

# *The use of emojis on social media platforms in facilitating inter-cultural communication*

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**Keywords:** Emojis use; intercultural communication processes; message senders; message receivers; cultural misunderstandings

**Abstract:** The aim of this research is to explore the use of emojis on social media platforms in facilitating inter-cultural communications. Upon analysis, it is found out that emojis can be comprehended differently in different cultural contexts. Moreover, in some countries or minor cultural groups, emojis are even banned to be used in daily communication processes as they may trigger defence. The use of emojis, is appropriately, can help reduce cultural misunderstandings as emojis can help express nuanced emotional states of message senders. From the perspective of receivers, understanding emojis' meanings well and in consistent with different cultural contexts, can help them understand personality traits and attitudes held by message senders. Lastly, using emojis can increasing inter-cultural communication intention and efficiency, as emojis can attract online users to communicate with one another more frequently.

## **1. Introduction**

Influenced by the increased use and popularity of social media platforms, people have all over the world have formed the habit of using emoji to facilitate their daily virtual communication. According to Mladenovic, from the perspective of marketers, emojis can be used to humanize brand voice and trigger emotional response from targeted audiences.<sup>[1]</sup> Nonetheless, few researches have been done to examine how emojis are perceived and the specific types of reactions they evoke. By adopting questionnaire study and drawing upon the Dual Coding theory, Mladenovic identified that among 318 questionnaire respondents, emojis did generate a negative effect on purchase intention, whilst such kind of negative effect could be turned to positive when mediated by positive affect. In addition to use emoji in their adverting processes, individuals also use emojis in their daily virtual communication. It is recorded that more than 3,500 different emojis are used on varying social media platforms<sup>[2]</sup>. Approximately, 90% of online community users use emojis in their daily communication processes<sup>[3]</sup>.

Given the popularity of emojis in online communication processes, Arya et al (2018) also state that some companies have started creating their emojis. For instance, Google created a series of emojis on World Emoji Day in 2016<sup>[4]</sup>. The dual coding theory also implies that consumers' cognition is based on two mutually connected building pillars, which are a verbal system and a non-verbal system. Hence, the use of emojis allows users to include both verbal and non-verbal

symbols in their communications. Advertisers who use emojis can greatly shorten decision-making processes of potential customers. Figure 1 shows the use of emojis by Domino's Pizza in its advertisement to attract Twitter users.



Figure 1: Domino's Pizza used emojis to attract Twitter users in its advertisement

Accompanied by the image of Pizza, Domino's Pizza used emojis to successfully attract the attention of targeted consumers on Twitter. In daily communication processes, the use of emojis is also commonly seen on social media platforms. Taking Facebook as an example, emojis are also commonly seen in daily posts of Facebook users (Figure 2).

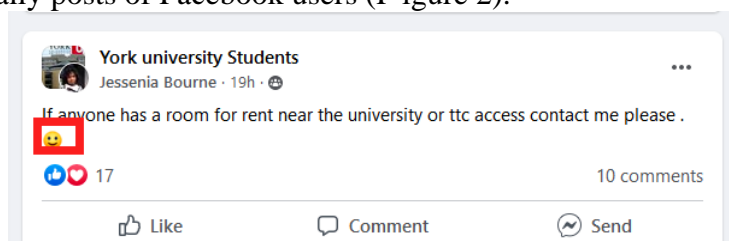


Figure 2: Emojis used in daily posts of Facebook users

Seen from the above post, using a smiley emoji implies that this Facebook user intends to show her friendliness, expecting the ones who reply to them in a similar and happy way.

Indeed, using emojis can also facilitate inter-cultural communications on social media platforms. Nonetheless, few researches have been done regarding this area. In view of this, this research aims at investigating the use of emojis in facilitating inter-cultural communication on social media platforms. For example, Cao examines the use of emojis in inter-cultural communications on social media platforms. He identifies that people from varying cultural backgrounds use different forms of emojis in different ways. They also understand meanings of these varying emojis differently<sup>[5]</sup>. Although Cao has recognized the varying use and comprehension of emojis by people from different cultural backgrounds, he did not propose the ways in which emojis can facilitate inter-cultural communication<sup>[6]</sup>. Therefore, the research can provide implications for social media users, especially those marketers to explore out ways to attract potential customers via more convenient ways.

## 2. Definition of emoji

Essentially, emoji can be defined as a pictograph which is used to replace a character or text<sup>[7]</sup>. Being a small digital icon, emoji has been widely used and attracted the attention of researchers from different backgrounds. Emojis are usually made up of symbols, such as :), :(, and so on, or appear as graphical images, such as figure 3<sup>[8]</sup>.



Figure 3: Graphical images of emojis

Originated in Japan, emojis were initially used to replace written communications<sup>[9]</sup>. Due to the fact that emoji is embedded in language and communication processes, some people may mistake images for emojis<sup>[10]</sup>. In the opinion of some social media platform users, emojis are conveying similar effectiveness as face-to-face communication. Judged from their nature, emojis are perceived as convey emotion or help express feelings of users, which will make their communication more effectively than purely using normal texts. From the perspective of Cheshin, emojis are more commonly used in socio-emotional contexts than in task-oriented contexts<sup>[11]</sup>. Hence, it is more appropriate for people to use emojis to express emotions towards those who are socially close to them than to those strangers or socially remote ones.

Bai also proposes that emojis have played the role of filling the need for non-verbal cues in communication processes, aiding people to express intentions and emotions behind information<sup>[12]</sup>. Emojis are widely used in different fields, such as psychological field, medical field, educational field, and so on. Taking the medical field as an example, emojis are used to help promote doctor-patient communication and improve health management level of patients<sup>[13]</sup>. On the other side, the use of emojis in the psychological field is associated with psychological differences. In other words, emojis used in the psychological field are to measure emotions and personality traits of individuals. By examining emojis, psychologists can help prevent crises and monitor emotions of individuals.

Regarding the differences, emojis used to express the same meaning can be manifested via different symbols, which can be reflected from the following table 1.

Table 1: Emoji differences on different platforms

	Face with tears of joy	Red heart	Pleading face	Fire	Smiling face with heart-eyes	Smiling face with smiling eyes	Smiling face with hearts	Thumbs up	Thinking face
IOS									
Android									
Windows									

Source <https://emojipedia.org/>.

Seen from the Table 1, among the IOS, Android and Windows platforms, there are slightly differences for the same meaning of emoji. Nonetheless, different as they are, they are still easy to be understood.

Apart from using emojis in different forms on different platforms, emojis are also used and understood by people from different cultural backgrounds. As discussed before, in different cultural contexts, apparently the same emojis may convey deep meanings. According to Oxford Languages, emojis are not merely treated as the preserve of texting teens, instead, emojis are embraced as a nuanced form of expression which can help overcome language barriers<sup>[14]</sup>. In cross-cultural communication processes, using emojis is perceived as effective for bridging the gap between

face-to-face and written communication. In particular, emojis are identified as conveying voice inflection, facial expressions, bodily gestures and emphatic stances<sup>[15]</sup>.

### 3. Definition of inter-cultural communication

As defined by Bennett, inter-cultural communication is defined as communication between people from different cultures<sup>[16]</sup>. As cultures embody a wide range of varying patterns of perceptions and behaviors, communication in cross-cultural situations also require both parties to take into account of differences. To put it simply, intercultural communication is difference-based. Specifically, intercultural communication can be perceived as communication that is affected by different ethnicities, religions and sexual orientations. Among these different ethnicities, religions and sexual orientations, intercultural communication always take place when different cultural communities negotiate shared meanings in their daily interaction processes<sup>[17]</sup>. Kecskes states that in the opinion of many scholars, interculturality is one main reason for mis-communication<sup>[18]</sup>. This is mainly due to the fact that inter-cultural communication is viewed as a field of inquiry which is basically constituted as a process of understanding troubles, based on the assumption that during inter-cultural communication processes, messages sent are usually not messages received<sup>[19]</sup>. Under such circumstance, some shared meanings are required to be proposed and agreed by both parties involved in inter-cultural communication processes.

In the process of inter-cultural communication, language barriers are critical elements affecting communication effectiveness. According to Buarqoub, in varying fields, such as education, business, health care, maritime, aviation and so on, language barriers are considered as the root causes of varying problems<sup>[20]</sup>. Adopting some shared ideas and thoughts or expressions is one viable way to overcome language barriers. According to Drury and Ma, choosing familiar words and languages or symbols and send to receivers is one effective way to prevent miscommunication<sup>[21]</sup>. Judged from this, the use of shared symbols can greatly reduced language barriers and avoid misunderstanding. To some extent, shared symbols, like emojis, are viewed as familiar symbols to both parties once widely recognized.

With an aim to overcome these language barriers, individuals from different cultural contexts have agreed to use some emojis. That's how emojis are gradually used in inter-cultural communication processes.

### 4. The emerging and widely use of emojis on social media platforms

Emojis emerged on different social media platforms and gained varying extents of popularity. First of all, using emoticons on WeChat is popular in the East. Iconic emojis used by Wechat users are called soybean emojis, which are also used on Sina Weibo, Kakaotalk and so on. In the meantime, as Wechat does not allocate restrictions on self-made emojis, Wechat users have created thousands of self-made animated emojis of IP characters. Additionally, artists are also allowed to upload animated emojis, which can be downloaded by other users. By the end of January 2020, there were more than 50 series of animated emojis created and used on Wechat platform<sup>[22]</sup>. In a recent survey conducted by Cao, figure 4 is considered as the most popular emoji, with a use rate of 43.88%<sup>[23]</sup>. Additionally, Wechat also imports some other popular emojis, such as what are shown in figure 5.



Figure 4: The most popular emoji



Figure 5: Wechat's other popular emojis

Apart from Wechat, other social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram have also facilitated the emerging and development of emojis. According to Tian, compared to using linguistic texts alone, using emojis in texts has greatly facilitated the conducting of sentiment analysis, ensuring better accuracy<sup>[24]</sup>. Generally, when using emojis on social media platforms, users tend to use them to replace a word or phrase, repeat a note/phrase, express their attitude or emotion independently, enhance/emphasize emotions they tend to reveal in their texts, modify meanings of linguistic texts, as well as showing politeness. On Facebook, the platform design and development team has expanded the choice of emojis for Facebook users. For instance, for the old “like” emoji, Facebook design team has extended six new versions of uni-code emojis, including Like, Love, Haha, Wow, Sad and Angry. Using these extended emojis allows Facebook users to express how they feel towards certain post. These extended emojis are supposed to generate universally the same or similar emotions among Facebook users. Based on a recent study conducted by Tian, among all the six extended emojis, the most frequent use is the “like” emoji, which is used by about 78.9% of Facebook users, followed by the emoji of “love”, which is used by 5.5% of Facebook users, the emoji of “angry”, which is used by 5.4% of Facebook users, the emoji of “sad”, which is used by 4% of Facebook users, the emoji of “Haha”, which is used by 3.7% of Facebook users and the emoji of “wow”, which is used by 2.5% of Facebook users<sup>[25]</sup>.

Moreover, on Twitter, another mainstream social media platforms, emojis are also widely used to express non-verbal emotions. Kejriwal puts forward that emojis used on Twitter has manifested the trend and spread of local shared culture<sup>[26]</sup>. As shown in below figure 6. By examining the use of emojis at a spatially large, but culturally and linguistically local region--the US state of California and its surrounding states, Wang identified that there were a wide range of emojis used frequently by Twitter users who are living at this particular area. However, emojis usage seems to recede at farther areas from the coastline<sup>[27]</sup>. Moreover, the emojis used by Twitter users have also reflected their local culture. For instance, the emoji shows as figure 7 could be found in several spots from the figure 6, implying that Halloween maybe coming. This could also be explained from the fact that Halloween is a public holiday in the USA.

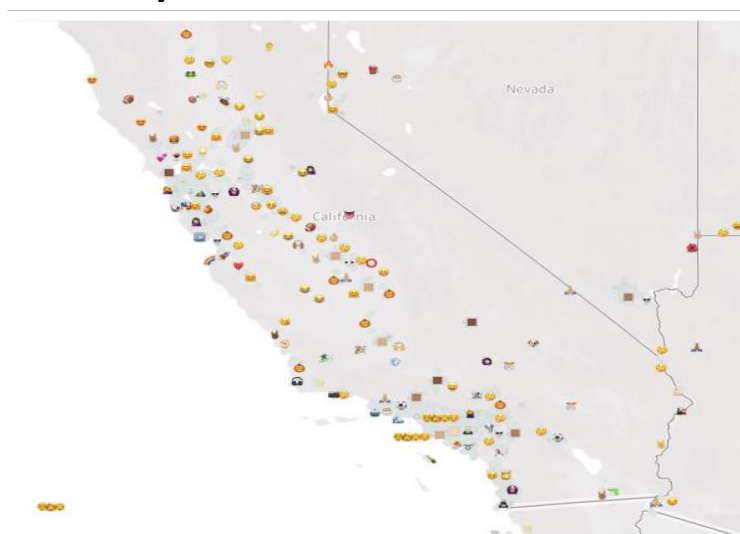


Figure 6: An example of using emojis as shared local culture by Twitter users





Figure 7: Halloween jack-o'-lanterns

## 5. The roles of emojis in facilitating inter-cultural communication on social media platforms

The roles played by emojis can be classified into two types, which are to reduce communication misunderstanding and to increase communication intention and efficiency.

### 5.1 Reduce cultural misunderstanding

In the opinion of Talukdar, emojis can make inter-cultural communication better<sup>[28]</sup>. This is mainly due to the fact that when emojis are sent by people to express their emotions, accompanied with words appropriately, they can help senders reveal their feelings appropriately. Emojis can also assist message receivers to understand emotional status and interest of the senders. Arafah and Muhammad assert that emojis can help express some connotation meanings in inter-cultural communications<sup>[29]</sup>. When interacting with others online, people may find it extremely challenging to integrate their internal feelings in their textual expressions. Under such circumstance, emojis can help change the situation. Seen from a psychological perspective, using emojis can help portray personality traits of users, making the other party involved in communication processes comprehend emojis senders' emotions more conveniently. In view of this, it is the use of emojis that makes inter-cultural communication processes more easily, facilitating ideas/thoughts expressions to be comprehended easily by message receivers. However, it should be noticed that abusing emojis can trigger cultural misunderstandings at certain situation. In the East, some emojis convey more deep meanings. For example, the emoji of “smile” can sometimes be used for expressing angry ironically. In addition, even for the same emoji, meanings can be completely different. According to Abdulrahman, this is an emoticon showing a finger pointing in an upward direction, as shown in Figure 8. In Italy, this emoji means “disagreement or disbelief”, whilst in Israeli and Kurdish culture, it means “hold on, relax or stay calm”. In Turkey, it means “delicious”. Only by understanding culture-related meanings of emojis in varying cultural backgrounds, users can use this emoji appropriately in online communication processes.



Figure 8: Pinched fingers emoji

Worse even, in some minor cultural groups or countries, emojis are not allowed to be used as using them may offend these minor cultural groups or countries. This reveals emojis can't be abused, instead, they should be used appropriately. Culture-related meanings of some commonly used emojis should be understood comprehensively by people before using them frequently in inter-cultural communication processes.

### 5.2 Increase communication intention and efficiency

Another role played by emojis in inter-cultural communication processes is that they can help increase communication intention and efficiency. According to Kim (2022), emojis do not only enable users to convey and reveal their nuanced emotional states in inter-cultural communication processes in the virtual world, but also can help enhance conversations and messages via modifying

tones. Accordingly, some literatures have reports that social media platform users have formed the habit of viewing emojis as more persuasive, appealing and attractive (Baek, 2022). Hence, when they encounter individuals who are fond of using emojis in virtual communication processes, they may be attracted to interact with these people (Ge, 2018). Besides, as emojis embedded in messages can help online users to reduce message ambiguities, inter-cultural communication efficiency can be enhanced greatly because of emojis use.

## 6. Conclusion

To conclude, this research mainly explores the use of emojis in social media platforms and the role of emojis in affecting inter-cultural communication processes on social media platforms. Upon analysis, it is found out that emojis can be comprehended differently in different cultural contexts. Moreover, in some countries or minor cultural groups, emojis are even banned to be used in daily communication processes as they may trigger defence. The use of emoticons can help to reduce cultural misunderstandings because emoticons can help to express the subtle emotional state of the message sender. From the perspective of receivers, understanding emojis' meanings well and in consistent with different cultural contexts, can help them understand personality traits and attitudes held by message senders. Lastly, using emojis can increasing inter-cultural communication intention and efficiency, as emojis can attract online users to communicate with one another more frequently.

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