Exploring Emojis in Digital Communication among Bangladeshi Undergraduates: Private University Scenario

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Abstract

This study examines the perceptions and use of emojis in digital communication among English majors in private in Bangladesh. There has been limited study on Bangladeshi private university students regarding emoji usage. This study thus investigates the impact of emojis on the development of language and communication norms, employing socio-linguistic principles and theories of digital communication. The research collected data from a cohort of one hundred and thirty-three undergraduate students attending three private universities in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The data was obtained through a quantitative methodology that involved the use of questionnaires and qualitative interviews. The results indicate a more profound comprehension of emoji interpretation and usage within the cultural and educational contexts of Bangladesh. The study contributes to sociolinguistics and digital communication studies, offering practical implications for educators, policymakers, and communication professionals in Bangladesh and beyond.

Keywords: Emojis, Digital Communication, Language evolution, Sociology, Bangladesh, English Undergraduates

Introduction

Communication practices have been significantly altered by the emergence of digital technology, particularly among younger people who value virtual connections over in-person ones. Especially in light of the global pandemic, there has been a noticeable shift among young adults towards digital communication rather than in-person interactions (Boutet et al.; Hsieh and Tseng). Nonverbal cues like facial expressions and gestures are crucial in face-to-face communication, providing insights into others' emotions and personalities, aiding in understanding verbal messages (Hall et al.; Walther et al.). When engaging in digital interactions, especially through text, the main form of communication is through words, with limited chances for gestures and facial expressions. This led to the birth of emoticons, predecessors of emojis (Gawne and McCulloch; Kralj Novak et al.). The introduction of graphical user interfaces has greatly increased the use of pictographs, which are visual symbols used to communicate information in pictorial format (Böcker). These symbols are often used in signage, instructional materials, and digital interfaces

to convey messages quickly and universally. As technology continues to advance, the use of pictographs is likely to become even more prevalent in everyday communication. Humans, nowadays, increasingly rely on icons for digital device interaction, a trend that is likely to continue as technology advances (Sampietro). Icons serve as a universal language, transcending cultural and language barriers, enabling quick and easy recognition of functions or actions, making efficient communication crucial in our digital world. Emoji are influenced by different elements of Japanese culture, such as manga, anime, kanji, and street signs (Moschini). It was a Japanese telecommunications company, Softbank, that first created a set of emojis for mobile phones in 1997 (Burge).

When the Unicode Consortium made emoji look the same on all devices and Apple, Google, and Twitter started using them around 2009, they became popular all over the world and are still getting greater exposure (Sampietro). Emojis have now become the preferred choice in communication over emoticons, thanks to technological advancements (Vidal et al.). According to a recent report, a significant number of mobile phone users, especially young adults between the ages of 18 and 24, use emojis regularly in their text messages and social media posts which indicates the increasing trend of using emoticons for communication (Sun et al.).

According to studies, emoticons and emojis, which are universal representations of individual sentiments and gestures and are culture-specific, are used in computer-mediated communication (CMC), which typically occurs via email or smartphone messaging apps (Azuma; Park et al.; Sun et al.). Whatever the purpose emojis serve for communication, emojis are everywhere now. Erle pointed out that back in 2015, one emoji - 😂 (a smiling face with tears of joy) was named the word of the year (Oxford Dictionaries), and right in 2017; a Hollywood film titled 'The Emoji Movie' was released, where the title says it all. However, not so many studies have been conducted to see the views of student participants. Not to mention, in the current research context, Bangladesh, little research has been done on students' perspectives on using emojis in conversation. Therefore, the researchers of this study

would like to understand the perception and impact of emojis such as thumbs up, heart, smiley and so forth on digital communication among undergraduates in Bangladeshi universities. Thus, we have formulated two research questions,

RQ1: What is the perception of Bangladeshi undergraduates regarding the impact of emoji usage on the evolution of language and communication norms within digital spaces?

RQ2: How do the students perceive the effectiveness of emojis, such as thumbs up, heart, smiley, etc., in conveying emotions in online communication?

Significance of the Study

Emojis have become a key instrument in digital communication, influencing how people express their emotions and communicate online. However, there is a research deficit regarding the opinion and influence of emojis among undergraduate students at Bangladeshi universities, particularly in private settings. Understanding these students' attitudes and usage patterns is critical for understanding cross-cultural differences, emerging communication rules, and practical consequences for educators, legislators, and professionals. The purpose of this study is to provide a complete knowledge of the function of emojis in changing modern communication dynamics among young people in Bangladesh by evaluating their views, usage patterns, and interaction with them. By focusing on private university contexts, the study intends to bridge a research gap and contribute to a better understanding of emojis in today's digital world.

Review of Literature

Some studies suggest that people use emojis to communicate emotional tone, to reduce the ambiguity of discourse, and lighten the mood and to compensate for the lack of nonverbal channels in digital communication (Derks et al.; Lo; Kaye et al.). Several research have looked into the implications of emojis in particular situations like purchasing things (Das et al.; Lohmann et al.; Manganari and Dimara) or workplace communication. Also, several survey studies on the recognition and interpretation of emoji have been conducted in food-related consumer

research (Jaeger et al.), where emoji are considered a valid way to assess emotions elicited by the consumption of some products (Jaeger et al.). There has been a divide among the researchers regarding whether emoji will be withdrawn in the near future (Miller et al.; Tigwell and Flatla), or emoji will be a universal form of communication (Danesi; Jaeger et al.). Since emojis are part of electronic-mediated communication (EMC), some researchers also did studies on emoji recognition limited the analysis to face emoji or faces and gestures because they are more frequently used in EMC (Annamalai and Abdul Salam; Miller et al; Rodrigues et al; Takahashi et al; Tigwell and Flatla).

Emojis in Digital Communication: The Transformation

Emoticons have been used since the 1800s, mostly in quirky writing. But on September 19, 1982, Professor Scott Fahlman used :-) and :-(on the computer science message board at Carnegie Mellon University to tell the difference between amusing remarks and serious remarks. This was the first known use of modern emoticons (Kralj Novak et al.). During the 1980s and 1990s, the wave of technology surged in Japan and digital communication was in trend, the first emoji, or 'kaomoji' as they were locally known, started to gain attention. Shifting views from Western to Asian, emoji in Japanese combines 'e' meaning picture and 'moji' meaning character. In 2019, a blog corrected the record on the first emoji set, stating that SoftBank, the carrier that partnered with Apple to bring the iPhone to Japan in 2008, released a phone with 90 emoji characters in 1997. In 2007, the use of emojis was not popularized much in the global world as it was only available on iPhones in Japan but as their popularity grew, the Unicode Consortium recognized their potential and standardized characters across different platforms, officially incorporating emojis in 2010. This started a new way of communication in the digital world, conveying emotions without typing them out word by word.

Sociocultural Perspectives on Emoji Usage

The use of emojis have greatly impacted on how we communicate in digital spaces and convey our emotions. Emojis can enable sociocultural communication by expressing shared cultural sentiments and transcending linguistic barriers. They adapt to differences in gender, race, culture, and skin tone, providing depth and warmth to written communication. By using emoji, an individual can also establish their national and ethnic identity, like Japanese use emoji to bow or greet someone, in Europe it is simple. In 2017, Hsieh and Tseng's research found that text, messaging and emoticons enhance perceived fun in mobile instant messaging, driving social connectivity, identity expression, and support for usage. This playful aspect of digital communication has transformed communication from formal to joyful.

Emoji use is influenced by societal norms and behavioural expectations. It is more acceptable in leisure contexts, particularly among women, and is perceived as intrusive; however, excessive use can be perceived as insincere, whereas single use is more well-received (Tossell et al.; Ahn et al.). Emoji usage varies according to culture, age, and gender. Younger people use emojis more often and creatively than older people. Despite these disparities, emojis assist decrease language barriers and improve emotional expressiveness, improving digital interaction.

Understanding Emojis through Linguistic Perspectives

Research on emojis from linguistic viewpoints has evolved from attitudinal meaning to analysing their semantic, pragmatic, and phatic roles in texts (Danesi), much like how gestures contribute to meaning (Gawne and McCulloch). Approach to emojis pragmatically brings up the question if emojis can be considered language, and the answer to that question according to Danesi's work in 2016 is 'not yet'. Emoji intelligibility decreases in direct proportion to their degree of independence from language, according to Danesi, who makes a distinction between adjunctive emoji, which provide meaning in addition to language, and substitutive emoji, which do the opposite (Logi and Zappavigna). According to Danesi, emoji interpretation does not require any formal instruction unlike language. For example, people use pantomime which is a combination of gestures or simplified speech using

emojis in games in which twitter users create sequences of emoji to illustrate the plots of famous books (Gawne and McCulloch). Emblems, which are also culturally established gestures with defined meanings, such as 'thumbs up', 'Two- finger peace' sign or nodding or single 'yes' are conveyed through emojis as well, although the sign varies according to culture. Some places use 'two finger peace sign' to convey that they have won or gained victory and palm to face inwards to be the 'peace' sign. Thus, the same emoji can mean different things in different cultures and different contexts. According to Parkwell, 'Emoji are understood to serve a variety of semantic, pragmatic, and grammatical roles, but they most commonly appear in tandem with standard text, where their meaning can be decoded via their place in a clause and the overall context of the message' (Parkwell). In many places the normal smiley emoji can mean a lot of different emotions, sad, happy and even sarcasm, one might not understand the meaning without reading the whole context. Though one can convey their emotion and intent through emojis, the typical uses of them are more similar to the properties of gesture rather than language. Although gestures are said to be 'non combinatorics' (McNeill) because they do not combine to form larger structures, some emojis are available for combinatorial sequences. For example, by using heart emoji and a cake emoji together, an individual can convey that they love cake.Similar to physical gestures, emojis are seen as digital gestures that facilitate a kind of universal communication while embedding nuanced meanings which are interpreted differently in various cultural and social contexts.

Methodology
Participants

For this research, we selected 133 undergraduates from the English Department of three private universities in Dhaka. All of the students completed their Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) examination and enrolled in the Department of English in these 3 universities. Subjects were both male and female ranging from 18 to 26 years which means students from 1st to 4th year took part in this research. Among these 133 participants, 87 are females and 46 are male students.

Data Collection Procedure

Since this is a quantitative study, we formed a survey questionnaire and distributed the questionnaire online using Google form. No students were asked to input their names and educational institutions' names due to the ethical consideration of keeping sensitive information anonymous. The questionnaire was divided into 4 sections named

Section 1: 'Demographic Information',

Section 2: 'Emoji Usage and Motivation',

Section 3: 'Perception and Interpretation of Emojis', and

Section 4: 'Impact on Communication Dynamics and Language'.

Under section 1, we have three items which asked the participants about their age range, gender and the academic year that they belonged to. Section 2 has 5 items. Among them 4 statements ranged from 5-point scale format, which ranged from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree.' The responses were rated as strongly agree=5, agree=4, neutral=3, disagree=2, and strongly disagree=1. Last statement asked the students to mention three emojis that they usually used. Section 3 has 5 statements that ask the students to indicate their answers between strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree. Finally, section 4 has a diverse combination of items that were both close and open-ended. For instance, the first item in section 4 asked the participants to write about how they think the use of emojis has impacted communication norms in virtual platforms followed by some examples. Item 2 asked the students to rate the extent to which they believe emojis positively influence language learning and communication in English. The third item inquired about the extent to which emojis can help bridge language barriers and facilitate cross-cultural communication among English language learners. In this section, the fourth and final question raised the topic of the future of emojis in digital communication. Three options were provided for students to select the one they believed was most applicable.

Data Analysis and Result
Section 1: Demographic Information

The demographic profile of the participants in this study shows a majority of respondents aged between

21-23 years (73.3%), with smaller groups aged 18-20 (14.1%) and 24-26 (12.6%). The profile has been visualized in the figure 1 below. Gender distribution indicates that 65.3% of the participants are female, while 34.7% are male. Regarding academic year, the highest representation is from first-year students (35.3%), followed by fourth-year (25.7%), second-year (24.2%), and third-year students (14.8%). This is shown in the second figure below the age profile.
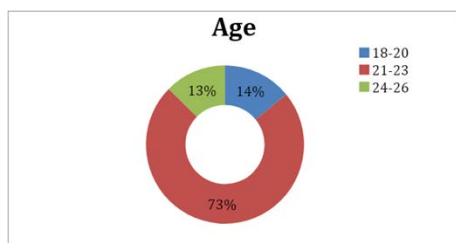

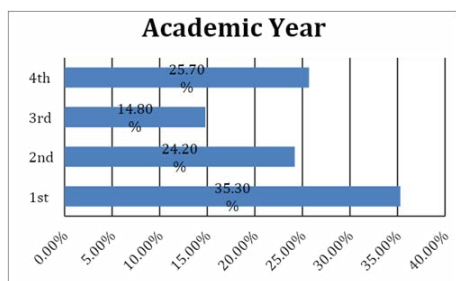**Figure 1: The age ranges of the participants**

Figure 2: The Ranges of the Participants regarding their Academic Years

The demographic data indicates a predominantly young, female-majority sample, with a balanced spread across different academic years. This composition is likely to influence the findings of the study, particularly in areas where age, gender, or academic experience may play a role in the outcomes or perspectives being investigated.

Section 2: Emoji Usage and Motivation

Section 2 has 5 items in total. The analysis of the first 4 items reveals diverse motivations and usage patterns of emojis among participants. A significant majority (73%) agree or strongly agree that they use emojis to make their writing more engaging and accessible. Similarly, 68.7% believe emojis help express emotions and tone effectively in written communication. Additionally, 56.4% feel that understanding emoji meanings is crucial for English language learners to be proficient communicators,

and 57.1% see emojis as useful tools for teaching emotional expression and cultural differences. The bar chart below will help us visualize the entire insightful observation.
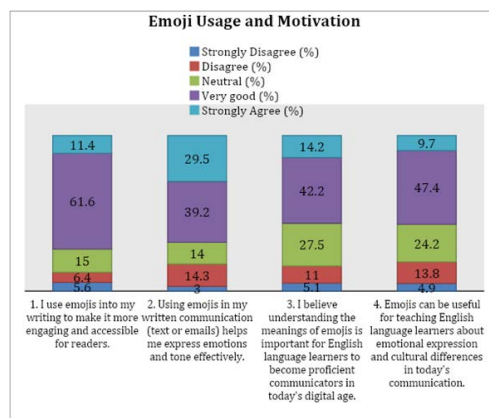

Figure 3: Emoji Usage and Motivation (Items 1-4)

The fifth item however, is an open-ended question. Students were asked to mention 2.5. three emojis that they use most often. The analysis showed that ☺ (Slightly Smiling Face), ♡ (Red Heart), and 😂 (Face with Tears of Joy) – these three emojis are mostly being used by the young people these days. The choice for these emojis shows how young people use pictures to show feelings and subtleties in digital conversation. It is easier to say a lot of different feelings with just a few characters when people use emojis like ☺, ♡, and 😂.

The data shows that participants recognize the multifaceted benefits of emojis. They are seen not just as decorative symbols, but as essential components of modern communication that can enhance engagement, express emotions, aid language learning, and even educate on cultural diversity.

Section 3: Perception and Interpretation of Emojis

Regarding the perception and interpretation of emojis, 63.8% of respondents agree or strongly agree that emojis enhance or clarify written communication, and 59.1% feel emojis accurately convey emotions. However, 60.4% acknowledge that interpretation can vary based on cultural backgrounds and personal experiences. A notable 74.8% agree that the unclear and confusing meanings of some emojis should be

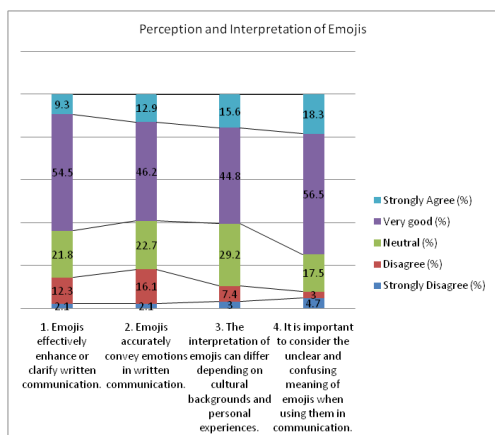considered when using them in communication. The following chart sums it up,

Figure 4: Perception and Interpretation of Emojis

The statistics show that respondents have a complex but mostly positive impression of emojis. They are renowned for their abilities to clarify and improve textual communication while also properly conveying emotions. There is, however, a lot of awareness about the chance of misreading, which shows how important it is to use emojis carefully and in the right context.

Section 4: Impact on Communication Dynamics and Language

When asked about the influence of emojis on language learning and communication, 47.6% of participants agree or strongly agree that emojis have a positive impact. In terms of bridging language barriers and facilitating cross-cultural communication, 41.3% rate the impact as moderate, with 23.4% indicating a higher positive impact (very much or extremely). However, looking to the future, a substantial 65.7% believe that emoji usage will continue to grow, while 32.2% expect it to remain the same, and only 2.1% think emojis will lose popularity.

The analysis strongly indicates that emojis will continue to play an important and increasing role in digital communications. Most respondents anticipate a rise in usage; thus, teachers and communicators should welcome and adapt to this trend. Emojis are a distinctive and powerful tool for improving communication, bridging cultural divides, and

engaging various audiences. This detailed analysis highlights the significant role emojis play in digital communication among undergraduates, emphasizing their utility in enhancing engagement, emotional expression, and cross-cultural communication, while also recognizing the challenges posed by varied interpretations.
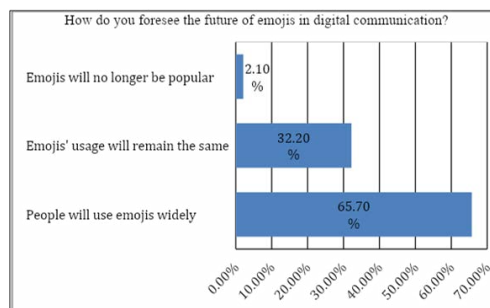

Figure 5: Future of Emojis

Practical Implications of this Study

This study has several practical implications. After conducting the research and seeing the data interpretation, the authors of this study believe that Bangladeshi teachers can improve their teaching methods by incorporating emojis to make learning materials more engaging and to teach emotional nuance in language. According to the study, 73% of participants found emojis engaging, and 68.7% found them effective for expressing emotions. To cultivate cross-cultural communication skills and overall communication proficiency, curricula may incorporate lessons on emoji usage, as 57.1% perceive emojis as beneficial for teaching emotive expression and cultural differences, and 56.4% underscore the significance of comprehending emoji meanings. From the data, the researchers also understood that emoji usage will persist. Thus, educators should remain informed about digital communication trends and incorporate them into their teaching strategies. Emojis can bridge language gaps among students, as 23.4% of respondents acknowledged. This means emojis help break language barriers and foster understanding among students with different linguistic backgrounds.

Limitations of the Study

The sample size for this research is relatively small, consisting of only one hundred and thirty-three

participants. Additionally, it focuses exclusively on students from the English Department of three private universities in Dhaka. The demographic in question may not accurately reflect the wider population of undergraduate students or the various ways in which different groups utilize and interpret emojis. Moreover, the study's findings may have limited applicability to regions or countries outside of Dhaka, Bangladesh, due to the geographical and cultural scope of the participants. The results of the study may be influenced by cultural factors unique to Bangladesh, and it is possible that the study does not fully encompass the various ways emojis are used and interpreted in different cultural settings. There are other limitations to conducting online surveys using Google Forms. One of these limitations is the potential for biases, specifically self-selection bias. This means that individuals who are more comfortable with digital tools and platforms may be more inclined to participate in the survey. In addition, the anonymous nature of responses, although ethical, may hinder the ability to obtain further insights or clarifications. Additionally, the study mainly uses quantitative methods, which may not fully capture the nuanced and subjective aspects of emoji usage and interpretation. Interviews or focus groups could offer a more in-depth understanding of the personal and cultural factors that impact the use of emojis. Additionally, exploring different contexts, like academic versus social communication, or studying the effects of new and evolving emoji designs, could offer a more complete understanding of their role in communication.

Conclusion

This study offers some crucial information regarding the demographics, driving reasons, attitudes, and prospects for emoji use among Dhaka undergraduate students. Emojis have been found to improve engagement, express feelings, aid in language learning, and enhance multicultural understanding. They have risen in importance in digital interactions, while being occasionally imprecise and open to many interpretations. Further studies should contemplate employing of a broader spectrum of individuals and larger numbers of samples in order to enhance these results. Additionally, exploring multiple

geographic and cultural contexts would result in a more comprehensive understanding. The use of qualitative approaches may provide more in-depth insights into people's subjective experiences with emojis. As digital communication evolves, it is vital that educators, communicators, and organisations understand the subtleties of emoji usage.

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