture references all at once. At the intersection of the three categories, super GIF users have multi-level competence in digital communication: they are able to read and recreate visual codes while understanding their cultural, technological, and social dimensions.

According to the positive statements from the enthusiastic category, GIFs are primarily a means of expressing emotions for super GIF users, as reflected in the statement, *“I love GIFs because they can convey much more emotion than emojis.”* Based on this, GIFs are not just simple illustrations, but conveyors of emotional nuance and expressiveness. Similarly, the statement *“I love that GIFs act out what I want to say”* emphasizes the performative role of GIFs, according to which GIFs are not only present as reactions, but are also capable of creating visual narratives by acting on behalf of the user. The statement *“I love finding the perfect GIF to make my friends laugh”* stands out among the positive statements in the enthusiastic category, highlighting both humor and social connection, in which GIFs become an important element of shared laughter or community building.

The statements in the search category mainly emphasize digital skills, with the super GIF user category seeing potential in GIFs, highlighting one of their main features, looped motion. This is demonstrated by the statement *“I like GIFs because of their animation and looped movement,”* which evaluates GIFs from an aesthetic point of view. The continuum of movement not only maintains attention but also creates a visual experience. In addition, the statement *“I like that GIFs are fast and don't take too long to view”* also highlights the technical feature of GIFs, namely that they can be consumed quickly and easily.

The positive statements in the third, referential category point to characteristics of super GIF users such as background knowledge or social dimensions. The statement *“I like GIFs because of their pop culture references”* points to the pop culture literacy behind GIFs, which links the message to a particular film, series, or community experience. Related to this is the fact that super GIF users refer to pop culture knowledge and the internal codes of the community, where GIFs are a visual language of understanding and belonging, as indicated by the statement *“I use GIFs as inside jokes between myself and my friends.”* The statement *“GIFs from movies and TV shows that I love*

make me feel nostalgic” reflects digital nostalgia and an emotional attachment to moving images, which can be considered an important tool for community building.

Furthermore, the negative statements of the enthusiastic, searching, and referential user categories also draw attention to important characteristics of super GIF users. First, based on the reverse interpretation of the statement “*GIFs don't grab my attention as much as emojis*” from the enthusiastic and referential categories, super GIF users view GIFs as a more complex visual code that can convey more layers of meaning than emojis.

Similarly, in the statement “*I don't like GIFs because they are part of internet culture,*” which also comes from the enthusiastic and referentialist categories, super GIF users don't separate themselves, but identify with the common digital culture and see GIFs as a symbol of cultural participation and creative community. Closely related to this is the negative statement from the enthusiastic category, “*I feel like I have to use GIFs because everyone else is using them,*” which, when interpreted in reverse, expresses the intention to connect. In this interpretation, the super GIF user appears not as a participant in popular culture, but as an active shaper of digital community language. The shared use of GIFs is not a compulsion, but an opportunity for interaction in which the user participates creatively and consciously.

The negative statement in the search category, “*I use GIFs because videos sometimes take too long to load,*” highlights the functionality of GIFs. In this context, GIFs are not a “weaker” alternative to video, but a fast, condensed, and visually effective means of communication. Super GIF users consciously use the temporal and formal characteristics of the medium to reinforce their message. The negative statement “*I use GIFs to feel closer to people when I send them messages,*” which comes from the searcher and referentialist categories, points to the fact that for super GIF users, GIFs are not only an aesthetic medium, but also an interpersonal one. Thus, it can be seen as a communicative gesture that combines visual humor, irony, and emotion, all of which play a role in making connections in the digital space. Finally, the statement “*I don't think GIFs are useful for expressing my emotions in text conversations*” comes from the negative statements in the search category, which, in reverse interpretation, defines GIFs as a language that focuses on the expression of emotion. Based on this, the super GIF user sees GIFs as an opportunity in the field of digital emotional expression and is aware that communication in the online space needs metalinguistic cues, and GIFs can be suitable for this.

During my analysis, I found that humor is a prominent factor in all categories, whether purely enthusiastic, referential, or mixed. In every category, it is important that users use GIFs as a source of humor. This can be explained by the fact that humor plays a general and decisive role in communication, regardless of the category to which the given form of communication or person belongs. In the pure enthusiastic and referentialist categories, humor is also an important part of communication. In the enthusiastic category, for example, humor can help strengthen relationships and express identity, while in the referential category, humor generally plays a role in demonstrating pop culture literacy, thus making the use of GIFs in a humorous context particularly important within these categories. In the case of mixed categories, it is also important to note that humor is a key factor. Even though these categories generally combine purely enthusiastic and referentialist characteristics, humor continues to play a prominent role in interpersonal relationships and message transmission.

Conclusions

The research presented a comprehensive overview of how GIFs are not only complex in themselves, but also interpreted in a wide variety of ways by users. By further developing the initial research, I was able to identify new, more nuanced user categories that carry additional shades and dimensions beyond the extremes. It can be concluded that pure categories appeared less frequently than mixed categories, which can be partly attributed to the fact that the enthusiastic and referentialist categories, in particular, can be considered extreme. The enthusiastic category includes those who place particular emphasis on partner-oriented communication and, to this end, enrich it with nonverbal cues and the presentation of their unique identity. On the other hand, the referentialist category is more self-serving, as the use of GIFs serves not to identify with others, but rather to showcase pop culture literacy. The searcher category is in the middle and is not exclusively about motivation and communication goals, but rather about the use of technological competencies. Based on the creation of subcategories, it can be said that GIF users are more complex and that GIFs as a visual tool can help to convey nonverbal signs, as seen in expressive GIF users, or can help to belong to a community, as observed in the meme-oriented category. What complements the underlying research is the mixture of clear categories,

that is, enthusiastic, searching, and referential categories, which I have named super GIF users. This category contains the important characteristics of all three categories, and it can be said that this is the category that exploits the full potential of GIFs and has all the skills necessary for using GIFs, both in terms of usage and understanding.

Based on the results of my research, I have come to the conclusion that GIF user categories form a complex system that shows similarities to users of other media, such as television, radio, or internet user communities. This approach allows for a deeper understanding and promotes further research in this area.

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