

Technically white: Emoji skin-tone modifiers as American technoculture

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Abstract

The inclusion of skin-tone modifiers into the standard emoji set marked a shift from the default white racialization of emoji towards explicit attempts to expand racial representation in the human emoji characters. This study explores the racial logics of emoji as culturally-situated artifacts that rely on linked understandings of race and technology. We conduct an interface analysis of emoji skin-tone modifiers, coupled with user discourse analysis, to explore the design and user interpretations of skin-tone modifiers. Our findings suggest that though the skin-tone modifiers were introduced as an intervention into the lack of racial representation in emoji, they continue to technically center whiteness in the emoji set as an extension of American technoculture.

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Introduction

The blatant absence of non-white human characters in the early emoji sets available in the United States mobile market drew strong criticism from Black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) emoji users via social media, tech blogs, and opinion pieces in popular online media outlets. This public backlash to what Roxane Gay (2013) termed “the unbearable whiteness of emoji,” [1] created visibility around emoji representation as a social issue, putting pressure on Apple to respond to these critiques by working closely with the Unicode Consortium to update the encoding standard (Triang, 2014). The result of these efforts was the introduction of the emoji

