

Is Emoji a Universal Language?

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Abstract

The invention of the internet and digital communication channels has made it possible for people in different parts of the world to interact without geographic restrictions. Nevertheless, people from different speech communities may encounter communication barriers as a result of their language differences. The invention of emojis, which are perceived as a universal language, is believed to bridge the communication gap between individuals of different languages. To find out how effective emojis are in communication, the findings of four empirical studies, which investigated the use of emojis in communication, were collected and analysed qualitatively. The present study was anchored on Sonja Foss's Theory of Visual Rhetoric, which posits that visuals must communicate effectively and accurately to their audience before they can be identified and described as communicative. The findings of this study, however, showed that while emojis can trigger the emotions of readers, they may fail to communicate effectively to them. Based on these findings, it was concluded that emojis may not be an effective tool in cross border interactions.

Keywords: Emojis, cross boarder communication, visual rhetoric.

Introduction

Language is a communicative device that is found among humans. It is used to communicate emotions, ideas, opinions, and thoughts. Language is also an instrument of culture

because it helps in transmitting desirable values, behaviors, and traditions that make up the way of life of a social, cultural, or ethnic group. Language is found in different aspects of life and is used in religion, commerce, law, mathematics, engineering, arts, science, and technology. It is used in teaching and learning. It can also prove effective in building relationships, resolving conflicts, governing people, and even causing chaos. In other words, language, though primarily invented for communication, is an important tool humans cannot do without.

Language is known to come in different forms. When it is in the auditory form, it is known as oral or spoken form of language. If it appears in prints or texts, it is referred to as the written form. However, sometimes, information may be communicated with other forms, which are neither auditory nor textual. In such a case, this communication form is referred to as a sign. Nevertheless, despite the form language takes, it is known to be culture-specific since their composition and interpretation revolve around the cultural experiences of its users. This is to say that the language used in every community contains aspects of its culture. However, there are debates on the universality of signs, which are believed to cut across cultures, races, and ethnic groups. This subject has been concluded because it has not been proved whether signs are universal or not.

The need for the universality of signs has become more important and most urgent as technology develops, innovates, and expands. The invention of the internet has brought the world together and broken the restrictions caused by the physical geographic barrier. People in different parts of the world can communicate easily and carry out social, economic, religious, and political conversations, which could lead to progress and development of states and humans. Nevertheless, despite the inventions of technology and its devices, and the success in breaking cross-border physical barriers to communication, inventing the language that can unify communication participants from different language groups remains a challenge.

It has been observed that people use images, such as emojis, smileys, and memes, as a form of communication device in computer mediated communications, which include social media interactions, email messages, and other communications that take place on different online platforms. The use of these images has attracted the attentions and interests of researchers, who

attempt to discover whether they, the images, can act as an effective communication tool. However, to the best of knowledge, the effectiveness of these images in cross-border interactions has not been given adequate attention. This present study, therefore, attempts to find out if emojis aid communication among individuals from different cultural and language groups.

What is an Emoji?

Emojis are tiny pictorial characters used in digital communication. They are sometimes used to express actions, ideas, or emotions. They are sometimes used as substitutes for alphabetic characters or to complement alphabets. Emojis is regarded as characters for special writing system that uses images to convey messages. However, as a character that can be used by participants from different language and cultural groups, irrespective of the diversity in primary writing systems, there is a debate regarding the universality of emojis.

Understanding what an emoji is requires retracing steps to ancient Egypt, where hieroglyphs were the writing style. Some researchers have connected emojis to hieroglyphs and claimed they (emojis) are the same as the characters in the ancient Egyptian writing system. However, the ancient Egyptians used hieroglyphs for sacred writing, which they used only for religious purposes. Then, the Egyptians had to study this writing system so they can carve them accurately and also accurately interpret the messages they embedded. If truly emojis are Egyptian hieroglyphs, it means they are culture-specific and not universal since they may contain elements of the ancient Egyptian culture. Nevertheless, the connection between emojis and hieroglyphs are still speculations since it is still difficult to prove that emojis are truly hieroglyphs.

The ancient Egyptians abandoned the use of hieroglyphs around c.2575BC. Though the reasons behind this behavior is unclear, it is believed they must have done this because of the difficulty the writing style posed to their carvers (or writers) and readers. In the 19th cc, it was resurrected by a French orientalist and philologist, Jean-Francois Champollion. This led to the birth of Egyptology, the study of ancient Egypt, as a course of study in higher schools of learning. The re-awakening of the pictorial writing system motivated its use across board, though sparingly at first and increasingly towards the end of the 20th century. In 1999, a Japanese graphic designer,

Shigetaka Kurita, introduced a pictorial writing system that looks similar to hieroglyphs into the digital writing system. But instead of using the name, ‘hieroglyph’, for his invention, he named the now digital pictorial characters, ‘emoji’. His action has since sparked a debate on whether emojis are hieroglyphs introduced into the digital world or not.

Communicative Features and Functions of Emojis

Emojis, as indicated earlier, have features of hieroglyphs, which mean they are both pictorial writing systems. The name, ‘emoji’, was also derived from two Japanese words, *e* (picture) and *moji* (character). In other words, *emoji* literally means ‘picture character’.

Emoji, though believed to have been inspired by hieroglyphs, do not share the same cultural status as the ancient Egyptian writing system. While hieroglyphs, which means sacred (hieroglyph) writing (glyphic) was used for religious writing, emoji can be used for religious, social, and educational interactions. Furthermore, while hieroglyphs were revered and reserved to be used by a few appointed individuals, emojis do not have this status and can be used by everyone that has access to internet-enabled devices. This shows that even though emojis share the physical features of hieroglyphs, they do not share the same status.

Another basic feature of emojis is that they can be expressive. Emojis makes it easier for users to communicate emotions and some actions. However, researchers, such as, have pointed out the arbitrary nature of emojis, which they believe can cause communicative barrier when used across cultures. The arbitrary nature of emojis show that they are culture-specific, indicating that people from different cultural, social, and religious backgrounds may interpret emojis differently as a result of the differences in their experiences. However, this subject is still under debate across board.

The number of emojis used in communication is increasing as time goes by. The writing style is open to inventors, though the system is standardized by Unicode. In addition, different digital platforms and digital operating systems slightly modify their emojis to make them similar to the Unicode approved characters but, at the same time, unique to their platforms. This is to say that diversity occurs in the physical forms of emojis.

In a bid to standardize emojis and give them a universal status, Unicode Consortium, a not-for-profit organization, approves the basic physical forms of emojis and assign meanings to them. The meaning and usage of every approved emoji can be found on the Unicode website. However, it is uncertain if every user of the writing system bothers to check the meanings of the pictorial characters before using them. This could question how people determine the meanings of emojis while encoding or decoding the messages they embody.

Theoretical Framework – Theory of Visual Rhetoric by Sonya Foss

The Theory of Visual Rhetoric was propounded by Sonya Foss in 2004. Foss based her theory on the principles of visual rhetoric, which is a branch of visual literacy that studies the use of images and other visuals in communication. According to the Theory of Visual Rhetoric, though messages can be communicated with images, different viewers can read different meanings in an image. The theory postulates the concept or action an image represents may have different implications in different socio-cultural settings because of what it represents or means in each culture. In other words, this theory affirms the popular saying that a picture is worth a thousand words, meaning that no picture can be interpreted from one perspective.

Furthermore, Foss' Theory of Visual Rhetoric posits that an image can only be seen as communicative if it is symbolic, shows signs of human intervention, and addresses a specific audience. An image, according to the theory, is symbolic if it can be connected to what it refers. This connection, according to must be arbitrary, meaning that its interpretation is conventional. In other words, a sender of an image must first consider what it means in the receiver's culture, knowledge, or experience before using it. This is the way to ensure accurate interpretation of images used in communication.

Similarly, the theory postulates that images used in communication must show the action taken or effort made by the sender (human intervention) as his way of sending a specific message. This action is what will be interpreted by the other parties in the communication event. Finally, the theory holds that an image must be used in a way that reflects or identifies the intended receiver or viewer. This means that it must be created in a way that captures the physical, social, and cultural

experiences of the intended receivers. With this theory, this study is able to determine if emojis are truly communicative, especially in cross-border interactions. Its tenets form the theoretical basis for the argument of this study.

Methodology

The aim of this study is to determine whether emojis can be used as effective communication tool in written conversations among people of different languages and cultural experiences. As a result, the study explored the use of emojis in social media communication. It selected five empirical studies, which examined the use of emojis in social media interactions in different parts of the world. These studies were selected because their objectives were to identify how effective emojis are in communicating intended meanings.

The secondary data collected from the purposively selected samples were analyzed qualitatively. The Theory of Visual Rhetoric by Foss provided the theoretical background for analyzing the collected data. The data were described so that the findings of the selected studies could be explored to discover if emojis can communicate effectively in all situations.

Data Analysis

Five empirical studies, which examined the effectiveness of emojis in communication are qualitatively analyzed. For the sake of this study, the samples are identified as Study 1 – Study 5.

Study 1

Study 1 is a qualitative study conducted by Halverson, C.M.E., Donnelly, C.E., Weiner, M., & Lee, J.L. (2023). The objective of the study was to evaluate the functions of emojis in clinical text messages. The researchers collected data from Diagnose, a secured online platform used by health workers to interact with one another. Halverson et al. a content analysis of 129,360 messages exchanged between physicians and hospitalists across the world. Below is a summary of their research findings:

1. Most of the messages exchanged between medical practitioners contain emojis.

2. Emojis were mainly used to express emotions.
3. Emojis were used to initiate, maintain, and end conversations.
4. Emojis were used by participants of different ages.

Study 2

Study 2 is a mixed method study conducted by Firdani, A.U. & Kahar, R. (2022). The objective of the study was to examine the use of emojis in social media conversations between lecturers and students. They collected data from the interactions post-graduate students of English had with their lecturers in their WhatsApp group. After analyzing the data quantitatively and qualitatively, they made the following findings:

1. Lecturers and students used different emojis in their interactions.
2. The folded hand emoji, which was used only by students, where used to deliver different emotive messages, which include to apologies, show appreciation, plead for a favor, show respect, revere, and show hope.
3. Emojis were used to reduce ambiguity between students and their lecturers.

Study 3

Study 3 is qualitative research conducted by Sabri, A.F., Yusoff, S.Z., & Hassan, I. (2021). The objective of the study was to explore the effectiveness of emojis in WhatsApp interactions among undergraduates in Malaysia. Data were collected through semi-structured interview, whereby eight students were interviewed. The research findings disclosed the following:

1. Emojis are only used among peers.
2. Using emojis with non-peers may lead to misunderstanding and misinterpretation of messages.
3. Emojis are considered inappropriate in formal conversations.
4. Emojis are used according to what they represent in the user's cultures'

Study 4

Study 4 is a quantitative study conducted by Annamalai, S. & Salam, S. N. A. (2017). The aim of their study was to examine how undergraduates in Malaysia interpret emojis. They collected data from 210 students, using questionnaire as the data collection tool. The students were asked to interpret 75 emojis. The research findings show that:

1. Students have different interpretations for most of the smiley emojis though the interpretations are slightly similar to their Unicode meanings.
2. Some commonly used emojis were given interpretations that do not align with their Unicode meanings.

Study 5

Study 5 is a quantitative study conducted by Ghazanfar, S., Maqbool, S., & Masum, R. (2022). The objective of their study was to explore how emojis are interpreted by different individuals. They used questionnaires to collect data from 100 students in different universities in Lahore, Pakistan. The students were asked to select emojis for representing specific messages as well as to interpret the meanings of some emojis. The research findings disclose that:

1. Different emojis can be used to deliver a particular message or express a particular emotion.
2. Male and female students gave different interpretations to the same emojis.
3. Male and female students prefer different emojis for expressing their feelings.

Discussion of Findings

The objective of this study is to determine the effectiveness of emojis as communication tools in cross-border interactions. Put differently, the study aims to determine the possibility of emojis being a global communication device in written interactions. To determine this, five empirical studies that explored the use of emojis in local communication were examined. The findings indicate that emojis are effective tools for communicating emotions and they can help to reduce ambiguities. However, the study also discovered that emojis can be interpreted differently, with some of their interpretations differing from the Unicode assigned meanings.

According to Foss' Theory of Visual Rhetoric, an image can receive several interpretations from its viewers, depending on their socio-cultural experiences (Foss, 2004). In the five studies explored in this current study, Study 5 revealed that gender may affect the choice of emojis used in delivering a particular message as well as the interpretations given to a particular message. This means that one emoji can receive different interpretations from different users as a result of their genders. At the same hand, the male and female genders may decide to select different emojis to deliver a particular message.

Furthermore, Studies 2 and 3 show that the age and social status of users may influence their choice of emojis in delivering a particular message. For example, Study 2 discloses that students and lecturers do not use the same emojis while interacting with one another. Study 3 further shows that people prefer using emojis among peers than among non-peers. The reasons for this disparity border around culture, values, and social expectations.

Culture has also been identified to influence choices in the use and interpretations of emojis. In Study 3, for instance, it was discovered that people use and interpret emojis according what it represents in their culture. Nevertheless, Studies 1 and 2 show that emojis can be used in a digital communication between people of the same profession or field even though Study 3 indicates that the writing system is avoided in formal interactions.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Emojis are pictorial characters that are used in written digital communication. The writing style can be used for different purposes, including social, religious, and educational interactions. It is also used by people of different ages and profession because it helps in clarifying messages and expressing emotions. Emojis are also culture-specific since use and interpret them based on what they represent in their culture. This latter use and feature of emoji question its ability to aid communication among people with different language, cultural, and social experiences.

According to the Theory of Visual Rhetoric by Foss, an image can mean different things to different people because of the differences in their socio-cultural experiences. The theory also posits that images used for communicative purposes are symbolic, arguing that they are arbitrary

and only have conventional meaning. These postulations are affirmed by this study because the analyzed data revealed that several factors influence the interpretation of emojis. Among these factors are gender, social status, and culture.

The presence of culture as one of the factors that determine the interpretations of emojis calls to mind the fact that emojis may not be an effective tool in cross-border communication. Since people from different cultures have different experiences, their interpretations of an emoji may differ. Nevertheless, to confirm this, the following recommendations are made:

1. Experimental studies should be conducted to determine the effectiveness of emojis as a communication tool among people of different languages and cultures.
2. Factors that influence the interpretation of emojis should be studied, identified, and categorized.

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