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Cross-Cultural Emotional Polarity Comparison of Emoji on Chinese and Western Social Media in the Context of the World Cup

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ABSTRACT

In the age of digital communication, emojis function not only as affective cues but also as socially enregistered symbols shaped by cultural context and platform affordances. However, cross-cultural work often presumes within-culture stability and overlooks platform dynamics; synchronized event-window comparisons are rare. Guided by enregisterment theory, this study offers a descriptive cross-platform analysis of Weibo and Twitter during the 2022 FIFA World Cup. The objective is to quantify category- and emoji-level sentiment and to identify systematic cross-platform contrasts in polarity distributions and mean intensities. Using a corpus of over 488,000 posts, the analysis applies sentiment-polarity methods and a function-based emoji categorization to compare emotional expression patterns. Kernel density and mean comparisons reveal divergent affective styles: Weibo exhibits more direct, affect-rich emoji use, whereas Twitter shows a more restrained, metaphorical style. These contrasts are interpreted—without causal claims—as consistent with an enregisterment account in which meanings cohere through repeated use at the intersection of cultural affect norms and platform affordances. This study refines sociolinguistic understandings of digital symbols in global cross-platform communication.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, emojis have become indispensable multimodal resources in global online communication, functioning as effective cues and evolving cultural symbols (Li & Zheng, 2024). Emojis can simplify and intensify interpersonal meaning-making as visual surrogates for emotional expression, bridging linguistic boundaries in ways that text alone cannot (Danesi, 2016; Evans, 2017). However, despite their global popularity, emoji use is not culturally neutral. Instead, it is shaped by local communicative norms and platform-specific conventions. For instance, while Chinese users often deploy emojis for direct emotional expression, Western users are more inclined to use them metaphorically or humorously (Guntuku et al., 2019; Chen, 2023). This divergence invites closer theoretical scrutiny into how emojis acquire culturally embedded meanings through everyday digital interaction.

To better understand these processes, this study draws on enregisterment theory (Agha, 2007), which explains how linguistic forms and symbols—through repeated social practice—become indexical of particular social identities, emotional states, or cultural values. From this perspective, emojis are not merely decorative icons but semiotic resources that undergo enregisterment, as users collectively assign them context-dependent meanings. For example, an emoji used repeatedly in moments of national celebration or public mourning can come to symbolize more than its original design intent, functioning instead as a socially "registered" emblem of a community's emotional response. While scholars have applied this theory to dialects, internet slang, and visual memes (Johnstone, 2016; Pietikäinen et al., 2011), its application to cross-platform emoji dynamics remains limited.

While a growing body of research has examined emoji usage across cultures, most studies have emphasized broad comparisons between Eastern and Western communicative styles, focusing on how users in different societies employ emojis to express emotions, humour, or irony (Guntuku et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2022). These works have shed light on the cultural dimensions of emoji interpretation and intention, often framing emojis as reflections of deeper sociocultural norms. However, such studies tend to treat emoji usage as relatively stable and uniform within each cultural group, often overlooking the platform-specific dynamics shaping how emojis are used, understood, and emotionally charged. While culture certainly influences emotional expression, the structure and affordances of digital platforms—such as visibility algorithms, interaction design, and content moderation—play a crucial role in how emotional meaning is socially constructed and circulated. Moreover, few studies have explored how the emotional polarity of emojis—that is, how strongly positive or negative they are perceived and deployed—varies not only across cultures but across platforms, even in response to the same global event. The role of repeated usage in emotionally intense, time-bound contexts (e.g., international sports tournaments) in shaping emoji meaning has also received limited theoretical attention.

This study addresses these gaps by applying enregisterment theory (Agha, 2007) to the cross-platform use of emojis during the 2022 World Cup. It intends to examine how emojis acquire emotional and cultural significance through repeated use on Weibo and Twitter, and how this process of symbolic enregisterment is shaped both by users' cultural backgrounds and the communicative norms of the platforms themselves. The World Cup provides a rare opportunity to analyse emoji practices under shared temporal and thematic conditions, allowing for clearer attribution of observed differences to cultural and platform-based factors rather than topic or time variance. As a site of high emotional involvement, international fandom, and identity performance, it magnifies the expressive function of emojis and accelerates their symbolic evolution. By examining sentiment polarity and usage frequency of emojis during the event, this study uncovers how certain emojis become emotionally dominant, socially conventionalized symbols on one platform, while remaining relatively neutral or underused on another.

Furthermore, this study offers a layered perspective on emoji meaning-making by integrating cultural context with platform-specific communicative infrastructures. It is argued that emoji enregisterment is co-constructed through both cultural habitus and technological mediation, with Weibo fostering more

expressive and affect-rich emoji use, and Twitter promoting more restrained, metaphorically encoded emotional expression. In light of these theoretical and methodological contributions, this study seeks to answer two guiding questions:

1. What are the differences in the emotional polarity distribution of emojis on Chinese and English platforms when expressing the same event (such as the World Cup)?
2. How do these differences reflect the influence of cultural background and platform-specific affordances on the enregisterment path of emojis?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Sociolinguistic enregisterment

Enregisterment describes the socio-semiotic process by which recurrent forms become publicly recognizable styles that index social personae, stances, and activities; it builds on interactional insights and is systematized in Agha's framework of how linguistic/semiotic features acquire group-linked value through repetition and metapragmatic circulation (Agha, 2007). Foundational interactional work foreground's identity performance and role-aligned language use, providing the footing for later enregisterment accounts (Goffman, 1959). However, empirical profiles of platform-conditioned enregisterment—operationalized via category- and emoji-level polarity distributions within a synchronized event—remain limited.

2.2 Emojis: affective/pragmatic use and cultural significance

Emojis function as paralinguistic cues and culturally sedimented symbols; repeated, emotionally salient uses foster recognizable meanings within communities (Danesi, 2016; Evans, 2017). Cross-cultural studies further show divergent pragmatic valences—for instance, common "laugh-cry" symbols tending toward irony on Western platforms but more literal joy on Chinese platforms—underscoring culturally inflected enregisterment paths (Guntuku et al., 2019; Zeng, 2023; Agha, 2007; Huang et al., 2020). Yet most cross-cultural studies neither use a synchronized event window nor quantify category- and emoji-level polarity and mean intensities across platforms, leaving platform effects largely implicit.

2.3 The World Cup context

Mega-events like the FIFA World Cup concentrate global attention and produce dense, synchronous, topic-aligned discourse across platforms, enabling commensurable cross-cultural comparison while reducing topical/temporal confounds; sports social media also foregrounds real-time "sports talk," emotion, and community alignment (Filo et al., 2015; Highfield, 2016; Hutchins & Sanderson, 2017; Gao et al., 2012). In this synchronized, high-affect window, emoji use is amplified and symbolic uptake accelerated, yielding contemporaneous cross-platform data suited to sentiment profiling and category-level contrasts (Wang, 2018; Du & Yang, 2015). Despite these advantages, few studies leverage the World Cup to produce commensurable, cross-platform polarity profiles.

Consequently, there remains a synchronized, cross-platform evidence gap: category- and emoji-level polarity distributions and intensities have rarely been mapped under a single global event, and their alignment with platform-conditioned enregisterment is underexplored.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a quantitative, corpus-based approach to examine how emojis undergo enregisterment on social media platforms in a cross-cultural context. Data were collected from Weibo and Twitter during the whole duration of the 2022 Qatar World Cup (November 20 to December 18, 2022). Using Python-based

web scraping tools, 291,131 Weibo posts and 197,151 English-language tweets were retrieved based on stratified keyword sampling. Keywords included “World Cup” (English and Chinese), team names, and popular player names. To ensure temporal consistency, data were sampled daily throughout the tournament.

After initial collection, the data underwent a multi-step cleaning process. Duplicated content such as retweets and reposts was removed, and commercial advertisements were filtered out using keyword-based exclusion (e.g., “抽奖,” “限时,” “关注送礼,” “discount,” “promo”). Posts containing only emojis, irrelevant hashtags, or meaningless characters were also excluded. Only original, emotionally meaningful posts with sufficient textual content were retained for further analysis.

Emoji categorization was based on an inductive, function-oriented method. Instead of relying on predefined labels, emojis were grouped into twelve categories—Positive Emotion, Encouragement/Support, Humour, Festive/Celebration, Negative Emotion, Numbers/Gestures, among others—according to their emotional and pragmatic functions in discourse. This categorization emerged from examining high-frequency emojis’ co-textual usage, semantic content, and event-specific roles during emotionally salient moments (e.g., goal scoring, match results). The following table presents the twelve categories, along with representative examples of each emoji to enhance reader comprehension.

Table1. Emoji categories and representative examples

Emoji Categories	Encouragement/Support	Positive Emotion	Holiday/Celebration	Cartoon/Cultural	Daily Activities	Numbers/Hand Gestures	Totems/Animals	Greetings/Salutations	Objects/Nature	Negative Emotion	Music Symbols	Humor
Example	💪	😇	🎉	🧕	🥌	👌	🦘	👋	❄	😭	🎷	😂

For instance, emojis like 🍿 and 💪 were assigned to “Encouragement/Support” for their frequent use alongside cheer messages, while 😂 was placed under “Humour” due to their use in sarcastic or light-hearted posts. Statistical analysis (e.g., sentiment polarity means, engagement data, ANOVA) further validated the stability of these categories.

Sentiment polarity analysis was conducted using platform-specific lexicons. For Weibo, the Chinese Sentiment Lexical Extremes Table was applied after tokenization (Jieba) and stopword removal; for Twitter, the AFINN sentiment lexicon was used. Each post’s sentiment score was calculated as the average polarity of matched lexicon words. Posts with no identifiable sentiment terms were assigned a neutral value of 0. Emojis were then analysed in relation to co-occurring text sentiment, enabling evaluation of their emotional alignment and intensity across platforms.

To visualize emotional patterns and support cross-platform comparison, Kernel Density Estimation (KDE) charts and mean polarity bar graphs were generated using Matplotlib. These visual tools clearly show how different emoji categories are emotionally distributed within each platform. All data used in this study were publicly available and anonymized prior to analysis. Personally identifiable information (PII), including usernames and profile details, was excluded to ensure ethical compliance with research standards on public digital content.

Limitations of this study include the inability of automated sentiment analysis to fully detect irony or cultural nuance, particularly in humorous or metaphorical emoji use. Lexicon-based methods may not capture the dynamic semantic shifts of emojis across time or platforms. Furthermore, differences in emoji rendering across devices and user interfaces may slightly affect interpretation. These limitations are acknowledged and suggest future directions for integrating qualitative and neurocognitive methods to enrich findings.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Weibo Platform – Dominated by Positive Emotions

As shown in Fig. 1, emoji categories with higher sentiment polarity values tend to cluster around positive emotional expression. For instance, the Numbers/Gestures category—represented by emojis such as ✌️, 👍, and ✊—shows the highest mean sentiment polarity (0.194808). These symbols are frequently used during World Cup discussions to celebrate victories, applaud performances, or signal team support.

Following closely is the Encouragement/Support category (0.186571), including emojis like 👏, 🙌, and 💪 which often appear in contexts of cheering for players or expressing solidarity. Similarly, Festive/Celebratory emojis 🎉 and 🏆also score highly (0.171829), reflecting their use during celebratory moments, such as goal announcements or match victories. These categories show concentrated KDE peaks near the positive sentiment range, suggesting a coherent affective function within the user community.

In contrast, Negative Emotion emojis such as 😭 and 😡 exhibit the lowest polarity (0.125503), with a much flatter and broader KDE distribution, indicating a lower frequency of use and more varied emotional interpretations. Likewise, Humor emojis 😂 show moderate polarity (0.158873) but a wider KDE spread, suggesting users may apply them in light-hearted and sarcastic tones. This further supports the idea that platform and cultural context co-shape emoji function and emotional register.

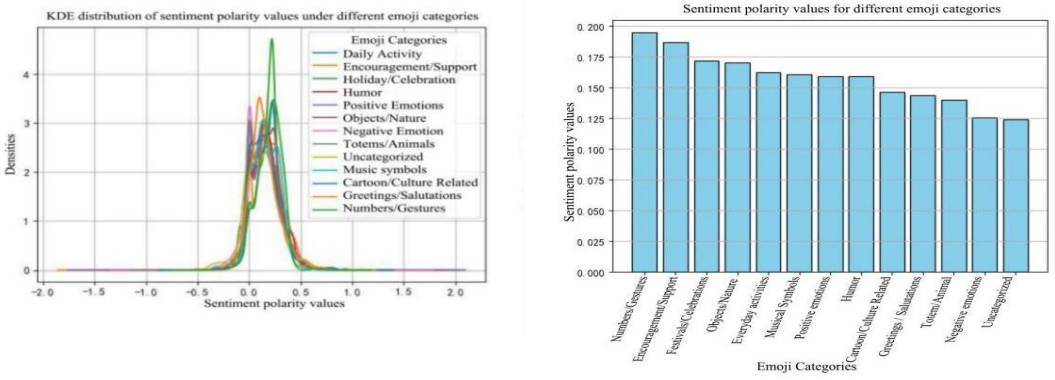

Fig. 1: Distribution of Sentiment Polarity Values Across Different Emoji Categories on the Weibo Platform

By integrating polarity values with distribution patterns, this analysis demonstrates that the World Cup emoji landscape is not only skewed toward positive expression but also shaped by shared emotional codes that cluster certain emojis—especially those tied to success, support, and celebration—into culturally enregistered emotional tools.

4.2 Twitter Platform – Mild and Cautious Expression

Referring to Fig.2, after analysing the sentiment polarity of emojis on the Twitter platform, it is found that the overall emotional polarity values across all categories are relatively low, indicating that users tend to express emotions more cautiously in World Cup-related discussions. An in-depth analysis of individual categories reveals distinct emotional tendencies associated with different types of emojis.

First, the positive emotion category—including emojis such as 🥰, ✨, and 😀—shows the highest mean sentiment polarity (0.079478). Despite being the highest, the value remains modest, suggesting that while users show some positive emotional inclination, the overall emotional intensity is limited. Following this is the encouragement/support category (0.066891), which includes emojis like 👊, and 💫. These

express encouragement or support for teams or players, but the relatively low values reflect a more reserved emotional tone.

Next are the holiday/celebration emojis, such as 🎉 with a mean polarity of 0.063955, and the greetings/salutations category, including emojis like 👋, with 0.062949. Although these emojis are commonly associated with positive and festive feelings, their usage on Twitter appears emotionally subdued. In addition, the music symbols category such as 🎷 shows a mean polarity of 0.042655, indicating a mild attempt to convey a cheerful tone, but without strong emotional intensity. Categories such as objects/nature, daily activities, and totems/animals all fall below 0.03, suggesting that these emojis serve more descriptive or thematic purposes than emotional ones.

Numbers/hand gestures (e.g., 👌, ✌️) and cartoon/culture-related emojis are even lower in polarity, indicating minimal emotional contribution. Lastly, humour emojis like 😂 and negative emotion emojis like 😭 and 😠 show the lowest sentiment polarity values (0.014221 and 0.008683, respectively), highlighting a strong tendency among Twitter users to downplay negative emotions and avoid overt emotional display in public discourse.

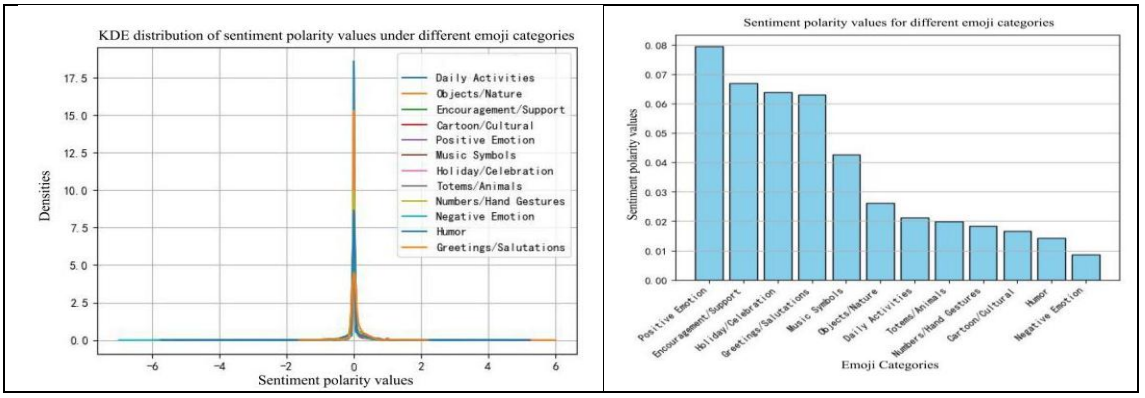

Fig. 2: Distribution of Sentiment Polarity Values Across Different Emoji Categories on the Tweeter Platform

In summary, although positive and supportive emojis are still used on Twitter in the context of the World Cup, their emotional expression is relatively mild. This suggests that emotional restraint may be a prevailing characteristic of user behaviour on this platform, influenced by both platform culture and broader communicative norms.

4.3 Discussion

This study examines how cultural background shapes the enregisterment path of emojis on Weibo and Twitter during the World Cup, focusing on how these symbols acquire emotional and social meaning through repeated usage in culturally specific contexts. According to enregisterment theory, the meaning of a symbol is not inherent. However, it is continuously redefined and solidified through social interaction and practice, eventually becoming a recognizable index of group identity or communicative norms (Agha, 2007). In digital environments, emojis serve as semiotic tools that are culturally recontextualized, and this process is particularly evident on regionally distinct platforms like Weibo and Twitter.

Weibo, as a Chinese platform, supports expressive and overt emotional displays. During the World Cup, users frequently used emojis such as 👏, 🤩, and 🏆 to express enthusiasm, encouragement, and national pride. These emojis quickly became associated with collective success and solidarity. Zeng (2023) noted that on Chinese social media, emojis often function as direct emotional extensions of the user,

particularly during national events, where shared experiences reinforce symbolic meanings. This aligns with Agha's (2007) notion that repeated usage in socially marked contexts accelerates the enregisterment process.

For instance, emojis like 🎉 and 💪 were frequently used during match victories to signify honour, joy, and unity. Through repeated and emotionally intense use, these emojis were rapidly enregistered within the Weibo community as culturally salient expressions of collective pride. This also reflects Danesi (2016) observation that emojis can evolve into culturally embedded affective markers, not just universal icons. In contrast, Twitter—reflecting Western communicative norms—shows a more restrained and metaphorical emotional style. While celebration-related emojis such as or were present during the World Cup, their usage was significantly less frequent and emotionally intense than Weibo. Evans (2017) explained that Western users often employ emojis in symbolic or stylistic ways rather than as strong affective displays.

An example is the emoji 😂, one of the most widely used emojis globally. Guntuku et al. (2019) found that this emoji often carries ironic or sarcastic undertones on Western platforms, especially in public discussions. Furthermore, Danesi (2016) suggested that Western users tend to use as a social deflector, softening criticism or emotional tension with humour. In contrast, Zeng (2023) observed that Chinese users interpret this emoji more literally, as an expression of real amusement or joy. Thus, depending on cultural background and usage patterns, the same emoji may carry very different pragmatic and emotional meanings.

This contrast highlights how platform culture and regional communicative styles interact to shape emoji enregisterment. On Twitter, emojis are often deployed more as tools for light social engagement or textual styling than as direct emotional signifiers. As a result, the enregisterment process on Twitter is slower and more diffuse, with emotional meanings developing incrementally rather than intensively.

Overall, the comparison between Weibo and Twitter supports the idea that emoji enregisterment is deeply influenced by cultural norms. Weibo users tend to exhibit expressive emotional habits, contributing to faster and more emotionally saturated enregisterment paths. In contrast, Twitter users display more cautious and stylistically mediated emotional expressions, leading to slower and less emotionally intense symbol evolution. This reflects broader sociolinguistic findings that symbol meaning is shaped by frequency of use and cultural attitudes toward emotional expression (Huang et al., 2020; Agha, 2007).

While this study focuses on cultural and platform-based differences in emoji usage during the World Cup, it is important to note that future research could explore the potential impact of match outcomes on emoji usage. For instance, celebratory emojis such as 🎉 and 💪 may see an increase in use following victories or goals, reflecting the emotional intensity associated with success. As such, future studies could incorporate match-related variables to better understand the dynamic interplay between event outcomes and emoji sentiment in social media discourse.

5. CONCLUSION

Using a synchronized World Cup window, this study profiles emoji-level sentiment on Weibo and Twitter, identifying two key patterns: (i) encouragement/support and festive/celebration emojis show more intense positivity on Weibo, while (ii) Twitter exhibits lower-intensity, more metaphorical usage. Through the lens of enregisterment theory, these contrasts reflect platform-specific stabilization of emoji meanings under different cultural norms. Importantly, positivity is event-contingent: match outcomes likely amplify celebratory emoji use, meaning these findings should be viewed as indicative of cross-cultural/platform differences rather than causal effects. This study refines sociolinguistic perspectives on how digital symbols accrue meaning and provides insights for platform governance and cross-cultural communication strategies.

These conclusions contribute to theoretical discussions and provide practical insights for social media design and cross-cultural communication practices. As Mo (2023) pointed out, social media platforms facilitate intercultural exchange, but the interpretation of symbols must be adapted to cultural contexts. In the Chinese digital sphere, emoji design could benefit from enhanced visual intensity and emotional clarity, while global platforms must strike a balance between universality and emotional subtlety. Furthermore, aligning with Xu (2024), the results highlight the importance of contextual awareness in emoji interpretation to avoid miscommunication.

Future research could build on this work by adopting a longitudinal approach—tracking the evolving meanings of emojis across major global events—or by incorporating neurocognitive methods to explore the cultural decoding of digital emotion. As Sun et al. (2022) suggested, with the rise of immersive digital environments such as virtual reality, the embodied semantics of emoji usage in cross-cultural contexts will become a dual frontier for both technological innovation and intercultural understanding.

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7. CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders**.**

8. AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Qiong Zhang contributed to the conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, data curation, visualisation, and writing of the original draft. **Zaemah Abdul Kadir** provided conceptual guidance, supervision and contributed to the review and editing of the manuscript. **Wan Nazihah Wan Mohamed** contributed to the conceptualisation, methodology refinement, overall supervision, project administration, and correspondence, as well as the review and editing of the manuscript.

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