

DIGITAL INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION AND EMOJIS AS NONVERBAL CUES

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Abstract

The evolution of digital technology has shifted interpersonal communication patterns from multisensory physical spaces to computer-mediated communication characterized by rigid text. The absence of immediate nonverbal cues in digital text creates a high risk of ambiguity and misunderstanding among users. This study aims to analyze emojis as nonverbal cues in interpersonal communication within digital spaces and to understand how users interpret emoji meanings based on the interaction context. A qualitative approach with a descriptive method was employed, relying entirely on secondary data. The results suggest that emojis serve as visual cues (digital paralanguage) that are effective at conveying immediate feelings, adjusting message intensity via symbol repetition, and managing conflict by using them as linguistic neutralizers. The interpretative meaning of emojis proves to be highly fluid, open to multiple interpretations, and context-dependent. The validity of emoji interpretation is significantly influenced by the relational dynamics between communicators, the syntactic relationship between text and emoji (e.g., sarcasm), and digital cultural fragmentation resulting from generational and geographical differences. The study concludes that the effectiveness of digital interpersonal communication lies not in the literal visual form of the emoji, but rather in the shared social codes and contextual sensitivity between each of communication actors.

Keywords: *Digital Space, Emoji, Mediated-Communication, Interpersonal Communication, Nonverbal Communication.*

A. INTRODUCTION

A fundamental shift has occurred in the nature of human interaction in the modern period as a result of the rapid progress of information and communication technologies. Digital media has transcended its role as a supplementary instrument and has become the principal platform for everyday social interaction (Gushevinalti et al., 2020; Maulida & Winanta, 2021). The transition from in-person communication to digital platforms has resulted in the emergence of predominantly text-oriented interaction styles. The emergence of instant messaging applications and social media networks has eradicated geographical limitations, allowing people to communicate messages at any time and from any location with high frequency (Kabisar & Maryani, 2023).

However, this migration to text-based digital communication presents unique challenges for the effective delivery of messages. In conventional or face-to-face communication, the comprehension of meaning is greatly aided by immediate nonverbal cues, such as vocal intonation, facial expressions, eye contact, and body gestures (Fadhilah et al., 2023). These nonverbal elements serve as guides for interpretation, helping to prevent message misinterpretation. When interaction shifts entirely to written text on device screens, these kinesthetic and vocal aspects vanish, leaving behind rigid text that is prone to causing misunderstandings between users (Priyono, 2022).

It is precisely the absence of physical nonverbal cues in the digital space that has spurred various symbolic innovations, most notably the use of emojis. Emojis emerged as

visual representations specifically designed to bridge the emotional gap inherent in textual communication (Baktiar et al., 2022). These iconic symbols, depicting various facial expressions, objects, and activities, are utilized by the digital community to restore the lost human elements to their interactions. Through emojis, social media users seek to infuse emotion, tone, and atmosphere into the brief sentences sent to their partners (Firmansyah et al., 2023).

Emojis are no longer merely visual embellishments that enhance the appearance of a message in digital interpersonal communication. It have evolved into digital nonverbal cues that serve a crucial function, such as reinforcing, complementing, or even replacing actual emotional expressions (Nurdin & Labib, 2021). A sentence that might otherwise seem flat or even curt can transform into a warm, friendly statement simply by adding a smiley face symbol at the end. This phenomenon demonstrates that emojis possess a rhetorical power capable of shaping how a text-based message is perceived and interpreted (Nahwiyyah & Dewi, 2020).

Nevertheless, the use of emojis in digital interactions is not without its challenges and interpretive ambiguities. Unlike verbal language, which relies on standardized dictionaries, the meaning attached to an emoji is never singular or universal. Because emojis rely heavily on visual imagery, their meanings are highly fluid and open to multiple interpretations (Subakti, 2019). Different users may interpret the similar emoji in diametrically opposed ways, depending on their individual perceptions. This visual flexibility creates the potential for message distortion if not approached with a deep understanding of the nuances involved (Lamirin & Suryanti, 2021).

The highly contextual nature of emoji meaning is influenced by various external factors surrounding the interaction. Cultural backgrounds, the level of interpersonal closeness, the psychological state of the communicators, and even the exact supplementary text contributes to the singular interpretation associated with an emoji (Hariani, 2023). For instance, a particular emoji might be viewed as polite and friendly among peers, yet deemed unprofessional or even offensive when used in formal communication with a superior. Consequently, social context serves as the primary determinant in establishing the validity of an emoji's meaning in cyberspace (Permatasari et al., 2023).

Given this reality, it is essential to gain a deep understanding of how emojis function as a new form of nonverbal language in the digital space. A failure to align the communicator's intended meaning with the recipient's interpretation of emoji usage can trigger interpersonal conflicts and diminish the effectiveness of digital interpersonal communication. By grasping the contextual nature of emoji meanings, users can hopefully manage their digital interactions more wisely.

B. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive method, relying entirely on secondary data (Rukin, 2019). A qualitative approach was chosen due of its appropriateness for interpreting the texts, symbols, and meaning dynamics of emojis in digital communication without requiring statistical testing. The secondary data for this study were obtained through a search of digital documents, including screenshots of public conversations on social media, open discussion forums in instant messaging applications, and relevant supporting literature such as journal articles, books, and prior scholarly reports. Based on the available data, emojis as nonverbal cues and its variations meanings in digital interpersonal communication is described.

The data was analyzed through data reduction (Muhadjir, 1996), wherein the researcher filtered, categorized, and focused on text-based interactions containing emojis that were relevant, while eliminating non-representative information. The second was data presentation, in which contextual patterns of emoji usage were described narratively to clarify the

relationships between their meanings. The last was conclusion drawing or verification, where the researcher synthesized the findings regarding the emojis as nonverbal cues and its variations meanings in digital interpersonal communication.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Emojis as Nonverbal Cues in Digital Interpersonal Communication

The rapid advancement of communication technology has massively shifted the arena of social interaction from the physical world to virtual spaces (Choi & Choung, 2021). This transition of medium automatically changes the structure of human interaction, moving it from a direct, multisensory experience to computer-mediated communication that relies heavily on written text. In physical spaces, humans are accustomed to exchanging messages holistically because the interaction is supported by the actual presence of the interlocutor. However, in rigid text-based digital spaces, all the comforts of physical interaction vanish, leaving behind stiff rows of alphabets on device screens that depend entirely on the literacy and interpretive abilities of the readers.

The most fundamental weakness of text-based communication in digital spaces is the total loss of nonverbal cues (Al Tawil, 2019). Nonverbal messages, such as facial expressions, eye contact, hand gestures, body posture, and vocal intonation, account for more than half of the success in conveying meaning. These physical cues serve as interpretative anchors, ensuring that a message is understood exactly according to the sender's original intent. When the communication medium is stripped down to mere text, the absence of these physical cues creates a massive emotional void within the cyber realm.

This emotional void subsequently creates a very high risk of misunderstanding among digital media users (Erle et al., 2022). The written text is cold, flat, and highly vulnerable to semantic distortion because the recipient tends to read the text based on their own psychological state or mood, rather than that of the sender. A neutral sentence written with no bad intent can easily be interpreted as curt, angry, or threatening by the receiver. This structural limitation is precisely what drives digital societies to innovate, leading to the birth of a new visual language in the form of emojis.

Emojis exist not merely as visual elements to enhance the aesthetics of a chat room, but as structured instruments to substitute missing nonverbal cues. These small visual symbols, depicting various facial expressions and gestures, are deliberately created to reconstruct the human elements lost from text-mediated communication (Bliss-Carroll, 2016). By strategically placing emojis, digital media users attempt to breathe artificial kinesics and vocal qualities back into their screens. Emojis function as digital replicas of real human facial expressions in the physical world.

Through secondary data analysis of various digital interaction documents, it was found that the primary function of emojis is to serve as visual inflections or emotional tone markers (*digital paralanguage*). Emojis act as virtual voice directors that tell the recipient how a sentence should be read and heard in their minds. For instance, a short sentence like "*Where are you?*" carries a literal meaning that feels highly interrogative and rigid. However, when a smiling face emoji is added (*Where are you?* 😊), the tone of the sentence immediately shifts into a friendly, warm, and caring inquiry.

If the similar short sentence is paired with a crying or anxious face emoji (*Where are you?* 😭), its psychological meaning instantly transforms into an expression of panic, deep worry, or intense longing. The rhetorical power of emojis to completely pivot the emotional orientation of a rigid text proves that these visual symbols hold a status equal to vocal intonation in face-to-face communication. Emojis are capable of filling the vocal void that conventional punctuation marks, such as periods or question marks, simply cannot represent (Danesi, 2022; Boutet et al., 2021).

In addition to serving as tone markers, secondary data also indicates that emojis function as highly effective regulators of message intensity through the mechanism of symbol repetition. The level of seriousness, urgency, or emotional outburst of a sender is frequently visualized quantitatively through the number of emojis sent. Sending a single laughing face emoji (😂) might merely indicate that a message feels amusing to the sender. However, when the same emoji is sent repeatedly (😂😂😂), its intensity skyrockets into a digital representation of boisterous, uncontrollable laughter in the real world.

Another crucial function of emojis as nonverbal cues is their ability to mitigate conflict or act as cushions for textual ambiguity (Boutet et al., 2021). In both professional and social interactions within digital spaces, command sentences, reprimands, or corrections often trigger psychological tension for the recipient due to the rigid nature of text. The data shows that inserting affective and friendly emojis, such as a thumb-up (👍) or a warm smile (😊), can successfully de-escalate this tension. Emojis in this context serve as linguistic softeners, communicating that the sender harbors no hostile intentions.

This phenomenon reinforces the view that emojis have succeeded in re-humanizing digital text, which was initially mechanical and cold. Emojis restore the affective dimension to long-distance interpersonal communication, allowing emotional closeness to be maintained even when both parties cannot see each other face-to-face (Coyle & Carmichael, 2019). These symbols provide a richer, more honest, and dynamic space for self-expression within the digital space. Users are no longer trapped by the limitations of written words to describe their complex emotional states.

The finding confirms that emojis have evolved into a well-established nonverbal sign system that is inseparable from the modern digital communication ecosystem. Their presence successfully bridges the gap between what the communicator thought and emotions and what the listener perceives. Through their ability to replace facial expressions, regulate emotional intensity, and clarify message intent, emojis can be said as a vital pillar in creating digital interactions that are more adaptive, efficient, and rich in human emotional nuance.

2. Contextualization and Multi-meaning of Emojis in Digital Space

While emojis are engineered with predefined visual architectures, their interpretative meanings are remarkably fluid and never absolute. In computer-mediated communication, textual signs do not function in a vacuum. It enters a dynamic linguistic ecosystem where meanings are continuously negotiated. The visual clarity of a graphic symbol does not guarantee a singular, universal interpretation among different users (Vandergriff, 2013). Secondary data analysis reveals that emojis are highly susceptible to a phenomenon known as semantic shift, where the actual message decoded by the receiver deviates significantly from the literal definition intended by the system developers.

This fluidity highlights that emojis do not possess a fixed semantic core, but rather a contextual validity. When a user selects a specific icon, the symbol absorbs the immediate social conditions surrounding the interaction. The decoding process in digital space is highly subjective, heavily reliant on the psychological disposition, cultural background, and digital literacy of the individual reading the screen. A single visual token can yield highly polarized reactions, transforming from a harmless gesture of friendliness into a tool of passive-aggressive confrontation, depending entirely on the framework of the specific conversation (Coyle & Carmichael, 2019).

One of the primary causes driving this semantic divergence is the nature of the interpersonal relationship between the communication actors (Shi et al., 2019). In close-knit social circles or peer groups, the threshold of formality is lowered, giving rise to an internalized, private vernacular. Within these intimate contexts, negative or provocative emojis, such as the

clown face (🤡), the skull (💀), or even the piece of poop (💩), frequently lose their literal derogatory connotations. Instead, they are repurposed as symbols of playful banter, shared inside jokes, or affectionate teasing, reinforcing social solidarity and mutual comfort within the group.

When these identical symbols cross the boundary into formal or professional communication networks, their interpreted meaning undergoes an immediate, severe shift. In an asymmetric relationship, such as an interaction between a subordinate and a superior, the use of highly casual or ambiguous emojis is stripped of its playful context (Hand et al., 2022). A supervisor receiving a clown or skull emoji from an employee will likely decode the message as an act of insubordination, disrespect, or extreme unprofessionalism. This binary reaction demonstrates that social hierarchy acts as a strict regulatory filter for emoji interpretation in digital spaces (Stein, 2023).

Beyond relational dynamics, the structural meaning of an emoji is inherently tied to its syntactic integration with the accompanying verbal text. Emojis rarely appear in absolute isolation. It is almost always paired with sentences, acting as modifiers (Yang & Liu, 2021). When the semantic orientation of the emoji aligns seamlessly with the literal meaning of the text, a parallel relationship is established, reinforcing clarity. However, when a stark contradiction is deliberately introduced between the written words and the appended symbol, a complex linguistic layer of digital sarcasm or irony is instantly generated.

A classic example of this textual-visual contradiction can be observed in the deployment of the clapping hands emoji (👏) or the smiling face with open hands (😄). In a straightforward context, these symbols denote genuine celebration, congratulations, or support. Yet, when appended to a sentence that describes a clear failure or an unfortunate event, the emoji 🙌 completely subverts the literal praise of the verbal text. The visual cue forces the recipient to invert the message, transforming a superficial compliment into a sharp, cutting piece of online satire.

Furthermore, the interpretative landscape of emojis is deeply fragmented by generational divides and evolving internet subcultures. Digital natives, particularly younger cohorts like Generation Z, have established highly complex, non-literal semiotic codes that depart drastically from the original design intentions of emoji creators. For these younger demographics, the traditional smiling face emoji (😊) is no longer a symbol of genuine happiness or warmth. Instead, due to its static, unblinking visual design, it has been widely reinterpreted as an expression of patronizing coldness, passive aggression, or forced politeness.

In contrast, older generations of digital users tend to engage with emojis through a strictly literal and utilitarian lens. To an older user, a smiling face (😊) simply represents a pleasant disposition, and a crying-laughing face (😂) is used strictly to indicate that something is genuinely humorous. When these two distinct demographic groups intersect in a digital space, a profound semantic mismatch often occurs. The younger user may interpret an older relative's benign use of a symbol as a subtle emotional slight, illustrating how age-related digital literacy shapes the fragmentation of meaning in cyberspace (Garcia et al, 2022).

Cultural and geographical boundaries also play a decisive role in dictating how emojis are decoded globally (Guntuku, 2019; Kejriwal, 2021). Because emojis are distributed uniformly across international software operating systems, the same visual icons are inherited by societies with vastly different cultural values. Anthropological and linguistic data indicate that nonverbal gestures carry localized taboos and traditions, which are directly projected onto their digital emoji counterparts. This projection turns seemingly neutral icons into highly sensitive hazards during intercultural digital exchanges.

For instance, the classic thumbs-up emoji (👍) is universally understood in most Western digital spaces as a quick sign of approval, agreement, or confirmation. However, in

several places, the physical gesture of raising the thumb historically carries an offensive, vulgar connotation equivalent to an obscene insult. When a user from a culture where the gesture is benign sends it to someone from a region where it carries a taboo, the mechanical uniformity of the emoji system fails to protect the interaction from a severe cross-cultural misunderstanding (Thompson, 2019).

Similarly, the folded hands emoji () exhibits remarkable contextual flexibility depending on the cultural and religious orientation of the users. In several countries this icon is frequently decoded as a representation of prayer, spiritual hope, or a request for divine intervention. Some countries, however, signifies this emoji as an expression of deep gratitude or a polite apology. Meanwhile in professional tech environments, the similar icon is often pragmatically re-labeled as a high-five, used to celebrate teamwork (Kusters & Sahasrabudhe, 2018).

This extreme semiotic elasticity confirms that the validity of an emoji's meaning does not reside within the pixelated graphic itself, but within the code-sharing established between the communication actors. Communication effectively breaks down when the sender and the receiver do not operate within the same interpretive framework. The technology offers the platform and visual lexicon, although the prevailing social context ultimately determines whether a message signifies empathy, professional affirmation, or a hostile affront (Kaye et al., 2016; Stein, 2023).

The continuous evolution of internet platforms further accelerates this semiotic instability through the introduction of memes and viral trends. A specific emoji can overnight become associated with a pop-culture event, a political movement, or a viral joke, completely overshadowing its original dictionary definition. For example, the peach emoji () and the eggplant emoji () have been thoroughly different from their botanical origins within global youth culture, taking on permanent double-entendres that require specific subcultural awareness to navigate safely.

It reveals that cyberspace has developed a sophisticated, highly volatile form of visual literacy. To communicate effectively in the modern digital age, an individual cannot rely solely on basic verbal vocabulary or literal symbol recognition (Stein, 2023). Users must possess a nuanced understanding of social contexts, relational boundaries, generational shifts, and cultural variations that govern the digital ecosystem. Without this contextual sensitivity, the use of emojis can easily backfire, generating unintended friction rather than clarity.

The analysis regarding emoji deployment highlights that these visual signs are fundamentally contextual entities. Emoji is highly adaptable because its form and meaning can adjust with the dynamics of human relationships and cultural developments. Emojis have successfully broken the rigid constraints of linear textual communication, but they have also introduced a new layer of interpretive complexity. The successful of digital interpersonal communication depends on the mutual alignment of these contextual variables between communication actors within the virtual space.

D. CONCLUSION

Emojis serve an essential function as replacements for nonverbal signals in the realm of digital communication. It fills the emotional gap left by unchanging text by serving as visual inflections or a type of digital paralanguage. Emojis serve to convey emotional dimension, adjust the intensity of messages through repeated symbols, and function as linguistic facilitators to reduce conflict. It is potentially reestablishing human characteristics such as facial expressions and vocal inflections that are typically lost in computer-mediated interactions. Emojis imbue digital language with a sense of humanity and assist how a message is perceived and understood by the recipient. However, this study also concludes that the meaning of an emoji is never singular or universal, rather it is highly fluid, dynamic, and contextual. The

validity and interpretation of an emoji's meaning depend entirely on a shared code communication actors, which is strongly influenced by three key factors 1) the interpersonal relationship types, 2) the syntactic combination of text and emojis which can trigger sarcastic interpretations, and 3) digital cultural fragmentation driven by generational and geographical differences. In short, the effectiveness of digital interpersonal communication is determined not only by the literal visual form of the emoji itself, but by the user's sensitivity in aligning the symbol with the social and situational context surrounding the interaction.

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