

The Use of Emojis in Online Communication

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Abstract. In today's digital world, online chatting is a prevalent form of human communication. However, written text alone often struggles to convey emotions clearly, which can lead to misunderstandings. This is why emojis have become important—they add emotional warmth and context to messages. Many people now see the skilled use of emojis as an indicator of high emotional intelligence in digital talk. This study examines how emojis are used in online communication, focusing on their effect on conversation mood, relationships, and cross-cultural exchange. Using ideas from semiotics, psychology, and sociology, the research explains the key role of emojis in daily talk. It also explores how people from different cultures, ages, and genders may interpret the same emoji differently. Potential issues with emoji use, such as confusion or misuse, are also discussed. Finally, the study notes both the value and the limitations of emojis and suggests directions for future research in digital language studies.

Keywords: emoji, online communication, psychology, sociology, digital language

1. Introduction

Online discussion is now a popular topic in academic research, spanning fields such as semiotics, psychology, sociology, and linguistics. Emojis are not mere decorations; they improve text-based communication by adding emotional detail, reducing ambiguity, and building social connection. When added to text, emojis help people express themselves more clearly, show their feelings, and avoid misunderstandings. They are useful tools that help create meaning in digital talk. This poses a main question: how do emojis function so well in online communication? To answer this, the study draws on existing research, empirical studies, and scholarly perspectives. By observing how friends, family, and different groups use emojis, it is clear that emoji use is highly personal, showing the complexity of digital communication. This study aims to improve our understanding of online interaction, which can facilitate more effective communication in an increasingly digital world. As many scholars note, emojis have become a key part of our online vocabulary—a new visual language that crosses traditional language barriers and deserves academic attention [1].

2. What is an emoji and its role in digital communication

Emojis are visual symbols used in digital messages to show feelings, ideas, objects, or actions. They are more than just decorations; they function as non-verbal cues that accompany written text to express subtle meanings. In online writing, emojis make the text more engaging and clarify tone,

intent, and emotion that plain text may not show. They are especially useful for softening messages that might otherwise seem impolite, sarcastic, or cold. In short, emojis restore social and emotional cues, making online conversation feel more interpersonal.

Studies support the usefulness of emojis. One recent report found that 91% of people said emojis help them express emotions better, and 75% felt more connected to others who use emojis [2]. This highlights two main functions: simplifying self-expression and strengthening social bonds online. Emojis transmit emotional messages swiftly and clearly, overcoming the limitations of text. They are efficient, a thumbs-up, heart, or smiley face can show approval, thanks, or amusement without long sentences.

Emojis are not meant to replace written language but to support it. They function optimally alongside words to express emotional and social hints. However, complex ideas still need clear sentences and paragraphs. Excessive emoji use can oversimplify content, create confusion, and possibly weaken writing skills, especially among young people who may focus more on emojis than on learning new words. Therefore, emojis are helpful tools that should be used wisely within a full text.

3. The semiotic and psychological foundations of emojis

To understand emojis, the study must consider their semiotic and psychological bases. From a semiotic view, emojis often act as iconic signs—they resemble what they represent (e.g., a smiley face). But some emojis have become symbolic signs, where the meaning depends on cultural agreement rather than appearance [3]. For example, the skull emoji now often means "dying of laughter" online rather than death. This dual nature allows both quick understanding and nuanced, context-dependent interpretation.

Psychologically, emojis work through emotional contagion—exposure to an emotional symbol can trigger a similar feeling in the viewer [4]. A smiley emoji may cause a mild positive reaction, analogous to a real smile. Neurological research shows that viewing expressive symbols activates areas linked to face recognition and emotion processing [5]. This neural response helps bridge the emotional gap in text-only talk, increasing closeness and involvement in digital exchanges.

Thus, emojis establish a shared emotional base in online communication. They reduce the ambiguity, coldness, or hostility that plain text can have, especially in informal or delicate situations. By enabling quick emotional feedback, emojis help keep conversations smooth and ensure mutual understanding. They act as digital versions of non-verbal cues such as facial expressions and tone of voice.

4. Varied interpretations of emojis: a multifaceted analysis

Emoji interpretation is not universal; it varies significantly across different dimensions of human experience. This section examines how cultural background, age, and gender influence the way emojis are understood and used, highlighting the complexity of emoji communication in a globally connected digital space [6].

4.1. Cultural and social influences

Emoji meanings are shaped by culture, region, and social setting. A 2024 study found that people from the UK and China often interpreted emojis differently [6]. For instance, the "thumbs-up" emoji means approval in Western cultures but can be perceived as impolite in parts of the Middle East and

West Africa. The "folded hands" emoji may express thanks or prayer in the West, but in Japan and South Korea it often expresses polite requests or apologies, reflecting cultural values of respect and indirect communication.

The same emoji can carry different emotional meanings across cultures. In East Asian high-context societies, a smiling emoji might be used to keep social harmony, even when someone feels uncomfortable. This can be misunderstood as insincere by people from low-context cultures who prefer direct emotion display.

Social context also plays a crucial role. In formal settings (corporate, legal, academic), excessive emojis may seem unprofessional. In creative fields or casual team chats, they can show friendliness and modern style. Effective emoji use requires awareness of context and audience.

4.2. Age differences

There are clear generational gaps in emoji use and understanding. Younger people (Gen Z, Millennials), who grew up with digital communication, often use emojis in ironic, layered, or group-specific ways. For example, the skull emoji may mean "dying of laughter," and the loudly crying face often indicates laughter, not sadness. Older generations may find these uses confusing.

Young people use emojis not only to convey feelings but also to signal group identity and cultural knowledge. This fast change in meaning can lead to misunderstandings between generations at home, school, or work. Bridging this gap requires digital empathy, open discussion about communication styles, and willingness to clarify intentions.

4.3. Gender patterns

Gender correlates with frequency and type of emojis individual use. Studies show women's interpretations of emojis tend to match the intended meanings more closely than men's [6]. This aligns with theories that women are often socialized to be more aware of emotional details and relationship harmony [7]. In practice, women generally use a broader range of emojis, especially those showing warmth, empathy, and support.

Men often use fewer emojis, preferring symbols for activity, achievement, humor, or neutral agreement (e.g., trophy, flexed bicep, check mark). These patterns come from social norms, not biology. In cross-gender communication, different styles can cause subtle misunderstandings. For instance, a woman might send heart emojis to show friendly support, but a man might interpret them as romantic interest. Awareness of these patterns, without relying on stereotypes, can improve mutual understanding.

5. The impact and usefulness of emojis

Emojis do more than show feelings; they influence the progression of online conversations. Research shows that seeing a smiley emoji triggers brain activity similar to seeing a real smile [5]. This makes digital interaction feel more natural and closer to face-to-face talk, improving the quality of online relationships.

Studies confirm social benefits: messages with emojis get more positive replies and make the sender seem more likeable [8]. Emojis act as social lubricants, reducing formality and increasing warmth. They are useful not only in casual chat but also in marketing (e.g., boosting email open rates) and education (e.g., making feedback more encouraging).

Context is crucial, however. In serious, formal, or sensitive situations—such as delivering bad news or talking to senior professionals—emojis may be seen as inappropriate, making the sender seem unprofessional or insensitive. Also, messages with well-chosen emojis are often remembered better, highlighting their role in memory and emotion. This shows that emojis are powerful tools that must match the situation.

6. Conclusion and future research

In summary, emojis are powerful tools for expression, emotional clarity, and social connection in digital communication. Although their interpretation varies across cultures, ages, and genders, this flexibility helps make them widely useful. Emojis have grown from simple facial symbols into a rich visual language that complements written communication.

Combining emojis into sequences can expand expressive range, but it also raises risks of ambiguity and cross-cultural misunderstanding. Skilled emoji use requires cultural awareness, understanding of audience, and a balanced approach that improves rather than diminishes clarity.

This study was based on existing literature and survey data. Future research could use interviews, analysis of real-world messages, and long-term studies to track how emoji use changes over time. As emojis continue to grow and diversify, studies should also explore their professional uses in healthcare, customer service, and education. Teaching "emoji literacy" could help people communicate better across cultures and generations. Ultimately, understanding emojis means understanding an evolving system of human interaction, both a challenge and an opportunity for improved communication.

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