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Research Article

The Emoji Effect: Unpacking Emotion in the Digital Age

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Abstract

Emojis have become a central aspect of digital communication. Especially in social media, where they enhance textual meaning, emotional expression, and engagement. This paper explores the evolution of emojis from their origins in Japan to their widespread use across various digital platforms. The study examines how emojis function as a visual language. They influence communication styles, storytelling, and user interactions. While emojis facilitate intercultural dialogue and enrich online discourse, their interpretation remains context-dependent and culturally influenced. Despite challenges in standardization and potential limitations in conveying complex ideas, emojis continue to shape modern communication, reflecting the broader shift toward visual expression in the digital age. Findings indicate that while emojis substantially enrich online discourse and contribute to a more visually oriented communication environment, their interpretation remains heavily dependent on context and cultural background. These results higlights the broader shift toward visual expression in the digital age and suggest new directions for future research in digital semiotics and intercultural communication.

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1. Introduction

In In today's digital world, the nature of communication has evolved significantly, moving beyond traditional modes of speaking and writing to incorporate a rich array of visual cues and symbols. Social media, as a predominant mode of communication, has transformed the way people interact, with emojis emerging as a pivotal element of digital expression. These small digital images not only convey emotions and ideas but also provide subtle nuances that shape the overall tone of online discourse. As Danesi (2017) suggests, emojis are heralding a shift in written communication by functioning as alternatives to words, enhancing textual meaning, and potentially bridging cultural divides. Bai, Xu, and Li (2019) further supports this, highlighting how emojis facilitate affective communication and strengthen interpersonal connections in digital contexts. Furthermore, Chiang and Gomez-Zara (2024) emphasize the evolution of emojis in human-computer interaction, noting their increasingly sophisticated role in emotional sharing across platforms.

Emojis have become integral to online interactions, where they serve multiple communicative functions. They add a layer of emotional context to text, express irony or humour, emphasize particular points, and soften the delivery of potentially harsh messages. In many cases, the absence of emojis can render a message that may otherwise appear curt or impersonal. This phenomenon raises several critical questions about the evolving role of language in digital contexts: Are words alone becoming insufficient in conveying complex messages? What additional meaning do these digital symbols contribute? When and why did the widespread use of emojis begin, and how do they differ from other digital expressions such as emoticons and kaomoji? The proliferation of emojis is partly rooted in the increasing need for efficient and emotionally rich communication in text-based

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environments. According to Evans (2020), emojis serve as emotional punctuation providing clarity and tone to otherwise ambiguous digital text. Similarly, Kelly and Watts (2015) argue that emojis contribute to phatic communication — the maintenance of social relationships rather than the exchange of information — which is a crucial component of modern online discourse.

Beyond everyday personal communication, emojis have permeated various other domains, including social debates, business communications, art, and literature. Their usage in these diverse fields points to a fundamental transformation in language structure and communicative practices in the digital age. For instance, a study by Bai et al. (2021) demonstrates how brands increasingly employ emojis to humanize corporate communications and foster customer engagement on social media platforms. Moreover, Zhou et al. (2024) illustrate how the interpretation of emojis varies across linguistic and cultural boundaries, reinforcing the need for cultural awareness in global digital interactions.

This paper seeks to explore the emergence of emojis as a new form of language, analyzing their effect on communication dynamics, social media interactions, and broader language structures. By examining the semiotic properties of emojis, this research aims to illuminate how these symbols function within digital discourse, influencing meaning-making processes and cultural expression.

The study will address several core research questions:

- How do emojis operate as a visual language in digital communication?
- In what ways do emojis enhance or modify the communicative content of texts?
- What are the implications of emoji usage for understanding intercultural communication in online environments?

By systematically investigating these questions, the paper intends to contribute to the growing body of literature on digital semiotics and the dynamics of contemporary language use. This research not only highlights the transformative impact of digital symbols on communication practices but also provides insights into the broader cultural and linguistic shifts occurring in our increasingly interconnected world (Luangrath, Peck, & Barger, 2022)

2. The Evolution of Emojis in Digital Communication

Emojis have transformed digital communication by introducing a rich, visual vocabulary that complements and, at times, substitutes for text. Originating in Japan during the late 1990s, emojis were first created by Shigetaka Kurita, who designed pictographs for mobile phone communication (Giannoulis & Wilde, 2020). Initially developed to enhance emoticons—keyboard-based symbols used to express emotions—emojis quickly expanded the range of expressive possibilities available to users. With their incorporation into the Unicode standard, emojis became globally accessible, facilitating their integration into a variety of digital communication platforms.

The term ‘emoji’ is derived from the Japanese words ‘e’ (picture) and ‘moji’ (letter or character), which together convey the concept of a “picture-word.” Kurita’s pioneering set, introduced in 1998 and influenced by contemporary manga aesthetics, laid the foundation for the modern emoji landscape. Although emoticons—constructed from punctuation marks—had been widely used on websites and in emails since at least 1997, the introduction of emojis marked a significant evolution in digital expression. The transition from emoticons to emojis is further underscored by the earlier development of ‘portrait emoticons’ by Nicolas Loufrani in 1997, and the trademarking of the smiley face by Franklin Loufrani in 1972, an effort aimed at infusing news reporting with a more positive tone (Danesi, 2017).

The ubiquity of smartphones and the rise of social media have been crucial in embedding emojis into everyday digital discourse. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitter (currently rebranded as X) have normalized emoji usage, with research indicating that emojis appear in nearly half of Instagram messages (48%) and over one-third of Facebook posts (33.5%) (Kurniawan, 2018). This prevalence suggests that emojis serve more than a decorative function; rather, they have become an indispensable component of digital conversations, playing a pivotal role in the conveyance of meaning and emotion.

Beyond their utility in everyday messaging, emojis have significantly altered the landscape of digital storytelling. By representing emotions, characters, and events visually, emojis enhance the interactivity and appeal of online narratives. This evolution in digital communication reflects a broader shift toward visual expression, where images and symbols are increasingly used to complement or even replace textual content (Giannoulis & Wilde, 2020). Consequently, the integration of emojis into storytelling is not only changing how stories are told online but is also contributing to the development of a hybrid communication model that balances text with visual cues. Considering the emotive role of emojis, it is helpful to present a list of frequently used facial emojis that

often appear in social media interactions. This list (fig.1) will serve as a simple reference point for ongoing discussions.

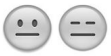
Emoji	Meaning/Function
	*Smiling Face With Sunglasses*: This is used to convey "coolness" or a sense of composure or aplomb.
	*Flushed Face*: This conveys embarrassment or awkwardness; it might also be used to show humility in response to a compliment.
	*Devil Faces:* Although these are used interchangeably, the smiling one adds the nuance of naughtiness, whereas the frowning one adds a connotation of mischievousness. The purple color, rather than the generic and bland yellow one, is intended to add infernal and devilish connotations to the meaning.
	*Smiling Face With Heart-Shaped Eyes*: This is used typically to convey affection, love, or gratitude.
	*Face With Cold Sweat*: This conveys stress; in the data it was found typically in messages that indicate that some essay is overdue or that a test is coming up.
	*Neutral Faces:* These are used to show indifference or the state of being unimpressed by something.
	*Unamused Face*: This conveys suspicion, disappointment, or displeasure. It was found consistently in reaction to excuses given by an interlocutor.
	*Crying Face*: This constitutes a "hurt" reaction to some message.
	*Loudly Crying Face*: This imparts a more intense feeling of being hurt than the one above. It is often used with ironic or satirical intent.
	*Worried Face:* This communicates not only worry, but also shock and fear.
	*Angry and Pouting Faces*: These are used often together to convey anger, with the red one being the stronger one.
	*Frowning Face and Anguished Face*: These are used interchangeably to express shock or disappointment.

Fig:1. Emojis with their meanings (Taken from: *The semiotics of emoji: The rise of visual language in the age of the internet* by Danesi, M. (2017, P 24)

3. Emojis as a Visual Language

From a language perspective, emojis act as a form of visual communication. Unlike traditional writing, which depends on letters and sounds, emojis use images to express meaning, similar to early pictographic writing systems (Danesi, 2017). Their visual nature allows people to communicate across different languages, making them a useful tool for global interactions (Giannoulis and Wilde, 2020). Arafah and Hasyim (2019) suggest that emojis complement and sometimes replace written text, influencing tone and meaning in messages on platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram.

A key feature of emojis is their ability to work alongside text in different ways. They can clarify meaning, set the tone of a message, or even replace words. This process, called 'iconographetic communication', blends text and images to create new ways of expressing ideas. However, unlike alphabet-based writing, the meaning of emojis depends on context and individual interpretation, which can vary across cultures.

As of Unicode Standard 11.0, released on May 21, 2018, there were 2,528 official emoji characters. With additional variations, such as different skin tones, the total number increased to 2,789. Unicode 12.0 introduced 236 new emojis, with 61 officially released on March 5, 2019. Around 60 new emojis are added each year, and none have been removed so far. While emojis are not considered 'words' in the traditional sense, some researchers believe they have the potential to overcome language barriers. Linguist Vyvyan Evans states that, '[e]moji is, today, incontrovertibly the world's first truly universal form of communication (Evans, 2017).' However, he clarifies that emojis are not a full language like English, French, or Japanese (Evans, 2017, p. 19). Despite this, discussions about emojis as a 'universal language' are common, and in 2013, the Emoji Art and Design Show in New York referred to them as a 'new visual vernacular'.

Moyu Liu argues that the positive and negative emotions projected by emojis cannot always be taken at face value. There is a complex dynamic between projected emotion and what Liu calls 'facial display rules' (2023) which specify socially appropriate facial expressions in a given situation. Adherence to such behavioural codes comes with negative psychological effects which remain outside the purview of most research. Liu makes a distinction between "expressing emotion" through emojis and "managing emotions" through them; while the former denotes healthy social exchanges, the latter can be associated with depressive symptoms (2023).

The degree or intensity of emotions conveyed by an emoji also varies based on circumstances. Liu mentions two hypotheses which her research tested: (a) people convey more emotional intensity through emojis with interlocutors who are closely related to them; and (b) emoji use is directly proportional to the level of intimacy shared by the interlocutors (Liu, 2023). I argue that the two areas of inquiry defined by Liu can be studied together to show that people indulge in expressing emotion in intimate or informal contexts in a higher number of cases on an average, and "facial display rules" take over predominantly in more formal or official online interactions.

There is an important but indirect relationship between the physical actions that emojis represent and their contextual meaning in conversations. Gibson et al. (2023) suggest that the communicative role of gestures should play an important role in the analysis of emoji, but the correlations between them may not be direct. For example, the "hand raised above the head" emoji is usually understood in Western countries to imply granting permission for something. Hence it is also called the "person gesturing OK" emoji (Emojiguide). However, the same emoji is used by the Japanese to convey respect, since it is similar to a Japanese gesture for respect to elders (Liu, 2023). The case of the "thumbs up" emoji is comparable: it is perceived as a positive gesture in the West but might be interpreted as impolite in Middle Eastern countries (Giannoulis & Wilde, 2020).

Konstantin Prinz cites research that demonstrates that while reading emojis activates the same part of the brain as reading facial expressions, reading emoticons – i.e., the ancestors of emojis comprised of punctuation marks – activate a different part of the brain associated with learned language signs (2022). This shows the correlation between facial expressions and emojis, but nevertheless, emojis are generally perceived to form a language with its own grammar, rather than being part of non-verbal communication. Thus, emojis are situated in between language and non-verbal cues. This in-betweenness is highlighted by the fact that emoticons, which activate a linguistic rather than gestural part of the brain according to Prinz (2022), got automatically converted into emojis after they were regularized by Unicode. Unicode is a governing body that functions like OED and Merriam-Webster for the English language:

This emoji vocabulary is now integrated into operating systems as a relatively fixed list controlled by the Unicode Consortium, a conglomerate of technology companies that decide how computers encode typed information. Thus, variants to emoji and creation of new emoji are largely decided by this governing body. (Cohn et al. 2019). There are certain examples of emojis being used in sequence, like words are used in sequence to form a phrase or sentence. Danesi (2017) and Cohn et al. (2019) give the example of the phrase "bombshell bikini" being formed by three emojis, where the first two, the "bomb" emoji and the "shell" emoji, act as rebuses to form the word "bombshell." This linguistic mimicry, however, can only be understood by English speakers. There can be countless other examples of language and culture-specific uses of emoji sequences.

Apart from conveying a familiar idea humorously, emoji sequences encapsulate the characteristics of emojis that are located in between verbal and non-verbal communication. Cohn et al. study different kinds of sequences, including repetition of the same emojis for emphasis or increased intensity, ordered sequences conveying a particular complex message, and associative assortments connected to some idea being conveyed. They classify these into categories like reduplication, responsive emotion, affixation, temporal sequence, semantic list, metonymy. However, they also demonstrate that emoji senders and receivers often interpret an emoji sequence differently, even if they come from the same cultural background. Therefore, emoji sequences are only effective in communication if they are complemented by written messages. Lea Thamsen's specialized study of emoji sequences conclude that in such sequences, "emoji are demanded to act according to the affordances of the written modality, forcing them to occur in linear sequences, which in return obliges them to lose some of their visual characteristics" (2019, p. 2). Cohn et al. summarize the key differences that persist between the grammar of emojis, and linguistic grammar as follows:

Visual communication typically organizes information at a larger, narrative level, which does seem to involve architectural principles similar to linguistic syntax, and its manipulation evokes similar brain responses, as measured using event-related potentials, as violations of syntax. […] [W]e believe that emoji are structurally constrained by their technology from further developing more robust linguistic structures to become full 'languages', despite the rich interactive social environment in which they are used. (Cohn et al. 2022, p. 16)

Text-and-image relationships function in a similar modality to speech-and-gesture relationships in conversations, and the grammar of emojis cannot be understood in separation.

The above analysis shows that the verbal as well as the non-verbal aspect of emojis can be broken down into subcategories. Li and Yang posit that "online preference to emoji use does not perfectly mirror non-verbal signs in face-to-face communication" (2018, p. 1). Therefore, there is a need to assess which emojis are interpreted the most consistently across contexts, so as to reduce the chances of miscommunication. Boutet et al. conclude that only such emojis can be used as effective surrogates for nonverbal cues. Neither equivalent to nonverbal cues nor continuous with linguistic communication, the place of emojis in communication is unique, and defined by the in-betweenness that I pointed out earlier. Arafah and Hasyim (2019) analyze emojis in terms of the traditional Saussurian linguistic concepts of langue and parole. They distinguish the langue or general grammar of emo use from the individual instances of their use or parole. The slippage between the two accounts for the constant shifts in general conventions of emoji use, just as living languages change over time.

4. Emojis and Social Semiotics

This The study of emojis through the lens of semiotics—the discipline that examines signs and symbols—offers valuable insights into how these visual elements function in digital communication. Emojis operate on multiple levels, interacting with both linguistic conventions and social practices. As Danesi (2017) argues, emojis can be analyzed across three distinct dimensions: syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic.

Syntactic Level

At the syntactic level, emojis follow recognizable patterns within written texts. They are strategically placed at the beginning or end of sentences to indicate tone or provide emphasis. This structured placement mirrors the rules governing traditional language, suggesting that even in a predominantly visual medium, there exists an underlying system of organization.

Semantic Level

On the semantic level, emojis function as symbols that encapsulate meaning. Their interpretation can be both culturally specific and, in certain cases, universally comprehensible. For example, the 'Face with Tears of Joy' emoji—recognized widely for representing laughter—was designated as Oxford Dictionary's Word of the Year in 2015 (Danesi, 2017, p. 5). Although this emoji is predominantly associated with humor, its meaning is not fixed; it may also convey sarcasm, relief, or mockery depending on the context of its use.

Pragmatic Level

Pragmatically, emojis influence how messages are interpreted by readers. Their use can modify, reinforce, or even alter the intended meaning of the accompanying text. Research by Gibson et al. (2023) demonstrates that certain emojis, such as the 'Face Covering Hand', function as "laughter tokens"—softening statements or signalling irony. This contextual dependency underscores the notion that while emojis have structured uses, their meaning is malleable and shifts with social interaction.

4.1. The Saussurean Framework and Beyond

The semiotic analysis of emojis draws on the foundational work of Ferdinand de Saussure, who introduced the structuralist framework for understanding language as a social system. Saussure distinguished between *langue*—the structured, collective system of signs—and *parole*, the individual, context-dependent use of these signs. This bifurcation highlights that meaning does not reside solely in the intrinsic properties of signs but emerges from the relationships and differences among them (Sanders, 2004).

Emojis embody characteristics of both *langue* and *parole*. On one hand, they are governed by standardized patterns and conventions (as maintained by organizations such as the Unicode Consortium), suggesting a quasi-systematic quality similar to *langue*. On the other hand, their flexible, context-dependent use in everyday digital communication aligns with the notion of *parole*. This duality generates complex patterns of use and evolution, positioning emojis as a dynamic and living form of semiotic communication.

Extending the structuralist insights of Saussure, this paper will also incorporate poststructuralist perspectives as articulated by Jacques Derrida. Derrida's critique of fixed meaning and emphasis on the fluidity of sign systems further supports the view that the significance of emojis is perpetually deferred and reinterpreted in varying social contexts.

5. The Emergence of Structural Patterns in Emoji Usage

While emojis do not adhere to the conventional grammatical rules that govern spoken or written languages, their use exhibits recurring patterns that resemble certain aspects of linguistic structure. Danesi (2017) identifies three principal functions that highlight this structural tendency:

Syntactic Function – Emojis often replace punctuation marks or serve as sentence boundary markers, guiding the reader's interpretation of tone and flow.

Semantic Function – Emojis substitute for words or entire phrases by using visual representations to convey meaning.

Reinforcement Function – Emojis are frequently employed to emphasize or clarify the emotional intent or contextual meaning of a message.

For example, a simple statement such as *"I'm excited"* may leave the emotional tone ambiguous in a text-based conversation. However, adding an emoji like the *Smiling Face with Heart Eyes* effectively reinforces the intended sentiment, blending text and image to enrich communication (Giannoulis & Wilde, 2020, p. 18). Further studies by Cohn et al. (2019) explored whether emoji sequences display patterns comparable to spoken or written language. Their findings indicate that emojis are typically arranged in simple, linear sequences rather than conforming to the syntactic rules that organize natural languages. Unlike sentences, emoji strings lack consistent rules for word order, subject-verb-object relationships, or grammatical agreement. Additionally, emojis are most commonly used as substitutes for nouns and adjectives, while they are less effective at representing verbs or illustrating actions. This limited range of expression underscores that although emojis contribute to and enhance digital communication, they do not constitute a fully autonomous linguistic system.

6. Emojis and Social Media Engagement

Emojis play a major role in social media by increasing interaction and emotional expression. Research shows that posts with emojis receive more engagement than those without, as they make content more appealing and relatable (Kurniawan, 2018). Businesses and social media influencers use emojis to connect with audiences, make their messages feel more personal, and evoke emotional responses. Emojis also help people express their identities and build communities online. By combining emojis in unique ways, users can personalize their messages to reflect their emotions, personalities, and cultural backgrounds. This flexibility allows for deeper engagement and stronger digital interactions (Danesi, 2017).

A study by Bai et al. (2019) reviewed emoji research across different fields, showing that emojis are more than just decorative symbols. They act as important non-verbal cues in digital communication, replacing facial expressions and gestures. The review found that positive emojis are used more often than negative ones, suggesting that people prefer to create positive interactions online. This supports the idea that emojis help improve communication and strengthen social connections (Li & Yang, 2018). Bai et al. also investigated different kinds of diversity in emoji use: individual diversity, cultural diversity, and platform diversity. Their work shows that emoji use varies by age, gender, cultural background, as well as the platform that is being used (Bai et al. 2019). On an average, men and women differ in emoji preferences, and their uses of the same emoji are perceived differently by receivers. Females use emoji more than males. Cultural diversity, i.e. cultural background has an impact on the use of emoji. Indian and Pakistani users will use some specific emojis related to their culture. Emojis can display differently across various platforms, devices, and operating systems. This is because each platform has its own unique set of emoji designs, which can result in variations in appearance. These variations can sometimes lead to misunderstandings or misinterpretations, especially when communicating across different platforms.

7. Limitations and Challenges in Emojis Use

While emojis offer significant advantages in enhancing digital communication, they also pose certain challenges that limit their effectiveness as communicative tools. One major issue arises from the lack of universal interpretation. Emojis are highly context-dependent, and their meanings can vary across cultures, leading to potential miscommunication. As Giannoulis and Wilde (2020) observe, cultural factors play a critical role in shaping emoji interpretation. A notable example is the 'Thumbs Up' emoji, which is widely perceived as a positive gesture in Western societies but is considered offensive in some Middle Eastern contexts.

In addition to cultural ambiguity, emojis face structural limitations in expressing complex ideas or nuanced emotions. Thamsen (2019) highlights that emojis are generally arranged in linear sequences similar to written text, which restricts their capacity to represent intricate or layered meanings. Prinz (2022) further argues that emojis struggle to distinguish subtle emotional differences — for instance, the distinction between genuine happiness and sarcastic amusement often remains unclear without accompanying textual clarification.

Moreover, concerns have been raised regarding the cognitive impact of excessive reliance on emojis. Danesi (2017) suggests that an overdependence on emojis may oversimplify linguistic expression and potentially diminish critical thinking skills. Despite these critiques, other scholars maintain that emojis do not replace written language but rather complement it by enriching digital conversations with emotional and visual cues. This perspective underscores the role of emojis as supplementary rather than primary communicative elements in online discourse.

8. The Future of Emojis as a Language

As digital communication keeps changing, the role of emojis in language remains a topic of discussion. Some experts believe emojis will become more advanced, with features like animation and customization to make them even more expressive (Giannoulis and Wilde, 2020). Others think that as voice-activated technology becomes more common, people may rely less on emojis in text-based communication.

The standardization of emojis through Unicode ensures they will continue to be a part of digital communication. However, their long-term impact depends on how people use them and how technology develops. While emojis may never become a full language, their influence on social media and digital culture is undeniable. Most research on emojis has focused on their role in replacing words and conveying meaning. However, emojis do not just replace nouns—they can also take the place of verbs, adjectives, and even entire phrases. They can be used creatively in sentences, sometimes even substituting letters within words. When multiple emojis are used together, they can create meaning beyond individual symbols, acting as a new form of expression.

Emojis have been called a "paralanguage" because they are peripheral to the language used in social media communication (Logi & Zappavigna, 2024). Like traditional paralanguage—such as tone, facial expressions, and gestures in speech—emoji operate in relation to written language rather than forming a separate grammatical system. Research suggests that emoji can serve referential roles, substituting words, or modal roles, modifying text to add emphasis or emotion. Studies liken emoji to co-speech gestures, suggesting they work similarly to how gestures accompany spoken language—enhancing meaning rather than carrying independent linguistic value. They function as a unique semiotic resource that interacts with text in distinct ways. Their meaning often depends on their linguistic co-text, as isolated emoji are ambiguous without textual or contextual cues.

A focused approach examines emoji–text relations through three types of convergence: concurrence with ideational meaning, resonance with interpersonal meaning, and synchronicity with textual meaning. This method emphasizes the dependence of emoji on linguistic context, as their meaning is often shaped by the surrounding text. By applying discourse semantic analysis, researchers can systematically describe how emoji align with written language, contributing to ideational content, emotional tone, and textual structure. This structured framework ensures that emoji are not viewed in isolation but as integral elements of digital communication.

9. Emoji Communication and Mental Health

Emoji, emoticon, and kaomoji use has been associated with "emotional labour" in the transactional contexts of Japanese escort blogs (Giannoulis and Wilde, 2020). Other simpler commercial uses, such as the use of emoji in customer feedback forms, can shed light on the correspondence between emojis and basic emotions. Prinz analyses emotions conveyed by emojis using the theory of facial mimicry and feedback (2022). In this respect, the effect of emojis can be termed as "emotional contagion through digital channels" (Prinz, 2022). This comparison with contagion is significant, reminding us of Jacques Derrida's description of the sign as a pharmakon – a Greek word meaning "poison" as well as "medicine" (Derrida ,1976). As the new cynosure of the world's linguists, emojis are the new pharmakon, a contagion that is neither language nor gesture, digitally-operative "communicative surrogates" (Danesi, 2022) that are entirely defined by their periphery.

Marcel Danesi has carried out extensive research on the emotional implications of emoji use. He describes emojis as "feeling structures" (2022). He shows that cultural variations in meanings has attenuated the intended universality of emojis as a langue or lingua franca. However, he contends that "the intent in emoji use is positive emotivity. And this has implications for their use in promoting wellbeing" (Danesi, 2022). Studying the use of emojis in the field of healthcare, Danesi argues that wellbeing is enhanced regardless of whether the emojis being used are positive or negative: emojis constitute a self-contained semiotic system based on emotivity – a system that is highly metaphorical and that is more intuitively forceful than words. It forms a conceptual blending system between verbality and visuality. (Danesi, 2022)

Danesi's earlier work on the semiotics of emojis reads them as part of "phatic communication" – a phrase borrowed from the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (Danesi 2017, p. 19). This means that emojis form that part of conversations which makes them easy and pleasant: an essential social function; they can be used as an utterance opener, as an utterance ending, and for avoiding silence.

The way we communicate is changing rapidly, with emojis and memes becoming key tools for expression. But what could be the long-term impact of relying on these simplified visual cues? Could they alter how we communicate emotions and understand one another? Social media platforms and predictive text shape the way we use language, but could they also influence how we feel and express emotions, much like how artificial intelligence, such as Kismet, is programmed to simulate human emotions? Increased virtual communication since the second decade of the twenty-first century has shown us both the strengths and weaknesses of digital interactions. While video calls and online discussions are useful, they cannot fully replace face-to-face communication. Many people have realized that physical presence carries emotions in a way technology cannot. However, as emoji usage evolves, could these digital symbols eventually bridge this emotional gap?

A major concern is how young people, who grow up using emojis, might be affected. Will they struggle to express complex emotions? Could relying on emojis oversimplify communication? Another issue is the role of big tech companies that design and track emoji usage. If our emoji choices are influenced by algorithms, could this shape how we feel and react? Predictive emoji suggestions make communication easier, but they also reduce the need for us to think deeply about our emotions, potentially leading to more automated, conditioned responses (Kiaer, 2023).

Emojis help people express emotions in digital conversations, making them an important tool for mental health. According to Danesi (2022), emojis act as 'feeling structures', allowing users to communicate emotions that might be hard to put into words. This ability makes them useful in healthcare, where they can help detect depression, improve patient communication, and support mental health programs for young people. Emojis provide a simple and non-judgmental way to express feelings. Thus, they are valuable in both public health and medical settings, helping bridge the gap between personal emotions and professional diagnosis.

Boutet et al. (2021) studied how emojis affect emotional communication and perception. Their research showed that emojis significantly influence how people interpret the mood of a message. Negative emojis make messages feel more negative, while positive emojis increase warmth and friendliness. Emojis also play a complex role in emotional well-being. According to Liu (2023), people use emojis in different ways depending on the social setting—just as they adjust their facial expressions in face-to-face interactions. The study found that people are more open with their emotions when using emojis in private conversations with close friends, but tend to control their expressions in public interactions. Expressing emotions through emojis was linked to greater happiness, while suppressing emotions with emojis had a weak link to depressive symptoms. This suggests that while emojis can improve emotional expression and well-being, using them to fit social norms may have some psychological effects.

10. Conclusion

Emojis have changed the way people communicate online. They act as a visual language that adds expression, engagement, and cross-cultural understanding. Their widespread use in digital conversations reflects a shift in how people communicate, with a growing preference for combining text and visual elements. While emojis can be difficult to interpret or standardize, their role in social media and online interactions makes them an essential part of modern communication.

The paper has discussed current research in the field of emoji semiotics to demonstrate that theorists agree on their situatedness in between language and non-verbal gestures, and there are differences in critical opinion on the correlation between emoji use and emotional wellbeing. The peculiar combination of distance and proximity in digital communication serves as the perfect occasion for this hybrid communicative tool. The paper has argued that emojis can be understood as a pharmakon or double-edged sign. Although negative emojis are associated with adverse mental health, the emotive intent of emoji use serves a generally positive psychological function.

As simplified representations of human emotions, emojis may influence emotional expression and comprehension over time. Social media interfaces and predictive text shape language use, raising concerns about algorithmic conditioning. The shift to virtual interactions has highlighted the irreplaceable nature of physical communication, though evolving emoji systems may attempt to bridge this gap. Particularly for younger users,

reliance on emojis may risk oversimplifying emotional complexity. This raises the question whether emojis enhance or constrain emotional expression, shaping future interpersonal communication in digital spaces.

More research is needed from linguistic, sociological, and psychological perspectives to understand how the hybrid, in-between nature of emojis affects the content of communication, thereby defining the very parameters of the digital platforms they operate in. As technology continues to develop, emojis will likely become even more interactive and expressive. Advances in artificial intelligence, augmented reality, and virtual reality may integrate emojis into real-time conversations, making digital interactions feel more natural. Whether as static images or animated icons, emojis will continue to shape the future of digital communication. They stand at the crossroads of technology, culture, and language, demonstrating how human communication is constantly evolving in a more connected world.

The use of emojis can have long-term impacts on language use patterns, with a possible reduction in the descriptive functions of language where emojis are available. Study has shown that even when the available emoji options in a platform are insufficient to express the required emotion, people still choose to use one of them in preference to a detailed written description of the emotion. Thus, there is significant risk that emoji use can reduce emotional nuance in conversations over time, with younger generations and people who are growing up during the social media revolution being at increased risk of losing their abilities to describe emotions through language. There may even be a gradual trend towards emotional desensitization, with a dystopic hypothetical scenario that Unicode might determine what emotions we feel, and how we express them.

On the other hand, general digital literacy has taken a boost from due to the easy accessibility of emojis. For example, online customer forms that use emoji responses record significantly higher customer engagement. Just like Graphic User Interface (GUI) revolutionized digital literacy among the masses in the 1980s and 1990s, the pictographic aspect of emojis is likely to remove language barriers from many people's digital literacy goals. Future research is likely to focus on these sociological questions and requires an interdisciplinary approach to jointly address the technological and psycho-social angles of the emoji revolution.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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