

**The Misinterpretation of Emojis in Cross-Cultural Communication**

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Emojis are “small images, symbols, or icons used in electronic communication to express a feeling or idea” (Oxford Languages). While these small icons are becoming more common in our society than ever, it is essential to understand how to use them correctly in our communication methodologies. Emojis can allow people to add humor, seriousness, and more without using words to express feelings. However, while emojis have made communicating non-verbally more efficient and engaging, emojis have a high risk of misinterpretation, mainly when emojis are used across different cultural contexts and with people from different cultures. An emoji you think is funny or happy can be interpreted entirely differently by someone from a different background. The potential for this miscommunication highlights the importance of understanding how emojis function in a globalized, digitally connected world.

In recent years, ample research has explored how cultural differences affect emoji interpretation and how these symbols impact digital interactions and digital communications with those from other backgrounds. Understanding how emojis are symbolically perceived across cultures can provide insights into both the benefits and challenges of emoji use in digital communication. Learning how different cultures use and translate certain specific emojis can be beneficial to avoid offending someone without meaning to do so.

This literature review will explore research on the cross-cultural use of emojis, focusing on three areas: the influence of cultural context on emoji interpretation, emojis as tools for nonverbal communication, and the impact of emoji misinterpretation on digital communication. By exploring these three areas of focus, this review will aim to not only explore how emojis are used in cultural settings around the globe but this literature review also identify gaps and trends in the current literature on the topic of emojis to understand better how emojis have been used to build a better digital landscape where these symbols are not misinterpreted as often.

### **The Influence of Cultural Context on Emoji Interpretation**

As emojis continue to gain global prominence, researchers are increasingly interested in understanding how cultural context influences emoji interpretation. Digital communication scholars are increasingly investigating how cultural differences shape how emojis are perceived and used. While emojis are symbols used by different cultures and groups worldwide, they are often interpreted and misused. People from different cultural backgrounds interpret emojis differently from users in other regions worldwide, leading to frequent misinterpretation and hindered direct digital communication (Sun et al., 2023, p.242; Leonardi, 2022, p.27).

Researchers in digital communication have highlighted how cultural differences shape how emojis are perceived and used, often leading to misinterpretations. For example, scholars in one academic article found that emojis used by residents in collectivist countries like Japan and China utilize emojis to promote “group harmony and emotional regulation” (Smith et al., 2021). However, in the same article, these scholars discovered that residents in individualistic countries like the USA, for example, typically utilize emojis for more personal and emotional reasons. Researchers discovered that countries like the USA typically utilize emojis to showcase emotions more frequently than residents in Japan and China.

What these findings showed, as a result, was that cultural values can shape the way we utilize emojis as a whole. Moreover, emojis are culturally value-driven, and cultures can shape how one nation uses specific emojis. While cultural values can shape how emojis are utilized by people worldwide, other factors play a pivotal role in how emojis are sent and used. Emoji features such as colors, gestures, and expressions can all play a significant role in emoji interpretation (Jones & Ramirez, 2022). These scholars explored how specific colors and facial expressions in emojis, such as the “thumbs up” or “heart” emojis, carry different meanings

across different cultures. These scholars found that residents in Western civilized regions typically view a thumbs-up emoji as a symbol of approval and agreement. However, residents in East Asian regions typically view a thumbs-up emoji in a more negative light. Similarly, these scholars found that emojis with red hues often represent love in Western countries; they are often interpreted as “prosperity, causation, and defense” for residents in East Asian regions (Jones & Ramirez, 2022,p.4).

While the colors of the emojis, the gestures, and the expressions play a pivotal role in understanding the cultural contexts of emojis, social media also shapes how emojis are used and perceived by those around the globe. In their study, Lee et al. (2023) explored emoji usage across social media platforms like Instagram, X, and Facebook. These scholars found from their study that cultures with high-context communication styles typically use more relaxed emojis to convey complex and challenging emotions. Meanwhile, cultures with lower-context communication styles typically express emotions more clearly than those from high-context communication styles by using a more comprehensive range of emojis to convey the appropriate emotion (Lee et al., 2023,p.12).

Understanding the influence of cultural context on emoji interpretation reveals that emojis carry a broader range of meanings and usages across different contextual and cultural settings. Collectivist societies, for example, use emojis to foster harmony and avoid conflict, while individualistic cultures emphasize self-expression and personal emotion. Beyond cultural values, elements like color, gesture, and facial expressions further complicate how emojis are perceived, often resulting in misinterpretations that can hinder effective communication.

However, emojis' significance extends beyond cultural contexts. They also play a crucial role as tools for nonverbal communication. The following section explores this broader function, which enables users to convey tone, emotion, and intention in digital interactions.

### **Emojis As Tools For Nonverbal Communication**

Emojis are powerful nonverbal symbols that carry meanings through various emotions, expressions, and gestures. Emojis are symbols that can convey tones, emotions, and feelings in a text without using words. For example, Gonzalez and Taylor (2022) state that “emojis in professional emails reduce ambiguity, making messages appear friendlier and more approachable (p.43)”. This research shows us that emojis can even be used in professional emails to create positive reactions and interactions without using words. They found in their research that emojis function as facial expressions without using words and can showcase nonverbal reactions, making people feel more at ease than when they have challenging face-to-face encounters. Liu and Chen (2023) observed how emojis foster mutual understanding by enabling users to express feelings that may be difficult to convey through words alone (p.45). They discovered that emojis create and enhance empathy and can create mutual understanding in social media interactions and relationships.

Other than emojis in professional settings, they can also be utilized in cross-linguistic conversations and helping individuals with language barriers. In their study, Martinez et al. (2021) examined how emojis were utilized in cross-linguistic conversations. What they found in their study was that the non-native speakers who participated in their study often relied on emojis to express their emotions to people who spoke a different language (p.5). This study's findings show that emojis have enormous potential to enhance cross-cultural interactions without relying

on word usage in texts. Moreover, emojis can aid communication across language barriers by providing universal symbols that visually convey emotions.

While emojis can shape cross-linguistic conversations, they can also be used in romantic or non-romantic relationships with others. Rivera et al. (2020) explored how emojis in long-distance relationships conveyed emotional responses to an individual's significant other. Their study discovered that couples viewed emojis as tools that helped replace physical expressions (Rivera et al., 2020, p.14). They discovered that emojis are nonverbal tools to showcase feelings (e.g., a heart-eye or kissy-face emoji) and can carry deep emotional affection without even realizing it. In their study, long-distance couples admitted using emojis to create intimacy and showcase their emotional thoughts about their partners without using words. Rivera et al. (2020) study showed us that emojis can shape relationship dynamics and convey emotions to people whose in-person affection can be limited.

Not only are emojis helpful for relationships and love interests, but emojis have also become a tool utilized in customer service interactions. Harris et al. (2023) explored how emojis were used in customer service settings. These scholars found that when customer service representatives used emojis to help people, they were often depicted as powerful tools to reduce customer anger (p.21). They found that emojis used in customer service settings helped keep the peace with the customer. Using emojis made the representatives appear supportive and empathetic to the customers' anger. These findings from this study showcased how emojis can humanize digital communication, even in formal and professional settings, and how emojis can reduce tensions during challenging moments.

These researchers highlighted how emojis have been utilized as nonverbal communication tools. Whether being used to create intimacy in relationships, foster empathy in

professional settings, or enhance understanding across linguistics, emojis have become powerful tools that enhance virtual interactions. While emojis are becoming more powerful tools to enhance digital interactions, it is critical to understand how the misinterpretation of emojis can disrupt digital interactions and lead to unintended misunderstandings in communication.

### **The Impact Of Emoji Misinterpretation On Digital Communication**

While emojis have become powerful nonverbal communication tools, they are still symbols often misunderstood in digital communication. Even though emoji misinterpretation is common, it still has the power to create confusion and miscommunication and can hurt people's feelings from different cultures. Smith et al. (2022), ) discovered that specific emojis such as the "face with raised eyebrows" or "frowny face" have multiple different interpretations that enhance misunderstandings about tones and emotions. This can create tensions between people of different cultures and even those of the same cultures.

In intercultural settings, emoji misinterpretation thrives and is quite common. Users from different demographics and backgrounds attach unique meanings to emojis. According to Tanaka and Lee (2023), "individuals from Western cultures might interpret the "folded hands" emoji as a gesture of gratitude, while users from East Asian cultures often view it as a symbol of prayer or respect (p.4)". This article's findings show that miscommunication is enhanced when people use emojis in multicultural settings, and they thrive. This article shows us that it is imperative in workplace settings with different cultures to learn about emoji misinterpretations and usages from other cultures to avoid offending someone.

Moreover, while emojis have been used effectively for long-distance romantic relationships, as expressed in the previous section, they have also created misinterpretation and misunderstanding. In their study of romantic relationships, Johnson and Perez (2021) discovered

that emojis like the “smirking face emoji,” which is often interpreted as being playful, can be interpreted as being flirtatious or sarcastic, depending on the recipient’s perspective (p.6).

Johnson and Perez emphasize that even though emojis can create more meaningful digital communication-based relationships, they often are misused, especially in romantic and emotionally charged relationships. Overall, the findings in this study showcased how ambiguous emojis are more harmful than we think and that there needs to be greater clarity when using emojis in emotionally sensitive situations.

On the other hand, professional environments are also vulnerable to the consequences of emoji misinterpretation. In their research on virtual teams, Black and Kumar (2023) explored how emojis were misused in professional settings and their outcomes. Black and Kumar (2023) found that emojis like the “winking face” or “face with rolling eyes” were often misinterpreted in virtual workplace settings. It led to team members perceiving messages as sarcastic, dismissive, and disrespectful ( Black and Kumar et al.,2023, p.12). They also highlighted how emoji misinterpretations in virtual workplace settings impacted teamwork and productivity levels and upset individuals who no longer want to contribute to the workplace setting. This study emphasizes that even though emojis are good in digital workplaces, they must be clarified and explained more to avoid tensions in the virtual workplace setting.

Despite these challenges, some strategies can be utilized to lower the risks of emoji misinterpretation. Flores and Yu (2022) explored strategies people can use to create clarity for emoji usage in digital interactions. They found that individuals often use confusing emojis with more apparent texts to prevent misinterpretation in professional and workplace settings. Flores and Yu (2022) suggested pairing emojis with clear text explanations to ensure their intended meaning is understood, especially in formal and cross-cultural interactions (p. 9). This approach



can help reduce emoji confusion and misunderstanding while preserving and maintaining the other aspects emojis bring to the digital communication landscape.

While emojis offer significant advantages as nonverbal tools, their interpretation is highly context-dependent. As a result, emoji misinterpretations can strain relationships, disrupt professional collaboration, and hinder cross-cultural communication.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, emojis are symbols that have a significant role in digital communication that is influenced by cultural context, their function as tools for nonverbal cues, and the potential for misinterpretation. Research has shown that geographic regions can shape how emojis are understood and that collectivist societies may interpret and use them more to create group harmony. In contrast, individualistic cultures and societies use them more freely for personal freedom and expression.

Emojis are also powerful nonverbal communication symbols that create meanings without words. However, they amplify miscommunication in professional, multicultural, and personal relationships with others, which can lead to some dire and disrespectful or terrible outcomes. It is crucial to explore emojis more. This review highlights the need for more rigorous, diverse methodologies in studying emoji interpretation across cultures and strategies to mitigate misunderstandings in digital interactions. Understanding and exploring emojis' evolving role in cross-cultural communication-based settings is more important than ever. Furthermore, future research should examine and develop better frameworks for how emojis should be utilized to limit the misinterpretation of emojis in cross-cultural settings as a whole.

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