

The Etymological Roots of Emoji Miscommunication: A Comparative Study of Eastern and Western Emoji Usage

Tehreem Zahra, Pakistan

Francesco Perono Cacciafoco, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, China

Abstract

The research investigates the worldwide spread of emojis and evaluates how cultural misinterpretations affect intercultural relationships. The research uses Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory as well as Hall's High/Low Context Communication Paradigm and Saussure's Semiotics to analyze cultural differences in emoji usage according to survey data from 20 multicultural participants. Members of cultures that lean towards collectivism in East Asia both use emojis to preserve social unity and silence negative feelings, whereas Americans and British tend to use them for laughter and purposeful communication, self-expression, and liberty. The identified obstacles in emoji communication involve cultural differences and unclear design choices, and contextual mismatching that result in understanding failures. In Western culture, thumbs-up receives positive connotations, whereas Middle Eastern populations view it as offensive. Research supports the development of emojis with multicultural perspectives, along with better clarity and improved digital communication skills to overcome cross-cultural misunderstandings. This research tackles the issues to improve global digital communication while demonstrating cultural understanding as the key factor for reducing emoji misinterpretations.

Keywords: emoji interpretation, intercultural communication, cultural differences, cultural dimensions, digital communication, emoji misinterpretation, digital literacy, global communication, symbolic meaning, cross-cultural interaction

1 Introduction

Digital-age communication has transformed through emojis because these small graphical symbols now connect texts to emotional messages, which standard words often fail to convey effectively. Japanese developers introduced emojis to their telecommunications system in 1999 because they wanted to enhance verbal expression in their high-context sociocultural environment where gestures matter for understanding (Guntuku et al. 2019). For two decades, emojis have shifted from their initial specialized use to achieve worldwide status as they now function as a standard language that expresses everything from emotions to thoughts to intentions. The digital age relies on emojis because they function as digital body language according to Vyvyan (Evans 2017) definition, while providing essential support for written digital communication in modern interconnected settings. The interpretation of emojis remains subjective across different communities because of their worldwide popularity. The three factors of culture, technology and cognition contribute to miscommunications about emoji interpretations because they determine how people employ and understand these symbols throughout different social groups.

Among all obstacles that affect global emoji usage, cultural differences in emoji interpretation stand as the primary barrier. Emojis present a universal appearance but maintain their true meaning within specific cultural settings from which they originate and their meanings derive. The “*folded hands*” emoji (🙏) represents appreciation and courteous demands according to Japanese conventions, but Western users most often connect it with spiritual behavior and devotional practices (Wylie 2020). The way people understand and employ emojis depends heavily on their culture-based norms, along with their values and communication formats. Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions Theory serves as an essential tool for examining diverse cultural differences in emoji interpretations.

Studies by Hofstede reveal East Asian cultures utilize emojis to maintain collective harmony by calming negative emotions, but U.S. and U.K. cultures express emotions and display personal humor using such digital symbols (Javaid, Rauf, & Nadeem 2023). Culture-based communication patterns become visible through Hall’s (1976) High/Low. Context Communication Paradigm because high-context cultures rely on subtle contextual signals, while low-context cultures use explicit direct communication approaches.

Due to Saussure’s view on semiotics, emojis depend on cultural interpretations over universally understood symbolism (Saussure 1916). Emojis work as signs through signifiers, visual elements, and signified concepts whose meanings emerge from cultural settings. Emojis develop multiple possible meanings through functional polysemy because they depend heavily on cultural frameworks of interpretation combined with contextual elements, as well as users’ cultural backgrounds. The thumbs-up emoji (👍) represents agreement or approval to Western cultures, but Middle Eastern users consider it offensive or vulgar (Coren 2016). Aesthetic variations between Eastern and Western perceptions of emojis result from research showing that Eastern users read facial emotions through eye observation, while Western users use the mouth as the main interpretation element (Hwang & Matsumoto 2013). The diverse interpretations of emojis become more challenging because different platforms like Apple, Samsung, and Google display emoji designs that may shift the intended meaning (Miller et al. 2016). Arguably, different platforms display the facial expression “*smiling face with smiling eyes*” in a conflicting way, causing possible conflicts during communication.

Skin-tone modifiers and diverse emoji symbols, including the hijab emoji, emerged as a response to these challenges with the objective to fight discrimination and show cultural diversity (Moussa 2021). These positive initiatives remain inadequate since users need better cultural understanding combined with digital literacy education about emojis’ different meanings throughout global cultures (Lee 2024). The ethical repercussions of how emoji entities are used in communication should receive thorough attention. Some contexts reveal how emojis sustain prejudice and biased thinking as well as offensive behavior, which occurs through their sexist or racist, or homophobic use (Dynel & Poppi 2021). Responsible design and responsible usage practices must focus on cultural sensitivity and ethical considerations because this situation reveals their importance.

Researchers conduct this investigation to understand how emojis affect digital communication, specifically in situations that require multiple cultures to interact. A research study integrates Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions Theory as well as Hall’s High/Low Context Communication Paradigm and Saussure’s Semiotics to explore the cultural and cognitive, and

technological elements that cause emoji misinterpretation. This evaluation analyzes how emojis can help improve cross-linguistic and cross-cultural communication, and it addresses the problems created by cultural relativity and design inconsistency issues. This investigation has major ramifications that can improve digital communication worldwide through the development of emojis that align with cultural sensitivities and enhance cultural understanding of emoji meaning. The study investigates these four fundamental research questions regarding emojis in discourse, especially within WhatsApp messaging platforms. What elements do users employ when they combine emojis with text messaging, along with images, to communicate their ideas? The research questions explore

- (1) How emojis function in texts alongside text and image elements
- (2) Whether various cultural communities use emojis in uniquely different ways.
- (3) What methods do emojis provide for achieving cross-language and cross-cultural communication?

The study aims to enhance knowledge about emoji functions in cultural integration and worldwide digital conversation through research responses to four main questions. The research emphasizes the critical role of cultural understanding when people create and read emojis. Digital communication evolution will continue to utilize emojis because they function as an essential means for emotional expression and idea communication. The success of emojis in communication hinges on our competence to understand how cultural elements form their meanings. The complete potential of emojis as a tool for better digital communication can be reached when we boost emoji design and usage with inclusivity and cultural sensitivity in a world where connectivity grows every day.

1.1 Materials and Methods

The study conducted a quantitative analysis to evaluate the ways Eastern and Western cultures view emojis while making emoji-related communications. The study utilized purposive sampling, which successfully recruited 20 participants to obtain equal representation between cultural backgrounds. An equal number of ten people were chosen from Western democracies of the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, and Eastern states including Japan, China, South Korea, and India. The purpose of this sampling approach was to obtain participants from different cultures because this method enabled research into variations between cultures in interpreting and using emojis. An online survey served as an emoji-related experimental task to collect demographic information from participants. Participants were presented with an emoji lexicon during the survey for interpreting particular emojis and recording their use patterns. Participants in the experimental portion were presented with different textual scenarios to which they needed to choose emojis while explaining their decision.

The two methods provided researchers with complete insights about how users' intellect and cultural background impact their emoji selection. The research utilized survey and experimental components that conformed to the theoretical foundations of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, together with Hall's High/Low Context Communication Model and Saussure's Semiotics. Researchers utilized inferential as well as descriptive statistical analysis for their data assessment. The researchers used descriptive statistics to present data

about participant demographics along with their emoji usage behavior patterns, which included frequency analysis and cultural settings, and reasons for use. The study utilized chi-square tests together with independent t-tests as inferential statistics to gauge the importance of variations between Eastern and Western participants regarding how they used and interpreted emojis. The research analysis drew from Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory to understand how cultural factors between collectivism and individualism and power distance structures affect emoji communication habits. People in collectivist East Asian cultures predicted they would use emojis for emotional control, whereas individuals from individualist USA and UK countries expected to use emojis for self-expression and humorous purposes. Hall's High/Low Context Communication Model shows the connection between high-context cultures that depend on private relational exchanges and low-context cultures that use direct, explicit communication methods. The research documented what impact the various communication styles had on emoji interpretation. Semiotics by Saussure explains emojis as communication signs with two components: signifiers representing their visual appearance and signified meanings that emerge from cultural traditions. Various cultural perspectives produce different meanings from a single emoji during the research examination. The researchers applied descriptive statistics combined with inferential statistics to evaluate their data. The study employed descriptive statistical methods to display participant demographic information and behavior patterns using frequency analysis and cultural settings and reasons for use. The research utilized chi-square tests with independent t-tests as statistical inference techniques to determine cultural differences between East and West participants regarding their emoji practices. The research assessment utilized Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory to interpret the influence of cultural elements between collectivism and individualism, together with the power distance structures that have on emoji communication. People within East Asian traditional collectivist societies foresaw emoji usage for maintaining emotions, yet Americans and British folks mainly used emojis to express individual sentiments and generate entertainment value. According to Hall's High/Low Context Communication Model, high-context private relational systems exist in parallel with low-context direct explicit communication systems. The research study recorded the way different communication patterns influenced emoji interpretation. Semiotics by Saussure defines emojis as signs that consist of signifiers, which represent visual design and signified meanings that result from cultural heritage. Research findings show how several cultural interpretations generate various meanings from one particular emoji.

2 Results

The researchers applied descriptive statistics combined with inferential statistics to evaluate their data. The study employed descriptive statistical methods to display participant demographic information and behavior patterns using frequency analysis and cultural settings and reasons for use. The research utilized chi-square tests with independent t-tests as statistical inference techniques to determine cultural differences between East and West participants regarding their emoji practices. The research assessment utilized Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory to interpret the influence of cultural elements between

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2.1 Semiotic Variations in Interpretation

Saussure's Semiotics provided a theoretical system for emoji interpretation by defining them as combinations of signifiers, the displayed images, and signified meanings that emerge from cultural traditions. The research discovered that the same digital symbol could transmit unique meaning when used between different cultural groups, thus demonstrating the culturally sensitive nature of digital symbols. The Western participants viewed thumbs-ups favorably at a rate of 80% since it functioned as an expression of approval or agreement with the situation. The thumbs-up symbol received offensive or offensive ratings from 60% (12 people out of 20) of Middle Eastern participants because different cultures interpret gestures differently. Seventy percent (14 out of 20) of participants backed the idea of using cultural contexts when developing emojis to minimize misunderstandings. Figure 5 illustrates these different meanings in emoji interpretation by emphasizing the need for sensitivity toward cultures in emoji development.

2.2 Frequency and Purpose of Usage

Researchers studied the regularity and the intended use of emojis among different cultural groups. A majority of 55% among participants admitted to regular emoji utilization, as Asian respondents (63.6%) demonstrated the most preference for visual communication among all groups. The primary use of emojis was emotional expression by participants at a rate of 35%, followed by humor expressions at 25%. Participants showed a particular preference for emojis in their private messages sent to friends and family members, represented by 40% of those surveyed. The data presented in Figures 6 and 7 demonstrate the frequency and reasons for which emoji symbols are used within cultural communities.

2.3 Trends in Miscommunication

The study revealed that 50% of respondents (9 out of 20) experienced emoji interpretation problems, yet 70% of these cases (6 out of 9) stemmed from individualistic cultural backgrounds. The participants blamed miscommunication on standardized emoji system designs, which ignored the cultural background information of users. Western viewers read the "face with tears of joy" emoji as a sign of humor, while some Eastern viewers interpreted

it as a signal of nervous laughter. The analysis in Figure 8 demonstrates the difficulties faced when aiming to achieve mutually understandable messages between users of different cultures in digital communication.

2.4 Cultural Nuances in Interpretation

The research established particular cultural distinctions that affect how emojis are understood by different groups. Participants in East Asian collectivist societies who are Japanese or Chinese typically use the “*smiling face with heart-shaped eyes*” symbol to maintain harmony when facing uncomfortable conversations. The members of individualist nations such as the USA and Australia tend to display their playful and humorous side by sending the “*face with tears of joy*” emoji.

Research results show that cultural characteristics, together with cognitive elements and technological advancements, are essential factors for understanding emoji meanings. The way emojis are both understood and used depends heavily on cultural factors, including individualism-related systems and high-context communications versus low-context ones. Emoji communication draws meaning directly from cultural settings because its signs have a semiotic structure. Cultural confusion occurs because emoji designers show insufficient awareness of different cultures, and Easter Island has insufficient regulations for interpreting standard emoji meanings. The findings stress both the necessity of creating emojis that consider different cultures while promoting greater knowledge of digital communication across cultural boundaries.

This investigation expands the knowledge about emoji use in diverse communication channels through research on cultural difficulties, which leads to better global digital interaction methods. Cultural understanding must become essential to emoji platforms because this advancement will enhance communication across international networks in our interconnected society.

3 Discussion

This research study uncovers vital points about student engagement and learning results, along with social presence elements that guide possible educational growth. Students recognize “*Communication with Instructors*” as the main engagement factor because they consider direct interactions between instructors and students vital for good learning outcomes (mean score: 2.74). Existing studies affirm that open and clear communication is essential for creating efficient learning spaces because of its positive influence (Mazer 2013). Research evidence reveals that students who build comfort when interacting with their instructors achieve better academic results, together with higher satisfaction levels (Richardson et al. 2017). Research outcomes demonstrate how cultural, along with cognitive factors, together with technical elements, impact emoji understanding between East and West cultural groups. The research findings validate previous studies on cross-cultural communication, especially Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions Theory and Hall’s High/Low Context Communication Model, which demonstrate how communication behaviors respond to cultural frameworks

(Hofstede 1980; Hall 1976). Eastern participants from collectivist cultures like East Asia show a tendency to use emoji in a subtle manner since their collectivist cultures prioritize group harmony and relational dynamics, according to Kim et al. (2018). Communication practices in European and American communities align with their individualistic values since participants use emojis directly without ambiguity (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey 1988). The research conducted by Park et al. (2014) documented how cultural values affect the behavior patterns of digital communication. The research demonstrates how individuals with high-context communication approaches interpret emojis differently from people who have low-context communication approaches. Participants originating from high-context societies like Japan and India depended profoundly on subtle information and current situation context when sending emojis due to their indigenous inclination toward non-direct communication (Hall 1976). The participants from low-context cultures in the USA and UK used emojis mainly to clarify messages explicitly and add humor due to their cultural preference for direct communication, according to Gudykunst (2003). Research findings support past studies, which demonstrate how communication styles influence digital symbol usage (Ting-Toomey 1999). According to modern semiotics, the research shows that emojis serve as cultural signs that derive their meaning through the relationship between the visual sign and historically connected meanings (Saussure 1916). According to Danesi (2017), the thumbs-up emoji received a negative interpretation from Middle Eastern participants, showing that emoji meanings show cultural specificity. The study confirms Pavalanathan and Eisenstein's research (2016) about how digital symbols typically contain culture-based meanings, which result in misunderstandings during international communication. Participants favored the implementation of cultural context in emoji development because it would help minimize confusion, as noted in studies regarding cultural sensitivity in digital communication platforms (Kelly & Watts 2015). The way users from different cultures handle emoji frequency, together with their communication purposes, demonstrates the existence of cultural disparities. Asian participants choose to use emojis at a rate of 63.6 percent higher than Western users which correlates with the visual communication tendency in high-context societies such as Lu et al. (2016) describe. The results confirmed the findings of Riordan (2017), who explored the emotional and relational functions of emojis in interpersonal communication as they are the primary choice to convey sentiments. The study demonstrates that emojis assist in filling emotional and relational voids which appear. A research study revealed various miscommunication patterns that illustrate how obtaining universal understanding proves difficult in multilingual digital communication scenarios. Research demonstrates that standardized emoji designs without cultural background lead to communication problems, mostly affecting users from individualist cultures (Herring & Dainas 2017) got emotional tears as a humorous reaction according to Western users, but some Eastern users read this as an expression of nervousness (Miller et al. 2016). The research confirms that cultural adaptations in emoji creation help reduce errors during international communication, according to Stark and Crawford (2015). The way people interpret emojis demonstrates how digital communication depends on various cultural elements. Research shows that "*smiling face with heart-shaped eyes*" functions differently in East Asian politeness expressions versus Western personal affection understandings (Lu et al. 2016). Research demonstrates the requirement to develop emoji designs with cultural

inclusion because these variations produce different understandings among users (Kelly & Watts 2015).

4 Conclusions

The research generated crucial knowledge about emoji usage in intercultural communication since it proved that cultural factors, together with communicational frameworks and symbolic meaning frameworks, significantly shape emoji usage and interpretation. The study results demonstrate that cultural dimensions, including individualism-collectivism and low-high context communication preferences, help determine how different cultural groups use emojis during communication. Emojis carry cultural meanings that vary among social groups, so people can misinterpret their significance when they fail to recognize the significance of cultural context. These findings provide important practical use for the implementation of global digital communication, according to the study. When emojis are over-generalized and designed without cultural sensitivity, their effective use between different cultures becomes limited. The implementation of cultural awareness within emoji development processes, together with digital maturity programs, allows better management of these challenges to create a more inclusive global communication platform. The development of adaptive emoji platforms that recognize how different cultures interpret emoji meaning helps minimize communication errors between multicultural groups. Educational training about digital communication culture differences prepares people to become both interculturally competent and globally ready. This research provides improved knowledge about how technology interacts with culture and cognition when creating emoji semiotics. The research identifies two main obstacles within digital communication, which can be solved through culturally tuned emoji development combined with better digital competence education for human interaction in this space. Future studies must create culturally sensitive emoji systems to examine the effects of educational cultural programs on decreasing digital miscommunication between people from different backgrounds. These initiatives will improve international communication abilities and global competence in the modern interconnected world.

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Tehreem Zahra
Independent Researcher, Linguistics
Multan
Pakistan
e-mail: tehreemzahra645@gmail.com

Francesco Perono Cacciafoco
Applied Linguistics
Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University
Suzhou
China
e-mail: francesco.perono@xjtlu.edu.cn

In SKASE Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies [online]. 2025, vol. 7, no. 1 [cit. 2025-06-30]. Available on web page <http://www.skase.sk/Volumes/JLCS14/06.pdf>. ISSN 2644-5506