

## Why is there no hijab emoji?: Emoji representation

NARRATION: On an episode of *Saturday Night Live* from 2014, the actress and comedian Sasheer Zamata talked about the lack of diversity in emoji.

SASHEER ZAMATA (SOUNDBITE FROM *SNL*): If you want evidence of tech companies' lack of diversity, just look at your phone. There are over 800 emojis available on Apple products, and not one of them is of a Black person.

NARRATION: Since that clip from 2014, there has been a lot of progress in the representation and diversity of emoji. In 2015, skin tone modifiers were approved, allowing the people emojis to have various skin colors, and greater availability of gender representation came with an update in 2016, which meant there wasn't just Santa Claus but also Mrs. Claus, not just women with bunny ears but also men with bunny ears.

But before I explain why issues like race and gender in emoji have been such a long process, I need to address some technical aspects, so bear with me. What is or is not an emoji is governed by two bodies: the I-S-O, or ISO, and the Unicode Consortium. ISO is an organization that deals with international standards of all sorts. These range from the obscure, like the standards on the designation of the direction of twists in yarn, to things we're more familiar with, like QR codes and the ISBNs we see on books. ISO also has a stake in emoji, which I'll get to later.

The other governing body I mentioned, the Unicode Consortium, maintains a standard for the encoding and representation of characters. By creating this standard, Unicode makes sure that a character on one device looks like that same character on another device—this is called cross-platform compatibility. So the reason why a company like Apple can't just create new emojis without Unicode's approval is that without Unicode, there's no guarantee that the emojis Apple makes will appear correctly on, say, Android phones.

When emojis first appeared, they were on devices by various Japanese telecommunication companies, but they weren't standardized. Eventually, though, Unicode decided to step in and create a standard for emoji.

KATE MILTNER: Back in 2008, Unicode decided that they were going to encode emoji, and there was a two-year process from deciding that they were going to do this until releasing them out into the world with Unicode 6.

NARRATION: That was Kate Miltner, a PhD student and emoji researcher, who gave a talk at the emoji conference Emojicon back in November 2016.

KATE MILTNER: So there were some people at the Consortium who were concerned about the representation of human emoji, and they acknowledged that some of them were controversial but because Unicode is a standard and the ISO is a standard, they wanted it to be as neutral as possible.

But they knew that this was going to be tricky because the emoji that the Consortium had inherited from the three Japanese telecom companies had some ethnic emoji that were potentially controversial—originally, Indian man, Chinese man, and Western man. But instead of taking these emoji out of the set or changing the illustration of the glyphs they decided to address the potential controversy by renaming the ethnic emoji in a descriptive manner, right, so Western man became person with blond hair, Chinese man became man with gua pi mao, and Indian man became man with turban.

And the goal for doing this was to avoid controversy and to stay away from making political decisions as much as possible.

**NARRATION:** Although this attempt at an apolitical approach makes sense when trying to create a standard and avoid controversy, in a way, it created controversy on its own. By sweeping the issue of race under the rug, Unicode essentially ignored the representation of emojis for Black people for several years.

As for the design of the emojis themselves, Unicode does not strictly dictate the exact details for emoji designs. This is why the emojis on an Apple device may look very different from the emojis on an Android device. Unicode does provide, however, some general recommendations for how the emojis look. So for the emojis of people, Unicode recommends that the default, when no skin tone modifier is used, be a non-human skin color. This explains why when you first use an emoji of a person on your device, the skin tone default is yellow.

Back in November 2014, an update on Android devices took some stylistic liberties in its depiction of people emojis, perhaps in an attempt to skirt issues of race and gender. These Android emojis depicted people as blobs with faces, sometimes with protrusions that we can only assume were arms and legs. So the woman dancing emoji was just a yellow blob dancing with a rose in its mouth. The baby angel emoji showed a yellow blob with wings and a halo.

Although seeming to avoid issues of race and gender, these blobs eventually ended up posing these issues anyway, and so now the days of blob people are no more. Here's Rachel Been, a designer and art director at Google at the Emojicon conference.

**RACHEL BEEN:** So one of the first things that we did, if you guys are aware of, is we converted, sort of, some of our blob people into people people. And yes, this was a stylistic decision to some degree, but I think it came up as a little more than that. It came up for two things mainly: gender and race—and self-identification really. So we felt that this sort of anthropomorphizing or humanizing of these blob characters—it wasn't appropriate to sort of assign genders or to assign races to blobs. It seemed almost like doing the culture a disservice by making a certain blob a certain race. So we wanted to convert these from a design perspective to allow sort of that cross-platform compatibility with other platforms but also in terms of self-representation, we wanted people to be able to represent themselves as people and not as blobs with racial selection.

**NARRATION:** So while Android changed their blobs to look more human-like to address issues of race, that doesn't mean work in emoji representation is over. In March 2017, Unicode released the final emoji list for the year. New emojis included child, adult, and older adult emojis, which are gender inclusive—that is, they don't specify a specific gender. But many people emojis remain gendered, so while there are women with bunny ears and men with bunny ears, there are yet to be gender-inclusive people with bunny ears.

Still, even if issues of skin color and gender were to be completely settled, other issues of emoji representation pop up, issues that range from ones of religious representation as well as national identity.

For example, the headscarf or hijab emoji was proposed by Rayouf Alhumedhi, a 15-year-old from Saudi Arabia, currently living in Germany. Here she is at Emojicon talking about her motivations for proposing the emoji.

**RAYOUF ALHUMEDHI:** Why is there no hijab emoji? It really baffled me because there are millions of hijabi women like me who use technology avidly. And, I mean, just the United Arab Emirates, that small country, has a smart phone penetration of 80.6%, and that's just a small country in the Middle East, so if you really

look at the global picture, it definitely accounts for so much more. And secondly, because of the fact that if there are four emojis, four spaces on the keyboard reserved for the four stages of a mailbox, why on earth isn't there one for a hijab, for the millions of hijabi women, the five hundred million hijabi women.

NARRATION: You heard that right—in case you haven't noticed, there are four mailbox emojis. These are open mailbox with lowered flag, open mailbox with raised flag, closed mailbox with raised flag, and closed mailbox with lowered flag.

Also, the issue of representation in emoji doesn't just go for depicting people themselves but also for more symbolic things like national identity. Although there is a flag emoji for Antarctica, surprisingly, there haven't been flag emojis for England, Wales, and Scotland. And remember ISO? It's that organization I mentioned at the beginning that's in charge of all sorts of international standards like QR codes and ISBNs. The flag emojis were based on ISO standards. Here's Jeremy Burge, one of the co-authors of the proposal for these flag emojis, to explain.

JEREMY BURGE: There isn't really a precedent for adding new flags to the emoji standard—that every flag is based on an ISO code already, and Wales and Scotland and England just through some international quirks, they consider themselves countries, and they basically—they don't have fully fledged ISO codes, but because there wasn't a process, the main thing that made sense to me is to submit a proposal about it and start the process.

NARRATION: For many people, the Scottish flag emoji in particular stands for a lot more than just the country. Politically, Scotland has been considering the issue of independence from the United Kingdom for several years. Back in September 2014, Scotland had an independence referendum. Ultimately, the people of Scotland voted No to independence, but with the rise of the pro-independence Scottish National Party and with the Brexit vote, independence is still a possibility. I talked to my friend Curtis Stiles, who, although an American, has lived in Scotland for several years.

CURTIS STILES: I think the desire to have a Scottish emoji is essentially part of the almost rebirth of the Scottish nationalism, I guess. And I say that because the Scottish national identity with the current political situation is becoming more and more pronounced, and I think the desire for the emoji is just one smaller aspect of that kind of wider movement.

NARRATION: Both the headscarf emoji and the flag emoji proposals were approved and are expected to appear on phones in late 2017. What all these emoji show is that, whether the Scottish flag, the hijab, or gender representation, the issues surrounding emoji are more than just the fun ways to spice up text messages. Emojis reflect very real issues we face as human beings who want to communicate about ourselves to others. Emojis stand for our sense of self and identity. And who knows? Maybe one day, with more emojis at our fingertips, people of all races and genders can dance with bunny ears in an independent Scotland.