Proposal to Add Emoji Symbol for Falafel to Unicode

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Abstract

This proposal requests the addition of a FALAFEL emoji to a future version of the Unicode standard. The emoji food set is lacking in Middle Eastern and North African foods, and in unambiguously vegetarian, kosher, or halal foods outside of fruits and vegetables. A falafel emoji addresses these gaps.

1 Introduction, Identification, Images

FALAFEL is a ball of fried chickpeas or fava beans, and is popular in the Middle East and North Africa, and increasingly throughout the world. One of its key advantages is that it accommodates a range of food preferences: given reasonable care in preparation, it is vegan and vegetarian, halal, and kosher (for the remainder of this proposal, "VHK")

Figure 1: Sample emoji renderings by Aphee Messer, in a bowl and with common toppings.

Falafel is often topped with hommous, tahini, or babaganouj, which conveniently all have a similar sandy color. The proposed emoji would picture a few

Figure 2: Additional renderings by Aphee Messer.

falafel balls in a bowl, covered with one of these toppings, with one split open to reveal the green interior of the ball. Figure 1 presents a sample rendering. To aid in visualizing alternatives, the left illustration of Figure 2 shows balls of falafel in a bowl without any topping, and the right illustration shows toppings without a bowl.

The food category in the emoji set includes a wide range of fruits and vegetables, but very little else that is VHK. For example, cheeses may not be VHK due to rennet, and the Japanese origins of emoji have led to a wide range of explicitly or likely shellfish-based food emoji. The current emoji set has good representation of foods from the American and East Asian regions, but very little from the Middle East and North Africa.

Made with chickpeas, the dish is always *falafel*, but made with fava beans, the dish is sometimes named *falafel* and sometimes *ta'amia* (طعمية), depending upon the region or the whims of the chef. Search results gauging the popularity of TA'AMIA give ambiguous results, but it is suggested as an alternative name for the proposed emoji.

2   Expected Usage

Because the FALAFEL emoji is intended to address under-representation of VHK foods in the emoji food set, it is worth noting that the world's VHK population is substantial. The Indian Census estimates that in 2014, 28.4% of Indian men and 29.3% of Indian women were vegetarian.[1] With 1.27 billion Indians in 2014, this gives circa 366 million vegetarians. Our rough calculations using a large-scale worldwide survey by the Pew Forum gives an estimate of 796 million Muslims likely to be halal,[2] which already gives just over 1.1 billion VHK eaters,

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[1]Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India, "Sample Registration System Baseline Survey 2014". http://www.censusindia.gov.in/vital_statistics/BASELINE%20TABLES07062016.pdf

[2] Estimate by the authors primarily based on a Pew Forum survey of 38,000 Muslims in 39 countries. See *The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society*, by Lugo, Cooperman, et al. at http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2013/04/
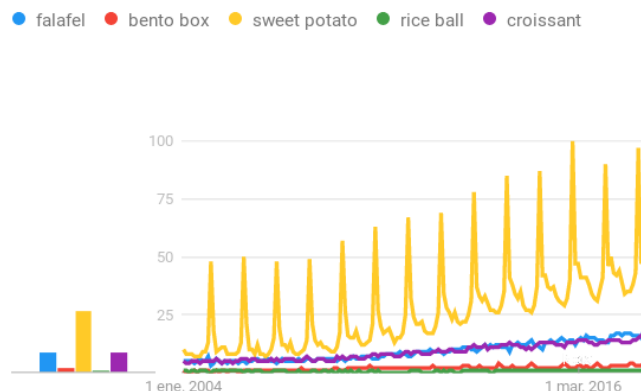
Figure 3: In English, "Falafel" is as common as "croissant" in Google's database.

without even counting vegetarians outside India, Muslims outside the Pew study area, or kosher eaters.

2.1 Frequency

Figure 3 shows frequencies of various food terms in Google's English-language database of user searches. In this data set, the usage of "falafel" is roughly as popular as "croissant." The figure includes "sweet potato," which is more popular in Google's database but clearly seasonal, while falafel shows consistent usage. Some of the emoji related to Japanese food, RICE BALL and BENTO BOX, are also presented for comparison, though they may not be ideal for comparison to falafel.

To preserve the scale, "rice" was omitted from the plot of English search terms: being a basic staple, it was searched on Google 17 times more often than "falafel."

But among Arabic search terms, falafel is in the same range as basic staples. Figure 4 shows search frequencies in Google's database in Arabic. "Rice" (رز, in red) appears in the database of searches only three times as often as falafel (فلافل, in blue). Another staple, "bread" (خبز, in purple) is only 70% more popular than falafel at the end of this period. Falafel seems slightly more popular than "kebab" (كباب, in yellow), while "croissant" (كرواسون, in green) seems largely unknown.[3]

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worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-full-report.pdf. Full details on the calculation are given in the repository supporting this document, at https://github.com/b-k/unicode-falafel.

[3] Ta'amia is largely unknown in English, with only 469,000 hits in Google and 14,000 in Bing. Its search behavior is anomalous in Arabic search engines: Bing gives 53,000 hits compared to 301,000 for falafel (17.6%), and Youtube gives 26,200 hits compared to 460,000 for falafel (5.7%), but Arabic Google gives 4.9 million hits, not far behind the 5.67 million hits for falafel. Counts from boolean searches can be unreliable, but searching Google for pages that mention ta'amia but not falafel ("فلافل - طعمية") returns 4.3 million hits, while Google counts 4.1 million pages mentioning falafel but not ta'amia ("طعمية - فلافل"), for a total of 8.4 million pages, not far behind the count for rice. Because of these ambiguous results, ta'amia
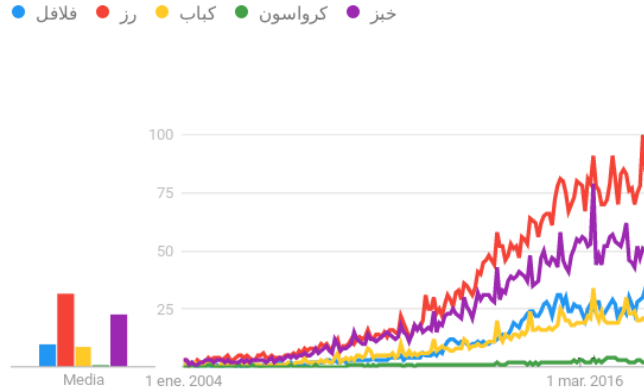
Figure 4: In Arabic, "Falafel" competes with basic staples in search popularity.

English, count	Bing	Google	YouTube
Falafel	6,460	25,000	301
Rice	21,900	607,000	13,500
Sweet potato	13,700	46,200	786
Croissant	12,100	91,800	537
Bento box	2,160	8,760	229
Rice ball	926	1,010	154

English, scaled	Bing	Google	YouTube
Falafel	1.00	1.00	1.00
Rice	3.39	24.28	44.85
Sweet potato	2.12	1.85	2.61
Croissant	1.87	3.67	1.78
Bento box	0.33	0.35	0.76
Rice ball	0.14	0.04	0.51

Arabic, count	Bing	Google	YouTube
Falafel	301	5,670	460
Rice	1,690	10,400	595
Bread	601	72,200	703
Kebab	303	2,650	625
Croissant	62.2	405	63.7

Arabic, scaled	Bing	Google	YouTube
Falafel	1.00	1.00	1.00
Rice	5.61	1.83	1.29
Bread	2.00	12.73	1.53
Kebab	1.01	0.47	1.36
Croissant	0.21	0.07	0.14

Figure 5: Search engine hits in thousands, from three search engines. Counts are given on the left, and as a percent of the falafel count to the right.

Trends in image searches are presented in the appendix in Figures 6 and 7. The results are largely similar, but rice is somewhat more common in Arabic image searches and English speakers are enamored of croissant photos.

Figure 5 shows the search result counts in three search engines, in English and Arabic. Apart from Arabic Google's anomalous count for bread, the results largely follow those from the trend lines: in English, falafel result counts are behind but on the same order of magnitude as sweet potatoes and croissants, while in Arabic, the falafel result counts are behind but on the same order of magnitude as rice and bread.

2.2   Use in sequences

FALAFEL as street food is served as a wrap or in a flatbread, so sequencing it

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is omitted from the tables of results.

before STUFFED FLATBREAD facilitates the FALAFEL + STUFFED FLATBREAD pairs, which could transform the wrap and flatbread emoji into unambiguous representations of a falafel wrap or pita. FALAFEL + SALAD is another common menu item. Some Western restaurants serve a falafel burger as a vegetarian option, which users might represent via FALAFEL + HAMBURGER.

2.3 Image distinctiveness

The ideal falafel is briefly fried so that the exterior is brown, but the interior remains green, which is a relatively distinctive appearance. Other brown balls with a green interior, such as some fruit, are unlikely to be arranged in a bowl or covered in a sauce. The brown-to-green pattern is distinctive and easily recognized even in small fonts. However, we leave it to the vendors to choose the most effective designs.

2.4 Completeness

Falafel would be the first VHK Middle Eastern food represented in emoji. Middle Eastern food has almost no representation in emoji. For various reasons, distinctive foods commonly found in the melting pot of Middle Eastern cuisine such as tahini, shakshuka or baklava are missing. HUMMUS has been previously proposed and rejected by the Unicode Technical Committee. Döner kebab has an emoji in the form of STUFFED FLATBREAD. The proposal itself, "UTC document L2/15-084,"[4] makes only brief reference to its Turkish origins and instead bills it as "Germany's most favorite fast food snack;" the final emoji is further generalized to cover cuisines from around the world.

3 Selection Factors for Exclusion

3.1 Overly specific

FALAFEL has a level of specificity comparable to many other emoji, such as CROISSANT, BROCCOLI, or SWEET POTATO.

3.2 Open ended

Falafel recipes are largely uniform, so there is no need for additional emoji for different falafel subtypes. One can find recipes for flatter discs or donut-shaped falafel, but we believe these are relatively uncommon and the traditional ball is sufficient to express the idea of falafel. The proposed image is a reasonable representation of the fava-based dish, be it named *falafel* or *ta'amia*. The universe of iconic and visually distinctive foods in the Middle East is fairly scoped.

3.3 Already Representable

"Emoji Additions Tranche 6: More Popular Requests and Gap Filling"[5] does propose "falafel" as an alias for STUFFED FLATBREAD, but the image is deliber-

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[4]http://www.unicode.org/L2/L2015/15084-kebab.pdf
[5]UTC document L2/15 195R2, https://www.unicode.org/L2/L2015/15195r2-emoji-add-tranche6.pdf

ately ambiguous. The proposal describes "frybread, pita, [or] focaccia" stuffed with "ingredients, such as meat, vegetables, and condiments," and the proposed character in the proposal document shows brown strips that can not be falafel. As above, a key feature of falafel is that it is unambiguously VHK. A VHK eater who answers the question *what would you like for dinner?* with STUFFED FLATBREAD has no idea what he or she will get.

Falafel is not married to pita. As street food, it is often served in lafah, a thin wrap producing a dish with closer resemblance to a burrito than a stuffed pita. One may also find falafel on a mezze plate along with other small dishes. Expressing the latter use with existing emoji, for example via STUFFED FLATBREAD + FORK AND KNIFE WITH PLATE, may leave significant ambiguity that the author is writing about flatbread containing primarily falafel, minus the flatbread.

3.4 Transient

The plot above from Google's database shows consistent usage of "falafel" since 2004. Pre-Internet, falafel is old enough that its origins have been lost. Consensus seems to be that ta'amia came first, with falafel an eventual variant, though it is unknown when the substitution from fava to chick peas was first made. Ta'amia may have originated among Christian Copts of Alexandria in centuries past, or even the times of the pharaohs.

3.5 Other exclusion factors

The FALAFEL emoji is not a logo, brand, or other excluded category. Although universally hailed as delicious, we could find no sources that regard falafel as a deity.

Section 2.1 compared falafel's popularity to that of foods represented by early emoji such as bento boxes and rice balls, but these comparisons are only one part of the overall range, and the argument does not hinge on those comparisons.

No exact image is required.

4 Location on the emoji keyboard

As per Section 2.2, falafel is well-paired with wraps and flatbreads, so sequencing it before STUFFED FLATBREAD facilitates the FALAFEL + STUFFED FLATBREAD pairs.

Appendix

The specifications for emoji proposals require screen shots of searches in several search engines, and plots Google Trends counts for images. These are provided here for reference. The counts in Figures 8 and 9 are transcribed to Table 5. As per the specification, these searches were done in a browser's privacy mode. The word *falafel* is fairly unique and unambiguously refers to a food, so the searches were done without additional context (like *falafel food* or *falafel dish*).
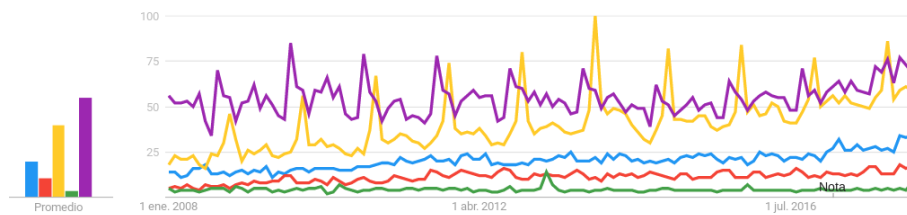

Figure 6: Counts of pictures in Google's English database, using the same color key as Figure 3. Notably, falafel is in blue. Croissants, in purple, are very photogenic.
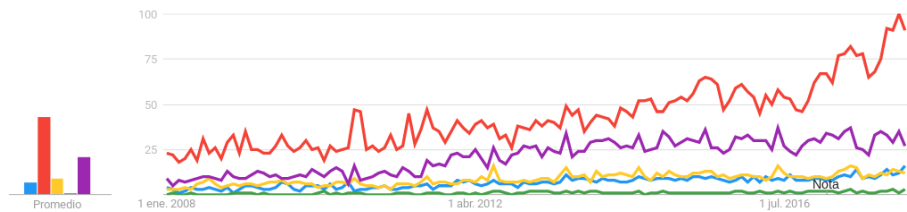

Figure 7: Counts of pictures in Google's Arabic database, using the same color key as Figure 4. Rice (red) appears more often than in the text search result count; falafel (blue) less often, but still commensurate with kebabs (yellow) and not far behind bread (purple).

	Bing	Google	YouTube
Falafel	falafel **Todos** Imágenes 6,460,000 Resultados	falafel **Todos** Imágenes Videos Cerca de 25,000,000 resultados	☰ ▶ YouTube "falafel" Cerca de 301,000 resultados
Rice	rice **Todos** Imágenes 21,900,000 Resultados	rice **Todos** Imágenes Noticia Cerca de 607,000,000 resultados	☰ ▶ YouTube rice Cerca de 13,500,000 resultados
Sweet potato	"sweet potato" **Todos** Imágenes 13,700,000 Resultados	"sweet potato" **Todos** Imágenes Videos Cerca de 46,200,000 resultados	☰ ▶ YouTube "sweet potato" Cerca de 786,000 resultados
Croissant	croissant **Todos** Imágenes 12,100,000 Resultados	croissant **Todos** Imágenes Videos Cerca de 91,800,000 resultados	☰ ▶ YouTube croissant Cerca de 537,000 resultados
Bento box	"bento box" **Todos** Imágenes 2,160,000 Resultados	"bento box" **Todos** Imágenes Maps Cerca de 8,760,000 resultados (0.	☰ ▶ YouTube "bento box" Cerca de 229,000 resultados
Rice ball	"rice ball" **Todos** Imágenes 926,000 Resultados	"rice ball" **Todos** Imágenes Videos Cerca de 1,010,000 resultados (0.	☰ ▶ YouTube "rice ball" Cerca de 154,000 resultados

Figure 8: Screen shots of English language searches

	Bing	Google	YouTube
Falafel	فلافل الجميع 301,000 النتائج	فلافل صور الكل حوالي ٥٬٦٧٠٬۰۰۰ م	فلافل ▶ YouTube ≡ حوالي 460,000 نتيجة
Rice	أرز الجميع 1,690,000 النتائج	أرز صور الكل حوالي ۱۰٬٤۰۰٬۰۰۰	أرز ▶ YouTube ≡ حوالي 595,000 نتيجة
Bread	خبز الجميع 601,000 النتائج	خبز صور الكل حوالي ۷۲٬۲۰۰٬۰۰۰	خبز ▶ YouTube ≡ حوالي 703,000 نتيجة
Kebab	كباب الجميع 303,000 النتائج	كباب صور الكل حوالي ۲٬٦٥۰٬۰۰۰ م	كباب ▶ YouTube ≡ حوالي 625,000 نتيجة
Croissant	كرواسون الجميع 62,200 النتائج	كرواسون صور الكل حوالي ٤۰٥٬۰۰۰ من	كرواسون ▶ YouTube ≡ حوالي 63,700 نتيجة

Figure 9: Screen shots of Arabic language searches

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