Journal of Social Sciences Research & Policy (JSSRP)

GISSR
Global Institute of
Social Sciences Research

Emojis as Linguistic Cues: An Analysis of Written Digital Communication

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Abstract: *The importance of emojis (colorful pictorial characters) in convincing and understanding communication in this digital world cannot be ignored. This study attempts to investigate the relevance of emojis as linguistic cues in written digital communication. To achieve this objective, the researcher collected 300 screenshots of WhatsApp messages communicated among male and female students at Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan. The collected data was categorized according to primary emotions as presented by Vyvyan Evans. The data were analyzed for the expression of emotions through emojis and for communicative channels, which is mainly in digital nonverbal communication. The results indicated several interesting facts: firstly, emojis provide us with a communicative channel; Secondly, one can better express his or her primary emotions such as love, surprise, anger, joy, sadness, and fear through emojis; Thirdly, receivers can interpret messages correctly when relevant emojis are added to it. The results of the study are consistent with the study of Vyvyan Evans, in which he has indicated the importance of emojis in this digital age. This study has implications for the innovative use of emojis to ensure that communication is clear, comprehensive and effective.*

Introduction

It is human nature that they love to share their experiences, ideas, emotions and thoughts with others and the process of this sharing is called communication. Communication is a key to human relation, through which strangers get to know each other and develop relationships. In order to have harmonious relationships, people communicate with their friends and family through number of ways. The way of communication is either verbal (words utter or piece of writing) or nonverbal (body language and symbol system), or both of at the same time. The present study primarily deals with written digital communication.

Nonverbal communication is the sending and receiving of wordless messages or simply, it is the symbol system which even babies can understand. Hence nonverbal communication is important from birth to the end of life. It is omnipresent and an essential ingredient in human interaction. It is important as through it people express their attitude, feeling and emotions. People make important judgments and decisions concerning those nonverbal behaviors. They approach certain people because they find them attractive while ignoring others concerning their appearance. In digital communication we consciously

dip into our vocabulary because there lack facial expressions, body language, pitch of voice etc. through which we administer our communication. For example, if we see someone with tears in eyes and an upset mood, we do not need to tell that this person is gloomy. Our nonverbal actions whether intentional or unintentional offer us and our partner clues about our conversation like the starting conversation, turns of speech, how to get chance to speak, how to signal others to take turn and how to end conversation. One of such nonverbal communication is digital communication, discussed below.

Information and thoughts are encoded digitally as discrete signals in digital communication. Simply digital communication is communication done via Digital media, including web, social and mobile technologies, that has dramatically affected and expanded the ways in which we communicate. The evolution of Web 2.0 and social media has resulted in a global communications layer that has reshaped personal and professional interaction.

In our increasingly connected world, one can hardly imagine his/her life without digital communication. It allows modern people to connect with each other more easily than ever before. People are living active digital lives. They're spending more time on digital devices, such as mobile technologies. Digital means of communication like messaging apps are surging in popularity all over the world . In our digitally connected social lives, digital communication proved us channel of communication but the rich communicative context like facial expression, body language, and speech intonation is largely absent. Emoji help us as it fulfills similar function to gestures, body language and intonation in spoken interaction. Emoji in text messaging, email, WhatsApp and other forms of digital communication, enable us to better express tone and provide linguistic cues to understand what is being conveyed.

Professor Vyvyan Evans (in 2016) defines emojis in his book *The Emoji code* "emoji is an anglicized version of two Japanese words *e* picture and *moji* character and for those who might not be crystal clear on the subject emojis are the colorful symbols _the winks smiley, love hearts and so on embedded as single character images, or glyphs in our digital keyboards". Originally emojis means pictographs and has resemblance to the English words emotion and emoticon.

In 2015**,** a new linguistic science of text-based communication was born as a result of Professor Vyvyan Evans' research**.** He said that I never thought about emojis before this and as "I began to investigate, I quickly discovered that emojis were a very recent phenomenon". Thus, he started working on it and wrote the book*, The Emoji Code*, in which he discussed several important points, summarized as under:

- Is emoji the new universal language?
- Emojis are shortlisted words.
- It helps us to get the intention of speaker/ writer.
- It manages the flow of ongoing discourse.
- Emoji offers burst of color using 2D visual mode and works in conjunction with the linguistic mode to communicate meanings.
- Emoji users are better communicators.

Above mentioned are some of the aspects which have been researched but others are some of the aspects which need to be researched in the field. In digital communication emoji plays vital role but its relevance as linguistic cues were ignored both internationally and nationally. In order to fill the gap, the present study is conducted to explore the relevance of emojis as linguistic cues in written digital communications.

In communication nonverbal cues like body language, facial expressions and pitch of voice etc. help us to understand the intended and contextual meanings of communicators but in written digital communication we sometime fail to unfold the arguments of communicators because of lack of communicative context. In such situations emojis helps us to provide communicative context which results in correct interpretation of messages. Emojis not only help us to understand messages correctly but are also effective in expression of emotions as well. So the objective of the present study is to

explore the relevance of emojis as linguistic cues and its role in expression of primary emotions.

Research objectives

1. To explore the relevance of emojis as linguistic cues in written digital communication.
2. To investigate how emojis help in understanding the contextual meaning of communicators.

Research Questions

1. To what extent do emojis work as linguistic cues?
2. In what ways do emojis help in understanding contextual meaning accurately?

Literature Review

According to the definition of Merriam Webster, communication is the process through which with the help of symbols, information is exchanged. Communication is strong; it creates barriers between us, reassures or alerts children, and either unites our allies or divides our enemies (Keating 1994). What she is saying is that communication is our ability to share and feelings –is at the heart of all human contact. Whether people belong to any part of the world they employ the same activity when they attempt to share thoughts and feelings with others .Knapp and Hall concluded that nonverbal communication from moment of birth to end of life is very important. Nonverbal communication is essential ingredient in human interaction but in our digital communication this communicative channel is lacking which lead to misinterpretation of messages. In the present digital age, Emojis help to provide communicative channels. Vyvyan Evans(2016) is his book "The Emoji Code" defined emojis as an anglicized version of two Japanese words – e 'picture' and moji ' character'. And those who do not understand it, simply emojis are -smiley's, the winks, ,love hearts, and so on- embedded as single character, image ,or glyphs ,in our digital keyboards.(p.18) Emojis are better source to provide communicative context in digital communication(Evans,2007)-While many linguists are on opposing views that emoji is a step backward to dark ages of illiteracy. Evans in his tweet on 11th febuary,2017 talked about his interview in The Chicago Tribune said that there is a lot of prejudice against emojis. According to   Kurita(1999)) "Everything was shown by text. Even the weather forecast was displayed as 'fine'. I had trouble understanding it when I first saw it. A picture of the sun, for instance, has traditionally been used to indicate the weather in Japanese TV weather reports. Instead of a text message that reads "fine," I would rather to see an image of the sun. While on the other hand some get confused with emoticons and emojis. Emoticons and emojis are different, Emticons were created by Scott Fahlman, a professor at the Carnegie Mellon University. The original term results from the blending of "emotions" and "icons". Although this denomination has been criticized as inaccurate. According to, Dresner and Hearing (2010), the popularity of the term points to their functions as expression of emotions .In fact ,it is frequent to find emoticons at the end of the user's contribution where, they help to reinforce the emotion, mental state or mood expressed by users as well as helping the addressee interpret the message.

Lo (2008) noted that most internet users are unable to recognize the appropriate mood, attitude, and attention goals when presented with material that is devoid of emoticons.However, adding emoticons in the same context as emojis causes a dramatic change in the recipient's impression of the communication.

Use of emoticons may be ambiguous and that is why Vyvyan Evans stressed on use of emojis for expression of emotions and interpretation of messages correctly. Because emojis are the same as human expressions and therefore, universal. One of the reasons of preferring emojis over emoticons is emojis are like seeing is believing. It means through emoji we see original expressions of a person and thus we believe in it. Visual representation is so important in communication that even those who cannot speak, understand it. A case in point is Blisssymbolics; a visual language and this was developed by Charles Blissan Austrian Jew, and he conceived his visual system as an easy-to-learn "world language". Emojis like emoticons are emotion indicators, as indicator of non-emotional meanings and illocutionary force indicator as well.

Kenda (2017) reviewed on work of Vyvyan Evans said that emoji are far more than just brighten up our text messages to friends and family .Prof Vyvyan Evans said: "Emojis are not happy and sad faces only, it

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has communicative values".

Emojis help us to understand intended meanings, "Men tend to take statements made by their significant other at face value when they actually have deeper meanings." For instance, a woman is genuinely testing a man's judgment when he tells her, "I'm going out with my mates," and she responds, "Okay, do whatever you want." "You should know me well enough by now to know that I won't be okay with that," she says. Additionally, Evans contends that when an emoji is included with the communication goal, men are more likely to comprehend it.

It is essential to use emoji in digital communication as Evans said: "People who don't use emojis are challenged in a digital context in the same way that you would be if you were unable to change the tone of your voice .If you don't use them it might be because you don't realise how much your messages are being misunderstood" (2017:86). Due to essential use of emojis in digital communication Oxford Dictionary admitted in 2015 *Emoji of the Year*; tears of joy emoji.

Vyvyan Evans tweeted: RT@ChitriBooks:Emojis get a big (thumbs up emoji) from British linguists and 17th July 2018 was celebrated as fifth annual *world Emoji Day.* Previous studies on emojis and emoticons discussed use for interpretation of messages and expression of emotions. The present study deals with the necessity of emojis in digital communication and expression of primary emotions through emojis. The study primarily deals with emojis as linguistic cues and emotions icon.

Materials and Methods

Qualitative research method was used in this research because qualitative research relies primarily on the collection of qualitative data (i.e. non-numeric data such as words and pictures) and in present study data is in the form of screenshots. The researcher collected data from both male and female students at Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan to study use of emojis in their digital nonverbal communication. The researcher used this method because each screenshot was unique and special as far as style of chat is concerned, which vary from person to person, so, it needs to be analyzed qualitatively.

For the purpose of data collection, the researchers requested the students at the university to share screenshots of their messages via WhatsApp. In this way 300 screenshots of conversation were collected. Each screenshot keeps record of sent messages and replies. All the collected data is up to date and every participant was made aware of purpose (research) of data, so their privacy is not threatened /challenged. Each screenshot taken and received with the permission of participants.

Since this research took place in real world setting so screenshots of messages are of real world conversation. Privacy of participants was the topmost priority and those participants who did not like their names to be mentioned in the study, those screenshots were cropped. Screenshots of chats were used only for this study purpose.

Participants in the study included male and female students of the university. The data was collected from both male and female equally (150 chats of male and 150 screenshots of female student's chats). As there is coeducation in AWKUM so it was feasible for the researcher to collect data from male and female students both. .As data is collected from university students and from BS students, so their ages ranged from 18-23 years.

Screenshots of WhatsApp messages were collected from students of different faculties of the university randomly. The collected 300 screenshots were divided into six groups of primary emotions as proposed by Vyvyan Evans. The six categories of emotions were love, sadness, anger, surprise, fear, and joy. Simple random sampling was used because the study intended to select a representative without bias from the accessible population. Purposive sampling was also used in order to collect focused and informative data to avoid time wastage.

The instrument used for data collection in the present study is screenshots of WhatsApp messages .This instrument was used for the reason that it keeps record of conversations and reliable data could be collected. In these screenshots one can get the contextual meanings through help of emojis used in those collected messages because every screenshot contains sent message(s) and reply (ies) too.

Gender was an independent variable in the study. It means no preference was given to either gender or that is why data was collected randomly. Besides gender, age was also an independent variable, and

data was collected from the university students rather than faculty of the university. As age of BS students ranged from 18-23, were selected   to access easily and out of biasness. As there are majority of the students   doing BS from the university, so they were easily accessible as compared to students of M. Phil who are less in number.

Unique case orientation data analysis is one of the data analysis strategies in qualitative researches and this   was employed in this section as well in which each screenshot was considered unique and special. The data was analyzed qualitatively. In the first step of data analysis, data was analyzed for relevance of emojis as linguistic cues. Secondly, understanding of contextual meanings through usage of emojis along with text messages. Relevant examples from the data collected were analyzed and presented in the findings section of the study. Thirdly, data was analyzed for effective expression of primary emotions through emoji, similarly examples from collected data were presented in each category of primary emotions.

Findings and Discussion

The findings in present study are divided into three sections according to research questions and objectives of the study.

1.   Relevance of Emojis as Linguistic Cues

Linguistics cues are those hints and cues in communication which minimize the struggle of message receiver in order to interpret messages correctly. In our day to day verbal communication we make impressions and decisions about speakers on basis of appearance, skin color, attire, body movements (kinesthetic), postures, gestures ,accent, type of handshakes, facial expressions .But in our digital nonverbal communication these nonverbal actions are absent. These nonverbal actions are very important and to have this communicative channel, emojis were created.

When we send an SMS to our friend, partner, or colleague, they might not be clear on whether to sympathize, laugh or angry; the words do not actually convey what we mean. However, putting a relevant emoji (smirking face) of expression provides a non –verbal cue, a meta-comment, showing us how to interpret the words: "fine, go and enjoy". But smirking face emoji tell them that message sender is in angry or off mood and go and enjoy was a sarcastic comment.
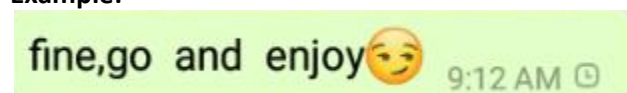
Example:

Figure 01

Suppose the sender did not use emoji in this text so receiver would not be able to guess that how is the mood of sender. In verbal communication this cue could be gotten from facial expressions and accent but in nonverbal communication emoji perform the same function.

2.   Understanding of Contextual Meanings Through Emojis

Nonverbal communication is contextual and different situations or environments produce different nonverbal messages. We act differently in the classroom than at our home. It is the setting (context) that offers norms and guidelines for our interpersonal actions. As one of the examples from the data has collected have its specific setting which is shown through the emojis.
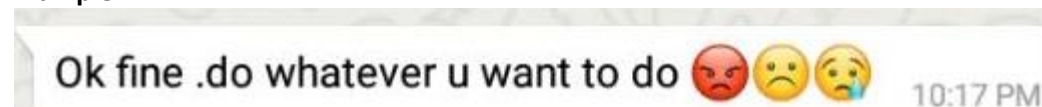
Example:

Figure 02

Suppose this message was sent by a girlfriend to her boyfriend on reply to his message that I am going on visit to a place. If this emoji was not present, then her boyfriend would be unable to know that she is not happy with the message. Understanding the contextual meaning with help of emoji made him reply in a certain way. In the screenshot below complete conversation between girlfriend and boyfriend is
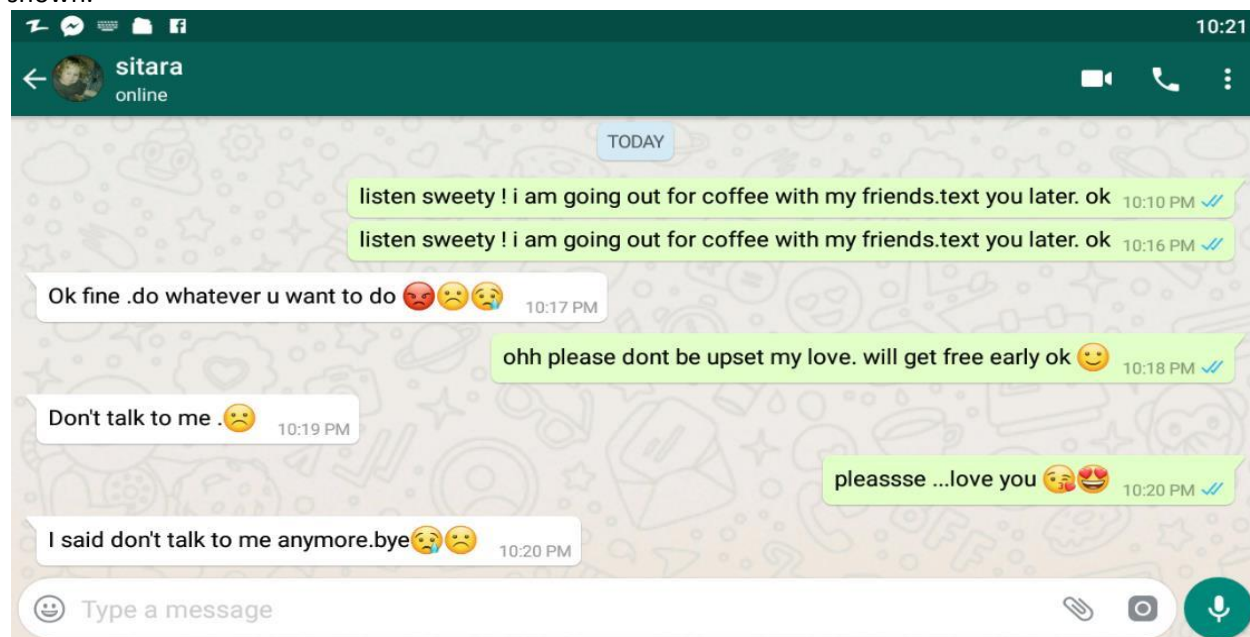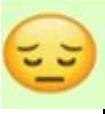
shown.

Figure 03: the use of emojis in a chat.

3. Expression of Emotions through Emojis

In written digital communication most of the time communicators feel difficulty in expression of emotions because channel of communication like gestures, body language and facial expressions are lacking. Vyvyan Evance categorized emotions into three;primary emotions ,secondary emotions and tertiary emotions . Primary emotions are central of a concern to this study and are discussed in detail.

S. no	Emotion	Name of the emoji used	Emojis	Example from the data
1	L O V E	1: Smiling face with heart eyes	😍	Obviously the one and only my Abu 😍 ❤️❤️ 1:43 PM ✓✓
		2: Face blowing kiss	😘	Shazma · Status 📷 Photo this baby smile in a way that one should say that he is told by someone to smile .looking so nice 😘😘😘 3:33 PM ✓
		3: Kissing face	😚	U Zeeshan U Hamza Awesome 😚 😚 11:16 P.M.
		4:Hugging face	🤗	we r hving off toommorow 11:12 PM 🤗🤗🤗🤗 11:12 PM
		5: Heart	💖	👫 dedicate to my parents 💖 12:18 AM ✓✓

		6: Liking	👍	Zalida Kha da kha pa sur ki da 👍 👍 ❤️ ❤️ 12:16 AM
		7: Lips	💋	I love you 💋💋💋 4:02 PM
2	S U R P R I S E	1: Face with rolling eyes	🙄	Atndnc a ulago 7:40 PM 🙄 7:40 PM ✔✔
		2: Face with open mouth	😱	Na mra platehalmintas 10:50 PM 😂😂 da ho pa nahara heeta veel hm gran de 🐶 10:50 PM ✔✔
		3:Astonis hed face	😬	😬 🙂 🙂 mazziii m okree zalimanoo🐟 7:09 PM
		4: Face with open mouth and cold sweat	😓	I cant believe it .she said this about me😓 6:08 PM
3	J O Y	1: Face with tears of joy	😂	You • Status GIF GIF 😂😂😂😂 Could u send me? 11:19 PM
		2: Rolling on floor laughing	😂	Seriously 🤣 🤣 10:41 AM
		3: Smiling face with open mouth	😃	Amina G urooj kiya hoa? 4:14 AM Urooj Kuch nae😃 7:26 AM
		4: Smiling face with open mouth and smiling eyes	😆	Aimn ba rata summary oki 😆 9:56 PM
		5:Winkin g face	😉	U r 😏😏 Then no need to think about it😂😂 8:03 PM ✔✔

		6: Smiling face with sunglasses	Hi I'm fine how are you... Da ogura mala khu um gware bala English razee Akhwa shay mana zan ruk shu 😎 7:59 PM
		7; Face with stuck out tongue and winking eye	If u can..then that 'll be a good option 😜 8:36 PM ✓✓
		8: Smiling face	thank u sooooo much mam 😊😊😊😊😘 3:51 PM ✓✓ InshaAllah 3:51 PM ✓✓ No thanks... 😊😊😊 3:51 PM
		9: Face souring delicious food.	Yummmy jalebi 😋😋 11:04 PM
4	A N G E R	1: Angry face	But I hate you when you don't Text me 😡 4:03 PM
		2: Dizzy face	u crazzy 😵😠 11:20 PM
		3: Punch	sana awwwww 👊👊👊 9:07 PM
		4: Gun emoji	Mah Noor Ta rawala da topak 🔫 12:08 AM
5	S A D N E S S	1: Crying face	Light nshta 6:05 PM UPS om khatam sho 😢 6:06 PM
		2: Loudly crying face	sometimes I want to die 😭 10:58 PM ✓✓
		3: Frowning face	Yara kho bs ma us sa waima 😔 11:18 PM ✓✓
6	F E A	1: Face with cold sweat	YARA MA AORADLI EXAMS START KEGE 😥 9:47 AM ✓✓

| | R | 2: Fearful face | | |
| | | 3: Face screaming in fear. | | |

Conclusion

Prof. Vyvyan Evans' study on Emojis shows that emoji is a universal language and provide us with rich communicative channel which is mainly missing in written digital communication. The primary goal of this study was to explore the relevance of emojis as linguistic cues in effective expression of emotions and correct interpretation of digital messages with the help of emojis. This study shows that emojis are helpful in interpretation of digital messages because they provide us with communicative channels and have relevance with linguistic cues. It means that emojis are not just images on digital keyboards rather than, they have communicative value as well and show the mood and intention of communicators in digital communication. Emojis are also helpful for expression of emotions. In this regard this would not be an entirely unexpected finding given that emojis help us to understand contextual meanings more easily than simple punctuation marks in written digital communication. For example, person A sent message to person B that "I slipped on the ground". The person A is confused that whether he/she should laugh or sympathies; the words actually do not convey the intended meaning .However, putting relevant emoji to the text provide nonverbal cue and person A understands contextual meaning of person A.

Not surprising, most of Abdul Wali Khan University's students use emojis in their digital communication and they reported that they enjoy colorful chats, and also helpful to them to understand contextual meanings easily. They also reported that emojis help them to express their emotions more comfortably as compared to phrases and sentences. As Prof Vyvyan Evans stated that emojis are not just happy and sad faces on our digital keyboards, they have communicative values as well and this study confirms the same idea that emojis are not just pictographs but emotional icons as well. In this way the findings of the study contribute to the literature of emojis and important for digital users to use emojis to have successful communication.

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