

December 6, 2011 | NY Times
Whimsical Texting Icons Get a Shot at Success
By JENNA WORTHAM

Say you wanted to invite a friend to happy hour. You could send a simple text message, but that would be boring. Instead, why not send a cartoony picture of two clinking beer mugs?

That's the kind of thing Alicia Fernandez, a student in fashion marketing at Berkeley College in New York, likes to send to friends. "Instead of saying 'I love you,' I'll just use a heart," she said. "Or when I'm writing 'LOL,' I'll put a laughing-crying face instead."

Ms. Fernandez is talking about emoji, which are the more elaborate cousins of emoticons — those creative combinations of colons, parentheses and other punctuation that people use to drop a facial expression into a text message or e-mail.

But unlike emoticons, emoji don't require tilting your head sideways to make sense of the image. They are a kind of pictorial alphabet stored on a phone that can be displayed in place of the regular keyboard, making it easy to tap out a visual message.

Outside their native Japan, emoji have been available to in-the-know smartphone owners for some time via add-on applications. But now they may be on the verge of going mainstream in the United States, thanks in part to Apple's latest update to its iPhone software. The latest version, iOS 5, comes with an installed library of emoji that can be turned on as an "international keyboard" in the device's settings.

Apple declined to comment on its decision to add emoji, but it was most likely driven by a global standardization of the format last year that was meant to ensure that a picture of a cute cat will still look like a cute cat on a different phone in a different country. The move has put emoji on the radar of many more iPhone and iPod Touch owners.

Shawn Roberts, 39, a lawyer in Oklahoma City who was familiar with using emoji in e-mail services like Gmail, said they were an entertaining way to communicate with his 9-year-old son, Sam. Mr. Roberts said he and Sam often use pictures of tiny footballs or basketballs as they trade banter about sports and coming games.

"It's just fun," he said. "And it lets you convey a little more emotion or feeling in messages."

Emoji have long been popular among cellphone users in Asia. They first emerged in Japan in the 1990s, said Mimi Ito, a cultural anthropologist at the University of California, Irvine, who studies how young people use digital media in Japan and the

United States. Cellphone carriers first added the images to differentiate their phones from those of rivals, and they caught on as an efficient way to quickly convey a specific thought, mood or joke.

Since so many of our daily interactions are happening over mobile phones, it makes sense that people would crave new ways to convey meaning other than plain text, said S. Shyam Sundar, co-director of the Media Effects Research Laboratory at Pennsylvania State University.

“Text as a medium is particularly dull when it comes to expressing emotions,” Professor Sundar said. “Emoticons open the door a little, but emoji opens it even further. They play the role that nonverbal communication, like hand gestures, does in conversation but on a cellphone.”

Professor Sundar also said Apple’s decision might be part of a larger business strategy that is intended to give the company a leg up on its competition. With features like emoji directly in the software, the company is fashioning a unique mobile culture — not unlike how BlackBerry Messenger, the popular chat application for BlackBerry phones, forms a cultlike following among its users.

It is hard to gauge whether emoji will thrive in the West. In Japan, at least, they are more than a cute novelty, having become “a very established part of Japanese texting culture,” Professor Ito said.

But some things may be lost in translation in emoji’s journey. For example, the emoji of a smiling coil of human waste is a popular way to express dissatisfaction in Japan, but doesn’t have quite the same resonance in the United States. And while the iPhone has emoji for steaming bowls of ramen, balls of rice and cups of sake, there aren’t any for common Western items like pizza.

Certain combinations of characters have become pictographs in Japan, used to convey a specific meaning. For example, a knife and fork emoji, followed by a question mark and a smiley face, could signify an invitation to dinner.

Emoji can also be used for more elaborate forms of communication. A blog called Narratives in Emoji offers stories and movie plots in emoji shorthand. A recent entry titled “Titanic,” 14 characters long, begins with a ship’s anchor and ends with a broken heart.

<http://narrativesinemoji.tumblr.com/>

