

Online Gestures: Icon Use by Fan Communities on LiveJournal

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Abstract

This paper examines the use of icons as communication devices in persistent conversations. The paper presents findings from the author's ethnographic study of a fan group on LiveJournal. Analysis reveals how icons approximate physical gestures in face-to-face conversation. Icons are used as a signal for attention, for emphasis, or as acknowledgment of another party's conversation or mood. Designers of online environments are advised to consider the potential application of icons as conversational elements in online communities and provide for greater flexibility, variety and consistency in their use.

1. Introduction

Whether called avatars, user pictures or icons, visual symbols have been an available option for user identification in many graphical online settings. In early text environments, emoticons were used, as their name suggests, to denote mood and reaction. While both continue to be used for these functions, in some cases visual symbols serve as an added source of information in conversations.

This paper reports on icon use as revealed by a three-year ethnographic study of a fan group on LiveJournal (LJ), which included interviews and surveys. This paper discusses only one aspect of this overall study, which was undertaken to understand the group's practices and use of technology to achieve their goals. By studying the group's use of verbal idioms and icons, the ethnography revealed that although icons are optional for posts or comments they are used with great consistency in this group. Thus they emerged as an important part of the interaction and conversation practices of these LJ users and as an object of study. In examining the use of icons within the LJ fan group, similarities emerged to the use of gesture in face-to-face (FtF) communication. Icon use within this particular group lends support to the need for enriching asynchronous textual environments with elements of FtF communication, particularly in settings that encourage emotional discourse.

Gestures are movements that are synchronized with linguistic units, and are parallel in semantic and pragmatic functions to the synchronized linguistic units [1]. The issue of synchronicity becomes complicated online as many environments are, and will continue to be, asynchronous and textual, two factors which inhibit the normal function of gesture

when FtF. Pursuant to the communicative theory of gesture where language and gesture are one system used to convey meaning, icon use appears to follow gestural use in several ways: as a signal for attention, for emphasis, or for acknowledgment of another person's utterances and intent. Following a literature review, each of these will be addressed in Section 5. The paper will conclude with design implications for online communities. This paper will not attempt to explore the use of icons among other groups on LJ or at other online locations, nor the use of such visual symbols in different mediums.

2. Use of Gestures in Conversation

People in conversation use gesture both as a means to attract attention to the speaker, and as an audience reaction of support or disagreement with a speaker. As attention-getting behavior, physical gestures and posture are both used to emphasize particular points (e.g. a raised finger), directing turn-taking (head turned to another participant), and signaling topic changes (shift in stance, leaning forward). As Schegloff notes the use of gesture is a way of setting a conversational scene by use of posture, gesture, and facial expression [2]. Heath adds that posture and gesture "allows the speaker to establish a state of mutual involvement if only temporarily without shifting the focus of attention from the topic or business at hand" [3]. Establishing receptivity and signaling involvement online is difficult without these conversational cues, which adds to miscommunication.

Sounds or gestures from an audience serve as feedback for speakers as they signal agreement or attentiveness (such as repetition of phrases). Appropriate reaction to the conversational content, such as surprise or amusement, aids in the creation of a partnership in the exchange. Vocal expressions, ("uh-huh", "hmm"), visual expressions including eye gaze and head nods, express alignment with or understanding of the discussion in progress. Although such expressions and their frequency may vary by culture, in general a lack of such listening behavior expresses disinterest to the speaker [4].

Kendon proposes a typology of gesture functions that includes pragmatic, performative, modal and parsing functions. The same gesture may function in any one of these ways depending on context. A given gesture can have its own semantic theme and when employed in combination with speech produces a

specific local meaning [5]. Having the same gesture put to different use depending on context is important in the case of icons. LJ, like many other online platforms, has limited icon storage and the same icon may have to serve multiple uses. Two of the functions Kendon discusses signal the intent of the speech act. The first, performative, conveys the intended tone of the speech by the speaker to the listener. Another, the modal function, is used when the speaker is conveying information and may separate speaker from content. For example, in a performative gesture, the speaker may convey discomfort (looking away, fidgeting) or earnestness (engaged eye contact, small touches). In the modal function the speaker may convey ambivalence about the conversational content (a wagging hand or shrug) or support (head nods, a pointing finger). These same gestures could be used in different contexts to mean different things.

Gesture can also be used to demonstrate participation and support to others. Holmes gives examples of supportive reactive behavior by women in conversation including laughter, listening sounds (mm, yeah, oh right), and supportive utterances [6]. Such signals of attentiveness and involvement can be useful online where exchanges may feel impersonal and utterances can appear to be made into a void.

3. From Prop to Lexicon

Since the early days of text-based MUDs, online users have attempted to bring the physical into their conversations, typing out gestures, expressions and actions. The WWW allowed for increased use of avatars or icons as graphical representations that add the physical through the visual. These visual aids can be used to distinguish individuals online and emphasize aspects of their personality. Suler found on MUDs that most users did not use pictures of themselves as their primary avatars but rather preserved anonymity through images representing partial aspects of themselves [7]. Similarly, discussing AIM buddies, Nakamura stated they occupy a liminal role between early visual avatar forms and signature files which used either text alone or text with text art to represent slices of identity [8].

The identity function of avatars and sigs have carried over to LJ icons which, rather than being liminal, are integrated, being either image, text, a combination of image and text, or even animation. In a study of LJ groups whose focus is the creation and distribution of icons, Tarkowski sees LJ icons as moving from identity prop to elements in a cultural lexicon where icons are produced, exchanged and received as cultural content. An aggregation of icons is a “visual dictionary” split into the 100 x 100 pixel

frames allowed by LJ's format [9]. When these visual forms of cultural representation are created and shared by users and employed in conjunction with textual statements, the highly specific local meaning Kendon attributes to gesture can also be seen in icon use.

3. Method

In a short-term online study project conducted in 2004 the author found that LJ was increasingly being used by fan writers to host their personal as well as fan oriented discussions. The group was scattered over thousands of individual and community blogs on LJ. The most recent numbers indicate around 35,000 participants [10]. The use of virtual ethnography was indicated as a way of following conversations and activities across these varied locations. As a participant-observer I opened my own journal and began first observing and then joining conversations that focused on varied issues including gender, reading and writing practices, hierarchies, and identity.

As discussed by Hine [11] and Mason [12], the virtual ethnography is an immersive experience where a detailed and systematic account is kept of activities within the group while the researcher builds relationships with participants to develop a representation of the group's purpose, boundaries, and forms of exchange. Although I both posted at my journal and included information in my profile that I was engaged in a study of the community, not all individuals I encountered could have known this. For reasons of privacy all references to specific individuals or locations on LJ will be anonymized in this and other publications.

Over a two-year period I observed that icon use varied by the same individual as well as across individuals and that icons were discussed as an object of value to participants. Participants expressed both in conversation (and later in a survey) that they chose to open paid LJ accounts for the purpose of having more icons at their disposal than free accounts allowed. I recorded specific comments and discussions about icons which foregrounded attitudes towards the practice. As LJ includes a polling feature I also invited participants by way of several community blog posts to take part in a survey hosted on my journal. During a weeklong period 299 individuals took the survey, answering multiple choice questions and making screened comments. I also emailed two icon makers at random requesting interviews, one of which was conducted by phone and the other through IM.

4. The LJ Interface

On many weblogs, threaded conversations, or

direct replies to other participants are not possible. In addition respondents often have no way of knowing if anyone has replied to their comment or if their contribution has started a new topic of discussion unless they revisit the post and read through the entire comment thread. On LJ more emphasis has been placed on creating opportunities for conversation as opposed to solitary replies. Comments to a post do appear chronologically, but as the poster or other respondents reply to earlier comments, these replies become threaded to the originating comment, allowing both for new topics to be split off and for one-on-one discussions to occur. In addition, anyone with an LJ account can opt to be notified by e-mail if someone has replied to their post or to their comment anywhere on LJ. Communication therefore isn't limited by time or memory. A new reader stumbling across an old post can comment to the original poster or another respondent years after the fact and receive a reply.

between two other participants may be considered an "interruption." by some users. In such cases, an acknowledgment of the possible intrusion may be made by the newcomer. Within a threaded discussion there may be signals of topic change or stages in the conversation. There can be explicit "closings" to the conversation with a respondent mentioning offline commitments, suggesting they will continue the conversation in their own journal or by email, or thanking someone for information provided. Offline, non-verbal communication is helpful in these conversational shifts, and may include physical stances, movements, vocal inflection, or pauses. Within this group, icons may serve some of these signaling functions.

Figure 1 is an example of two threaded exchanges with their accompanying icons. The text has been deliberately resized to anonymize the usernames. Most icons in this paper are shown in actual size.

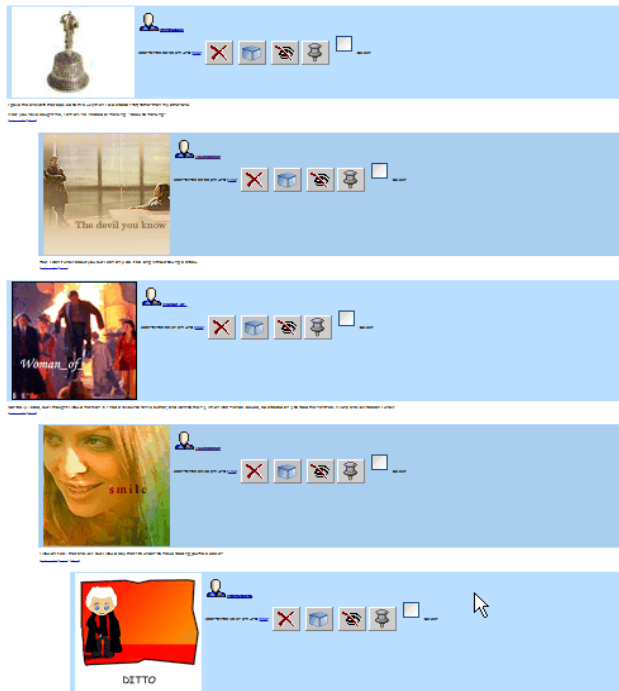


Figure 1: Threaded comments in LJ

A conversation within the fan group on LJ may utilize the following format. A post is an opening, introducing one or more topics. Readers can then respond to different sections of the post or introduce their own topics. Later respondents read earlier comments as well as the post and respond to either or both. Each new comment is in essence a turn being taken. A third person who comments to a thread

5. Icons as Gesture

In my 2006 survey of 299 group members, 96% reported consistently using icons with their posts and comments. In assessing the icon use of others, 33% believed that icons were selected for use intentionally, 64% believed that use was sometimes intentional, and only 3% believed icon selection by others was not intentional. In reporting on their own behavior 88% of respondents said that they selected accompanying icons because "The icon represents (in some way) the topic I'm writing about." In choosing among a variety of icon functions, 57% also responded that "I use the icon to do part of my "talking" for me." What follows in this section is an analysis of how icons represent topics and speak for the users.

As stated in the introduction, this LJ group can employ icons as substitutes for three gestural functions: (1) to signal attention to a particular part of the exchange, (2) to emphasize their statements or intent, or (3) in acknowledgement of the content or mood of a conversational partner's statement. In some cases these functions may be co-occurring.

5.1. Signalling for attention

When discussing FtF communication, Heath writes that gestures can prepare a listener for speech yet to come through a signal for attention. Gestures stand out from the environment and draw the gaze of others [3]. The icon as seen in Figure 1 is a visual accompaniment to posted text and stands out, drawing the eye far more effectively than textual stimuli. Schegloff notes that a signaling gesture precedes the utterances to which attention is required and may also

coincide with speech but will diminish after the important utterances have occurred [2]. In the default LJ journal layout seen in Figure 1, icons appear to the left of the username and text being posted, so in Western languages it would literally precede the textual conversational component. The icon placement then can function as a signaling gesture does, preparing the reader for the content found within the post, or the tone of the comment being made. Such a signal is particularly useful when more than one topic is being addressed in the post, or if a part of the post is not being stated explicitly. This signal is achieved through content matching, selecting an icon that somehow reflects the tone or topic of the important text.



[Anon 1]

Sorry but this gets all my male/female commercial/anti-capitalism sentiments riled up....are you still a fan if you're making money off it????

[i know jenkins loves talking about cultural media convergence and apparently hills is all over davies&eccleston but...are they still fans??? oh, and they're all guys...what a surprise!!!]



[Anon 2]

I'm really not sure I get your point. I'm a guy and my reactions to this have nothing to do with my gender or capitalism (my technophilia yes, my interest in cultural change, yes, and so on). Or did I miss something?



[Anon 1]

*it's not that i want to necessarily relish the outsider status or celebrate the subversiveness...but i think there are costs involved in fan/producer convergence, and from where i stand right now, it *is* gendered!!!*

sorry for the not completely appropriate icon, but any marxist will do in a pinch, i guess :-)

Figure 2: Icons as signaling gesture

In Figure 2, which has been edited for length and anonymity, the topic under discussion is the blurring line between producers and consumers of media content. There exists a theme of undermining capitalist structures. Anon 1 felt that an icon representing Marxism would be a relevant one for her reply. However as can be seen from her discussion this is only part of her focus, since she also discusses gender. Anon 2 questions the relevance of both of the topics and also uses his icon in a “content match” capacity, to emphasize his confusion at the response he has received. In a FtF exchange Anon 2 might have utilized a quizzical look or shake of the head. In this online exchange he is disagreeing with Anon 1 but also asking for clarification, thus his icon emphasizes his confusion rather than his disagreement.

Anon 1’s reply uses text to reinforce her claim to the relevance of gender, but then foregrounds the secondary topic of capitalism by drawing explicit attention to her icon choice. It is possible she felt the image of Theodor Adorno was not sufficiently recognizable to stand on its own in representing the political framework of the discussion. She may also have been using it as a device to bring both topics into play while concentrating textually on only one of them. Both Anon 1 and Anon 2 are using icons they consider part of the discussion and which highlight portions of their text. Moreover Anon 1’s comment about “appropriateness” of an icon indicates a larger pattern of expectation where icons have meaning and relevance to a discussion and where it’s assumed they will be noticed.



[Anon 3]

And I honor your rage with the appropriate Office Space icon.

Figure 3 : Icons as signaling gesture

In the example in Figure 3, Anon 3 is responding to a friend’s complaint about intrusive behavior by office mates who are examining her personal belongings. Anon 3 selects an office-themed icon whose text demonstrates hostility and annoyance, stating “touch it and die.” This message was probably

a clear enough response to her friend’s post to go unremarked. However, in this post, which I have edited for length, Anon 3 addressed two different issues, only mentioning the office complaint in her conclusion, which I have reproduced above. Her textual foregrounding of the icon thus drew attention to her support of her friend’s anger.

In both these previous examples, the icons being used emphasized particular parts of the textual content, while also in the case of Anons 2 and 3, reflecting the mood or intent of the content. In keeping with Kendon’s gesture typology these could both be seen as “performative” gestural acts, indicating the intent of speakers.

5.2. Emphasis

The icon as emphasis is fairly common within this LJ group. Most of the time the icon’s use goes unmentioned as in Figure 4. For the icon to be understood by the viewer they must share both cultural references and an understanding of context with the speaker.



[Anon 14]

Hee! Aw, poor Giles - it's not easy having a hangover when there's a demanding vampire chained up in the bathtub, and well-meaning friends insist on checking up on one. At least he made the best of it. ;-)

Figure 4: Icon emphasizing tone

In Figure 4 Anon 14 performs content matching to produce an effect of emphasis. She is commenting on a story that features a character named Giles who is suffering a hangover. She uses an icon of Giles asleep in bed, which is how the story begins, and she makes reference to his state in her comment. She does not mention how her icon matches her text response since the reader of this thread would have presumably read the same story, and recognized the character of Giles in her icon. Anon 14’s icon subtly emphasizes the sympathetic tone of her comment.

In some cases the speaker may draw attention to their icon as a way of producing emphasis. This can be seen in Figure 5. Here Anon 6 makes a (lengthier and not included here) central argument about how various acts by others in the group are very similar. Her icon represents a spirit of unity claiming all

members of the group are dorks. With her icon she performs her argument both visually and in text, providing emphasis to her message of solidarity. By calling attention to the icon she emphasizes how all parts of her message reinforce one another.



[Anon 6]

**uses just-off-the-PSP-presses icon in honor of this point* We're all dorks here, man!*

Figure 5: Icon emphasizing text

5.3. Acknowledgment

In Figure 3, Anon 3’s example raises the issue of conversational support, which is also a feature of gesture. Note that both Anon 3 and Anon 6 used the word “honor” in presenting their icons. The provision of a supportive response to another person’s story is seen particularly among women in FtF interactions [6], as well as online [12]. Young women (18-24) make up the majority of participants with whom I have interacted, much as they are the majority elsewhere on LJ [13]. The gendered nature of this community of study may be a factor in how icons have come to be used within a group that emphasizes emotional content and dialogue over activities and information seeking.

Figure 6 presents a case where the icon acknowledges the poster’s own actions. In a demonstration of the conversational norms discussed in Section 4 of this paper, two posters are having an exchange when a third one, Anon 11, steps in and contributes an answer to the question about charging money. Anon 11 also uses an icon which serves a dual purpose. The icon is the logo of a television show called “Pardon the Interruption.”



[Anon11]

2006-05-02 04:13 pm UTC (

It could be the noir thing that Angel started out with but does Veronica Mars charge for her sleuthing?

Yes, Veronica does charge. Or rather, she charges some people and not others.

Figure 6: Icon as acknowledgment

However the icon's use here acknowledges that Anon 11 is breaking into a conversation between two other posters. The "interruption" is accepted and responded to by the second speaker. The icon carries the apology separate from the text of the post.



[Anon 4]

boggles



[Anon 5]

::shakes head:: ::uses appropriate icon::

Figure 7: Icon as acknowledgment

The two examples in Figure 7 were both replies taken from the same post. In this post, the speaker was discussing a problematic relationship with another person in the community. In her reply, Anon 4 posts only an icon and the word "boggles." Note that the term boggles is set off with asterisks, indicating that even the text is representing an action. Anon 4's icon also uses image and text to convey confusion and astonishment. Anon 4's response is nearly entirely gestural. The content indicates she has understood and reacted to the troubles the speaker expressed in her post.

Anon 5, responds (at greater length than seen in Figure 7) and concludes with the quoted text which calls attention to her icon choice. Anon 5 also makes gestural comments in text -- a shaking head, the action of selecting an icon. Her icon, showing two people embracing, can be seen in a general sense as a simple expression of comfort and support. Within the context of this particular group, however it has further meanings. The two individuals in the icon are well known to the participants. They are fictional characters who are childhood friends. The scene pictured is when one saved the other from committing horrible acts of violence due to despair and grief. It is, in fact, a pivotal moment for both characters, one where the friendship's ties were severely tested, but emerged triumphant. The poster's story was one of betrayal by a person she had trusted. The icon then may not only represent support from Anon 5, but also

a reaffirmation of friendship between Anon 5 and the poster -- an indication that she, unlike the betrayer, is a true friend who will stay the course. This is not a meaning ever stated in her textual response. Anon 5 merely notes that this is an "appropriate" icon. By pointing this out, however, she is also activating the various levels of meaning inherent in the image.

The use of icons as acknowledgment can sometimes, as in Anon 4's case, result in the icon itself carrying the larger part of the message content. What follows are two other cases of acknowledgment where the icons stand nearly alone.

In Figure 8, the first individual or "speaker" notes she has contacted her conversational partner by email but is also commenting publicly to lend support to the partner's expressed opinion. The "listener" then responds twice, both times with minimal text saying in the first one merely "*g*" (or grin) and in the second "Also this one." In the first response she is using her icon (both of which say "Hugs") to acknowledge the act of friendship and, because she wants to emphasize this, repeats with yet a second icon. In this exchange not only do the listener's icons carry the bulk of her response, but in the second reply the text is there to support the icon by explaining that the icon is not part of a "blank" post made in error.

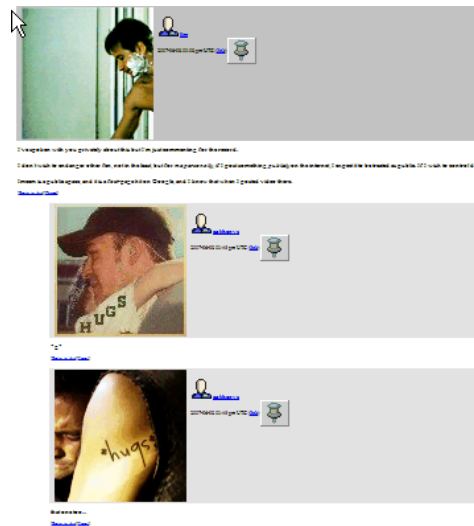


Figure 8: Icons as sole response

In Figure 9 the first poster solves the potential miscue of a "blank post" by not only using an icon with her post but also using an icon *as* her post. This poster is responding to comments which have left her disgruntled. Both her accompanying icon, "Well, this sucks" as well as the posted icon, "I fluff my butt in your general direction" express her reaction to the post content. A second poster, comments to the first by

laughing (LOL, set off with asterisks) and says “this is priceless” with an emoticon grin, employing various forms of “non-verbal” content for her reaction. The second respondent also uses an icon titled “Fresh.” Although the image is of fruit, one gathers that her intent in using it is for the other meaning of the word “fresh,” as in audacious. Her icon therefore expands on her comment of amusement and appreciation, clarifying why she enjoys the first poster’s response and acknowledging the first poster’s cleverness.



Figure 9: Icon as sole response

6. Miscues in gestural use

While the use of gesture in FtF is generally to support the spoken conversation, miscues can occur. A chin rub may indicate thought, confusion, or merely an itch. The greater the familiarity both speakers have with one another, the more likely it is that gestures will be correctly interpreted. Although the fan group under study shares considerable cultural knowledge that allows them to interpret icon use among themselves, the group is so large and practices vary so widely that interpretations are not always correct. When group members were asked in the icon survey whether they usually felt they understood the purpose of the icon in a post or comment, 58% of respondents said yes, 38% said sometimes, and 1% said no with 3% saying they generally didn’t pay any attention to icons. Acknowledging that icon use can cause

confusion, 52% reported that on at least one occasion they had been so confused by someone’s icon use that they had asked for clarification. Additionally, 79% of respondents felt to some degree that learning how icons functioned in the community had been part of their learning process when entering the group.

Confusion can result when icons are used differently by the same person in different contexts. Only 5% of survey respondents *never* intentionally used certain icons with their posts or comments. By contrast, 21% reported doing so *every* single time, with the majority doing so “most of the time” (46%) or some of the time (28%). There is evidence then that not only are icons not used for conversational functions by all respondents, but that icons are not always used in the same way by the same person. These other icon uses are varied and due to space limitations will not be covered here. Instead this section will focus on the most commonly observed reasons for icon miscues.

6.1. Miscue due to individual practice

In the following exchange Anon 7 is discussing LJ’s then recent policy of increasing the number of icons available to users. This announcement provoked great excitement among most members of the group. Not so for Anon 7:

Okay, this new 100,000,000 icon thing means nothing to me, because I use the tree and the tree alone. [Anon 7]

I like the tree! I can always tell it's you without the tediousity of reading. Reading, yuck! [Anon 8]

Anon 7’s normal habit is to use only one icon, of a tree, whenever she posts. This icon is used to represent herself, and she has no need for extra icon space. Anon 8 responds that the tree serves its function. When seeing it, she knows instantly that Anon 7 has posted, well before she reads the username or text comment. In a more poignant example, a group member has died unexpectedly. In memorial remarks her icon is an object of comment:

It was always a good feeling to see her icon on your comments. You knew that your day was going to be a little brighter... [Anon 9]

I will miss that horse icon in my comments - I remember 'talking through' how to make a picture into an icon with her last year, and I knew whenever I saw it that there would be an intelligent and friendly remark. [Anon 10]

In the cases of Anon 7 and the deceased group member, icon use would not have varied due to the content of their posts. Anyone who didn't know them and observed their conversation would either be confused by the icon use or would deduce, due to its repetitiveness, that the icon was not serving conversational purposes.

The use of icon as a symbol of self continues to be a common one in this group. In cases like that of Anon 7, an icon's only use is as an identity marker. In the case of other participants, icon repetition is the result of limitations in the technological platform. Users on LJ currently have anywhere from 6 to 133 icons at their disposal depending on their status as a free user, paid user or permanent user. If a person does not have many icons available, this can result in repeated use of the same icon for different purposes.

6.2. Miscue due to lack of icon specificity

The lack of diversity in icons is a source of some frustration to this LJ group. When asked if they would like to have more icon space, 70% answered yes, and 61% specified they wanted more because "I often don't have the icon I want when posting/commenting." This is the case even when the majority of survey respondents (59%) had between 30 and 133 icons already uploaded to their accounts. In fact only 13% of respondents reported they did not have additional icons stored elsewhere for eventual use, with 42% reporting between 100 and 500 additional icons stored off of LJ.

Due to the lack of desired icons, what a user has available must often take on multiple meanings in use. In Figure 10 Anon 12 expresses support with her icon, but also feels the need to explain in her comment that it serves multiple purposes for her.



[Anon 12]

*This is my woo-hoo icon. Well, actually, I use it for anything positive. *g**

Figure 10: Doubling function of icons

Similarly, Anon 14 acknowledges that the content of her icon may not be specific enough:

"I am using this icon ironically and with full knowledge of alternate interps of the pic" [Anon 14]

Another issue demonstrated by Anon 14 is the possibility that even when "appropriate" icons are used in a post, their meaning may not be clear to others.

6.3. Miscue due to varied interpretations

As part of the icon survey, users were asked to give their interpretations of 5 different icons, some with text, some without. Because the icons were shown without the context that would normally be present if they were used in conversation, viewers read a great deal into them. All icons received diverse answers, with one receiving 31 different interpretations.

In everyday use within this group icons derive context from several sources: icons accompany a post with textual content; icons and their posts are made in certain locations which may have their own particular rules or conventions; and the icons and text are intended to be read by certain people. So recipient, accompaniment, and location are all cues to a viewer for what an icon may mean. However, as with gesture, icons are rarely the central component of a conversational exchange. Given their ubiquity there will be limits to the amount of time spent on their interpretation and their content is usually absorbed in a passive way. As an interviewee suggested when asked about icon meanings, most icon interpretation by readers is subconscious:

Int - I see a lot of people talking about icons like "Oh I like your icon" but not "Oh I like what you did with your icon and how it represents X, Y, and Z."

IW4 - Yeah but it may be in a subconscious sort of way, like they're picking up on the extra meaning subliminally but they wouldn't be able to articulate it even if they wanted to. It's hard to try and get that across.

An example of a "subliminal" interpretation is discussed below. In this occurrence a poster angered many in the community and then left LJ, deleting her journal in its entirety (and thus the referenced icon). Anon 16 responds to the event, feeling that the poster's final message did not take responsibility for her actions. She also feels the icon (which she is not quoting literally) added to that message:

I agree, she drove herself out of fandom, and did not make the apology that someone who actually realized what exactly she'd done wrong would've made... That little "fuck off" icon that accompanied her "apology" was not helping her case at all, either. [Anon 16]

Whether or not the poster meant her icon to be dismissive, Anon 16 interpreted it that way. What is certain is that Anon 16 felt that the textual message and the icon's message were in synch by failing to show remorse.

7. Implications for persistent conversation

The example discussed by Anon 16 brings up a problem in icon use within the fan group on LJ. Icons are impermanent accompaniments to the posts they are made with due to LJ's system design. If icons disappear along with the rest of a person's journal, this is not a problem. However if the original icons used disappear from a post, the new icons may either give a different meaning, or they may give no meaning at all, diminishing the original exchange.

As was stated in Section 4, LJ allows for conversations and replies to continue well past their original dates thanks to both a notification and tracking feature. LJ allows for conversations to be split off so that multiple topics can develop in replies to the same post. LJ also allows for exchanges between pairs or subgroups of people within the same post. The fact that these features exist not only in community blogs but individual ones means that every space on LJ is a potential conversation zone rather than one of individual reading and response.

However when it comes to the icon feature, the possibilities of this visual space were overlooked. Icons are hotlinked back to the user's account so they are not permanently embedded within a post or comment. Once uploaded icons can be tagged with keywords and comments and appear in a drop down menu every time a user posts. Given the limitations on icon space (and the prodigious daily production of new icons by group members), hosting space is often a problem. Most users who employ icons tend to rotate icons in and out of their account so as to be able to use new ones or diversify the content of the icons they have available for use.

Unfortunately once an icon is rotated out of a person's account, any place the icon once appeared will display the user's "default icon" instead. Since the default designation itself can change at any time, or the default icon may also be rotated out, any given post or comment may see a variety of icons replace the original over time, each providing new and unintended meanings to the post, or no clear meaning at all.

While conversations certainly continue apace regardless of icon replacement, this does not mean that these sometimes jarring contrasts between text and image are not considered problematic.



[Anon 20]

*PSA: Did you know that if you think it's a brilliant idea to rename all of your icons so that they're separated [into categories] - it forces *all* of your icons EVER...to your current default icon? Yes. FYI.*

So if you've ever in the history of my LJ replied back to me with, "God, that icon is so hawt..." you are spooging all over my joyful Buffy.

Figure 11: Altered icons

In Figure 11, Anon 20 alerts her readers that as a result of reorganizing her icons into categories (by changing their keywords) all her previous icon use has been wiped out. This change affects several years' worth of posts and comments. She goes on to note that all previous comments which referenced her icons now appear to point to her current icon, shown above. One can see by her emphasis and her need to alert others to her discovery (Public Service Announcement) that this is something undesirable and upsetting she's advising others to avoid. Alterations to icons can lead to incomplete or mixed messages as in the example below:

Somehow, with that icon, I just can't take this post seriously at all. [Anon 21]

Since the effect of changing icons is so global, and its occurrence so frequent due to the number of group participants, every day on LJ icons specifically selected for a post or comment change. Since icons are used to signal attention to post content a changed icon may also fail to alert a potential reader that the content is relevant to them.

Use an icon from the fandom of your fic/icon/meta. There are exceptions here, yes, but sometimes your friendly newsletter editor looks at the icon then the text and if you are posting BSG fic with a Narnia icon it increases the chance that I'll fly right past your fic. [Anon22]

In the comment above the poster noted that she used icons as part of her scan of blog posts to alert her to what she should be reading. Given the parallels to gesture examined within this paper, one can see how inappropriate gestures in a conversation can lead to

distraction, a failure to pay attention to specific content, or miscommunication.

8. Implications for system development

Developers creating platforms for online communities want to either attract certain types of users or wish to design for specific existing user groups. In the case of LJ, their design encouraged groups to form who wanted to have dialogue and maintain contact over time. Although icon use exists in many online spaces, and among other fan groups, their use as detailed in this paper is tied to this site and this fan group. The following comment comes from a discussion about the difference for fan groups between LJ and its clone Greatest Journal (GJ).

Because I know for a fact that much of GJ fandom considers what happens on LJ, people ...making icons for no good reason...to be painfully geeky and useless. [Anon 23]

For Anon 23, icons seem to serve no purpose on LJ, because on GJ (which allowed up to 5000 icons per user) icons are components in role-playing games (RPGs). GJ is targeted to such players who use icons for character illustration. By comparison icon use at LJ also serves a practical purpose but one that is in line with the conversational focus of fan interactions taking place there. LJ hosts relatively few RPGs, but LJ fans relish fiction discussion, the exchange of artwork and relationship building. To improve LJ's functionality a greater number of icons which are permanently embedded would allow users to enlarge their gestural "vocabularies" and also allow conversations to persist in their original state in a way that builds on the site's other affordances for long-term exchanges.

9. Conclusion

Icon use on LJ is generated by a need to create identity and rapport in a virtual environment. These needs are not unique to a technology or group of users. However seeing the differing uses individuals make of options such as icons tells us what they find missing or valuable in the spaces they occupy. As with FtF gestures, the greater the shared culture and familiarity among participants, the more likely visual signals will be correctly interpreted and add value to the conversation. The gestural employment of icons within the LJ fan group reflects their sense of community and shared culture. This group has expanded the icon's early use as an identity marker to a conversational marker, something which goes

beyond the individual and engages others in its use. By adding signaling, emphasis and acknowledgment to the icon's historical function, of user representation, this group is shifting the icon's relationship from the messenger to the message.

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