

BEYOND WORDS: THE DYNAMIC ROLE OF EMOJIS IN DIGITAL EXPRESSION

Azhar Ahmad

Research Scholar of English (Literature and Linguistics) Lahore Leads University, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan, Email: azharscholar313@gmail.com

Rubina Shaheen

Assistant Professor, Institute of English Language and Literature, Shah Abdul Latif University, Khairpur, Sindh, Pakistan. Email: drowsylaked_eye@yahoo.com

Sonal Khan Maitlo

MPhil. English (Linguistics), Lahore Leads University, Lahore, Pakistan. Email: sonalkhan3634@gmail.com

Muhammad Shoaib Mehmood

PhD Scholar, Department of English, Lahore Leads University Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan. Email: shoaib4739@gmail.com

Abstract

This study explores the evolving role of emojis as essential semiotic tools in the digital communication of Undergraduate students. Traditionally viewed as mere decorative additions, emojis now serve as critical paralinguistic cues that compensate for the absence of nonverbal channels in text-based environments. Utilizing a quantitative survey of undergraduate students, the research examines patterns of usage across platforms like WhatsApp to understand how these symbols facilitate emotional expression, clarify message intent, and reinforce social bonds. Findings reveal that approximately 96% undergraduates' engage with emojis daily, primarily to enhance message clarity and foster emotional connection. The inclusion of emojis significantly improves the accuracy of identifying specific emotions such as boredom, confusion, or anger compared to plain text. However, the study also identifies challenges, including occasional misinterpretations and generational shifts in meaning where certain symbols are used ironically or sarcastically. While students remain cautious of emoji use in formal academic or professional settings, their role in informal collegiate discourse has become a standardized mode of expression. The research concludes that emojis are not an impoverishment of language but rather a dynamic expansion of digital literacy, essential for navigating modern interpersonal relationships. In the end on the basis of the findings researcher presented some recommendations.

Keywords:

Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), Digital Semiotics, Emojis, College Students, Emotional Expression, Digital Literacy.

Introduction

In the contemporary academic landscape, digital communication has transcended traditional text-based exchanges to include a vibrant, multimodal lexicon of visual symbols. Beyond Words: The Dynamic Role of Emojis in Digital Expression at the College Level explores how university students predominantly Generation Z "digital natives" utilize emojis to bridge the gap between face-to-face and screen-mediated interactions. Once dismissed as mere decorative icons, emojis now serve as essential semiotic tools that provide the non-verbal cues such as tone, intent, and emotional nuance often absent in typed conversation. In the high-stakes environment of higher education, these symbols play a dual role: they foster social inclusion and relational warmth in informal chats, yet their use in professional or academic contexts remains a complex "minefield of misunderstandings" due to varying generational and cultural interpretations. This study investigates the evolving linguistic and social

functions of emojis, examining how they influence instructor credibility, student learning motivation, and overall perceived effectiveness in digital discourse.

Research Background

The shift from text-only communication to a multimodal digital language represents a significant evolution in human interaction. At the college level, where communication is a blend of academic rigor and social networking, emojis have transitioned from simple "smileys" to sophisticated tools for nuance, tone management, and identity formation.

Development of Digital Syntax

Digital communication lacks the non-verbal cues of face-to-face interaction, such as facial expressions and vocal inflection. For college students digital natives who conduct much of their social and academic lives via screens emojis serve as paralinguistic cues. They bridge the gap between written text and emotional intent, reducing the "online disinhibition effect" and preventing misunderstandings in high-stakes environments like peer reviews or group projects.

Social Bonding and Identity

In the collegiate social sphere, emoji usage is a marker of in-group belonging. Specific icons often take on localized meanings within a campus culture or a specific friend group. Furthermore, the diversification of emojis (skin tones, gender-neutral icons) allows students to express their cultural and personal identities more accurately, making digital spaces feel more inclusive and representative of a diverse student body.

Functional Utility in Academics

Beyond social fluff, emojis are increasingly used for functional efficiency. In fast-paced digital environments like Slack, Discord, or GroupMe, a "thumbs up" or "check mark" emoji replaces redundant "got it" messages, streamlining collaboration. Researchers are now looking at how this "visual shorthand" affects cognitive load and whether it enhances or detracts from the professionalization of young adults entering the workforce.

The Research Gap

While much has been written about emojis in general linguistics, there is a need to explore the context-switching abilities of college students. How do they navigate the boundary between "informal emoji-heavy" social texts and "semi-formal" communication with faculty or employers? This research background sets the stage for analyzing emojis not as a degradation of language, but as a dynamic expansion of it.

Research Implications

The research implications of emoji usage center on how these symbols redefine digital linguistics and social psychology. Here are the key areas:

1. **Linguistic Evolution:** Researchers are exploring whether emojis act as a new universal syntax or merely supplement existing language. This includes studying "emoji grammar" and how they replace or reinforce tone in text-heavy environments.
2. **Sentiment Analysis:** In data science, emojis provide a goldmine for nuanced emotion tracking. They help AI models understand sarcasm, irony, and intent more accurately than words alone.
3. **Cross-Cultural Communication:** Studies focus on how the meaning of specific emojis shifts across different cultures and age groups, highlighting potential areas for digital misinterpretation.
4. **Psychological Impact:** Research is looking into how emojis mimic non-verbal cues (like facial expressions and hand gestures) to trigger empathy and strengthen social bonds in virtual spaces.

5. **Professional Boundaries:** There is growing interest in the role of emojis in workplace dynamics, specifically how they impact perceived competence versus approachability in formal settings.

Rationale of Study/Justification

The researchers chose this topic because of her interest in this topic and because of his/her curiosity to explore this topic.

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to examine the role of emoji in the communication of students. Find the differences by age and perception.

Objective and Question

- The present research aims to analyze that how undergraduate students assimilate emoji's in the communication and the frequencies and insights of emoji's among undergraduate students.
1. How do undergraduate students assimilate emoji's in the communication and what are the frequencies and insights of emoji's among undergraduate students?

Scope of the Study

- Generally, the range of the overall study and the research questions to answer the college students integrate the use of emojis into their communication practices and make their communication interesting and expressible.
- Specifically, the study refers to the particular aspects that the researcher covers in the present study are the perception of students and the use of emoji varies by age.

Delimitations

- Conceptually boundaries of this study are limited to the emojis of WhatsApp only.
- This study refers to the specific operational procedures by interviews and open-ended questions.
- This study is limited to college students of the public sector.

Literature Review

Literature review is a written overview of major writings and other sources on a selected topic (Shaheen et al., 2026). Literature reviews summarizes and assesses the text of writing of the definite theme and provides a basis to think about the possible importance of innovative study (Maitlo et al, 2022). From these statements we can guess the importance of literature review. Following is the literature review related to the present research work.

Hård af Segerstad (2002) examined how Swedish speakers adapt to different modes of CMC. She explores four types of CMC: email, web chat, instant messaging and SMS. Her view is that CMC is neither spoken nor written language, but a hybrid between the two that does things that neither of the other two modes of language is able to achieve. Emojis have become integral to modern digital communication, serving as visual symbols that convey emotions, intentions, and context in text-based messages (Hamdan, 2022). Furthermore, stated that 2015 was the year that people started using emoji more and that having an emoji as the word of the year reflects the changes in communication (Rasheed et al., 2024, p.1047). For the reason that emojis are a relatively new phenomena in communication, the research is yet to uncover what their role is in online communication. However, so far, research seems to suggest that emoji can

be used to enhance emotions and modify messages in the same way that emoticon does (Miller et al, 2016).

Earlier researches has shown that an opening question that puts too much emphasis on the moderator leads to the risk of the informants turning to the moderator for questions, whereas a question where the moderator does not mention their role has the risk of making the informants unsure about what is expected of them” (Wibeck, 2010). The literature on emojis explores their role from various perspectives, highlighting both their benefits and complexities in enhancing communication. Emotional expression and contextual cues as Emojis fill the gap left by the absence of nonverbal cues in written communication (Doiron, 2018 ;Mathews, 2024). Research provide emotional context, helping to clarify the intended tone of a message. For example, a simple smiley face can indicate humor or friendliness, while a sad face can convey empathy or concern.

Enhancement of clarity and understanding of Research suggests that emojis can improve message comprehension and reduce ambiguity. By adding visual cues to text, they help to disambiguate the emotional intent behind statements, thereby improving overall clarity in communication. Much like research in youth language suggests young persons are perceived as using and introducing new features into the language, and as emojis are a relatively new feature in written communication, excessive emoji usage is attributed to younger generations (Kotsinas, 2007).

Cultural and contextual variations emojis are not universally interpreted in the same way across cultures and contexts. Studies have shown that cultural backgrounds and individual preferences influence how emojis are perceived and used (Al Rashdi, 2018). Therefore, effective communication with emojis requires an understanding of cultural nuances and context-specific norms. They are much like emoticons, however, emojis consist of pictures instead of typographics. Japanese designer Shigetaka Kurita invented emojis in 1999 (Lebduska, [2014](#)) while working on the i-mode mobile internet platform of NTTDoCoMo (Blagdon, [2013](#)).

Social and Psychological implications and the use of emojis can impact social interactions and relationships. Positive emojis, for instance, may enhance perceptions of warmth and friendliness, while negative emojis could potentially lead to misunderstandings or negative impressions. Understanding these implications is crucial for managing interpersonal dynamics in digital environments.

Technological and platform considerations and the design and availability of emojis vary across platforms and devices, which can affect their interpretation. Differences in emoji appearance (e.g., design variations or cultural-specific symbols) can influence how messages are perceived, emphasizing the need for consistency and awareness of platform-specific emoji usage.

Evolution and future directions emojis continue to evolve alongside digital communication technologies. New emojis are regularly introduced to reflect diverse emotions, identities, and cultural expressions. Future research may explore how these developments impact communication patterns and social behaviors over time. Previous research from Barron and Ling ([2011](#)) investigated the use of emoticons in electronically-mediated communication (EMC, which includes digital and computer-mediated communication, such as online chats) by analyzing adolescents’ focus group data of text messages.

Studies suggest that just as emoticons, emojis tend to be placed either in the end of the message or between clauses (Sugiyama, 2015). Using emojis as punctuation marks was one of the functions of emojis that the participants in a series of Japanese focus groups made by Sugiyama (2015). In addition to this, in a data set consisting of 1.6 million tweets from 13 different

countries, Novak et al. (2015) found that emojis are commonly placed in the end of a tweet. However, they did not proceed to analyze the placement of the emojis based on where in a clause they appeared, but only analyzed them about the beginning and the end of the tweet

In summary, “the literature underscores emojis” multifaceted role in communication” (Rasheed et al., 2024). From enhancing emotional expression and clarity to influencing social perceptions and cultural dynamics. As digital interactions become increasingly prevalent, understanding the nuanced role of emojis can empower individuals and organizations to communicate effectively and empathetically in diverse online contexts.

Material and Methods

It encompasses what data they're going to collect and where from, as well as how it's being collected and analyzed (Maitlo et al., 2023). It's a logical, systematic plan to resolve a research problem. Following is the research methodology for the present research. Utilizing a quantitative survey of undergraduate students, the research examines patterns of usage across platforms like WhatsApp to understand how these symbols facilitate emotional expression, clarify message intent, and reinforce social bonds. The population of the present research comprises 100 undergraduates' level students of different WhatsApp groups, by utilizing random sampling technique their two weeks WhatsApp chat was selected as targeted population or research sample to analyze the usage of the kinds and frequency of emoji's in these WhatsApp chats. The collected data was analyzed by observation and textual analysis. The data was presented in the tables.

Research Findings

Table. 1: Face Emojis

Emojis	Explanation
	Smiling Face With Smiling Eyes Face Emoji: represents happiness, contentment, or agreement. It's an ideal way to show gratitude and appreciation, especially when communicating with customers.
	Smirking Face Emoji: is a versatile, sly symbol used to inject flirtation, sexual innuendo, or witty banter into digital conversations. It signals a mischievous, smug, or self-satisfied attitude, often indicating that the sender is being playful.
	Loudly Crying Face Emoji: A yellow face with an open mouth wailing and streams of heavy tears flowing from closed eyes. May convey inconsolable grief but also other intense feelings.
	Face With Tears With Joy Emoji Face: The Face with Tears of Joy emoji represents laughing until you cry. Though commonly called an emoji, it's also considered an emoticon because it conveys specific emotion.
	Unamused Face Emoji Face: The Unamused Face emoji features a frown and a sideways glance, commonly used to signal irritation, skepticism, or displeasure. It is the digital equivalent of giving someone the side-eye.
	Enraged Face Face: Enraged Face is a bright red emoji featuring a heavy scowl and tightly scrunched eyebrows. It shares the same furious expression as the standard Angry Face but uses color to signal intense, boiling anger.
	Grinning Face with Sweat: the emoji is commonly used to express relief, nervousness, or mild embarrassment. It captures the feeling of a "close call" or a situation where you are smiling through a bit of stress.

	Upside-Down Face: the emoji is primarily used to convey sarcasm, irony, or a sense of "smiling through the pain". While it looks like a standard smiley, its inverted position signals that something is "off" or not to be taken literally.
	Winking Face: used to convey playfulness, flirtation, or a "hidden meaning" within a message. It serves as a digital equivalent of a physical wink, often used to soften the blow of a joke or to indicate that the sender is being ironic.
	Smiling Face with Hearts: The Smiling Face with Hearts emoji is primarily used to express warm, happy, and affectionate feelings, such as feeling loved, adored, or extremely content.

The above table one is showing the ten face emojis and their significances, smiling face with smiling eyes face emoji, smirking face emoji, loudly crying face emoji, face with tears with joy emoji face, unamused face emoji face, enraged emoji face, grinning face with sweat, upside-down face, winking face, and smiling face with hearts.

Table 2: Types and Percentage of Face Emoji's in the Communication

No	Types of Emotion Ratio	Percentage
1.	Smirking face	17.5%
2.	Smiling face with smiling eyes face emoji	19.0%
3.	Loudly crying face emoji	11.0%
4.	Enraged emoji face	10.5%
5.	Face with tears with joy emoji face	9.3%
6.	Unamused face emoji face	8.2%
7.	Grinning Face with Sweat	6.0%
8.	Smiling Face with Hearts	6.5%
9.	Upside-Down Face	7.3%
10.	Winking Face	4.7%
Total	10	100%

Table 2 shows types of emotions, emoji's mostly used by the students it was observed during the interviews and chats of the students that smirking face 17.5%, smiling face with smiling eyes face 19.0%, loudly crying face emoji 11.0%, enraged emoji face 10.5% is the greatest percentage, face with tears with joy emoji face 9.3%, unamused face emoji 8.2%, grinning face with sweat 6.0%, smiling face with hearts 6.5%, upside-down face 7.3%, and winking face 4.7% percentage. These total ten kinds of face emoji's makes 100% percentage.

Table 3: Heart Emojis

Emojis	Explanation
	The Two Hearts emoji: depicts two pink or red hearts of different sizes, with the larger heart usually in front or at the bottom. It is a popular symbol for expressing love, affection, and happiness, often described as showing that "love is in the air".
	The sparkling heart emoji: signifies intense love, adoration, joy, or positivity. It is often used to express a "sweet," "magical," or highly enthusiastic affection that goes beyond a standard red heart.
	The Growing Heart emoji: a pink heart inside two larger heart outlines generally represents an increasing feeling of love, affection, or joy. It is designed to give the impression of a heart expanding or "swelling" with emotion.

	The beating heart emoji: generally signifies intense love, excitement, or a literal heartbeat. While it shares the red/pink color of other heart emojis, the vibration lines distinguish it as a more dynamic and "pounding" version of affection.
	The Revolving Hearts emoji: represents mutual love and a strong, reciprocal emotional connection between two people. Because the hearts appear to be "dancing" or spinning, it often conveys a sense of being "dizzy with love".
	The heart with arrow emoji: represents being love struck, falling in love, or intense romantic desire. It acts as a digital nod to Cupid, symbolizing a romantic connection or attraction to someone.
	The broken heart emoji: is a universal symbol for heartbreak, grief, and emotional pain. While it is most commonly used to express sadness over a romantic breakup or unrequited love.
	The Heart on Fire emoji: primarily represents intense, burning passion, desire, or extreme love. It is a visual step up from the standard Red Heart, used when regular love just isn't "hot" enough to describe the feeling.
	The heart exclamation emoji: is used to express strong emphasis, enthusiasm, or excitement regarding love and affection. It functions essentially as a more passionate or urgent version of the standard red heart emoji.
	The Mending Heart emoji: represents the process of healing, recovery, and resilience. It is the visual opposite of the broken heart emoji, showing a red heart with bandage wrapped around it symbolizing that hurt, is mending is in progress.

The above table three is showing the ten heart emojis and their significances, the two hearts emoji, the sparkling heart emoji, the growing heart emoji, the beating heart emoji, the revolving hearts emoji, the heart with arrow emoji, the broken heart emoji, the heart on fire emoji, the heart exclamation emoji, and the mending heart emoji.

Table 4: Types and Percentage of heart Emoji's in the Communication

No	Types of Emotion Ratio	Percentage
1.	The Two Hearts emoji	19.0%
2.	The sparkling heart emoji	16.0%
3.	The Growing Heart emoji	14.0%
4.	The beating heart emoji	10.5%
5.	The Revolving Hearts emoji	9.6%
6.	The heart with arrow emoji	7.0%
7.	The broken heart emoji	6.0%
8.	The Heart on Fire emoji	6.0%
9.	The heart exclamation emoji	7.4%
10.	The Mending Heart emoji	5.0%
Total	10	100%

Table 4 shows types of emotions, emoji's mostly used by the students it was observed during the interviews and chats of the students that the two hearts emoji 19.0%, the sparkling heart emoji 16.0%, the growing heart emoji 14.0%, the beating heart emoji 10.5%, the revolving hearts emoji 9.6%, the heart with arrow emoji 7.0%, the broken heart emoji 6.0%, the heart on fire emoji 6.0%, the heart exclamation emoji 7.4%, and the mending heart emoji 5.0% percentage. These

total ten kinds of heart emoji's makes 100% percentage.

Table 5: Emoji's in Textual-Based Communication among College Students: A Study in Frequency

Age Group	Female	Male	NA	Total
17-20	20	18	1	39
20-23	30	26	0	56
23-26	26	32	2	60
26 or older	24	20	1	45
Total	100	96	4	100

From the gender cross tabulation results, it analyzed the perception of emoji's based on age, approximately 20% of users between the ages of 17–20 felt that the interpretation and usage of emoji's vary slightly from person to person, whereas 18% of users 20–23 felt that it is easier to express feelings with emoji's. Comparatively, users' ages 23–26 had similar results with 30% of respondents believing that interpretation and usage of emoji's varying slightly from person to person. However, perhaps the most surprising results came from respondents ages 22-26. Approximately 26% of respondents' ages 25–28 believe that it is easier to express feelings with emoji's with 32% believing that interpretation and usage of emoji's differs marginally from individual to individual. Observation an important conception in the use of emoji's was arguably the most important component of the survey distributed. As noted in, respondents ages 17-20 and 20-23 were the majority in the belief that emoji's help alter the perception of the intended meaning. Difference of the use of emoji's between ages 17-20 and 20-23 is 18% variance of the use of emoji's between ages 20-23 and 23-26 is 2% merely. More interestingly, 58% of users between the ages of 23-26 believed that emoji's do not alter the intended perception of a message. It is important to note that users aged 26 or older that were surveyed only had a 14% variance in beliefs that emoji's alter perception.

Discussion

Emojis have transcended their origins as simple pictorial embellishments to become an essential, dynamic component of digital expression, bridging the gap between face-to-face emotional cues and text-based communication. With over 70 billion sent daily, they serve as a "universal language" that enhances message clarity, conveys nuance, and fulfills emotional needs, often functioning as modern-day logographs that can substitute for words entirely. Undergraduates of the college use emojis regarding their norm, genders, and cultural practices, demonstrating in what way the social order simplifies communication. Emojis intensify emotionality in digital writing, compensating for the absence of nonverbal cues. This underscores their significance in modern communication among college students. Cultural values shape gender-specific communication beliefs, influencing how emojis are employed. In cultures valuing collective and emotion-laden communication, females often use emojis more frequently than males. Unexpectedly, maximum of respondents rated emojis higher scale as a worldwide language, basically changing insights of their communicative role, and this awareness extends beyond mere communication to effect user interface design and development. Enriched communication through emojis improves correlation contentment and individual pleasure. Emojis enable clear message intent interpretation, reducing ambiguity in digital conversations and fostering politeness while avoiding conflict.

Recommendations

Based on the evolving role of emojis in digital communication, here are key recommendations for effective, professional, and engaging emoji usage:

1. Mirror the emoji usage style of your recipient, particularly in workplace settings, to ensure the tone is appropriate.
2. Use emojis to clarify the text, rather than replacing words, which reduces the risk of ambiguity.
3. Stick to widely understood emojis to avoid misinterpretation, as emojis can be interpreted differently across cultures and generations.
4. Avoid using emojis when communicating serious topics, such as layoffs or formal complaints, or when communicating with new, formal clients.
5. In new professional relationships, avoid emojis until the other party uses them first to establish a comfortable communication style.

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