

Understanding Emoji Across Culture in Digital Communication: A Study among Undergraduate Students

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.908000125>

Received: 26 July 2025; Accepted: 01 August 2025; Published: 01 September 2025

ABSTRACT

Emojis have been widely used among undergraduate students as a communicative tool. This study investigates the interpretation of emoji among undergraduate students focusing on three major cultures in Malaysia, namely the Malays, Chinese, and Indians. The respondents are undergraduate students who are digital natives from various parts of the country. It focuses on their interpretation of selected facial emoji namely, the smiling face with heart-eyes, baby, folded hands, and clapping hands. This research analyses the data through identifying the interpretation of the emoji according to each culture, which is then followed by the analysis of differences in terms of semantic misconstrual between the cultures among students. The data reveals that (i) there are common interpretations shared among the three cultures for each emoji, which highlighting the universal inherent meaning possessed by emoji in digital communication, (ii) there are some additional interpretations from each culture for each emoji, which highlighting the culturally specific interpretation for each emoji depending on their cultural beliefs, and (iii) each culture unveils different degrees of variation in terms of interpretation for each emoji that were tested, highlighting potential misinterpretation among cultures in intercultural communication. The study also showcases differences in terms of the usage of emojis between cultures. In conclusion, the study provides evidence that emoji interpretation can be influenced by cultural idiosyncrasies, and understanding the differences in cultural beliefs can help facilitate smoother intercultural communication in digital communication among multicultural undergraduate students in Malaysia.

Keywords: emoji; digital communication; semantic misconstrual; cultural differences

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In the past, the available means of communication were limited to landline telephone calls, short message service (SMS), letters, telegrams, or face-to-face interactions. However, in today's globalised and rapidly advancing technological landscape, communication has shifted towards digital messaging applications like WhatsApp, Telegram, WeChat, and various others. Text messaging has taken over as the most popular mode of communication, surpassing traditional phone calls and in-person conversations (Erle et al., 2022). This transition has also led to a significant increase in the use of emoji, which are graphical symbols employed in digital text-based communication. Emojis have become a commonplace method for users to convey their intentions. Furthermore, it is worth noting that emoji usage has extended beyond individual communication and businesses have incorporated emoji into their marketing strategies. Usage of non-face emoji increases message evaluations and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) compared to simple text (Orazi et al., 2023).

In general, it is widely recognised that digital or online messaging presents challenges in conveying emotions and feelings, as communicating digitally or online can be challenging because non-verbal cues such as tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language are absent. These cues are important in face-to-face communication as they help convey meaning and emotion (Leonardi, 2022). These non-verbal cues encompass aspects such as a person's body language, facial expressions, gestures, and intonation. As a result, communication through text messaging, email, social media, and other online platforms differs significantly from in-person, real-life communication. Moreover, during face-to-face interactions, there are non-verbal elements that help emphasize the explicit meaning of a message and also to enforce some assumptions in the mind of the interlocutor. These non-verbal signals may be more effective in a face-to-face setting where they can be observed more easily (Ismailov & Rustamovich, 2022). However, the advent of emoji has provided a means to compensate for the absence of these non-verbal cues in online communication. Emojis convey their meanings by resembling physical objects from real life, such as smiling faces, animals, or food, through graphical icons that represent words, concepts, or attitudes (Leonardi, 2022). Interestingly, the role of emoji extends beyond merely expressing feelings. Saidi et al. (2022) in their study found that emojis are used to represent cultural relationships in communication, and they are also used as a persuasive medium to influence, persuade, or convince others. Additionally, emojis are used to overcome the limitations of expression found in verbal digital language, and they complete the verbal digital language so that communicants can create more effective conversations.

Emoji has gained significant popularity and has emerged as a crucial element in the digital world. Since 2016, 92% of the online populace incorporates emojis into their messages, and this number has only grown (Ghazanfar, 2022). Notably, Malaysians have embraced emoji usage, as evidenced by data from 2015, which revealed that Malaysia led the pack in emoji utilization compared to 16 other languages and regions, including American English, British English, French, and Arabic. This analysis was conducted by the developers of the SwiftKey keyboard application. SwiftKey is a virtual keyboard application available for both Android and iOS devices, offering features such as autocorrect, emoji integration, adaptation to the user's slang and nicknames, predictive text and emoji suggestions, multilingual support encompassing over 300 languages, and more ("SwiftKey The Smart keyboard and Get More Done | SwiftKey," 2019). Presently, while there is no available data concerning the number of iOS users who have installed the SwiftKey keyboard app, the application has garnered more than 100 million downloads and active users on Android devices ("Swiftkey Keyboard," 2019). This data underscores the prevalence of emoji usage among Malaysians in their daily digital interactions, encompassing both digital communication and social media posting. Furthermore, a global analysis of emoji utilization conducted by Ljubesic and Fiser (2016) identified Southeast Asian countries as some of the most frequent users of emojis, with Malaysia standing out as one of these nations. This analysis further highlights the substantial extent of emoji utilization within the Malaysian population.

The advent of emoji has introduced a significant concern related to the interpretation and potential misinterpretation of these graphical symbols. Despite its growing popularity, Leonardi (2022) mentioned that emojis can be challenging to communicate with because they are visual in nature and do not have a specific dictionary definition or meaning in context like words do. This can lead to ambiguity and difficulty in correctly interpreting and understanding their intended meaning. Furthermore, the interpretation of emojis can be subjective and influenced by the sender and receiver's interpretation of the message. How the sender chooses to respond to such misinterpretations is of paramount importance, as it can either foster improvement or exacerbate the relationship between them. Nevertheless, there is a scarcity of research addressing how users react or communicate when their intended meaning behind an emoji is misconstrued by the recipient.

Another research has found that languages, cultures and regions of the users influence their preferences of using emoji to express their thoughts and feelings. A study by Sick et al. (2023) found that both Italy and Norway share a commonality in how they interpret and use emojis to convey emotions related to food experiences. This implies that they may have a preference for using emoji as a means of expressing their thoughts and feelings about food. However, there are slight differences in preferences based on their regions. Italian children tend to use more emotion words to describe the meaning of emojis compared to Norwegian preadolescents. Norwegian preadolescents, on the other hand, mentioned that they use more positive emojis in general, indicating that there might be slight differences in how they express positive emotions through emojis.

Based on the results from prior studies, it can be said that although some of the meanings and interpretations of emoji are the same across cultures, the results also showed a difference semantically across cultures. There are various definitions for the term ‘culture’ that have been discussed over the years. Culture, according to A Patel (2023) is defined as a synthesis of thought patterns and attributes that characterize a particular group of people. The term ‘culture’ derives its origin from the Latin word ‘colure’, signifying the act of nurturing something from the Earth. This definition implies that when individuals engage with one another, they collectively evolve and cultivate their culture. Although culture is commonly described by external facets such as language, traditions, religion, arts, and cuisine, it transcends these superficial elements. It delves deeper into the way we perceive and engage with those in our surroundings. Remarkably, individuals within the same society, even if they share similar characteristics, can possess distinct cultural perspectives and ideas, influenced by a multitude of factors. O’Madagain and Tomasello (2021) discussed the evolution of cultural transmission in the human species, emphasising that culture can be learned from one generation to the next. It acknowledges that some traits may be lost over time, while new ones are introduced, making culture a dynamic and constantly changing entity. Additionally, it recognises that cultural diversity exists across different countries and that social factors influence the pace and nature of cultural transmission.

Malaysia is a diverse nation with a rich multicultural and multilingual society, comprising three primary cultural groups that are Malay, Chinese, and Indian. As of 2019, Malaysia had a total population of 33.6 million, with the largest ethnic group being the Bumiputera, accounting for 69.3% of the population. The second-largest ethnic group is the Chinese, representing 22.8%, while the Indian community is the third largest, constituting 6.9% of the population (Department of Statistics Malaysia Official Portal, 2019). The term “Bumiputera” does not pertain to a singular ethnic group, rather, it encompasses a range of ethnic groups, including Malays, indigenous communities from Sabah and Sarawak, and native populations in Peninsular Malaysia (Karupiah & Fernandez, 2022).

Historically, the distribution of cultural groups in Malaysia did not consistently reflect the proportions seen today. Prior to Malaysia gaining independence, Malays were recognised as the indigenous population of the country. The influx of Chinese and Indian immigrants to Malaya significantly contributed to the diverse cultural landscape that characterises modern-day Malaysia. In the late nineteenth century, during the era of European imperial expansion, Malaya, along with other Southeast Asian nations, came under Western colonial rule. Within the colonial framework, the British authorities actively encouraged and facilitated the migration of Chinese and Indian laborers to address labor shortages in various economic sectors such as plantations and mining. This was essential because Malaya had a relatively small native population at the time, insufficient to meet the labor demands of these industries (Cai, 2022). However, it is important to note that the migration of Indians and Chinese was not solely motivated by labor needs. In the case of Indian immigration, a significant aspect beyond labor migration was the role of missionaries who aimed to propagate the Hindu religion in Malaya (Awang et al., 2022). This historical context is evidenced by the remains at Lembah Bujang in Kedah. Nonetheless, the number of these early Indian immigrants was relatively small in comparison to later waves of Indian migration to Malaya. Regarding the Chinese, the first documented Chinese immigrants to Malaya were the entourage of Princess Hong Li Po, who arrived in Malaya approximately five centuries before subsequent waves of Chinese immigration (Chee-Beng, 2022).

Similarly, this phenomenon extends to the linguistic landscape of Malaysia. In essence, each cultural group in Malaysia has made its unique contributions to the linguistic milieu of the country. An illustrative instance of this is the sentence, “Machaa, that towkay belanja. Don’t have to pay”. Beyond the English words, elements such as “macha” originates from the Indian culture, signifying a term of endearment in Tamil, while “belanja” is derived from Bahasa Malaysia, denoting the act of treating someone to food or drink. Conversely, the term “towkay” which implies “boss”, finds its roots in the Chinese culture. This sentence remains intelligible due to the widespread recognition of the meanings of these words among Malaysians, resulting in minimal misinterpretation. This code-switching phenomenon is commonly observed in Malaysia's linguistically diverse and multicultural society (Treffers-Daller et al., 2022).

The previous example illustrates how Malaysians converse with the major cultures and influence the way they talk. However, when it comes to a specific culture integrating the values or beliefs of said culture, other cultures might have a hard time to comprehend the meaning of the term or the phrase used. To further illustrate, by using

the Malay culture as an example, the Malays use the animal pig or in Bahasa Malaysia, “babi”, as a curse word to offend someone (Danish et al., 2023). In contrast, other cultural groups in Malaysia do not regard the pig as a profanity, instead, they typically perceive it as livestock. The Malays' association of the pig with profanity stems from their adherence to the Islamic faith. According to Article 160 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia (2010), a Malay is defined as an individual who affirms their faith in Islam, habitually converses in the Malay language, and follows Malay customs. In Islamic doctrine, the consumption of haram (forbidden) animals is prohibited, with pork being one such haram animal (Quran 6:145, Sahih International translation), as it is considered impure. Consequently, due to the pig's association with impurity and disgust within the Islamic context, Malays tend to employ the term as a curse word more frequently than do individuals from other cultural backgrounds, including Chinese and Indian cultures, or any other cultures in Malaysia (Danish et al., 2023).

The use of culture-specific terms, such as the curse word “babi” among Malays serves as an illustrative example. Malays employ various terms and phrases with specific cultural connotations, which may not be readily comprehensible to individuals from other cultures (Muhammad et al., 2020). An instance of this occurred when a Chinese individual expressed his lack of offense towards the term “Cina babi” on Twitter, stating, “It’s like you curse someone by his fav food. ‘YO MELAYU NASI LEMAK!’ Do’t hurt at all” (SinnedDonut, 2017). The Chinese individual's lack of offense stemmed from his fondness for pork, which is implied by the term “babi”. He drew a parallel by referencing “nasi lemak”, a favorite Malay dish. The comments and responses to his tweet indicated agreement from Malaysians of various cultural backgrounds. Nevertheless, culture-specific terms and phrases are not exclusive to Malay culture, as other cultures also possess their own culturally specific linguistic expressions. These expressions are influenced by the values, beliefs, customs, and languages of the respective cultures (Zainal, 2021). Just as the Malays' faith influenced the use of the previously mentioned curse word, different cultures contribute to the linguistic diversity of Malaysia, rendering it a vibrant mosaic of cultures.

Building on insights from the analysis conducted by the Swiftkey keyboard application, which revealed Malaysians' extensive use of emoji and their incorporation of cultural nuances into daily communication, this current study aims to investigate the cultural disparities in emoji interpretation. Specifically, the study seeks to understand how Malaysians are influenced by their respective cultures when interpreting emojis. For instance, it explores whether Malays interpret the pig emoji as a profanity, a mere representation of a farm animal, or if other cultural groups also associate the pig emoji (🐷) with offensive connotations. Notably, it is essential to acknowledge that even within the same culture, the meanings and interpretations of emoji may not be uniform. These variations can also extend across different cultures, indicating that the disparities in emoji understanding may not solely be attributed to cultural factors but could be influenced by other factors as well.

Furthermore, this study endeavors to identify patterns in emoji interpretation among diverse cultural groups in Malaysia. In essence, it aims to elucidate how Malaysians from various cultural backgrounds react when their intended message, as the sender, is misconstrued by the recipient. The assessment of cultural differences in emoji interpretation employs a scoring mechanism that gauges the likelihood of an emoji being misunderstood. For example, if Malaysians exhibit diverse interpretations of the ‘face with tears of joy’ emoji (😄), the corresponding score for this emoji would be high, signifying a higher probability of misinterpretation. As this study primarily centers on the tendencies of selected emojis to be misinterpreted, it also examines how respondents from each cultural group respond when their emoji intentions are misconceived.

Statement of Problem

Emojis convey their meanings by resembling real objects, like a crying face, but how people actually interpret these symbols remains a bit of a mystery. Unlike words, which have clear dictionary definitions, emojis are detailed images that can be open to various interpretations. In today's world, emojis are incredibly popular for texting, social media, and even billboard ads. Surprisingly, research by Miller et al. (2016) has shown that people do not all see emojis the same way. In Malaysia, a study by Annamalai and Abdul Salam (2017) revealed that even among Malaysians, interpretations of the same emoji can differ widely. The reasons behind this diversity in emoji meanings in Malaysia are still unclear. If we do not uncover the root causes of these misinterpretations,

it could lead to more confusion and misunderstandings among Malaysians and between Malaysians and people from other countries.

Prior research has highlighted a significant gap when it comes to understanding how emojis are interpreted across different cultures (Miller et al., 2016; Stamatov, 2017). While some studies have explored how emojis are understood in various countries, there is still a lack of research on whether different cultures within the same country share similar or different interpretations of emojis (Barbieri et al., 2016; Guntuku et al., 2019). In countries like Malaysia, where diverse cultures coexist, misunderstandings in emoji usage and interpretation can easily occur. This is because culture deeply influences daily communication, including language, beliefs, and traditions, shaping the way Malaysians interact with each other. This challenge becomes even more pronounced in intercultural communication, especially among individuals from different cultures living in Malaysia. Just like in face-to-face conversations, cultural influences can affect how Malaysians use and understand emojis.

This study seeks to bridge this research gap by investigating how different cultures within the same country influence emoji interpretation and intercultural communication, particularly in Malaysia. This study is essential because it helps us understand how people interpret emojis, those little symbols we use in texting and online chats. Unlike regular words with clear meanings, emojis can mean different things to different people, and this can create confusion. Think of emojis like language, but they also have a cultural side. In a place like Malaysia, where people from different cultures live together, emojis can be influenced by these cultures. This study intends to find out how different cultures in Malaysia affect the way people use and understand emojis. By figuring this out, we can reduce confusion in our messages, which is important, especially when different cultures communicate with each other. In short, it is a study that fills an important gap in our understanding of emoji and how they impact our communication in a globalized world.

Research Objectives

The objectives of the present study are:

To identify the cultural differences in emoji interpretation for selected emojis.

To evaluate the patterns of interpretation of emojis among the different cultures in Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, people have become addicted to using graphic symbols in digital communication to express their emotions. These symbols are known as emojis. According to Ljubešić and Fišer (2016), these characters have developed in becoming a universal language in digital communication across applications, platforms, and cultures. As stated by Herring and Dainas (2020), there are some differences in interpretation which have been attributed to several factors that include in the interpretation of emojis which differ across platforms. Besides that, individual differences, the familiarity of the sender and receiver are also the factors. Herring and Dainas (2020) also distinguished the difference in interpretation of the use of the emoji in a particular culture and the norms of emoji using the emoji on a specific social media platform. As there are several studies on the differences in usage of emojis, it can be identified that different demographic categories of social media users perceive emojis differently.

The previous study by Miller et al. (2017) focused on the semantic level of the emojis interpretation. However, the emojis have a greater function and reasoning beyond the semantic level. Hence, it is essential to consider their pragmatic functions in social media discourse (Herring & Dainas, 2020). They also stated that there is a limitation in the area of literature, however, there are exceptions. According to Gullberg (2016) as cited by Herring and Dainas (2020), several qualitative studies of the function of pragmatic emoji as reported that emoji has become “a social tool that can be used to add personal identity expression or playfulness to a message, to manage the conversation and maintain relationships”.

Hu et al. (2017) has identified seven intentions underlying the use of emoji, which are “expressing sentiment, strengthening messages, adjusting tone, expressing humor, expressing irony, expressing intimacy, and describing content”. From their findings, the respondents rated 20 individual emojis in which to express each intention. However, the emojis were presented separately as “the intentions were not mutually exclusive”, therefore, their results are difficult to interpret. On the other hand, based on Herring and Dainas (2017)’s finding, they have identified the functions of eight mutually exclusive pragmatic graphicons which are “reaction, action, tone modification, mention, riff, narrative sequence, ambiguous, and other” that were found in the comments on Facebook groups. Hence, the results showed the reaction and tone modification were the highest number used in graphicon as well as “expressed the widest range of pragmatic functions”.

A study by Völker and Mannheim (2021) discovered the correlation between the socio-emotional qualities of emojis and interpretation of instant messages. A study was conducted using the four-ears model, which extricates information into four layers. It is found that self-revelation was the most prominent interpretation which is enhanced by the presence of emojis followed by factual information, appeal, and relationship in that order. Emojis facilitate the recipients to understand the person behind the message. As stated by Jibrail and Abdullah (2013), emojis are able to determine the quality of a message and indicate the true intention to communicate emotionally (Hu et al., 2017). The emojis are able to reduce the uncertainty and affirm positive and negative messages.

Kralj Novak et al. (2015) discovered that the emojis are positively used within the context in which they are employed to strengthen the positive tone (Prada et al., 2018). Positive messages were evaluated as transferring strictly facts or relationship info, whereas negative messages were perceived as revealing oneself from the sender’s perspective or appealing to the receiver’s expectations. Emojis play a contextual role in conveying emotional signals between communicators (Völker & Mannheim, 2021). The presence of emojis could lead to the idea of not handling a serious matter with respect. However, they could turn into a unique language to foster privacy and intimacy. Regarding emotional intelligence (EI) and employment of emojis, messages that exclusively include emojis also bolster connecting EI to facial emotion recognition. Recipients who selectively have a penchant for self-revelation reflect better capacity to detect and regulate someone else’s emotions and have determined themselves to be better in handling emotions in their relationships. Emojis aid in peppering pivotal emotional cues that recipients with exclusively higher emotional intelligence can grasp. As Völker and Mannheim (2021) noted that EI also proposes that facial nonverbal signals via emoji convey a better sense of self-revelation of the sender. People with lower EI may interpret messages with emojis on a more personal level, as they have worse emotion management and sociability.

In regard to gender, there are several studies showing that females frequently used emoji and emoticons as well as having a positive attitude of using them as compared to males (Prada et al., 2018). In a large-scale analysis of emoticons used on Facebook between 2007 and 2012, from Na’aman et al., (2017) findings, they found that gender and age significantly and robustly predicted the total number of emoticons posted, and that younger users and females posted more emoticons than older users and males. A survey was carried out of Portuguese social media users, where it was reported that women are more likely to use emojis more than men. Furthermore, they found “emoji more useful, interesting, fun, and easy to use” (Prada et al., 2018).

Moreover, in Asian culture, emojis are perceived as cute and feminine (Sugiyama, 2015). The study reported that emojis are considered the “key to the girls’ online performance of kawaii (“cute”) identities, and it is found that they are inappropriate for men to use. The gender of the sender is further paramount in determining the manner emojis of interpreted by the receiver. Affectionate emojis were reputed to be more appropriate and pleasant when the senders are women compared to men (Butterworth et. al, 2019).

The different renderings and forms of emoji across various social media platforms account for distinct interpretations from the receiver’s end as well as their familiarity with the sender. It has been discovered that different emoji types specialise in expressing different pragmatic functions; some emojis are often interpreted to modify the tone of the texts they accompany. Demographic categories of social media users also play a role in the diverse perception of emoji use. Younger users and females adopt more liberal use and a reasonable outlook of image icons in their interactions as opposed to older users and males (Herring & Dainas, 2020). In addition,

the older generation tends to use simpler and positive emojis generally as opposed to the younger generation which are more comfortable expressing themselves with complex emotions via emojis (An et. al, 2018).

On the other hand, there are disparate uses of emojis and the way they are interpreted when observed through various cultures. Regarding topics of food, Western users prefer to use emojis with a meat motif whereas Eastern users favour ones with a rice motif (Guntuku et. al, 2019). However, similar emojis that indicate money are universally associated with the subject across the two different cultures. In entertainment and photography themes, emojis that illustrate musical notes, headphones, and cameras are widely used across many nations (Li et. al, 2019) which contrasted the good luck connotations of the poop emoji in Japan against the more common, humorous use of it for the rest of the world.

METHODS

The research employed a qualitative methodology, as advocated by Goodman (2011), which emphasizes narrative descriptions. This approach was deemed appropriate for the current study due to its descriptive nature, aligning with the study's data characteristics. Qualitative methods are particularly suited for investigations where researchers seek to gain insight into human behavior and societal dynamics by delving into the perspectives, values, beliefs, and other attributes of the individuals involved, as articulated by Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (2008). In the context of this study, the research focused on examining whether respondents' cultural backgrounds influenced their behavior, specifically in terms of their semantic interpretation of emojis and their responses when their intentions were misunderstood.

The primary objective of the present study is to gain insight into variations in the interpretation of emojis and the divergent responses that occur when the sender's intentions are misinterpreted, where applicable. Consequently, the utilization of a qualitative approach is deemed appropriate as the chosen research methodology for this investigation.

In the current study, purposive sampling was employed, with a particular emphasis on homogenous sampling. According to Tongco (2007), the primary rationale behind choosing purposive sampling is its alignment with research objectives, allowing for a focused examination of specific population characteristics necessary to address the research questions.

The concept of homogenous sampling, as highlighting by Etikan (2016), emphasised the significance of a specific similarity and its relevance to the research topic. This sampling approach is well-suited for the current study, which focuses on the cultural backgrounds of respondents in Malaysia. Only individuals sharing the specific characteristic under examination, namely their cultural backgrounds, were included in the dataset for this study. The aim of this approach is to assess the extent to which cultural factors influence the interpretation of emojis. As noted by Godambe (1982), a variety of data collection methods are applicable in the context of purposive sampling, as cited in Tongco (2007). In this study, a questionnaire was employed as the data-gathering instrument, aligning with the suitability of this method for purposive sampling.

Malaysia's population stands at approximately 33.6 million, with the Bumiputera group being the largest ethnic community, accounting for 69.3% of the population. They are followed by the Chinese, constituting 22.8%, and the Indian population, which makes up 6.9% (Department of Statistics Malaysia Official Portal, 2022). The Bumiputera category includes Malays and the indigenous people of Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah, and Sarawak, as explained by Ramlee et al. (2008).

The present study exclusively focuses on the three primary cultural groups within Malaysia, namely Malays, Chinese, and Indians. A total of 180 respondents participated in the research, with 60 individuals representing each of these cultural groups. These respondents were drawn from various regions across Malaysia and were enrolled as undergraduate students at a Malaysian university. All of the participants can be classified as digital natives, having been born after 1983, in the age range of 19 to 34 years (Helsper & Eynon, 2010). To identify interpretation of emojis in three different cultures, four emojis were selected which were; (1) smiling face with heart-eyes emoji (😍), (2) baby emoji (👶), (3) folded hands emoji (🙏), and (4) clapping hands emoji (👏). The selected emojis were chosen in evaluating the patterns of interpretations among Malays, Chinese, and Indians in Malaysia.

RESULTS

Demographics of the Respondents

Out of 195 respondents who answered the questionnaire, only 180 sets of questionnaires could be used as the data for this study. There were 60 Malays, 60 Chinese and 60 Indians who answered the questionnaire. The age range for the respondents who answered the questionnaire was from 19 years old to 24 years old. Among 60 Malays, 41 respondents were females and 19 respondents were males. The ratio for gender for the Indians was the same with the Malays, with 41 respondents being females and 19 respondents being males. As for the Chinese, 43 of the respondents were females and 17 of them were males.

Smiling Face with Heart-Eyes Emoji (😍)

The smiling face with heart-eyes emoji is depicted as a smiling face with two red hearts as its eyes. This emoji is generally used to express love. All three cultures interpreted this emoji as ‘adoration’, ‘in love’, ‘love’, ‘love you’, ‘excited’ and ‘loved’. They mainly used this emoji to express their love and adoration for someone or something. They also used this emoji when they were feeling excited. This emoji also generated a variety of interpretations across cultures.

The Malays interpreted this emoji as ‘cool’, ‘heart eyes’, and ‘smiling’ and they used this emoji as the visual of the emoji seen, a smiling face with heart eyes. They also used this emoji to express that they were cool with anything or anyone. The Chinese interpreted this emoji as ‘lovely’, and ‘speechless’. For them, they used this emoji when they found someone or something that was lovely or when they were made confounded by the situation or someone. On the other hand, the Indians interpreted this emoji as ‘happy’, ‘thankful’ and ‘lovely’. They used this emoji to express that they were happy and feeling grateful. They also used this emoji when they found someone or something that was lovely.

In terms of the number of interpretations, the Malay culture has more interpretations for this emoji as they have the highest semantic misconstrual score out of the three cultures. The Indians scored higher than the Chinese indicating that they have a larger number of interpretations in comparison with the Chinese. Table 1 illustrated the semantic misconstrual score for smiling face with heart-eyes emoji across three cultures in Malaysia for comparison.

Table 1 Semantic misconstrual score for smiling face with heart-eyes emoji

Emoji	Semantic Misconstrual Score for each Culture		
Smiling Face with Heart-Eyes 😍 U+1F60D	Malay	Chinese	Indian
	0.18	0.13	0.15

Baby Emoji (👶)


The baby emoji is portrayed as the face of a baby, with some hairs on top of his or her head and with a smile. The emoji is not gender specific, as babies do not have any particular trait that shows a difference between a boy and a girl. It was observed that this baby emoji represents ‘baby’, ‘cute’ and ‘baby face’ in three cultures. The respondents employed this emoji as the literal meaning for babies. They also used this emoji when someone has a baby face and when they thought someone or something was cute.

The Malays interpreted this emoji as ‘childish’, ‘innocent’ and ‘crying’. They associated this emoji as childish and innocent due to the nature of babies that are childish at that age and due to the innocence of a child. Moreover, they also adopted this emoji for crying since babies are known for their frequent crying. The Chinese, on the other hand, interpreted this emoji as ‘soon’ and ‘evil creature’. This emoji serves to indicate ‘soon’ or to express that something or someone is an evil creature. The Indians, however, viewed this emoji in the same way as the

Malays, such as ‘childish’ and ‘innocent’. They also regarded this emoji as a ‘baby boy’, specifying the gender of the baby emoji.

In terms of the semantic misconstrual score, the Malays scored the highest semantic misconstrual score, followed by the Indians and the Chinese. The result proves that the Malays have the highest number of interpretations for this emoji, followed by the Indians and the Chinese. Table 2 illustrated the semantic misconstrual score for baby emoji across three different cultures in Malaysia for comparison.

Table 2 Semantic misconstrual score for baby emoji

Emoji	Semantic Misconstrual Score for each Culture		
Baby  U+1F476	Malay	Chinese	Indian
	0.15	0.08	0.1


Folded Hands Emoji (🙏)

Folded hands emoji is depicted as two hands with palms facing together. For this emoji, all of the three cultures almost interpreted it in the same way. The emoji was regarded as ‘sorry’, ‘plead’, ‘pray’, ‘high-five’, and ‘blessed’ in serving the purposes as to apologize to someone or pleading for something. In contrast, this emoji was also represented in a playful manner, showing a ‘high-five’ since the palms of the hands are faced together. Additionally, the usage of this emoji was linked to religious beliefs in signifying the act of praying and receiving blessings as the emoji resembles the gesture of praying hands.

Through observations, the Malays did not have any specific interpretation in comparison with the Chinese and the Indians for this emoji. The Chinese interpreted this emoji as ‘appreciate’ in showing their appreciation. Meanwhile, the Indian respondents regarded this emoji as ‘thankful’, ‘vanakkam’ and ‘hopeful’. For them, they employed this as a way to express that they were thankful, or they were feeling hopeful. Furthermore, this emoji serves to greet ‘vanakkam’ to someone whereby, culturally, the gesture of saying ‘vanakkam’ is by putting both palms together which could be the reason for their interpretation of this emoji as ‘vanakkam’.

Due to that, the Indians have the highest semantic misconstrual score for folded hands emoji, followed by the Chinese and the Malays. This result portrayed that they have a diverse interpretation of this emoji in comparison with other cultures. Table 3 showed the semantic misconstrual score for folded hands emoji across three cultures for comparison.

Table 3 Semantic misconstrual score for folded hands emoji


Emoji	Semantic Misconstrual Score for each Culture		
Folded Hands  U+1F64F	Malay	Chinese	Indian
	0.08	0.10	0.13

Clapping Hands (👏)

The original meaning of this emoji is hands clapping. Although the emoji resembles closely to the physical representation of the clapping hands, this emoji was interpreted differently across the selected cultures in Malaysia. For this emoji, the highest semantic misconstrual score was the Chinese, followed by the Malays and the Indians. This demonstrated that the Chinese had far more interpretations for this emoji than other cultures. All three cultures interpreted this emoji as ‘clap’, ‘congratulate’, ‘good job’, ‘sarcasm’ and ‘good’, as they employed this emoji to applaud someone, to congratulate someone, to praise someone or when they were being sarcastic.

It was observed that the Chinese interpreted this emoji as ‘stressed’, ‘amazed’, ‘shocked’ and ‘power’, among other interpretations as well. For them, this serves to express their stressed state in amazement, when they were shocked and as a compliment to the receiver. However, the Malays interpreted this emoji as ‘agreement’ and ‘pray’. They used this emoji when they wanted to show agreement with the receiver or when they wanted to pray for someone or something. Similarly, the Indians interpreted this emoji as ‘proud’ or ‘praise’. The emoji was used to denote that they were proud and to praise someone. Table 4 showed the semantic misconstrual score for clapping hands emoji across three cultures for comparison.

Table 4 Semantic misconstrual score for clapping hands emoji

Emoji	Semantic Misconstrual Score for each Culture		
	Malay	Chinese	Indian
 U+1F44F	0.17	0.22	0.12

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the importance of grasping how emojis are understood in our modern communication landscape. Unlike traditional words with fixed meanings, emojis offer a dynamic and culturally influenced means of expression, which can lead to diverse interpretations. Our research has shed light on how emojis are culturally impactful, particularly in the diverse setting of Malaysia, where various cultures coexist.

By investigating the reasons behind varying interpretations of emojis, we have taken a significant step towards reducing miscommunication, particularly in intercultural exchanges. This research fills a crucial knowledge gap concerning emoji interpretation within culturally diverse countries, providing valuable insights into the factors shaping emoji meanings. These insights have the potential to enhance intercultural communication in our interconnected world.

Regarding specific emojis, the “Smiling Face with Heart-Eyes” emoji consistently conveyed feelings of love and excitement across all three cultures. However, diverse interpretations emerged, with Malays associating it with ‘cool’, the Chinese with ‘lovely’ and Indians with ‘happy’ and ‘thankful’. Notably, this diversity in interpretation aligns with previous research that shows Malays displaying the highest semantic misconstrual score, indicating a wider range of interpretations (Intan & Yasir, 2020).

Similarly, the “Baby” emoji universally evoked a sense of cuteness, representing babies and adorable qualities across all three cultures. However, nuances emerged, as Malays saw it as ‘childish’ and ‘crying’, while the Chinese associated it with ‘soon’ and ‘evil creature’. Again, Malays had the highest semantic misconstrual score, suggesting a broader array of interpretations.

The “Folded Hands” emoji conveyed consistent meanings across cultures, representing ‘sorry’, ‘plead’, ‘pray’, ‘high-five’ and ‘blessed’. However, the Chinese added ‘appreciation’ while Indians included ‘thankful’, ‘vanakkam’ (a greeting), and ‘hopeful’. Here, Indians demonstrated the highest semantic misconstrual score, indicating a wider range of interpretations.

Lastly, the “Clapping Hands” emoji symbolized applause, congratulations, and praise across all cultures. The Chinese expanded their interpretation to encompass ‘stressed’, ‘shocked’, and ‘power’, while Malays associated it with ‘agreement’ and ‘pray’. Indians interpreted it as ‘proud’ and ‘praise’. Remarkably, the Chinese exhibited the highest semantic misconstrual score, and these findings underscore the complexity of emoji interpretation and how it can vary across cultures, in line with existing research in this field.

In conclusion, this study offers valuable insights into the diverse interpretations of emojis within different Malaysian cultures. Further research in this area can continue to explore the dynamics of emoji usage and its implications for effective communication (Barbieri et al., 2016; Guntuku et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2016; Stamatov, 2017). It is also suggested that future studies in this area can delve deeper into the evolving role of emojis in communication across diverse cultures.

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