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ART + COMMUNITY

**SCIENCE**



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# THE ART OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

*Emoji*

*a chapter by*

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## Introduction

Communication is key. A common phrase we always hear when relationship is the subject of conversation. Many of us believe that communication helps building, enhancing and sustaining relationships between people. We humans communicate to deliver messages, to express feelings and emotions as well as to share some ideas or information with others. As much as communication being essential to human being, comprehension is important too. The ultimate goal of communication is for the other person to understand and perceive the messages as what and how we wish them to. When receivers are able to understand and comprehend the message sent, we can happily say that our communication objective is achieved.

## Nonverbal communication

Nonverbal communication defined by Gamble and Gamble (2018) as communication that does not include words; messages expressed by non-linguistic means; people's actions or attributes, including their use of objects, sounds, time, and space, that have socially shared significance and stimulate meaning in others. Gamble and Gamble (2018) further explained the five functions of nonverbal communication that includes contradicting, emphasizing, regulating, complementing and substitute.

1. Contradicting happens when a person sends a double message; words spoken does not align with the nonverbal cues presented. You may say one thing, but your nonverbal behaviour shows something else. Imagine

saying repeatedly "I'm okay" but at the same time you are crying. Your nonverbal cues are showing the opposite meaning of your verbal message.

2. Nonverbal cues can help emphasizing the message delivered. As an example, when doing a presentation, you raise your voice to stress the importance of the points or information that you are presenting.
3. Nonverbal cues are also able to regulate the conversation that you are having. When being part of a group conversation, we usually take turns to talk or speak. With nonverbal cues such as eye contacts or hand gestures, we can control the flow of the verbal conversation.
4. Complementing happens when your nonverbal cues support the verbal message. A warm hug while saying "Congratulations my dear. I am so proud of you" to someone on their graduation day is complementing the message that you utter.
5. Nonverbal cues can be the substitute for messages that you are not able to convey verbally. Imagine you are in a crowded restaurant waiting for a friend. When he/she walks in you wave your hand up in the air to call them because spoken words will be difficult to be heard. Hence, body gesture is the best substitute for it.

## Emoji

Technology advancement makes boring text messages that initially involve only characters and symbols are now becoming fancier with yellow smiley faces called emoji. Shegetaka Kurita created emoji to enhance the way people communicate online. According to a study

conducted in Nigeria by Udenze (2020), they found that WhatsApp is the most popular social networking platform in most countries followed by Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and finally Snapchat. This finding supports the initial study done by Andrade et al. in 2016. A much recent study by Cześtochowska et al. (2022) indicates that there are 3,521 emojis available as of January 2022 for online users to express feelings and emotions through social networking system. Udenze (2020) identified the reasons for using emojis are for emphasis, to save time used in typing text, to convey emotion, for humour and lastly is to build rapport.

Software developers regularly update their applications to provide the best user experience online. Emoji has always been part of the updates. Social media platforms include updated emojis for its users to use for their captions, comments, private messages, replies and many more. As the emoji is evolving with time, the ever-famous yellow smiley faces 😊 can now be used alongside the animals 🐶, nature 🌳, food 🍔, beverages 🍵, sport activities 🏊, objects 📺, symbols ❤️ and flags of the world 🇺🇸 emojis. Cześtochowska et al. (2022) categorized emoji into twenty categories which are objects, nature, travel-places, food-drink, face, people, activity, clothes & accessories, symbols & signs, professions, geometrical, hands & gestures, Japanese symbols & objects, buttons & mobile, public information, symbols, letters & numbers, hearts, arrows, astrological and religious.

### Functions of Emoji as a Nonverbal Communication Tool

Various research was conducted to study the reasons why social media users use emoji while communicating online. A study conducted by Andrade et al. (2016) on Facebook users determined the four functions of emojis. Firstly, is as marker; facial expression used to express the feelings when communicating online. Secondly, emoji is used as an intensifier; to provide additional emotional context to the messages. Thirdly, is as teaser; sender usually use the emojis when they do not have anything to say yet or when they want to make the conversation more interesting, and finally as strengtheners of speech

acts; the positive and negative faces of the sender that can depict thanks, greetings, approval, regret and sarcasm.

Tian et al. (2017) in another study proposed six ways an emoji can interact with the linguistic text. This helps to extend the initial research conducted by previous researchers.

1. An emoji can replace a word or phrase. Example: I want to eat 🍔. This is a fun way to use emoji. Users are free to play around and be creative when they combined two and more emojis to create a sentence.
2. An emoji can be used to repeat a word or phrase with intention to add focus. Emoji used after a word is to create accent to the sentence. Example: *Let's go for a dance* 🕺💃.
3. An emoji can help express the speaker's emotion or attitude independently. One of the challenges when communicating online is to express the real feelings and emotions of the sender. A plain text is open for interpretation by receiver, therefore emoji helps to portray the exact meaning of the message. Example: *I missed my flight* 😞.
4. An emoji can enhance or emphasize an emotion expressed in the text. Example: *I'm happy with the result* 😊. The word happy was used in the text and the smiley face at the end of the sentence enhanced the emotion expressed by sender.
5. An emoji can be used to modify the meaning of linguistic text. Example: I believe you are having fun at *Drake's party* 😏. In this context, the emoji shows that the message sent was somehow with sarcastic remarks. It changes the whole meaning of the text.
6. An emoji can be used for politeness. Not to sound demanding and too harsh, an emoji can help to tone down a linguistic text to avoid misconception. Example: *Can you pick me up from my office? Thank you* 😊

## The Interpretation of Emoji

Earlier, we mentioned about comprehension is essential in communication. With nonverbal communication, misinterpretation can happen quite often to us as the cues presented may be perceived differently by others. To what extent an emoji will deliver the message that they are intended to? Taking an example of the emoji 🔥, straightforward we put the meaning of fire to it. In contrast to some, they use this fire emoji to say that someone is being hot. Nonverbally, this is part of the functions listed by Gamble and Gamble (2018) emoji is used to emphasize and to compliment. It is also at the same time is modifying (Tian et al., 2017) the whole context of the message.

A study to understand the ambiguity of emoji by Cześtochowska et al. (2022) explore the semantic of emojis. It was found that the semantic of emoji differ according to the types of emoji. A much concrete objects were easily understood as compared to abstract ideas and concepts. As presented in Table 1, sixteen emojis were identified to be useful and not to be misunderstood. They further identified emojis that were designed to represent symbols are the hardest to understand. Especially the symbols that need some cultural background or knowledge such as Chinese, Japanese and Korean characters emoji 🌙🍷 (Cześtochowska et al., 2022).

Table 1: Emojis that are useful and not to be misunderstood

| No | Emoji      | No | Emoji       |
|----|------------|----|-------------|
| 1  | Rainbow 🌈  | 9  | Key 🔑       |
| 2  | Cow 🐮      | 10 | Key 🔑       |
| 3  | Apple 🍏    | 11 | Spider 🕸    |
| 4  | Popcorn 🍿  | 12 | Shower 🚿    |
| 5  | Bee 🐝      | 13 | Spoon 🥄     |
| 6  | Tiger 🐅    | 14 | Carrot 🥕    |
| 7  | Dress 👗    | 15 | Butterfly 🦋 |
| 8  | Lipstick 💄 | 16 | Coconut 🥥   |

Amalina & Azam (2019) conducted a study to learn how emoji interpretations varies between three cultures in Malaysia. The study explored

five most used emojis as presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Most used emojis

| No | Description            | Emoji |
|----|------------------------|-------|
| 1  | Sleeping face emoji    | 😴     |
| 2  | Face with happy tears  | 😂     |
| 3  | Crying face            | 😭     |
| 4  | Face blowing a kiss    | 😘     |
| 5  | Screaming in fear face | 😱     |

It was found that even the meaning of these emojis were universally understood but the interpretations between cultures differ. It was found Malays, Chinese and Indian have the most interpretation for the face blowing a kiss emoji followed by the crying face emoji, face with happy tears, sleeping face and finally screaming in fear face emoji. Therefore, misunderstanding is likely to happen when communication was made interculturally.

## Conclusion

Message expression and interpretation of nonverbal communication are fluid and differs from one culture to another. A yawning emoji 😴 may symbolise boredom in one society and sleepiness in another. In short, both senders and receivers need to be of the same, or at least be exposed to each other's culture to successfully sync to the intended message. Abstract ideas are the hardest to decode when complemented with emojis, thus increasing the likelihood of misinterpretation of messages. With an overwhelming growing number of emojis currently made available to users, new additions would only add ambiguity to their meanings making communication less effective. Future exploration on message mismatch could help better understand human interpretation of nonverbal communication in different cultures over time.

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Timbalan Ketua Pustakawan

*nar*

*Setuju.*

*27.1.2023*

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