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# Revisiting emotions: an analysis of contemporary perceptions of facial expression

**Jenner, Matthew Joseph**

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# Revisiting Emotions: An Analysis of Contemporary Perceptions of Facial Expression

## Matthew Joseph Jenner

**Abstract**

Language is more than just words, and the human face has demonstrated immense communicatory significance as a mode of non-verbal communication, particularly in terms of the expression of different emotional states. This research is inspired by the following question: are facial expressions universal, or shaped by our environment?

This study addresses two competing schools of thought that have aimed to answer this question around non-verbal communication. The Universality Theory proposes that facial expressions of emotion are formed from the same innate emotional mechanism and are thus recognizable by all populations, regardless of cultural background. The Culturally Conditioned Theory proposes that cultural upbringing has an indelible part in mediating certain facial expressions and that each population group will convey unique expressions that are mostly understood throughout that culture. It also investigated these principles from the perspective of the modern use of emotion through digital communication, namely emoji, which has developed into one of the most widespread forms of contemporary global communication.

To investigate this question, we have conducted a form of qualitative research, inspired by the work of Ekman and Friesen (1969; 1971), whereby participants from three different regions of South Africa took part in a survey where they were shown various pictures, each depicting either one of the six basic emotions (happiness, sadness, fear, surprise, anger or disgust) and asked to provide their interpretations of the emotions being expressed. Participants also interpreted various emoji to bring this study into the contemporary space by looking at emotions in the digital realm. Additionally, due to requirements associated with the present COVID-19 pandemic guidelines, research surrounding the impact of health masks that cover the lower half of the face was included in order to determine the extent to which these masks impact the perception and interpretation of facial expressions of emotion.

This study aimed to determine whether the recognition of facial expressions of emotion (both human and emoji) are the result of some emotional mechanism or are culturally conditioned to specific populations. This study is the first from a purely South African perspective.