

Cyclist and driver middle-finger wars: Enter the emoji jacket

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Think Europe, think bicycles, as adults of all ages off to work or daily errands are on the road shared with automobiles. In 2020, bikes have become even more popular as environmental concerns have led to governments eager to promote clean air.

"Shared" is a loaded term, though. How well they share space and stick

to safe road behavior is open to discussion (a more polite term than debate).

Ford, for one, would like to become an automaker known for its effort to highlight the need for equal respect and responsibility between cyclist and drivers.

That could be helped along if people knew what each other was doing, between cyclist and vehicle driver. (As video notes said, communication between drivers and cyclists can be difficult with riders having to remove their hands from the handlebars to indicate changes in direction or to express thanks.)

Bright idea: A cyclist communicating with cars through an emoji [jacket](#), brought out by Ford. The vehicle maker said emojis could allow cyclists to more clearly communicate their intentions and feelings to drivers. The task ahead was actually creating a jacket prototype.

(Andrew Hawkins, a transportation reporter at *The Verge*, [remarked](#) that "Cyclists try to make themselves more visible to drivers by wearing reflective clothing and [blinking lights](#), but it never seems to be enough.")

This jacket initiative was created in partnership with Ford Share the Road campaign.

Can the emoji have a positive impact on the way road travelers, whether on two or four wheels, communicate?

Here is a reason to care about such questions: "Every year more than 2,000 cyclists are killed on our roads in Europe," said the presenter in a [video](#) posted on Feb. 6 by Ford Europe. Better communications between cyclists and drivers might help bring that number down.

Ford, wanting to make a difference, turned to language experts. What did they have to say about cyclist-driver communication? Neil Cohn PhD, assistant professor, Department of Communication and Cognition at Tilburg University, The Netherlands, held forth on the emoji.

He was quoted in the [Ford Europe](#) blog. "Emojis have become a fundamental part of how we use language," said Neil Cohn, a linguist. "Whether used to convey [facial expressions](#), humor, or sarcasm, they have become integral to our ability to express ourselves and quickly."

'Quickly' is a key word in a solution for better driver-cyclist safety outcomes. How long would it take for your head to process a smiley or frowny face?

[E&T](#)'s Siobhan Doyle, assistant technology editor, addressed the images-versus-words difference in processing:

"According to experts, the human brain can process entire images that the eye sees for as little as 13 milliseconds. This is substantially faster than processing a word: approximately 250 milliseconds. Indeed, it may be better to have image-type signs such as emojis rather than words shown on the back of a jacket to allow for drivers to react quickly to certain situations involving a cyclist. The quicker an individual sees a sign, the less likely it is to be involved in an accident on the road. Indeed, that is the whole purpose of the jacket: to prevent loss of life on the roads."

The Ford Europe blog said, "Since first being created more than 20 years ago, emojis have been described as the first language born of the [digital world](#) and according to the first 'Emoji Trend Report' most people feel more comfortable expressing their emotions through emojis than a phone call."

From linguists, Ford also turned to cyclists and industrial designers from [Designworks](#). The latter describes itself as a "rapid design and manufacturing business."

New Atlas had some technical details about the jacket, which features an LED display on the back of the jacket. The display lights up with various emoji: The LED mesh is wirelessly controlled by a handlebar-mounted remote.

"[Utilizing](#) push-buttons on that remote, riders can choose to display any of six LED symbols: left or right turn-indicator arrows, a hazard signal for when they're stopping, and smiley-face, frowny-face or neutral-face emojis."

Reader reactions to news of the jacket prototype on a number of sites revealed frustration over bicycle-vehicle behavior but whether or not the emoji jacket was going to help out had people arguing for and against.

A video viewer comment: "I think it's brilliant. If cars have turn, brake and warning signals, why not other road users? Totally makes sense."

Others thought it was far from brilliant. "The idea is simply terrible... For a fraction of the cost you can install additional light on your bike if you wish to signal the turn or brake..." And another said, "Is this for drivers who don't understand hand signals? What's the [emoji](#) for 'Please don't kill me'?"

A thought among the naysayers was a resentment that the burden of change was always on the [cyclist](#) and not the driver. "This is a bad joke. We don't need gimmicks just people in cars to be careful and considerate around people on bikes."

As for Andrew Hawkins in *The Verge*, he weighed in with this verdict:

"Speaking personally, I would be the first to buy one of these—just as long as I can program it to display a middle finger."

Trevor Mogg in [Digital Trends](#): "We certainly appreciate the thought that has gone into the jacket and feel it could be popular if the automaker ever decides to commercialize it."

E&T's Doyle: "Initially, this concept sounded pretty dumb to me, but looking into it further it may be more beneficial than I first thought. It's a pretty neat invention, especially if most cyclists were to wear it in places as busy as London, for example."

Meanwhile, *BikeRadar's* Jack Luke added some [perspective](#) to the bigger picture of road safety for cyclists and drivers who need to share the same space: "While we appreciate the notion of improving communication between different road users, we can't help but feel that the jacket once again places the responsibility on cyclists. Improved infrastructure, tougher penalties and reduced car traffic in urban areas are the key steps towards improving safety for cyclists."

What's next?

Don't expect to see the garment commercially any time soon. Ford said in the blog that they commissioned a prototype Emoji Jacket, designed to show how tensions could be eased by enabling riders to more easily and more clearly show [drivers](#) what their intentions are – and how they are feeling.

More information: fordeurope.blogspot.com/2018/01/e-to-share-road.html

fordeurope.blogspot.com/2020/01/helps-people-to.html

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