

[Home](#)

[→ Contact](#)

[↗ Twitter](#)

[↘ Podcast](#)

Digital Body Language

Published
November 25,
2023

In the virtual epoch, our methods of communication have largely transcended the confines of the corporeal. We encounter new connections virtually just as often as we do in the physical. In the era of telepresence, we find ourselves supplementing subverbal cues through a new medium. This digital “body language” is an attempt to compensate for the lack of tone, expression, and spatiality that are denied to us when communicating online. What’s more, these methods of digital body language are ever-changing, as both linguistic and nonverbal trends spread more quickly online, and users adapt to a steady cascade of new features, apps, and products that shape the flow of our communication habits.



Digital body language encompasses all the subtextual cues we use

to express ourselves
virtually: emojis,
punctuation,
capitalization, GIFs, and
even the timing of our
interactions. These are
the elements we use
both consciously and
subliminally to add
depth and nuance to our
language, conveying
emotions, intentions,
enthusiasm, and
deference much like we
would in person.

For instance, the dawn
of the message react
has introduced a new
norm of DMing courtesy.
The Instagram ❤️ holds
many meanings: we ❤️
as an acknowledgement,
as a conversation ender,
to emphasize a
particular message. A
total lack of the ❤️
sometimes reads as
curt; for a reply to be left
on “Seen” feels like a
dismissal. We are
inclined to toss a ❤️ to
our companion to
cushion the blow of an
abrupt end—I saw, I
read, I ❤️.

There are obvious
markers of tone carried
over from traditional
writing that influence
our virtual behavior:
exclamation points,
question marks,
ellipses....

One case of this is our
usage of capital letters.
An all caps word or
message signifies
shouting. We follow
normative grammar
rules by capitalizing
proper nouns. However,
we can see an

alternative interpretation through Zoomers who disable autocaps to give off an air of casual coolness, or to draw a distinction between informal texting and a professional email. We might disable this function to take advantage of the full range of grammatical emphasis (“i cant believe he did The Thing again”).

In professional settings, women will often supplement the penchant for reassurance and overt friendliness to disarm their interlocutor. We (women) are prone to sending smiley faces in emails, using exclamation points and warm sign offs to signal affability. This appears in stark contrast to how professional men interact: short messages, periods, and little-to-no textual embellishments, conveying the same tone of terse directedness that creates an aura of intelligence and seriousness.

Our response time plays a crucial role in conveying our interest and attentiveness. A prompt reply indicates active engagement in the conversation, while delayed responses signal distraction or disinterest. We suffer offense at an ignored message, and feel suffocated when we

engage with someone who texts back too quickly, or with too many messages. Balancing an expression of interest has become a tacit factor of our responsiveness; we don't want to seem overeager or overstimulate our interlocutor, while still communicating presence in a conversation.

Of course, these elements of digital body language are not universal; they vary considerably across cultures, contexts, and age groups. For instance, older generations have long been accused of overusing ellipses. Internet linguist Grace McCulloh writes: “‘When we think about informal pre-internet writing, space was at a premium. If you’re sending someone a postcard, but you only have a small box to write in, you won’t speak in full sentences,’ To save real estate on the page, the writer would string together thoughts using ellipses and dashes, rather than penning longer, formal sentences with periods.” Older generations are accustomed to shortening their thoughts, leaving an ellipses, and letting the receiver fill in the blank. Digital natives are inclined to express the full breadth of their thought, often by sending separate texts

to indicate line breaks or pauses in speech.

Another generational difference is the Zoomer's tendency to use indicators of laughter aspirationally. We know that LOL no longer insists that I'm laughing out loud, but to express an affable tone. It's easy to believe that we overuse these textual signifiers of laughter, however in-person, we tend to give up laughs more often to maintain a consistent back-and-forth within a dialogue. In real conversation, we express degrees of laughter that indicate different responses. Over text, this range is limited to LOL/LMAO, lol, HAHAHA, haha, emojis or laugh react. We laugh less often when we are alone, while in-person, we laugh to maintain a light-hearted rapport. While it might be true that your message hasn't conjured an audible laugh while I'm sitting at home, my LOL indicates that I'd be giving a deferential laugh if we were face-to-face.

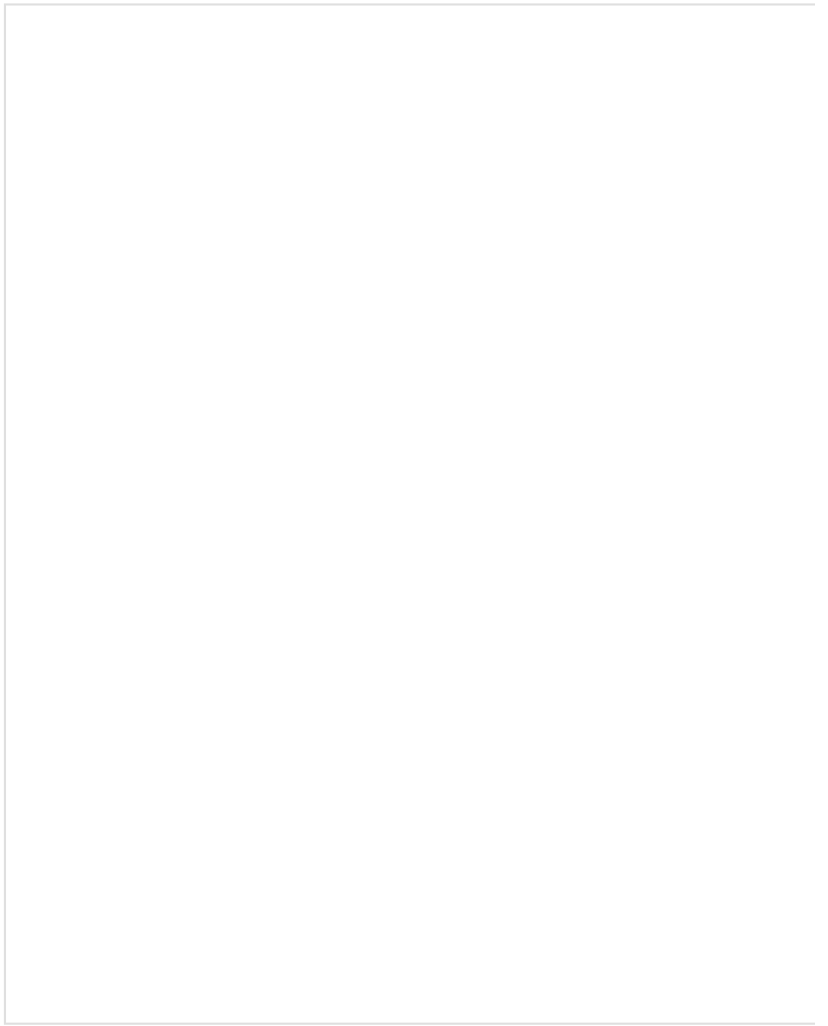
Much like laughter indicators, our use of emojis is also aspirational or representative of the emotion we would express IRL. We're sufficiently literate in digital language to know that LOL or expression-based emojis don't mean the sender is signaling a physical

reaction. While our body language is more natural and reactive during conversation, it's the presence of another person who arouses many of these exhibitions of nonverbal language. We exhibit a more limited range of body language when we are by ourselves, often only triggered by a feeling, thought, or experience so visceral that we can't suppress the reaction.

Last year on TikTok, discourse surfaced surrounding a phenomenon called the "Millennial Pause." This behavior reveals the Millennial's hesitancy held within the flow of recording—they take a split-second pause to check that their phone is recording, to gather their thoughts and bearings. This differs from the quintessential Zoomer user pattern who jump into their thoughts immediately; a habit dubbed the "Gen Z shake," where the user starts recording and speaking before they even place their phone on a surface, conveying a feeling of urgency and familiarity.

As we continue to adapt our usage of virtual platforms, our expressive palette extends beyond our physical constraints, creating a deep lexicon of symbols, cues, and nuances that transcend traditional modes of

communication. Much like the subtleties of face-to-face interaction, these online cues allow us to express emotions, intentions, and nuances that bridge the gap between the corporeal and the digital. The evolution of these cues is relentless, influenced by linguistic trends, technological advancements, and the perpetual influx of new communication platforms. Held in the intricacies of digital body language, it becomes evident that these cues are not mere substitutes for our body language as they create an entirely new layer of linguistic expression on top of textual and verbal speech. In turn, these digital expressions impact the way we communicate in real life—we reference memes, songs, slang, or even physically recreate emotional signifiers that first surfaced online (👉👉). While our physical body language informs our virtual communication, this system feeds back into itself, creating the loop of our language.



Follow us

[Podcast](#)

[Twitter](#)

[Email](#)

About us

USURPATOR is
an online
magazine
sharing essays
.....

and interviews
about the user
experience of
our current
virtual landscape

Run by
@hard_boiledb
abe