

Language of emojis: A meta-synthesis

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Abstract: Amidst the digital landscape, a significant challenge emerges: the absence of non-linguistic cues, such as facial expressions and body language. This limitation often results in misunderstandings and misinterpretations during online interactions. This research aims to empirically assess emojis' potential as effective substitutes for textual language and emotional expression, addressing the overarching question of their communicative efficacy. This study rigorously analyzes the language of emojis using a document-based approach. It searched Google Scholar with the term “language of emoji” across a wide timeframe, selecting five relevant papers published from 2018 to 2023. Only English papers focusing on linguistic, communicative, and socio-cultural aspects of emoji use were included. Through this method, the study aims to offer insights into emoji functions in communication, drawing from recent and pertinent research. The findings suggest that emojis serve as effective tools for communication, enabling individuals to express emotions and strengthen relationships in digital interactions. However, it is important to acknowledge that while emojis may enhance communication, there remains a need for further research. One of the reviewed articles highlighted the nuanced nature of emoji communication, indicating that their meanings are context-specific and subject to interpretation, thereby warranting deeper exploration into their communicative functions and potential limitations.

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INTRODUCTION

The foundation of human interaction relies on both verbal and non-verbal communication. Technological advancements have significantly altered the landscape of communication, especially in digital messaging platforms like WhatsApp, Line, Messenger, Telegram, and WeChat, which have become essential tools in our everyday interactions (Annamalai & Abdul Salam, 2017).

In the digital realm, a notable challenge arises from the absence of non-verbal cues like facial expressions and body language. This limitation impedes the transmission of emotions and intentions, often resulting in misunderstandings and misinterpretations during online interactions (Walther & D’Addario, 2001). Emoticons, initially represented in ASCII text, emerged as a remedy to this issue by offering basic graphical depictions of emotions. However, these evolved into emojis, which are small, two-dimensional pictographs, providing a more diverse and nuanced range for expressing emotions and various states (Barberi et al., 2016).

The prevalence of emojis has notably surged in mobile messaging apps, becoming an integral part of contemporary communication (Negishi, 2014). The widespread adoption of emojis reflects the broader trend toward digital interactions, particularly among teenagers and young adults who favor digital exchanges over face-to-face conversations (FtF) (Hall et al., 2019). These graphical representations offer a subtle portrayal of emotions and concepts (Kelly & Watts, 2015), becoming a crucial component of computer-mediated communication. However, differences from facial expressions are apparent (Riordan, 2017). While they possess a universal quality, diverse interpretations arise due to context and communal standards (Barbieri et al., 2016).

These graphical symbols offer a sophisticated portrayal of emotions and concepts (Kelly & Watts, 2015), rendering them indispensable in computer-mediated communication. However, differences from facial expressions are discernible (Riordan, 2017). Despite being universally understood, interpretations vary based on context and communal norms (Barbieri et al., 2016). In addition, uncertainties persist regarding their communication functions compared to nonverbal cues (Feldman et al., 2017). This study seeks to unravel the true role of emojis as textual emotion conveyors, probing the extent of their communicative impact.

Based from the researcher's reading limited research has delved into the nuanced factors influencing emoji effectiveness, including cultural and contextual variations, and individual differences like age, gender, and socio-cultural background. Understanding the role of non-verbal cues in emoji communication is also lacking. Addressing these gaps would deepen comprehension of emoji's role in effective communication, informing strategies for their optimized use across different contexts.

This research aims to explore the possibility of using emoji in modern communication, delving into their transformative impact on textual interactions. By analyzing their linguistic, emotional, and sociocultural dimensions, the researcher uncovers how emoji transcend the limitations of text-based communication, bridging the gap left by the absence of nonverbal cues. This study not only sheds light on the evolving nature of communication but also highlights the integral role of emoji in facilitating effective and expressive digital conversations.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a meticulous document-based analysis methodology to examine the language of emojis. A thorough and systematic search was conducted within the Google Scholar electronic database, with a focus on original peer-reviewed papers. The primary search term employed was "language of emoji." Notably, this search encompassed studies spanning a broad temporal range to ensure a comprehensive examination of the subject matter.

The selection process for relevant documents was rigorously conducted, adhering to stringent inclusion and exclusion criteria to establish a robust and well-founded information base for this research endeavor. While initially, eight papers were identified for potential inclusion, the study ultimately limited the scope to papers published within a specified timeframe from 2018 to 2023 to ensure relevance and currency. As a result, three papers published during 2016 to 2017 were excluded from the analysis, resulting in a final selection of five papers for thorough examination.

It is important to note that this study only includes papers published in English that specifically address the linguistic, communicative, and socio-cultural aspects of emoji usage. Papers focusing solely on technical aspects of emoji encoding, software development, or platform-specific features were deliberately excluded from consideration. A notable limitation of this research lies in the scarcity of peer-reviewed articles specifically focusing on the language of emojis.

By employing this rigorous methodology, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the functions of emojis in communication while ensuring the inclusion of recent and relevant research findings within the designated timeframe.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The review of studies between 2018 and 2023 reveals key insights into the role of emojis in digital communication. Despite a scarcity of peer-reviewed articles focused solely on emojis, the findings highlight their significant impact. Firstly, emojis enhance communication, especially in fields like healthcare, as seen in studies by Troiano and Nante (2018). Secondly, emojis are widely integrated into online platforms, fostering social bonds, as emphasized by Arafah and Hasyim (2019). Additionally, emojis effectively convey emotions and influence decision-

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making, as shown by Boutet et al. (2021) and studies at the Hawaii International Conference (2021).

Selected features of emoji in the five selected studies

Author/Source, year	Type of Paper	Objective of the Study	Main Findings
Troiano & Nante, 2018	Research Article	impact of emoji in scientific communication	Emoji could be useful tool to better communicate with health personnel in order to improve the management of patients' health.
Arafah & Hasyim, 2019	Research Article	discuss the phenomenon visual language of emoji	Emoji function strengthens the meaning and social connections between users in communicating.
Boutet, et. al., 2021	Research Article	measure the impact of emojis on emotion interpretation, social attributions and information processing	Emoji act as powerful symbols for facial expressions of emotions.
Hawaii International Conference, 2021	Research Article	understand the impact of emoji	Emojis are widely used on the Internet, both in computer mediated communication and social networking sites. They are used to modify decision making by manipulating emotions similar to facial expressions in face-to-face communication.
Gawne & McCulloch, 2023(retrieved)	Article	n/a	The use of emoji alongside text demonstrates similar properties of meaning to gesture: They do not decompose into smaller morphological units, they do not show predictable syntax, and their meaning is shaped by context-specific use, and there accepted variation in form. However, there is still a room for considering the different communicative functions of emoji.

Among the studies reviewed, Troiano and Nante (2018) investigated the use of emojis in scientific communication and highlighted their utility in enhancing interactions between healthcare professionals and patients, thereby potentially improving patients' health outcomes. This suggests that emojis serve as valuable tools for expressing emotions and facilitating communication between doctors and patients, particularly in contexts where face-to-face interaction is limited. One key linguistic feature of emojis is their ability to convey emotional tone and interpersonal meaning in text-based communication. Studies have shown that emojis serve as contextualizers, providing additional information about the emotional state or communicative intent of the sender (Miller & Turnbull, 2016). It is evident that emojis play a crucial role in enhancing the emotional expressiveness of text-based communication, serving as linguistic tools for expressing emotions, attitudes, and intentions in the absence of face-to-face interaction. By providing visual cues that complement written language, emojis enrich the richness and complexity of online discourse, allowing individuals to communicate more vividly and accurately in digital communication environments. As digital communication continues to evolve, further research is needed to explore the linguistic features of emojis and their impact on online interaction.

Arafah and Hasyim (2019) delved into the phenomenon of visual language through emojis, noting its rapid integration into online communication platforms in the era of information technology. They emphasized emojis' role in reinforcing meaning and social connections among users in digital conversations. This assertion was further supported by Boutet et al. (2021), who found that emojis effectively convey facial expressions and emotions, albeit in a more strategic and less spontaneous manner compared to traditional facial expressions. Emojis contribute to the construction and negotiation of social identity in digital spaces. Individuals may use emojis to express aspects of their cultural identity, such as ethnicity, gender, or social affiliation, by selecting emojis that resonate with their cultural background (Herring et al., 2013). Thus, the socio-cultural dynamics of emoji usage also extend to the negotiation of communicative norms and conventions within digital discourse. Emojis facilitate the expression of socio-cultural meanings that may be difficult to convey through written language alone, allowing individuals to communicate more effectively in multicultural and multilingual contexts (Miller & Turnbull, 2016). Moreover, emojis contribute to the development of new communicative practices and norms, shaping the evolving landscape of digital communication and cultural expression.

The research presented at the Hawaii International Conference (2021) underscored the widespread use of emojis in online communication, particularly in influencing decision-making processes by eliciting emotional responses akin to face-to-face interactions. Daniel and Camp (2018) corroborated these

findings by reporting that messages containing emojis are perceived as more comprehensible and credible by readers compared to those without emojis.

Generally, the collective findings suggest that emojis serve as effective tools for communication, enabling individuals to express emotions and strengthen relationships in digital interactions. However, it is important to acknowledge that while emojis may enhance communication, there remains a need for further research. One of the reviewed articles highlighted the nuanced nature of emoji communication, indicating that their meanings are context-specific and subject to interpretation, thereby warranting deeper exploration into their communicative functions and potential limitations.

CONCLUSION

Based from the collective findings, the study suggests that emojis serve as effective tools for communication, enabling individuals to express emotions and strengthen relationships in digital interactions. However, it is important to acknowledge that while emojis may enhance communication, there remains a need for further research as one of the reviewed articles highlighted the nuanced nature of emoji communication, indicating that their meanings are context-specific and subject to interpretation, thereby warranting deeper exploration into their communicative functions and potential limitations.

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