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An Analysis of WhatsApp Smiley Emoji Usage and Interpretation Among St. Augustine University Students in Mwanza, Tanzania

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Abstract. This study analyses the interpretation of emoji used in WhatsApp text messages among St. Augustine University students in Tanzania. The aim of this study is to determine whether there is a universal understanding of emoji usage. Mixed research approach used with sequential explanatory design. Purposive and simple random sampling used to get the participants of the study and data collected through questionnaires and focus group discussions. Data were analyzed by using both qualitative and quantitative methods of data analysis. The findings indicated that there is plenty of meaning interpretation for each smiley emoji. Out of the examined smileys emoji used as the variable in this research, only seven smileys emoji which are Love, kiss, lying, drooling, sleepy, crying, delicious, were interpreted similarly by all the respondents. The rest were interpreted differently according respondents' understandings of the smileys' meaning. It is recommended to incorporate Emoji Studies into Digital Communication and Media Curricula, as emojis are now a fundamental part of digital communication. Academic institutions, especially media and communication schools, should integrate emoji interpretation into their curriculum. This will help students develop critical digital literacy skills, equipping them to analyse emoji use in various professional, academic, and social contexts.

Keywords. Emoji, Smiley emoji, WhatsApp, Digital Communication

Introduction

Emoji means pictograph that are commonly used in instant messages on social media, websites, and apps, since Apple included them in their iOS devices in 2009, they have grown in popularity worldwide. Emoji were created by Shigetaka Kurita in the late 90s. Unlike emoticons, they were not only meant to represent faces but concepts and objects too. (Burge 2019). There are two types of emoji; smiley and pictogram, smiley is the face symbol used to indicate the sender's emotional state and pictographs are various visual metaphors such as hand gestures, vehicles, food, animal and many more (Hinz, 2015). For instance, in early 2023, Google released the second Beta version of Android 13 QPR2, notable for the inclusion of 21 new emojis. The update includes support for Unicode 15, the latest standard for displaying symbolic artwork.

Among the 21 new icons made available are a variety of options to amplify expression in conversations, such as a quivering face, a jellyfish, a donkey, a goose, and hands-pushing objects both left and right. The added emojis cover several categories, being

present in the face, food, and symbol groups. Following such technological advancements in creating emojis, which also begs for a prompt understanding of the emojis themselves, a question whether the users capture the underlying meanings of the emojis or not, is important, and a central concern of this study. Smileys have become increasingly popular within texting and social media conversations, Communication via texting, social media, email and other online.

WhatsApp Messenger is one of the popular social messenger applications that has replaced the traditional short messaging system (SMS) and has become the mode of digital communication at present. It allows users to send real-time text messages, voice notes, videos, and documents as long as the application is connected to the internet. (Hashim, Abdullah, Isa & Janor, 2015). Using emojis in digital text communication by using WhatsApp gives users a highly expressive manner to represent their feelings. In the era of digital communication, WhatsApp has become an indispensable tool for social interaction, particularly among university students. With its diverse range of features, it enables instant messaging, multimedia sharing, and the use of emoji as non-verbal cues to enhance communication. Among these, smiley emojis have gained widespread popularity as a means of expressing emotions, reinforcing textual messages, and fostering engagement in digital conversations.

However, in reality, the interpretation of smiley emoji is neither universal nor consistently understood across different users. While some students rely on these symbols to communicate emotions, others struggle to accurately decode their intended meaning, leading to misinterpretations, confusion, or even unintended offense. The same emoji may be perceived differently depending on the user's cultural background, social context, and personal experience, which undermines the effectiveness of digital communication. The absence of standardized interpretations creates a communication gap.

The study aims to provide valuable insights into emoji interpretation, improve digital literacy, and enhance the clarity of online communication among students in a rapidly evolving digital landscape. (Mushi, A 2024). The consequence of this semantic inconsistency is the emergence of miscommunication, misrepresentation of emotions, and even digital conflicts among students. Instead of enhancing understanding, emojis sometimes complicate conversations, dilute intended messages, or cause relational misunderstandings. The lack of empirical research on how Tanzanian university students perceive and interpret WhatsApp smiley emoji further exacerbates the issue, leaving a gap in knowledge on how digital literacy and symbolic interaction influence communication outcomes.

Literature Review

Emoji Usage on Communication Patterns and Social Interactions

The rapid advancement of digital technology and social media has fundamentally altered communication patterns, reshaping how individuals engage in social interactions. The increasing reliance on social networking platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp have shifted communication away from traditional face-to-face interactions toward instantaneous, multimedia-based exchanges in virtual spaces (Widodo et al., 2022). As a result, emoji's have emerged as a crucial component of digital communication, serving as visual cues that complement or replace textual expressions to convey emotions, enhance clarity, and create a sense of engagement in online conversations (Danesi, 2017).

One of the most significant transformations in digital communication is the ability to connect with others globally in real time. Social media and messaging applications enable instant communication regardless of geographical location, fostering continuous social

interaction among individuals from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Prada et al., 2018). The incorporation of emojis in digital exchanges adds a new dimension to this communication by helping user's express emotions more vividly, bridging potential gaps in understanding that arise from text-only conversations (Evans, 2017). The ability of emoji to convey tone, sentiment, and non-verbal cues enhances the effectiveness and emotional depth of digital discourse, making interactions more dynamic and engaging (Kaye et al., 2016).

The Impact of Smiley Emoji on Digital Communication

Today in this millennial generation emojis have created a new language for communication. Every technological platform like Apple, Google, Microsoft has given a great position to emojis. Every person on the planet can access with a digital device and send and receive emojis. Emojis has created a human connection between people transcends mere cultures which really defines the revolution created by emojis. The world will continue in this and a faster pace of technology with more innovative and creative emoji characters with every OS update, the future of emojis looks more bright and it can even emerge to be one of the most effective language for communication through the web. Hashim et. al. (2015) reported that it has become an application that can create major impact on communication in digital era.

A study done by Muhammad (2017) mentioned that the young adults use smiley emojis frequently by using WhatsApp messenger, and the most reasons of using emojis were to express their feelings and emotions through the emoji chosen, to make the conversations more interesting, to strengthen what they meant in texts, and make the conversation less tense, emojis can help manage the conversation and younger people use more emojis than older people. Smiley emojis help reveal people's moods, with variations ranging from the most basic expressions such as happiness, sadness, and anger, to more complex emotions such as embarrassment, boredom, or sarcasm.

According to Sugiyama (2015), emojis have two basic functions: They help people, especially young ones, to manage the communication climate as well as to construct and express their aesthetic self. The first function includes emotional expressions, but the emotional expression is not necessarily used to convey the emotions these users feel; it is the emotions that they need to convey in order to construct and maintain pleasant relationships. In this way, people engage in a sort of affective labour via emoticons. This helps them monitor and fine-tune their background feelings about themselves and their interactions, contributing to an amiable communication climate.

In the second function, emojis serve as an aesthetic expression rather than an emotional expression. By using the correct emoji in the correct situations, even adults may express their taste and improve their aesthetic point of view. This aesthetic aspect of emoji use appears to be quite gendered. The use of emojis is an essential part of fashioning the self, as the aesthetic aspect of emojis becomes a part of how they define and redefine themselves, just like mobile decoration.

Methodology

The study covered St. Augustine University of Tanzania students from the Faculty of Social Science and Communication Studies, and School of Education. Mixed research approach were used which integrates both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. Sequential explanatory research design applied that allows to collect both quantitative and qualitative data and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem. Purposive and simple random sampling

used in getting the total number of 153 students whereby 121 students were given questionnaire and the remaining 32 formed four groups, each with eight students for focus group discussion. Qualitative data was analyzed thematically and quantitative data was analyzed by using SPSS software by applying tables, percentages, graphs and some descriptions and explanations so as to let the quantitative results complement the qualitative ones.

Discussion of findings

The findings indicate that one of the most frequently used emojis among students at St. Augustine University is the *heart-eyed smiley face emoji* 😍 . This emoji is widely recognized as a symbol of affection, admiration, or delight, often used to express romantic feelings, deep appreciation. The *crying face with waterfalls emoji* 🌧️ emerged as one of the most commonly used emoji. This emoji is primarily used to express deep emotions, sadness, disappointment, or overwhelming feelings. The study revealed that students frequently rely on this emoji when they want to convey strong emotional reactions in digital communication.

Wrinkly smile face 😏 is perceived as friendly, universally acceptable, and contextually flexible, making it an integral part of digital communication. Also *friendly and attractive smiley* 😊 indicates friendship. This perception is consistent with findings from **Prada et al. (2018)**, which suggest that emojis help users **intensify emotional messages**, making digital communication more expressive and emotionally resonant. The ability of the crying face emoji to **evoke a strong emotional response** makes it a **powerful tool in digital interactions**, allowing users to connect with others on an emotional level, even in text-based conversations.

The findings under this objective indicate that, WhatsApp smiley emojis carry multiple interpretations among students at St. Augustine University of Tanzania, reflecting both shared and varied understandings of their meanings. Out of the examined emojis, seven (love, kiss, lying, drooling, sleepy, crying, and delicious) were consistently interpreted the same way by 100% of respondents, suggesting that their visual representation strongly aligns with their intended emotional expression. The high level of agreement on these emojis implies that they are widely recognized and frequently used in digital communication, making them easier to interpret. Emojis with more abstract or context-dependent meanings, such as those depicting confidence (52%), confusion (46%), or teasing (36%), were less consistently interpreted, indicating that some emojis lack a universally fixed meaning and may be influenced by individual perception, cultural background, or personal experience. The study further highlights that some smiley emojis are often misinterpreted due to their ambiguous visual representations, leading to inconsistencies in meaning across users. Emojis such as the zipper face, hushed face, flushed face, and pouting face that resembles a kissing gesture received the lowest percentages of correct interpretations, with some being understood differently by more than half of the respondents. The finding is similar to Wicke (2017), who argued that emoji meanings are often vague and open to multiple interpretations, with only a few being universally recognized. He further noted that emojis tend to be used both symbolically and conceptually, leading to diverse interpretations among different users.

WhatsApp smiley emojis play a significant role in conveying emotional nuances, making digital communication more expressive and engaging. The majority of respondents reported that they prefer using emojis to express emotions when communicating with friends, family, and colleagues, as they provide a straightforward and visually intuitive way of expressing happiness, sadness, excitement, or disappointment. Beyond their role in expressing

emotions, emojis help maintain clarity in communication by preserving the intended meaning of a message. Many respondents acknowledged that words can often be subject to multiple interpretations depending on how they are constructed by the sender and understood by the receiver. In contrast, emojis provide a more direct and universally recognized visual representation of emotions and intentions. Another key finding from this objective is that, emoji enhance engagement in WhatsApp conversations, making digital communication more interactive and participatory. The majority of respondents cited participation as one of the main reasons they prefer using emojis, as they facilitate bilateral engagement between the sender and receiver.

The study findings also reveal several challenges associated with emoji use among students at St. Augustine University of Tanzania. While emojis enhance emotional expression, clarity, and engagement, some students struggle with interpretation, particularly when encountering new or less frequently used emojis. The study identifies four major challenges faced by students when using WhatsApp smiley emojis: delusion, unfamiliarity with newly introduced emojis, infrequent use of certain emojis, and difficulties in interpreting emojis with colour variations.

This study affirms that WhatsApp smiley emojis have become an indispensable component of digital communication, shaping how individuals' express emotions, navigate social interactions, and construct meaning in online conversations. However, their interpretation remains highly dependent on user experience, cultural context, and conversational dynamics, highlighting the subjective and evolving nature of digital symbols. As digital communication continues to evolve, emojis will require ongoing critical examination of their linguistic, social, and psychological implications. The study highlights the need for greater awareness of how different demographic groups perceive and utilize emojis in communication. The findings suggest that while emojis enhance expressiveness, they also introduce new complexities, requiring users to develop interpretive skills that go beyond basic textual comprehension. This reflects the evolving nature of digital literacy, where successful communication now necessitates an understanding of visual, contextual, and symbolic cues in addition to traditional linguistic proficiency.

Inclusion of Digital Literacy in Media and Communication Policies Governments and education ministries should integrate emoji interpretation into digital literacy training, particularly in secondary and higher education curricula. This would ensure that students develop a stronger understanding of emojis as part of modern digital communication, reducing miscommunication and strengthening their ability to use emojis effectively in professional and academic discourse.

Implementation of an Emoji Guide in WhatsApp, one of the key findings of this research is that WhatsApp users struggle with emoji misinterpretations. To address this, WhatsApp Messenger should introduce a built-in guide or emoji glossary within the application that provides users with official definitions of each emoji as intended by its developers. This feature should be easily accessible in the chat interface, allowing users to tap and view the meaning of an emoji before using it. Incorporating Emoji Studies into Digital Communication and Media Curricula, as emojis are now a fundamental part of digital communication, academic institutions, especially media and communication schools, should integrate emoji interpretation into their curriculum. This will help students develop critical digital literacy skills, equipping them to analyze emoji use in various professional, academic, and social contexts.

Training Journalists and Content Creators on Emoji Use in Digital Media since journalists, advertisers, and social media influencers use emojis extensively in online content,

media studies programs should provide training on how to use emojis effectively in digital storytelling, marketing, and brand communication. This will help media professionals ensure that emojis reinforce rather than distort their intended messages. Utilizing AI-Powered Emoji Suggestions for Better Communication, users can benefit from AI-powered emoji suggestions, which analyze chat content to recommend the most contextually appropriate emojis. Leveraging WhatsApp's predictive text and AI capabilities can help reduce emoji misinterpretations by suggesting emojis that align with the sender's intended meaning. Future research should explore how generational, linguistic, and cultural differences shape emoji perception, as well as how emoji-based communication influences cognitive and emotional processing in digital interactions. Given the rapid expansion of emoji use in professional and academic settings, further investigation into the formalization of emoji meaning within digital discourse communities could also be beneficial.

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