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The Use of Emojis in Digital Communication: Perspectives from the UAE

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Abstract:

This study explores the interpretation and usage of emojis in digital communication among users in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Through a survey of over 500 participants, this research examines the cultural and contextual nuances influencing emoji interpretation. The methodology involved a quantitative approach using data from structured online surveys with insights derived from open-ended questions to explore emojis' multifaceted use and interpretation. The findings reveal significant variations in emoji usage and interpretation, influenced by factors such as age, gender, and cultural background. The study highlights the role of emojis as a complex, culturally infused aspect of digital communication in the UAE, offering new insights into how digital symbols are integrated into everyday communication. This research contributes to the broader understanding of digital communication practices in a multicultural and rapidly digitizing region.

Keywords: Emojis, Digital communication, Cultural interpretation, UAE, Survey analysis

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Introduction

The advent of emojis in digital communication has revolutionized the way individuals express emotions and ideas in online interactions. Originating in Japan in the 1990s, emojis have become ubiquitous in digital discourse, transcending cultural and linguistic barriers (Miller et al., 2017). Their ability to succinctly convey complex emotions and concepts has made them a subject of increasing interest in various fields, including linguistics, psychology, and communication studies.

In the context of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a region marked by its rich cultural diversity and high digital engagement, the study of emoji usage offers unique insights. The UAE's blend of traditional and modern influences and a substantial expatriate population presents a fascinating backdrop for examining digital communication practices (Al-Jenaibi, 2011). In the UAE's rapidly evolving digital landscape, emojis have become a pivotal element of communication, reflecting the region's unique blend of traditional and modern influences. This study aims to explore the patterns of emoji usage among different demographic groups in the UAE and to understand the cultural influences on the interpretation of emojis in digital communication.

Research in the area of digital communication has highlighted the importance of understanding the socio-cultural contexts in which emojis are used. Emojis serve not just as tools for emotional expression but also play a crucial role in shaping online identities and interactions (Lu, Ai, Liu, Li, Wang, Huang, & Mei, 2018). In a multicultural environment like the UAE, where communication practices are influenced by a confluence of different cultural norms, emojis can have varied interpretations and uses.

This research contributes to the broader discourse on digital communication in the Arab world, a topic that has gained increasing relevance in the age of globalization and digital connectivity. By examining how emojis are used and interpreted in the UAE, the study provides valuable insights into the nuances of digital communication in a culturally diverse context. The findings of this research are expected to have implications for various fields, including cross-cultural communication, digital marketing, and social media studies, offering a deeper understanding of the role of emojis in mediating online interactions (Al-Debei, Al-Lozi, & Papazafeiropoulou, 2015).

Therefore, by building upon previous research, this study poses specific questions that address the unique sociocultural landscape of the UAE. By exploring the influence of demographics, including age, gender, and nationality, on emoji preferences and interpretations, we aim to unravel the complex interplay between culture and digital expression. The research is guided by the following objectives: (1) to investigate demographic patterns in emoji usage, (2) to explore emotional and expressive dimensions associated with emojis, (3) to analyze contextual variations in emoji deployment, and (4) to examine the motivations behind emoji use within the UAE cultural context.

The findings from this study are anticipated to offer a nuanced understanding of how emojis function as cultural artifacts in the UAE, shedding light on the subtle yet impactful ways in which digital communication is shaped by cultural diversity. As we navigate the contours of emoji communication in this multicultural society, the insights gained will not only contribute to academic knowledge but also provide practical implications for developers, marketers, and communicators seeking to

enhance cross-cultural digital interactions. Similarly, by unravelling the complexities of emoji communication in the UAE, this paper seeks to chart new territory in the exploration of non-Western digital communication practices, setting the stage for future research endeavours and encouraging a more inclusive approach to understanding the global language of emojis.

Literature review

Recent scholarly interest in the impact of emojis on digital communication has grown substantially. Researchers have delved into the cognitive and emotional dimensions of emoji usage, exploring their role in enhancing the richness of online conversations (Erle et al., 2021). The evolving digital communication landscape and the widespread adoption of emojis have prompted scholars to investigate their implications in linguistics, psychology, and broader interdisciplinary contexts. This study contributes to this expanding body of knowledge by examining emoji usage patterns in the United Arab Emirates and shedding light on the cultural dynamics influencing their interpretation.

In the rapidly evolving landscape of digital communication, the pervasive use of emojis has become a cultural phenomenon transcending global boundaries. While extensive research has explored the impact of emojis on online interactions (Clark & Johnson, 2020), this paper delves into the intricacies of emoji communication within the unique cultural tapestry of the UAE. As emojis continue to shape the way we express emotions, attitudes, and reactions in digital conversations, understanding their nuanced role in diverse cultural contexts becomes imperative. The UAE's rich blend of nationalities and cultural influences provides an intriguing backdrop to investigate how emojis function within this multicultural environment.

Existing studies on emoji usage predominantly focus on Western contexts, leaving a significant gap in our understanding of how cultural factors influence the interpretation and use of emojis in non-Western societies. This paper aims to bridge this gap by examining the cultural dynamics shaping emoji communication in the UAE, offering insights contributing to the broader discourse on digital communication practices.

The advent of emojis in digital communication has catalyzed a transformative shift in the way individuals express emotions and nuanced ideas in text-based interactions. Initially emerging in Japan in the 1990s, emojis have evolved from niche symbols to a global linguistic phenomenon, particularly following their integration into Unicode in the 2010s. This development has sparked significant academic interest, particularly in examining the role of emojis in enhancing emotional expression and facilitating social interaction online (Miller et al., 2017). Emojis add depth to digital messages, acting as non-verbal cues that enrich text-based communication and help convey tone and emotion (Danesi, 2017).

The interpretation of emojis, however, varies significantly across different cultures and languages. Research indicates that the same emoji can have diverse meanings based on various factors between the sender and the receiver. The semiotics of emojis here are not limited to the signifier and the signified but rather go beyond that to address the communicative intent and capabilities (Kullab, 2016). Similarly, emojis interpretation is influenced by the user's cultural background, a phenomenon especially evident in multicultural settings like the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (Barbieri et al., 2016). With its unique blend of traditional and modern influences and a substantial expatriate population, the UAE presents a rich context for examining emoji usage within digital communication (Al-

Jenaibi, 2011). Understanding the nuances of how different demographic groups in the UAE utilize and interpret emojis is essential to grasp the broader socio-cultural dynamics at play.

Gender differences also play a significant role in emoji interpretation and usage. Studies indicate that there are noticeable variations in how males and females use and understand emojis, suggesting the existence of gender-specific patterns in emoji usage. These trends are reflective of broader social dynamics and individual identities, as emojis are often used to express emotions, enhance visual appeal, and improve the efficiency of message delivery (Bai et al., 2019).

The cultural context significantly influences the interpretation of emojis. While global emoji usage and understanding patterns exist, notable differences are observed across different cultures. This is particularly relevant in a country like the UAE, where the cultural context can greatly impact how emojis are used and understood. Such insights align with Hofstede's cultural dimension theory, which posits that cultural traits profoundly influence communication practices, including emoji usage (Hofstede, 2011; Lu et al., 2016).

Moreover, emojis have been found to play a vital role in facilitating communication across cultural boundaries. Their usage in cross-cultural interactions suggests that emojis can serve as a universal language, bridging cultural divides and aiding in emotional expression. This phenomenon underscores the importance of emojis in the modern digital communication landscape and resonates with findings from studies exploring emoji usage in various cultural contexts (Guntuku et al., 2019).

In conclusion, the review of the literature reveals the multifaceted role

of emojis in digital communication. Emojis not only serve as tools for bridging cultural divides but also as mediums for facilitating emotional expression and reflecting social dynamics and personal identities. The complexity and variability in emoji interpretation, influenced by cultural, gender, and individual differences, underscore the need for a nuanced understanding of emoji usage, especially in multicultural contexts like the UAE. The literature also reveals a distinct pattern of emoji usage in the Arab world, aligning with Hofstede's cultural dimensions, where high-context communication is prevalent. This examination of emoji usage from various perspectives enriches the understanding of digital communication in a culturally diverse setting. It offers valuable insights for future research in this evolving domain.

Arabic Studies on emojis

The exploration of emoji usage in Arabic digital communication reveals unique patterns and cultural nuances. Emojis, as a global phenomenon, have found their way into the digital lexicon of Arabic-speaking users, bringing with them a blend of universal and culturally specific interpretations. In the Arabic context, emojis serve as tools for emotional expression and as markers of cultural identity and social interaction (Al Rashdi & Al Maqbali, 2021).

Arabic digital communication, characterized by its rich linguistic and cultural heritage, presents unique challenges and opportunities for the use of emojis. The Arabic language, with its complex script and rich, expressive potential, interacts with the universal imagery of emojis in distinct ways. Studies have shown that Arabic-speaking users often employ emojis to complement the emotional and contextual subtleties of the language,

using them to enhance the clarity and emotional depth of their messages (Al Rashdi & Al Maqbali, 2021). This is particularly evident in social media and messaging platforms where emojis are used to reinforce the intended tone, whether it be humor, sarcasm, or affection.

Furthermore, research into emoji usage among Arabic speakers indicates a tendency to use emojis that resonate with cultural symbols and values. Emojis representing traditional greetings, expressions of respect, and religious symbols are often used more frequently by Arabic-speaking users compared to their Western counterparts (Al-Khalifa & Al-Azmi, 2019). This reflects the deep integration of cultural and religious elements into everyday communication within Arabic-speaking communities.

Another notable aspect of emoji usage in Arabic digital communication is the role of gender. Cultural norms and gender roles within Arabic societies influence the choice and frequency of emoji usage. Studies suggest that female Arabic-speaking users are more likely to use emojis that convey emotions and familial affection, whereas male users often opt for emojis that reflect friendship and social bonding (Al-Khalifa & Al-Azmi, 2019). These trends highlight the influence of societal norms and values on digital communication practices within Arabic-speaking communities.

The interpretation of emojis in Arabic communication also varies depending on the context. For instance, certain emojis may carry different connotations when used in formal versus informal communication or among different age groups within the Arabic-speaking community. Researchers have emphasized the need to understand these contextual nuances to fully appreciate the role of emojis in Arabic digital discourse (Al Rashdi & Al Maqbali, 2021).

In conclusion, the study of emojis within Arabic digital communication offers fascinating insights into the interplay between global digital trends and local cultural practices. Emojis in Arabic contexts bridge universal visual language and specific cultural expressions, enriching the digital communication landscape. In Arabic, the interplay between the language's rich metaphorical expressions and emojis creates unique communication patterns, highlighting cultural idiosyncrasies. This area of study not only contributes to our understanding of digital communication in Arabic-speaking societies but also highlights the broader implications of cultural diversity in global digital interactions.

Research Questions

The study poses the following questions:

1. How do demographic factors, such as age, gender, and nationality, influence emoji preferences and usage patterns among social media users in the United Arab Emirates (UAE)?

2. What emotional and expressive dimensions are associated with the use of emojis in the UAE, and how do these dimensions vary across different demographic groups?

3. In what ways does emoji usage vary in private and public communication contexts within the UAE, and how do cultural factors influence these contextual variations?

4. What are the primary motivations driving emoji use among social media users in the UAE, and how do these motivations align with cultural nuances and communication preferences?

By addressing these research questions, this study aims to understand emoji communication in the UAE, considering the intricate interplay of demographics, emotions, contexts, and motivations in shaping the digital language within this multicultural society.

Methodology

The methodology employed in this study aimed to investigate the usage and interpretation of emojis among social media users in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Adhering to a quantitative framework that offers a holistic understanding of emoji usage in the UAE.

The quantitative research design utilized a structured online survey as the primary tool for data collection. This approach allowed for the collection of data on a range of variables related to emoji usage, including the demographics of participants, frequency of usage, motivations behind using emojis, and participants' interpretations of these digital symbols.

The study's target population consisted of social media users residing in the UAE who are above 18 years old. A diverse and representative sample was sought through convenience and snowball sampling, recruiting participants across various demographics such as age, gender, nationality, occupation, and marital status. This approach ensured a wide-ranging perspective on the use and interpretation of emojis among different groups within the UAE.

For data collection, structured online surveys were administered using Google Forms. The survey questionnaire included inquiries about the frequency of emoji usage, motivations for using emojis, and participants' interpretations of them. Additionally, demographic information, including

age, gender, occupation, nationality, and marital status, was collected to provide contextual insights and to understand how these factors might influence emoji usage patterns.

The quantitative data was then analyzed using a range of statistical analysis techniques. Descriptive statistics and frequency tables were employed to summarize and present the survey data, providing a quantitative overview of emoji usage patterns among the study participants. This analysis helped identify trends and commonalities in emoji usage across different demographic groups.

The findings obtained from the quantitative analysis were systematically compared against the research questions and objectives. This integrative approach ensured an exploration of emoji usage among social media users in the UAE, facilitating nuanced insights and a well-rounded understanding of this dynamic communication phenomenon.

Ethical Considerations:

This research adhered to ethical guidelines, ensuring participant consent, data confidentiality, and transparency. The survey explicitly communicated the research purpose, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage. Data handling procedures complied with privacy regulations, and the findings were presented in the aggregate to avoid individual identification.

Limitations:

While efforts were made to achieve diversity in the sample, the study's findings may not be fully generalizable to the entire UAE population. The self-report nature of the survey introduces potential biases, and the study

focused on quantitative data, limiting the depth of qualitative insights.

Quantitative Findings

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

The survey's demographic profile was notable for its diversity, particularly in terms of gender, age, nationality, marital status, and occupation. Female participants constituted a majority at 69.3%, which may reflect gender differences in survey participation or indicate higher engagement of women in digital communication mediums. The age distribution showed a youth-skewed demographic, with 50.1% of respondents in their 20s. This age group is typically more adept at and engaged with digital communication tools, possibly influencing the results pertaining to emoji usage.

The nationality breakdown revealed that a significant portion of respondents were Emiratis (63.4%), providing a culturally specific insight into emoji usage within the UAE. The geographic distribution, primarily in Sharjah (42.7%), offers a localized perspective on digital communication trends within this region.

Marital status and occupation also provided interesting insights. A large portion of respondents were single (60.2%), which might have implications for the types of emojis used and their frequency in communication. The substantial representation of students (27.6%) further underscores the youthful skew of the sample, potentially impacting the findings related to emoji preferences and usage patterns (Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics

Variable	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	162	30.7%
	Female	365	69.3%
	Total	**527**	**100%**
Age	Below 20	59	11.2%
	20's (20-29)	264	50.1%
	30's (30-39)	127	24.1%
	40's (40-49)	56	10.6%
	50's (50-59)	18	3.4%
	60's (60-69)	2	0.4%
	70 or older	1	0.2%
	Total	**527**	**100%**
Nationality	Emirati	334	63.4%
	Non-Emirati (Arab)	142	26.9%
	Non-Emirati (Asian)	39	7.4%
	Non-Emirati (Western)	6	1.1%
	Non-Emirati (African)	6	1.1%
	Total	**527**	**100%**

Emirate	Abu Dhabi	76	14.4%
	Dubai	121	23%
	Sharjah	225	42.7%
	Ajman	69	13.1%
	Fujairah	13	2.5%
	Umm Al Quwain	14	2.7%
	Ras Al-Khaimah	9	1.7%
	Total	**527**	**100%**
Marital Status	Single	317	60.2%
	Married	191	36.2%
	Divorced	13	2.5%
	Widowed	1	0.2%
	Engaged	5	0.9%
	Total	**527**	**100%**
Personality Type	Introvert (not social)	29	5.5%
	In between	283	53.7%
	Extrovert (social)	215	40.8%
	Total	**527**	**100%**

Occupation	Administrative	135	23.6%
	Academic	44	7.7%
	Diplomat	4	0.7%
	Field Work	77	13.5%
	Own Business	47	8.2%
	Student	158	27.6%
	Unemployed	107	18.7%
	Total	**527**	**100%**

Personal Characteristics

Respondents generally reported high levels of life satisfaction (63.2%) and self-confidence (62.4%). These personal characteristics are essential to consider as they might influence the types and frequency of emoji usage. For instance, individuals with higher life satisfaction might be more inclined to use positive emojis, while those with high self-confidence might use a broader range of emojis to express themselves.

The data regarding the activity level on social media messaging apps revealed a balanced distribution, with 40.8% identifying as "Active" (Table 2). This highlights the integration of these apps into the daily lives of respondents. The frequency and type of emoji use could be correlated with the level of activity on these platforms, suggesting that more active users might be more familiar and comfortable with using a wide range of emojis in their communications.

Table 2: Personal Characteristics

Variable	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
How satisfied are you with your life in general?	Not Satisfied	30	5.7%
	Neutral	164	31.1%
	Satisfied	333	63.2%
	Total	**527**	**100%**
How confident are you in yourself in general?	Not confident	29	5.5%
	Neutral	169	32.1%
	Confident	329	62.4%
	Total	**527**	**100%**
How active are you in social media messaging apps?	Not active	83	15.7%
	Neutral	229	43.5%
	Active	215	40.8%
	Total	**527**	**100%**

Emoji Usage in Private and Public Communication

The survey results on emoji usage in different communication contexts are illuminating. Notably, 57.3% of participants indicated that they "Always" use emojis in private messages. This high frequency underscores the integral role of emojis in personal, private communication, possibly serving as a tool for enhancing emotional expressiveness or as a shorthand for complex emotions and responses (Table 3).

Conversely, emojis in public posts were less frequent, with only 28.1% using them "Always" (Table 4). This discrepancy may reflect a more formal or restrained approach to public communication on social media platforms, where messages and posts are visible to a broader audience. The

variation in emoji usage between private and public contexts suggests a nuanced understanding and application of these digital symbols tailored to the perceived norms and expectations of different communication settings.

Table 3: How frequently do you use emojis and other visual aids in your private messages on social media?

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Never	3	0.6%
Rarely	28	5.3%
Sometimes	194	36.8%
Always	302	57.3%
Total	**527**	**100%**

Table 4: How frequently do you use emojis and other visual aids on your social media public posts?

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Never	27	5.1%
Rarely	98	18.6%
Sometimes	254	48.2%
Always	148	28.1%
Total	**527**	**100%**

Among the most used emojis, according to participants, were the following 😂🤣😭❤️.

Motivations Behind Emoji Use

Understanding why people use emojis provides significant insights into their communicative value. The primary motivations identified were to

express emotions (31.5%), add visual effects (12.7%), and deliver messages faster (20.2%). The prominence of emotional expression as a motive aligns with the inherent purpose of emojis as tools for non-verbal communication in text. It highlights how digital communication, traditionally limited to text, is enhanced by emojis to convey feelings and attitudes more effectively (Table 5).

Adding visual effects and speeding up message delivery were also significant motives. These motivations suggest that emojis are not only about emotional expression but also about efficiency and aesthetics in communication. The use of emojis can add color and vibrancy to otherwise plain text, making messages more engaging and easier to interpret at a glance. The data on motivations for emoji use provide a multifaceted view of how these digital symbols serve various communicative needs.

Table 5: Why do you use emojis in general?

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
To add visual effect	169	12.7%
To express my emotions	419	31.5%
To deliver the message faster	268	20.2%
To make up for body language & tone of voice	228	17.1%
To decrease the seriousness of the written words	246	18.5%
Total	**1330**	**100%**

Recipients of Emojis

The survey also explored with whom the respondents most frequently used emojis. The findings revealed a preference for using emojis with family (28.6%) and close friends (28.3%), suggesting that emojis are predominantly used in intimate, informal communication settings. This preference may be attributed to the comfort level and familiarity in these relationships, allowing for a freer and more expressive use of emojis.

In contrast, the use of emojis with co-workers (11.5%) and strangers (4.9%) was less frequent (Table 6). This pattern may reflect cultural and professional norms, where the use of emojis in more formal or less familiar contexts is seen as less appropriate or potentially misinterpreted. The variation in emoji usage across different types of relationships provides insights into the social dynamics and etiquette surrounding digital communication in the UAE.

Table 6: With whom do you mostly use emojis?

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Close friends	373	28.3%
All friends	352	26.7%
Family	377	28.6%
Coworkers	152	11.5%
Strangers	64	4.9%
Total	**1318**	**100%**

Offline and Online Personalities and Emoji Usage

A crucial aspect of the survey was exploring the extent to which

participants believed their emoji usage reflected their offline personality. An overwhelming 75.9% felt that their online emoji usage was a true reflection of their offline persona. This finding is significant as it suggests that for most users, emojis are not just casual, whimsical additions to messages, but rather a genuine extension of their personality and emotional expression.

However, it's also important to note that 24.1% did not see their emoji usage as reflective of their real-life personality (Table 7). This could indicate a strategic or selective use of emojis in digital communication, where users adapt their emoji usage for specific contexts, recipients, or desired impressions. Such a discrepancy might also reflect the level of digital duality, where individuals consciously or unconsciously present a different persona online.

Table 7: Does your usage of emojis online reflect your personality offline?

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	400	75.9%
No	127	24.1%
Total	**527**	**100%**

Misunderstandings in Emoji Interpretations

The survey also shed light on the potential for misunderstandings in emoji-based communication. About 23.7% of respondents reported experiencing misunderstandings due to emojis (Table 8). This is a critical insight, as it highlights the ambiguities inherent in emoji interpretation. Emojis, while versatile, can be subject to varied interpretations based on cultural, contextual, and individual differences.

These misunderstandings could arise from different interpretations of the same emoji, the use of emojis in inappropriate contexts, or the recipient's unfamiliarity with certain emojis. This aspect of emoji communication underscores the need for awareness and consideration when using emojis, especially in more formal or cross-cultural contexts.

Table 8: Have you ever misunderstood or been misunderstood because of an emoji in a conversation online?

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	125	23.7%
No	402	76.3%
Total	**527**	**100%**

Several participants pointed to the use of a smiley face as a potentially "misunderstood" emoji that can be interpreted as "a fake smile," along with the red heart emoji, with some pointing to the dominant interpretation of it as an indication of expressing romantic love.

Cross-Cultural and Gender Aspects of Emoji Usage

Understanding emoji usage across different cultures and genders was another important aspect of the survey. Approximately 43.3% of participants felt that emoji usage and understanding in the UAE were similar to global practices, while 50.9% perceived some differences (Table 9). This suggests a blend of global and local influences on emoji usage, where universal emoji meanings coexist with culturally specific interpretations.

Table 9: Do you think people in the UAE use and understand emojis like people outside of the UAE?

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	228	43.3%
To some extent	268	50.9%
No	31	5.9%
Total	**527**	**100%**

Regarding gender aspects, 44% believed males and females understand emojis differently, suggesting that gender may play a role in how emojis are interpreted and used (Table 10). Furthermore, 59.5% observed that females used emojis more frequently than males (Table 11). This could be attributed to broader societal and communication patterns, where females might be more expressive or inclined towards visual forms of communication. These findings open up discussions about the influence of cultural and gender norms on digital communication practices.

Table 10: Do you think males and females understand emojis similarly?

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
No, males "don't understand emojis" as deeply as females	95	18%
No, males "understand emojis better" than females	14	2.7%
No, they both understand emojis in their own way	232	44%
Yes, they both understand emojis similarly	186	35.3%
Total	**527**	**100%**

Table 11: Do you think females use emojis as frequently as males?

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
No, males use them MORE than females	23	4.4%
No, males use them LESS than females	314	59.5%
Yes, they both use it just as much	178	33.8%
Other	12	2.3%
Total	**527**	**100%**

Emoji Customization and Acceptability

The survey delved into the aspect of emoji customization, particularly in the use of skin-toned emojis. A notable 43.8% of participants indicated they deliberately chose skin-toned emojis, reflecting a desire for personalization in digital communication (Table 12). This preference for customized emojis suggests an increasing demand for more inclusive and diverse emoji options that better represent the users' identities.

Table 12: When using emojis, do you deliberately use skin-toned ones?

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	231	43.8%
Sometimes	172	32.6%
No	124	23.5%
Total	**527**	**100%**

In terms of acceptability, the survey explored specific scenarios, such as the use of heart emojis between male and female strangers. The findings were mixed, with 58.6% considering it unacceptable (Table 13). This

highlights cultural sensitivities and social norms in emoji usage, where certain symbols might be interpreted differently based on the relationship between communicators and the context of the communication.

Table 13: Do you think using heart emojis between stranger males and females is acceptable?

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	196	37.2%
No	309	58.6%
Other	22	4.2%
Total	**527**	**100%**

Age Differences in Emoji Preferences

The survey also investigated whether perceptions and preferences for emojis varied across different age groups. Approximately 45% of respondents believed there was some overlap in emoji preferences between kids and adults (Table 15). This suggests that while there may be universally popular emojis, certain symbols might appeal more to specific age groups, influenced by generational trends, cultural references, and technological familiarity.

This aspect of the study indicates that emoji usage is not monolithic but varies according to demographic factors, including age. Understanding these variations can provide valuable insights for developers and marketers in creating and targeting emoji designs.

Table 15: Do you think people of different age groups use emojis similarly?

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	70	13.3%
To some extent	236	44.9%
No	221	41.9%
Total	**527**	**100%**

Demand for New Emojis

A significant portion of the survey participants, 67%, expressed a need for emojis that were not currently available (Table 16). This finding points to a gap in the existing emoji repertoire and a demand for a broader, more diverse range of emojis. Respondents' desire for new emojis might stem from the need to express unique cultural, personal, or situational aspects that are not adequately captured by the current emoji set.

This demand for new emojis underscores the dynamic and evolving nature of digital communication. As users' experiences and societal norms change, so too does the need for emojis that accurately reflect these shifts.

Table 16: Have you ever felt the need for an emoji in your text but couldn't find a suitable one?

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	353	67%
No	174	33%
Total	**527**	**100%**

Disliked Emojis and Desired Changes

An intriguing aspect of the survey was the exploration of emojis that were disliked or even hated by the respondents. A majority of 65.8% indicated that there were certain emojis they did not like (Table 17). This sentiment could stem from various factors such as the perceived meaning of the emoji, its aesthetic, or the context in which it is often used. For example, some emojis might be associated with negative experiences or may be perceived as overused or insincere.

Table 17: Are there any emojis that you do not like receiving or hate seeing?

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	347	65.8%
No	180	34.2%
Total	**527**	**100%**

In terms of desired changes, respondents highlighted several areas for improvement. These included alterations in the look and size of emojis, as well as the way they are used in communication (Table 18). Such feedback is invaluable for developers and designers in making emojis more user-friendly and relevant. It also reflects the evolving nature of digital communication, where user preferences and needs continually shape the tools and symbols used.

Table 18: Is there anything that you do not like about emojis or wish to change?

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Yes, people replying to your written messages with just emojis	217	24.2%
Yes, the look or size of the emojis	36	4.0%
Yes, people who do not use emojis at all	91	10.2%
Yes, reacting to messages with emojis without saying anything else	157	17.5%
Yes, sending too many emojis	103	11.5%
Yes, using confusing emojis	117	13.1%
No, I'm happy with the emojis as they are	99	11.1%
No, I don't care that much about emojis	75	8.4%
Total	**895**	**100%**

Impact of Emoji Disappearance

Finally, the survey contemplated a hypothetical scenario where emojis would no longer be available in digital communication. The responses to this scenario were varied, providing insight into how integral emojis have become to online interactions. About 32% indicated they would turn to alternative visual aids, such as GIFs or stickers, suggesting a continued need for non-verbal elements in digital communication.

On the other hand, 20.5% anticipated they would need to type more detailed text explanations without emojis. This indicates that emojis significantly convey nuances and emotions that might be challenging or lengthy to articulate in words alone (Table 19). The hypothetical

disappearance of emojis underscores their value as a concise, expressive, and often universal language in our increasingly digital world.

Table 19: What happens if emojis disappear?

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
I will use other visual aids like stickers, avatars, or GIFs	284	32.0%
I will go back to using emoticons "like :) or :D or <3"	157	17.7%
I will rely more on voice messages or calls	174	19.6%
I will have to type more and explain myself more	182	20.5%
Nothing will happen, emojis and other visual aids are not important	90	10.1%
Total	**887**	**100%**

Qualitative findings

Finally, participants used the opportunity to write their own comments and suggestions to express their ideas about emojis and visual aids in online communication. Some went beyond the given questions to ask the researchers for more details in future related research.

Different opinions on the topic of emojis

A participant wrote, "When I think of emojis and their purpose, what often comes to mind is their frequent usage in messaging. There are certain messages and tones that cannot be conveyed through words in texting and emojis help us here. At times, they seem to make us a little lazy as it's an easy way of conveying a message without typing much. In some

cases, it helps us if we don't have time, but in other cases it can remove the critic's element in socialization and can prevent us from having a proper conversation."

Interestingly, a participant linked the future of emojis with the past of ancient alphabets by saying "due to the rushed nature of our life, it seems emojis facilitate communication and we could be making a circle back to hieroglyphics." Another participant indicated that emojis "have become part of social expression and even language vocabulary. In a way, it is an expansion of the language or the creation of a parallel language that is visually expressive." However, another participant believed that emojis devalued words and replaced them, but that it was a necessary step to save time, and that "use of emojis would depend on the personal relationship between the sender and receiver. While it can sometimes add more context it can often lead to misunderstandings too."

When it comes to the different interpretations of emojis, a participant advised not to use emojis negatively, and another participant expressed, "I sometimes feel out of the loop since I'm not a frequent emoji user. Sometimes emojis go viral online on different social media platforms and the younger generation would invent a new meaning for an emoji. That sometimes would confuse me since I interpret a certain emoji in its straightforward meaning while social media users have a different meaning for it, and I rely on my younger cousins to keep me updated."

Suggestions for improving emojis

Participants recognized the importance of emojis and provided suggestions for improved emoji-based communication. For instance, a participant commented: "I believe that the era of emojis has just begun and

will not end easily. But I wish that emojis start having voices or be expressed in sound while expressing the message in shapes. Good luck." Similarly, a participant added "Yes, it would be better if emojis start moving, instead of being still."

In addition, many participants called for "removing bad or inappropriate emojis and adding new more useful ones". Arab participants emphasized the need to remove emojis that promote values against those of religion or culture. Some even asked for manuals to understand emojis because they struggle at times to interpret them, especially with users from different age groups.

In terms of the visuals, a few participants asked to change the shade of the emojis into ones that are "more vibrant." One participant wished for "light pink heart emojis," indicating a personal taste that users need to reflect in their online personalities. A Participant also mentioned that "emojis were more visually appealing in BlackBerry phones", and another one clarified that "different apps have slightly differing emojis (I assume because of copyright). When this occurs, sometimes they do look very different e.g. The difference between praying hands, or a high-five."

Finally, participants used the comments box to share that they are looking forward to the results of this research and that they are excited about the future of emoji research. For instance, a participant expressed, "I'm so excited about what this will bring for us."

Discussion

Unveiling the Nuances of Emoji Communication in the UAE

The exploration of the survey results delves into the intricate dynamics

of emoji usage among social media users in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This analytical section aligns with the overarching aim of our paper - to unravel the multifaceted nature of emoji communication in this culturally diverse context and offer insights for future research and practical applications.

1. Demographic Patterns:

The demographics analysis reveals a diverse participant pool, with notable patterns emerging across age, gender, nationality, and occupation. Females and individuals in their 20s emerge as predominant users, aligning with global digital communication trends. This demographic understanding serves as a fundamental framework for comprehending the primary demographic cohorts engaging with emojis in the UAE.

2. Emotional and Expressive Dimensions:

Our revelation of high levels of life satisfaction and self-confidence among respondents aligns with our broader aim of uncovering the emotional and expressive dimensions of emoji usage. The symbiotic relationship between personal satisfaction and varied emoji use emphasizes the intrinsic link between users' subjective well-being and their engagement with emojis. This aligns with our aim to uncover the underlying emotional dynamics that drive emoji communication.

3. Contextual Emoji Usage:

The nuanced patterns in emoji deployment in private and public communication contexts underscore the adaptive response to the formalities inherent in addressing broader social media audiences. This aligns directly with our aim of exploring how contextual factors shape emoji usage.

Understanding these patterns allows us to draw meaningful conclusions about the role of emojis in different communication settings, contributing to the broader understanding of cultural communication norms in the UAE.

4. Motivations Behind Emoji Use:

Our unraveling of the motivations behind emoji usage aligns perfectly with the aim of understanding the communicative value of these digital symbols. By identifying emotional expression as a predominant motive and recognizing the multifaceted roles emojis play in communication efficiency and aesthetics, we contribute to a deeper comprehension of why users engage with emojis. This directly supports our goal of unraveling the motives and drivers behind emoji use in the UAE.

5. Recipient Dynamics:

The exploration of emoji usage across different relationships aligns with our goal of understanding how recipient dynamics shape emoji communication. By highlighting preferences for family and close friends, we provide valuable insights into the intimate deployment of emojis, contributing to our understanding of the social dynamics influencing emoji use in the UAE.

6. Offline and Online Persona Alignment:

Our focus on aligning online emoji usage with offline personalities directly contributes to our aim of understanding the authenticity and integral nature of emoji expression. Recognizing emojis as genuine components of users' self-expression aligns seamlessly with our broader goal of unravelling the intricate relationship between online and offline personas in the context of emoji communication.

7. Misinterpretations and Cross-Cultural Aspects:

The emphasis on potential misunderstandings due to emojis contributes directly to our aim of exploring cross-cultural aspects of emoji usage. Intercultural communication relates to psychological adjustment, personal attitude, and communication skills (Ktiesh, 2021), which influences emojis' usage and interpretation. Therefore, the data underscores the necessity for cultural awareness and clear communication, aligning with our overarching goal of understanding how cultural, contextual, and individual disparities influence emoji interpretation in diverse settings.

8. Gender and Age Dynamics:

Our exploration of gender and age disparities in emoji usage patterns aligns with our goal of shedding light on broader societal communication trends. By recognizing the more frequent and varied use of emojis by women and younger participants, we contribute valuable insights into the influence of gender and age on digital language adoption. This supports our aim of understanding the diverse dynamics shaping emoji communication in the UAE.

9. Customization and Acceptability:

The focus on emoji customization aligns with our goal of understanding user preferences and demands for personalized options. Recognizing the preference for inclusive and diverse emoji representations underscores the need for digital tools that align with users' identities. This contributes directly to our aim of unraveling user expectations and desires in the context of emoji communication.

10. Impact of Emoji Disappearance:

The exploration of the hypothetical scenario of emoji disappearance aligns with our goal of uncovering the integral role emojis play in digital communication. By unveiling varied responses and emphasizing emojis' nuanced and irreplaceable nature in conveying emotions and subtleties online, we contribute directly to our overarching goal of understanding the potential implications of changes in emoji usage patterns in the UAE.

In synthesizing these findings, our analytical section significantly contributes to the broader understanding of emoji communication in the UAE. By aligning each aspect with our paper's aim, we provide a framework for future research endeavors and offer practical insights for developers, marketers, and platform designers seeking to enhance user experience in culturally diverse digital communication contexts.

Study Insights

The survey conducted on emoji usage in the UAE has unearthed a wealth of insights, reflecting the intricate role of emojis in modern digital communication. Here, we summarize the key findings and common themes that have emerged from the analysis.

1. Widespread and Varied Emoji Usage

One of the most striking findings is the widespread use of emojis across diverse demographic groups. Most participants, especially younger individuals, and women, frequently utilize emojis in their digital interactions. This usage varies significantly between private and public communication, highlighting a nuanced understanding of digital etiquette and the adaptability of emoji usage to different social contexts.

2. Emojis as Extensions of Personality and Emotion

A significant portion of respondents feel that their emoji usage reflects their offline personality, underscoring emojis as genuine extensions of self-expression. Emojis serve not just as digital adornments but as vital tools for conveying emotions, attitudes, and reactions, bridging the gap between text-based communication and face-to-face interactions.

3. Cultural and Social Dynamics in Emoji Interpretation

The survey also sheds light on the cultural and social dynamics influencing emoji interpretation and usage. The variations in emoji understanding and acceptability across different genders, ages, and cultural backgrounds reflect the complexity of digital communication in a multicultural society like the UAE. These dynamics are particularly evident in the cautious approach to emoji usage in formal or cross-cultural settings, indicating an awareness of potential misunderstandings.

4. Demand for Personalization and Diversity in Emojis

Respondents expressed a desire for more personalized and diverse emoji options, including skin-toned emojis. This reflects a growing demand for digital tools that cater to a wide range of identities and experiences, enabling users to represent themselves more authentically in the digital realm.

5. Emoji Misinterpretations and the Need for Clarity

The occurrence of misunderstandings due to emoji use underscores the need for clarity and context in digital communication. While emojis add richness to text-based interactions, they also carry the risk of misinterpretation, necessitating a mindful approach to their use, especially

in diverse or professional contexts (Carroll, 2023).

6. Potential Impact of Emoji Evolution or Disappearance

The contemplation of a world without emojis or the call for changes in emoji designs demonstrates their ingrained role in digital communication. The potential disappearance of emojis or the introduction of new designs could significantly impact how emotions, nuances, and subtleties are conveyed online (Assad, 2022).

Study Contribution

This study is a significant contribution to the field of visual communication as it delves deeper into the incorporation of emojis into visual language. It highlights the crucial role played by digital symbols and urges us to acknowledge the ever-changing landscape of visual communication. In today's digital era, emojis occupy a central position and are vital components of the evolving language of visual communication. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the importance of gender-inclusive digital communication and the need for gender-aware communication in the digital realm. It calls for a more inclusive approach to digital communication, which considers the diverse gender identities of its users. The study also highlights the role of emojis in facilitating gender-inclusive communication and how they can serve as powerful tools for promoting gender awareness in digital communication.

Conclusion

This study has explored emoji usage and interpretation among users in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), revealing the intricate dynamics of digital communication in a multicultural context. The significant variations

in emoji usage and interpretation, influenced by factors such as age, gender, and cultural background, underscore the complexity of emojis as a form of digital expression.

The gender discrepancies observed in the survey, particularly the more frequent and varied use of emojis by women compared to men, reflect broader societal communication patterns. This trend aligns with the findings of Bai et al. (2019), who highlighted gender differences in communication styles. Women's greater use of emojis may be attributed to a generally richer emotional language in female communication, which extends into the digital realm.

Generational differences also emerged as a significant factor in emoji usage. Younger participants displayed a tendency to use emojis more innovatively, resonating with the observations of Miller et al. (2017) about the evolving nature of digital communication tools. In contrast, older participants exhibited more traditional and conservative emoji usage patterns. This generational gap underscores the dynamic nature of digital communication, where younger users often lead the way in adopting and shaping new communication trends.

Cultural influences play a crucial role in emoji interpretation and usage, as evidenced by the diverse interpretations of emojis among different cultural groups in the UAE. This finding is particularly relevant in light of Hofstede's (2011) cultural dimension theory, which suggests that communication practices, including emoji usage, are deeply influenced by cultural traits. Emojis in the UAE serve as a bridge between universal visual language and specific cultural expressions, enriching the digital communication landscape.

The study also highlights emojis' role in facilitating cross-cultural communication, supporting the work of Guntuku et al. (2019). In the UAE's multicultural environment, emojis emerge as a tool that can transcend cultural barriers, offering a means of expression that, while not entirely devoid of cultural nuances, provides a common ground for diverse users.

Additionally, this research contributes to the broader understanding of digital communication practices in a rapidly digitizing and culturally diverse region like the UAE. Emojis, far from being mere digital icons, are shown to be complex, culturally infused elements of modern communication. They serve as tools for emotional expression and as markers of cultural identity and social interaction.

The findings of this study have significant implications for cross-cultural communication, digital marketing, and social media strategies. Understanding the nuanced use and interpretation of emojis can aid businesses and marketers in crafting more effective, culturally sensitive communication strategies. These insights have implications for designing culturally sensitive digital platforms and can inform global tech companies about the UAE's unique emoji usage patterns.

Finally, this study adds to the growing body of knowledge on the integration of digital symbols like emojis into everyday communication, highlighting the need for further research in this evolving field. Future research could delve deeper into the evolving interpretations of emojis across different cultures and social groups, particularly in contexts like the UAE, where rapid digitization and cultural diversity intersect. Longitudinal studies may offer insights into how digital communication practices, including emoji usage, evolve over time in response to technological advancements and cultural shifts.

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تحليل الرموز التعبيرية في الاتصالات الرقمية: من منظور كمي في دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة

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ملخص البحث:

تستكشف هذه الدراسة تفسير واستخدام الرموز التعبيرية في الاتصالات الرقمية بين المستخدمين في دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة. من خلال دراسة استقصائية لأكثر من 500 مشارك، يدرس هذا البحث الفروق الثقافية والسياقية الدقيقة التي تؤثر على تفسير الرموز التعبيرية. تضمنت المنهجية نهجاً كمياً باستخدام بيانات من استطلاعات منظمة عبر الإنترنت مع رؤى مستمدة من أسئلة مفتوحة لاستكشاف الاستخدام المتعدد الأوجه وتفسير الرموز التعبيرية. تكشف النتائج عن اختلافات كبيرة في استخدام الرموز التعبيرية وتفسيرها، متأثرة بعوامل مثل العمر والجنس والخلفية الثقافية. وتسلط الدراسة الضوء على دور الرموز التعبيرية باعتبارها جانباً معقداً وثقافياً من التواصل الرقمي في دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة؛ مما يوفر رؤى جديدة حول كيفية دمج الرموز الرقمية في التواصل اليومي. يسهم هذا البحث في الفهم الأوسع لممارسات الاتصال الرقمي في منطقة متعددة الثقافات وسريعة التحول الرقمي

الكلمات الدالة: الرموز التعبيرية، التواصل الرقمي، التفسير الثقافي، الإمارات العربية المتحدة، التحليل الاستطلاعي

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