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## Use of Emojis and Stickers for Online Interaction Facilitation: A Gender-Based Semiotic Discourse Analysis

**Abstract:** *Modern technology has revolutionized our methods of communication. Emojis and stickers are the newest advancements that transcend linguistic barriers and act as a universal language. This research paper applies a social semiotic framework to investigate the functions of emojis and stickers in digital discourse. Utilizing a mixed method approach, data has been collected through a web-based questionnaire from 137 participants and semi-structured interviews taken from 10 selected participants. The study aims to explore the central role of emojis and stickers in promoting positive online interaction and identify how their usage facilitates both genders while potentially differing interpretations. The findings suggest that emojis and stickers aid in expressing emotions, clarifying messages, and improving mood during conversations. Furthermore, the study reveals that users utilize emoticons strategically and functionally for various purposes beyond emotional expression. The study concludes that emojis and stickers serve as a global language and are vital in managing interrelations and message comprehension in online communication.*

**Key Words:** Emoticons, Emojis, Stickers, Socio-semiotic, Global Language

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### Introduction

The integration of technology into everyday life has brought about changes in how people communicate. This revolutionized concept has enhanced the performance of online interaction among people. The emojis and stickers serve as the visual representation of emotions such as happiness, anger, sadness and others, along with the stickers, which are

mainly used to state some sort of fun, quotations and jokes (Kato, 2018). However, many online social media apps have developed the facility of instant messaging, which has eased users' communication with their friends and loved ones. However, the instant messaging concept was first used for online communication and interaction. Alternatively, this is directed towards using

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emojis; finally, now stickers of all types are also being used (Chen, [2018](#)). In addition to the service of messaging, considering the use of emojis and stickers, its utilization has increased as they are used as a short form of messages and interactive signs to initiate and pursue communication. It is used as the universal language, leading to better human-based interaction for the better implementation of further activities (Liu, [2020](#)). Relating to gender discrimination, male and female have different perspectives on using emojis and stickers in their specified chatting while exchanging their thoughts and ideas (Lander, [2013](#)). Facebook first initiated the concept of stickers, and this led towards WhatsApp, so it moved towards many other apps. However, the emojis and stickers are now crafted by every user and individual on their own, as many online apps and technologies are established and used to serve this purpose (Wanniarachchi, [2023](#)).

In terms of online communication, the importance of emojis and stickers lies in the alteration of facial expressions, quality of voice patterns, and the sense of displayed human gestures achieved in digital communication (Garhwal, [2020](#)). The availability of emojis has been more consistently used than stickers, as emojis first introduced this kind of online interaction. It is used to improve customers' insights by maintaining impressive responsiveness, efficient communication, and synchronization of interaction (Koh, [2019](#)). The extent of this concept is based on the approach that it is identified as a systemized communication among the user and viewers, enriching the communication within an enhanced perception of attention and attraction of the delivered message.

As discussed earlier, in the context of gender discrimination among users using emojis and stickers, the male gender is based on completely different emojis to communicate according to their thoughts and nature (Tang Y. K., [2021](#)). On the other hand, the female gender, while using emojis and stickers, uses a very girlish type of emojis with the expression of softness in their stickers (Saini, [2018](#)). Although, this discrimination is more

likely to be based on the thoughts, ideas and aspects of communication initiated, pursued, and ended rather than just under the consideration of gender assisting males and females (Hasani, [2022](#)).

This study adopts a social semiotic approach to analyze the meaning of various modes of communication and investigate social media users' attitudes towards emojis and stickers (Wang, [2016](#)). The study aims to gain insights into Pakistani social media users' online interactions using these emerging semiotic resources through a mixed-methods design. The research is significant in revealing the underlying ideology and differences between male and female Pakistani social media users using emojis and stickers to express their intentions. This study sheds light on how semiotic tools can communicate messages concisely yet visually appealingly and how non-verbal cues can aid natural language processing and the interpretation of human emotions. Furthermore, the study explores how these forms of communication can either facilitate or hinder online interactions between men and women. This research can bridge the gap between Pakistani and foreign generations in using social media apps and serve as a foundation for future comparative studies.

## Research Questions

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The study aims to explore and provide answers to the following questions:

1. What is the role of emojis and stickers in moderating online discourse and promoting positive interactions?
2. How do emojis and stickers facilitate users in making their online interactions more effective?
3. What are the impact of emojis and stickers on participation, engagement, and the quality of communication among different genders in online conversations?

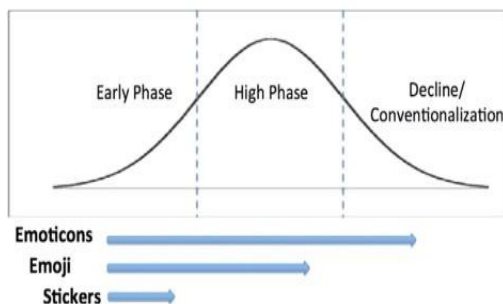
## Literature Review

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In the present era of technology, the way of communicating is being widely changed along

with the evolution of technologies. However, the rise of online communication has developed a social change among the people interacting online. All types of communication processes are moved towards social media communication platforms. In this way, the urge to use non-verbal signs such as emoticons, emojis and stickers is upsurged (Alshenqeeti, 2016). In 1979, emoticons were introduced based on the signs typed in ASCII characters. The main aim of emoticons was to interpret multiple emotions in a distinguished manner, such as happiness and sadness. Moreover, some of the emoticons were labelled along with the sign. Therefore, it was more likely to be used to compensate gestures at an abstract level. In the late 1990s, the emoji, known as the picturized character, was first introduced in Japan. After attaining the success of emojis at a global and international level, these emojis started to be utilized in social media platforms. In this way, the messages were retrieved based on interpreting the text-based conversation in the form of expressions. In 2011, a Korean company introduced the sticker concept in Japan. This was termed as an enhanced form of emojis as the stickers were present in the form of cartoon-like and reality-based illustrations. Furthermore, the stickers are animated even by embedding other graphics and the phrases attached specifically. With the rise of sticker use, customizing the stickers motivated all the users to make character-driven expressions through which the stickers started to be used explicitly more than the emojis.

**Figure 1**  
*Specified Evolution Phases*



As can be seen in Figure 1, the evolution of emoticons, emojis and stickers started with the emoticons, which led to a decline in no time after the emojis came into being. However, the emojis are identified as the ones which are highly popular to be in the high phase. At the same time, the stickers appear to be the second highest in the high phase evolution recognized in Pakistan and other countries of Asia. (Konrad, 2020)

Numerous studies have been conducted on the usage of emoticons in online communication. These studies revolve around the concept of emoticons, emojis and stickers and aim to investigate their role and impact on various aspects of online interaction.

- Moschini and Ilaria (2016) introduced the study based on a single emoji's evaluation known as the "face with tears of joy," which is used to assess the meaning as it is used for different situations by every gender and even by multiple meanings as well. To identify and examine these different types of emojis, a socio-semiotic multimodal approach is used to examine and indicate the right translation and culture by using emoji with various perspectives (Moschini, 2016). Digital images were used by Alshenqeeti & Hamza (2016) to present messages in the form of emails and attachments. Later, this was changed into a visual phenomenon presenting messages such as emojis. The socio-semiotic model is applied to identify the result by synchronizing the older and newer version of technologies applied in this context (Alshenqeeti, 2016).
- Ge, Jing & Ulrike Gretzel (2018) presented the social media user perspective in which the emojis are evaluated as a questionable approach. The general rhetoric mechanism is used for the labelling of engaged emojis. The approach known as the taxonomy of emoji-based verbal moves is used for the strategic responses of communication and persuasion purposes (Ge, 2018).

- Tang, Ying & Khe Foon Hew (2019) worked on people who cannot or lack the skill to communicate through messages and how they use emojis, stickers and related approaches to pursue communication orderly. However, this research uses the database and empirical studies to express the cognitive understanding of the possible ideas generated by the users (Tang Y. K., 2019).
  - Pérez-Sabater & Carmen (2019) evaluated emoji's specification based on gender attributes associated with the thinking and processing of ideas. The research question is raised as a gap such that it appears contradictory that different genders even use the same emojis but with different perceptions. However, this needs to be clarified, and a mechanism should be established. Therefore, questionnaires and interviews are used to assess the online and offline data (Pérez-Sabater, 2019).
  - Chen et al. (2019) investigated the male-female influence on emojis necessary to play an important role while specifying the sense of the Android user. However, a large set of data is collected according to the technology of Machine Learning applied to existing models for the reduced risk of information being leaked out, which is even done by using emojis today (Chen, 2019).
  - Adeyeri and Waliu Olalekan (2019) applied the social-semiotic approach to using emoji beyond the right meaning, which needs to be considered to assess every single meaning. They analyzed people's denotative meanings of emojis/stickers. Therefore, the socio-semiotic method is applied by relating it with qualitative research to divide certain emoji-based conversations among different groups for examination (Adeyeri, 2019).
  - It was investigated by Smutny et al. (2020) that there were certain emojis used to compare with the colours to represent and evaluate the right meaning of emojis. The gap is identified in that the messages contain more information rather than emojis, and the meaning assessed by everyone is also different according to their perspective. The methodology uses Y and Z generation, and results are carried out accordingly (Smutny, 2020).
  - Another research by Terras, Lisa & Souhila Touat (2021) explored the online interaction of the Facebook application by analyzing users' attitudes toward using emojis and stickers of each type while connecting through the means of messaging. To identify each term based on the user's assistance, the approach is used to associate with the two theoretical frameworks known as Speech Act Theory set by Austin and Searle and the social semiotic multimodal approach set by Kress and Leeuwen (Terras, 2021).
  - The most recent work done by Zappavigna, Michele and Lorenzo Logi (2021) was during the time of Covid-19; the use of stickers came into being very rapidly as it was the time of visualizing all the manual work. However, to explore the idealization of users using emojis and stickers apparently, there is a need to use the approach which is named a socio-semiotic multimodal approach to gain and understand the authentic idea based on the user's viewpoints (Zappavigna, 2021).
- Although previous studies have yielded important findings on emojis and stickers, much is still to be explored about their usefulness and facilitation in online communication. This is because emojis can help prevent misunderstandings arising from written texts, as they provide a visual representation of the intended message (Gullberg, 2016).

Unfortunately, only a few studies have investigated the significance of these tiny images, and most have relied on qualitative analysis. To fill this research gap, the present study has utilized a mixed-methods approach to investigate how emojis and stickers facilitate online interactions from a gender-based perspective. The study aims to gain insights into how these tiny images can be useful for communication between individuals of different genders.

### **Theoretical Framework**

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In this research, the framework used to evaluate emoji's gender specification is based on the Socio-Semiotic Discourse Multimodal Approach derived by Kress and Leeuwen (2011). The socio-semiotic model is used to identify the ratio and perspective of specified emojis, and stickers based on male and female points of view (Riaz, 2019). It is used in disseminating the different modes of communication used by people in real-life messaging interactions by developing a strong relationship among the people through two-way communication (Sadia, 2018). The study employs Kress and Leeuwen's (2011) Grammar of Visual Design Model as a theoretical framework. This model focuses on mapping the meaning-making potential of semiotic resources that have become prevalent in the current digital age, including visual, spoken, gestural, written, and three-dimensional modes of communication (Kress, 2011). Researchers commonly use it to analyze various types of visual data, such as paintings, cartoons, pictures, advertisements, drawings, emojis, websites, and more (Pratiwy, 2018). Moreover, the multimodal approach is also used in the 3D animation of movies which has widely enhanced the aspect of socio-semiotics (Xin, 2012).

In this study, the social semiotic framework is particularly relevant as emojis and stickers are one of the semiotic modes that have gained popularity in the digital age (Hauck, 2021). Social semiotics studies how

meaning is derived from social institutions and societal relationships (Moro, 2020). People use signs and symbols learned from a shared cultural pool to effectively communicate their views, feelings, attitudes, and ideas about life (Siever, 2020). As a semiotic resource, emojis and stickers have the potential to generate meaning (Brady, 2015) and therefore offer a useful framework for approaching, analyzing, and interpreting these technological artefacts as a form of meaning-making resource and providing facilities to their user in online interaction (Sofkova Hashemi, 2017).

Different modes are identified for the production and materialization of socio-semiotics based on which the multimodal discourse modes are proposed. The modes include writing, speech, gesture, music, dance, and interface (layout) modes (Silverstein, 2021). While identifying the significance of socio-semiotics is based on certain variable signs, which include the iconic, indexical and denotation signs. The iconic signs are known as the signifier resembled with the signified one, the indexical sign is used to represent the signifier caused by the signified, and the denotation is used to identify the basic meaning of any sign or attribute (Eckert, 2019). The five main aspects of the socio-semiotics approach are given in the following:

- Communication experience
- Sense of significance
- Pre-identified knowledge
- Message perspective
- Intent perception, along with audio messages
- Assessment of different meanings of the same perspective

The researchers based their study on Kress and van Leeuwen's social semiotic framework because it is specifically relevant to analyzing the semiotic modes of language, including emojis and stickers. These visual symbols have grown in popularity as a form of language in the digital age, making them a fitting subject for analysis in the present study. The research aims to demonstrate how these semiotic

modes facilitate online interactions between males and females (Kress, [2011](#)).

## Methodology

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This research employs a mixed-method approach to analyze how emojis and stickers facilitate their users. The study consists of both quantitative and qualitative analysis. For the quantitative analysis, a web-based questionnaire using a Five-Point Likert Scale is created and distributed among male and female students from various departments, including social sciences, law, arts, science, and others, from two different universities in Sialkot. The questionnaire has collected data on the frequency and types of emojis and stickers used, the emotional and communicative functions they serve, and the users' demographic information. The percentages of responses from the Google Form Questionnaire are presented in an Excel Sheet. For the qualitative analysis, semi-structured interviews have been conducted with ten selected participants to understand better the role of emojis and stickers in their communication. The participants have been selected based on their responses to the questionnaire and include both heavy and light users of emojis and stickers. The data from the interviews are transcribed and analyzed to identify the real intentions of social media users. Finally, quantitative and qualitative analysis results are compared to verify and triangulate the findings. This provides a comprehensive understanding of how emojis and stickers facilitate their users' communication.

To conduct the study, we used quantitative and qualitative data collection methods to examine the research question. This has allowed us to gather a comprehensive understanding of the topic from different angles and ensure our findings' validity and reliability.

## Quantitative Analysis

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As part of our research methodology, we have utilized Google Forms to collect sample data. We created a survey questionnaire consisting of 15 questions, which utilized a five-point Likert scale. This questionnaire included personal information such as gender, age, and the reasons for using emojis and stickers. After uploading the questionnaire to Google Forms, we linked it to a Google Sheet, where responses were automatically stored for collection and analysis.

## Participants and Data

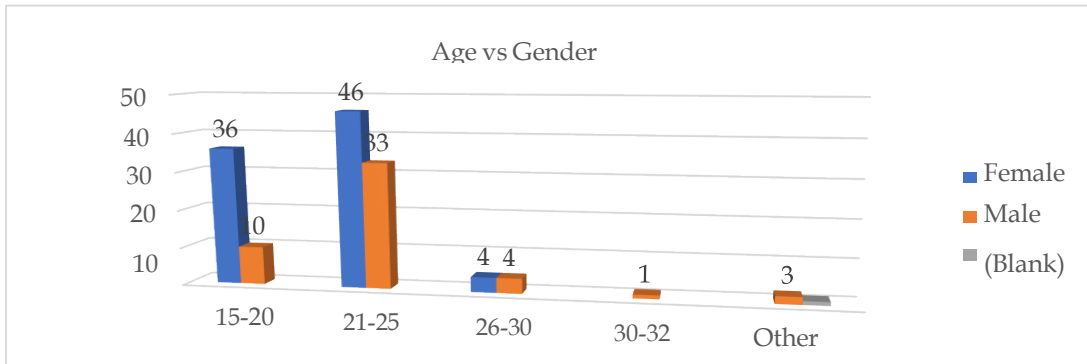
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We distributed our survey to various groups, including students and colleagues at the University of Management and Technology and the University of Sialkot. Additionally, we used social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook to share the survey with friends, family, and strangers. Our efforts yielded 138 responses, with 87 being female and 50 being male. Among the respondents, the age group of 21-25 is the most represented, with 46 females and 33 males. The age group of 15-20 has 36 female and ten male respondents. The third age group, 26-30, has three female responses. The final age group, consisting of respondents aged 32 or above, has two females and one male respondent.

These results indicate that most of our respondents are young university students, particularly those in the 21-25 age group. It is worth noting that the younger age group (15-20) has a higher proportion of female respondents than males, indicating a possible gender bias in our sample. On the other hand, the older age groups have fewer responses, possibly due to a lack of interest or accessibility to the survey among these individuals. Figure.2 shows a graph representing the percentage of respondents by age and gender.

**Figure 2**

Graph depiction of the percentage of age and gender from various respondents

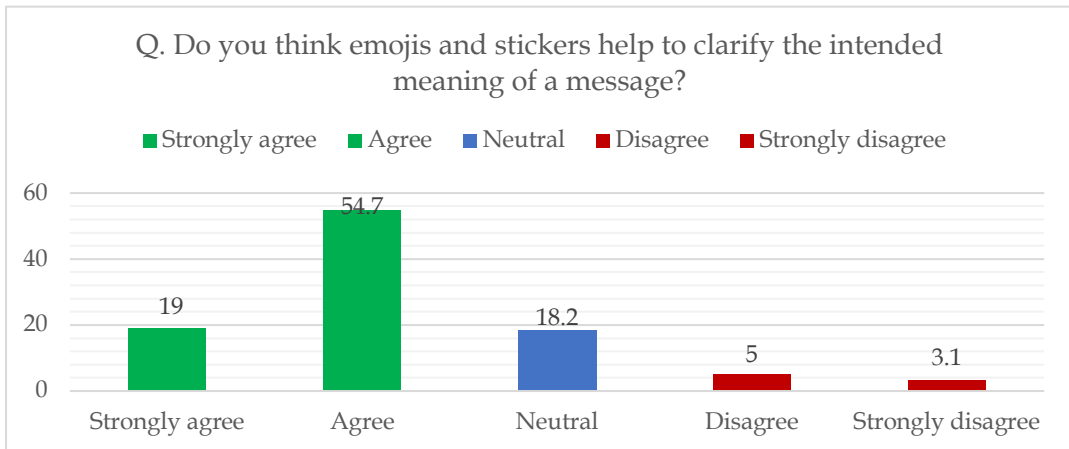


### Data Analysis and Data Discussion

The socio-semiotic model is utilized to analyze the usage and perspective of specific emojis and stickers based on male and female points of view. It is employed to understand the various modes of communication used by individuals in real-life messaging interactions and to foster strong relationships through two-way communication (Zhao, 2020). The survey

results indicate that the young generation predominantly comprises social media users who spend most of their time utilizing smart gadgets and social media applications to interact and communicate. Young university students tend to employ semiotic modes of language, including different signs, pictures, cartoons, gifts, emojis, stickers, and other elements for fun, enjoyment, and other purposes.

**Figure 3**



Furthermore, the results of this survey have highlighted that these small images, emojis and stickers, facilitate a variety of functions beyond enjoyment and fun among social media users. In response to the first question, over half of the respondents (54.7%) agreed that using these modes clarified the sender's

intended meaning. Of these, 19% strongly agreed with this statement, while 18.2% remained neutral. Only 5% of the respondents disagreed with clarifying messages through emojis and stickers, while a mere 3.1% strongly disagreed with this idea (Figure 3).

Figure 4

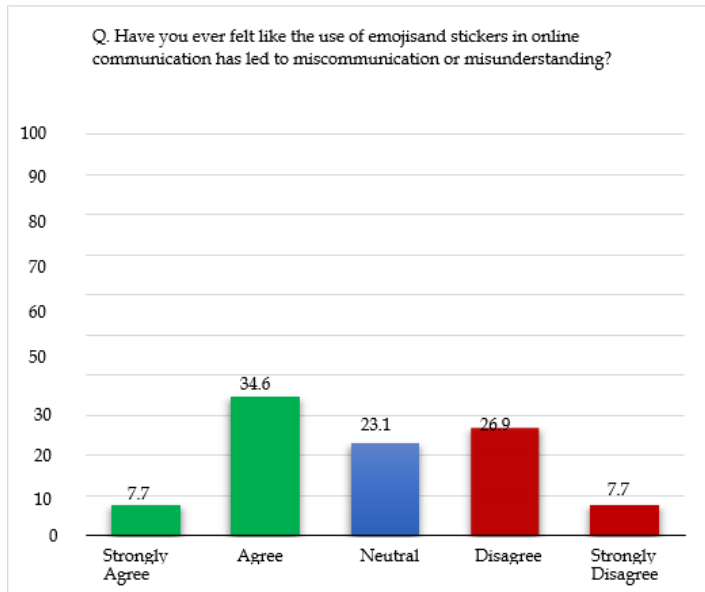
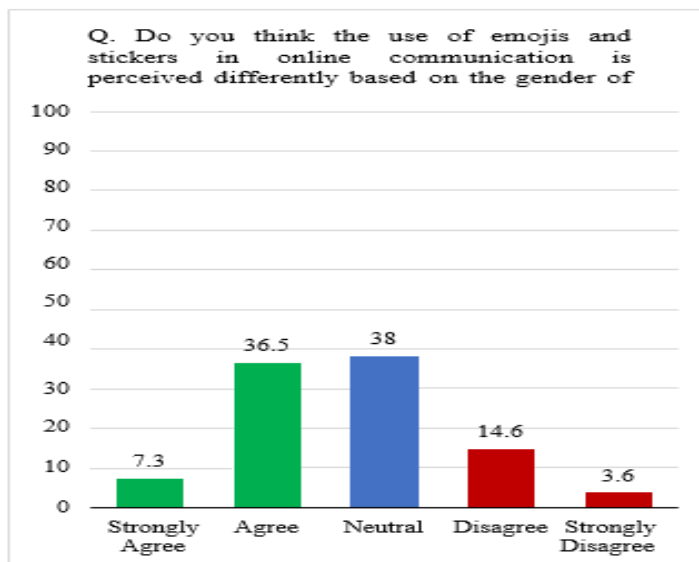


Figure 5



The second question has been formulated as a counterpoint to the first, asking whether emojis and stickers can lead to miscommunication or misunderstandings. The results showed that 34.6% of respondents agreed, and 7.7% strongly agreed that these small images could lead to

miscommunication. However, 26.9% of respondents disagreed, and 7.7% strongly disagreed that emojis and stickers created miscommunication. Meanwhile, 23.1% of respondents remained neutral on this issue. Overall responses to this question indicate that the presence of emojis and stickers does not



usually result in miscommunication. However, in some rare cases, miscommunication may occur due to specific reasons (Figure: 4). It is widely believed that messages from individuals of the opposite gender and the same gender are interpreted

differently. Regarding using emojis and stickers from a different gender, 43.8% of respondents agreed they are perceived differently. However, most of the responses, 38%, were neutral, and 18.2% disagreed with this notion (Figure: 5).

Figure 6

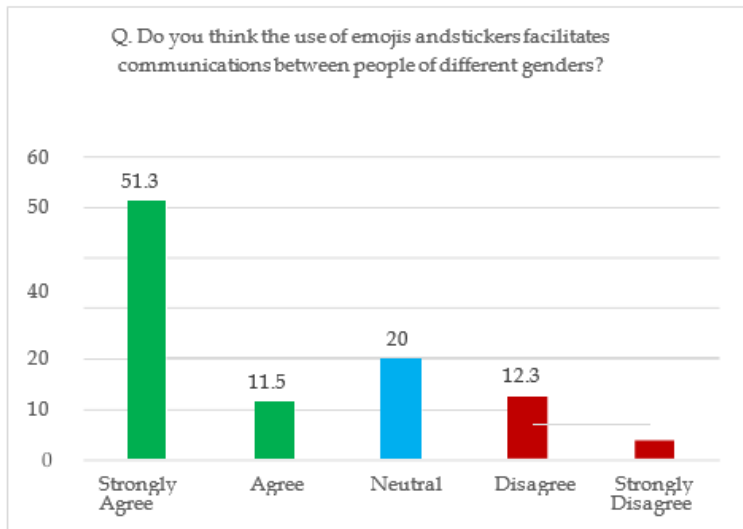
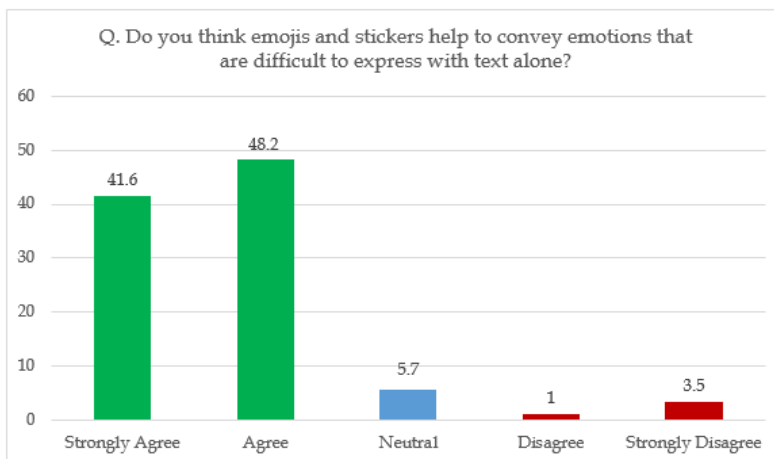


Figure 7



During interactions with individuals of the opposite gender, concealing certain intentions or struggling to express a message effectively may be necessary. However, according to the survey results, emojis and stickers can facilitate conveying messages and promoting

communication between both genders. The responses to the fourth question indicated that 65.4% of the participants agreed with this statement, while 14.6% disagreed. The remaining 20% of the responses were neutral (Figure: 6). The following query addressed our

research question about whether emojis and stickers facilitated social media users in creating more effective and expressive messages. As per responses to this question, 89.9% of the participants agreed that these

semiotic items facilitated conveying emotions that are difficult to express solely through text. In contrast, only 4.5% of the respondents disagreed with this idea (Figure: 7).

Figure 8

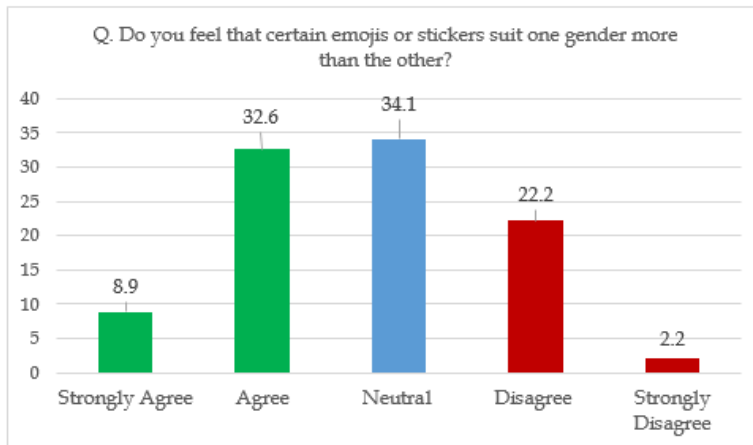
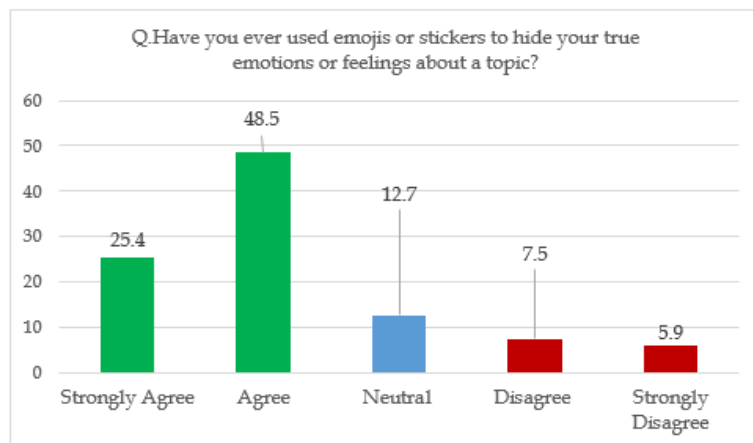


Figure 9



Question six inquired about the perception of certain emojis and stickers being gender specific. The survey results revealed that 41.5% of the respondents agreed with this notion, while 34.1% remained neutral. In contrast, 24.4% of the participants disagreed that some semiotic items were more fitting for one gender than the other (Figure: 8). One of the purposes of using emojis and stickers is to conceal emotions that one does not want to express directly. The responses to theseventh question

confirmed this, as 73.9% of participants reported using emojis and stickers to hide their true emotions. Another 12.7% of participants remained neutral on the issue, while 13.4% disagreed with this action. By using emojis and stickers, people can convey a certain emotion without explicitly stating it. It can be useful in certain situations where expressing one's true emotions might not be appropriate or desirable (Figure: 9).

Figure 10

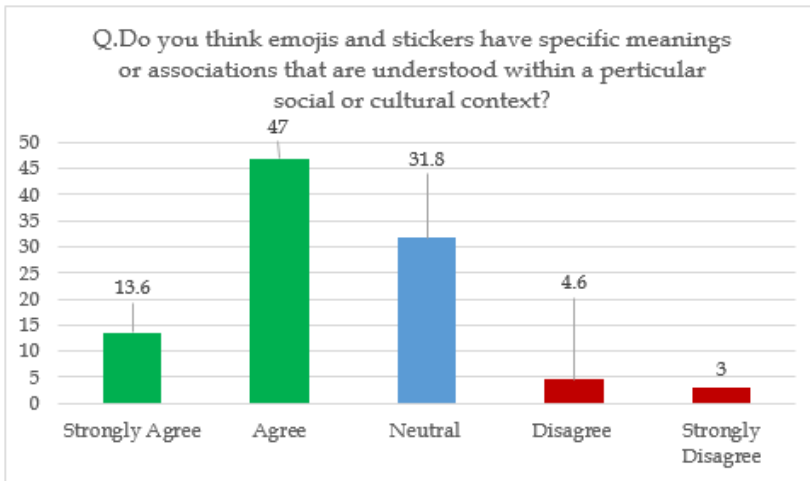
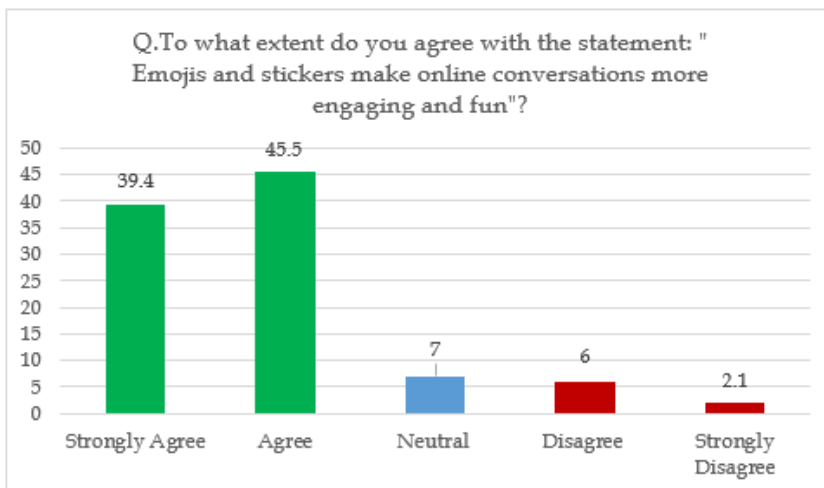


Figure 11



Emojis and stickers can add a playful and creative aspect to online interactions, making them more enjoyable and memorable for users. The results of question eight indicate that 84.9% of people agree that emojis and stickers make online interactions more engaging and fun. In comparison, 7% remained neutral, and 8.1% disagreed with the statement. Given the higher percentage of agreement, it can be inferred that most social media users utilize these small images for entertainment and engagement during communication (Figure: 10). The role of

context is crucial in conveying messages, as meanings can be perceived differently in various social contexts. The responses to question nine indicated that 60.6% of participants agreed that semiotic modes such as emojis and stickers had specific meanings and associations understood in cultural and social contexts. Another 31.8% of responses were neutral, while 7.6% of participants disagreed with this statement. This highlights the importance of considering cultural and social context when interpreting emojis and stickers, as their meanings may only

sometimes be universal or readily apparent (Figure: 11).  
 across different cultures and communities

Figure 12

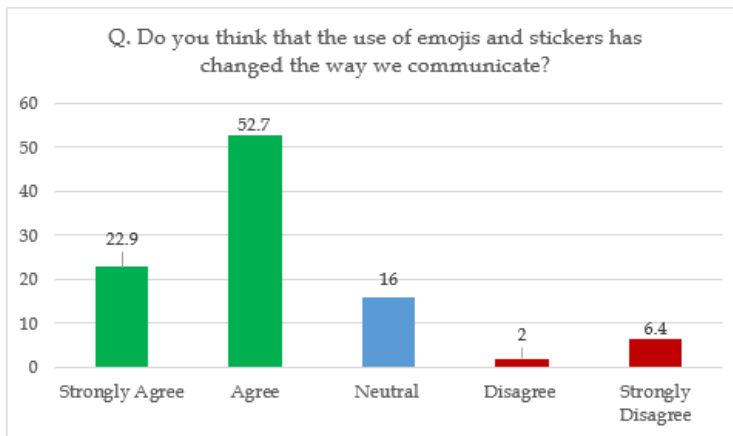
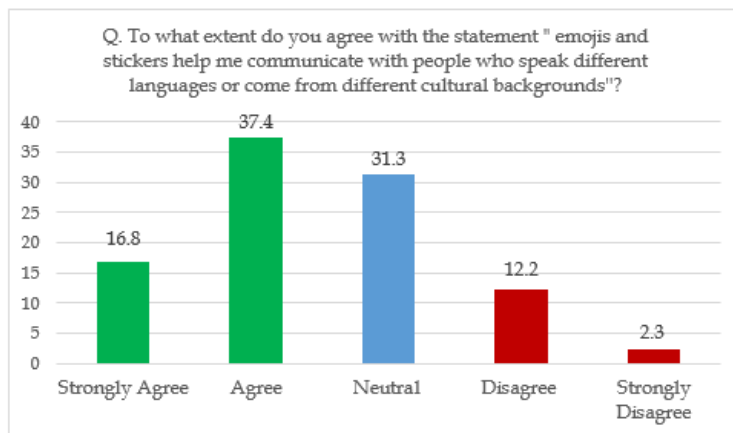


Figure 13



The emergence of emojis and stickers has added colour and aesthetics to online communication, and people have incorporated them into their conversations in a new way. The responses to question ten indicated that 75.6% of participants agreed that these semiotic modes had changed their way of communication, while 16% remained neutral and 8.4% disagreed with this point of view. Emojis and stickers have become widely accepted and preferred means of communication, allowing for more expressive and nuanced interactions between individuals. As a result, they have become an integral part

of modern online communication and have greatly impacted how people communicate with each other (Figure: 12). Sign language is a form of communication that can bridge the gap between individuals who do not speak the same language or come from different cultural backgrounds. This is supported by the responses to question eleven, where more than half 54.2% of the respondents agreed that emojis and stickers facilitate communication with people who speak different languages. 31.3% of the respondents expressed a neutral point of view, while only 14.2% disagreed with the statement. (Figure: 13)

Figure 14

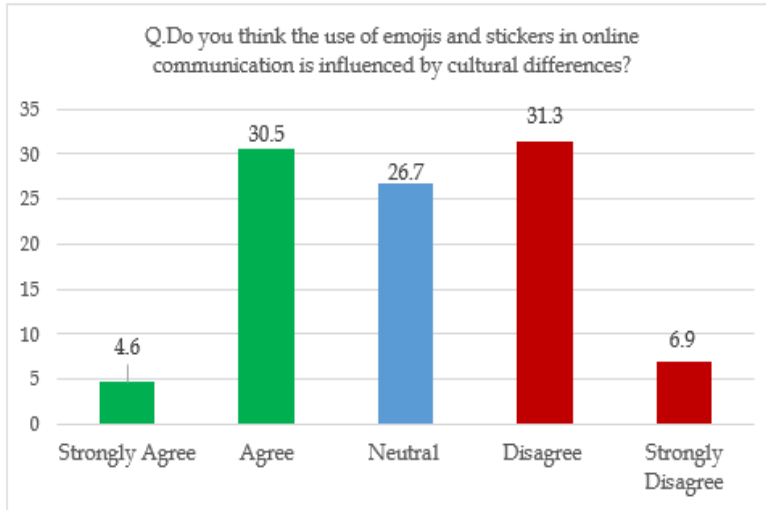
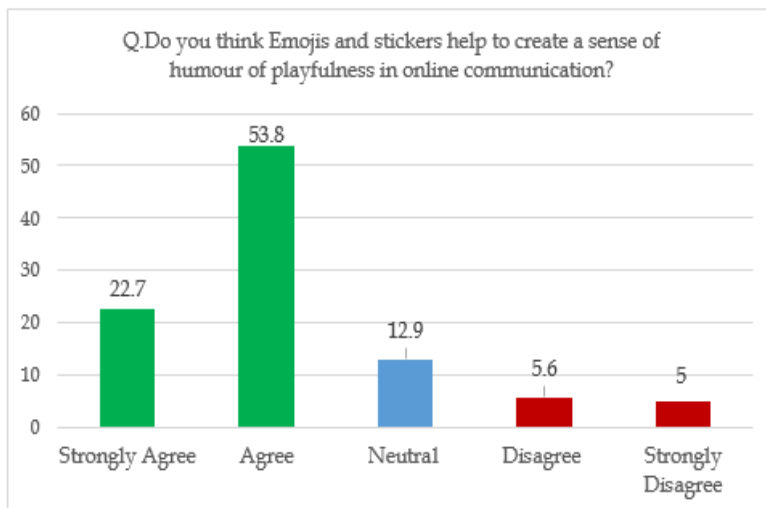


Figure 15



The responses to question twelve indicate that 35.1% of participants agree that cultural differences impact online interactions. On the other hand, a higher percentage of respondents (38.2%) disagreed with this statement, while 26.7% gave neutral responses. This suggests that emojis and stickers can help bridge cultural differences during online interactions. (Figure: 14). Emoticons can add humour, enjoyment, and engagement to online

communication, thus improving the overall quality of the message. Question thirteen's responses incorporated this point of view by demonstrating that most social media users (76.5%) agree that these semiotic modes contribute to a sense of humour and enjoyment in online communication. A small percentage of respondents (12.9%) remained neutral, while only 10.6% disagreed with this viewpoint (Figure: 15).

Figure 16

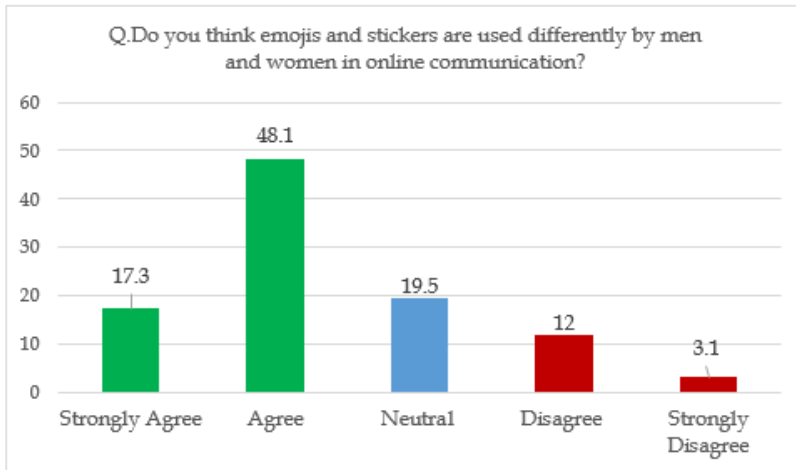
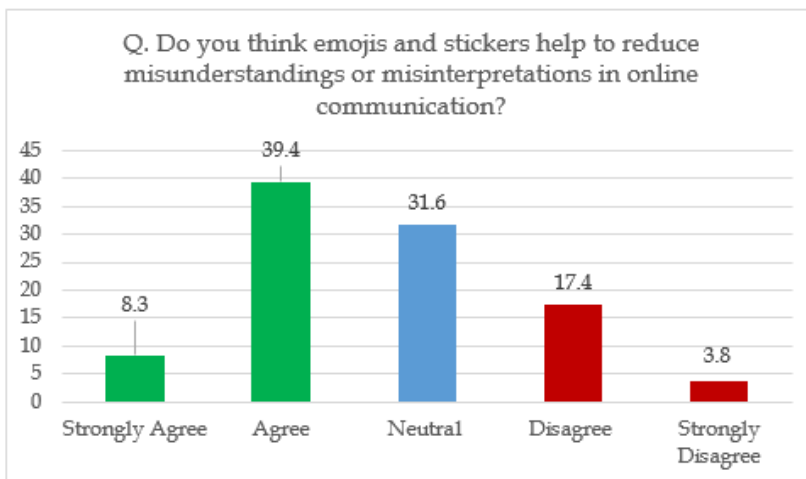


Figure 17



It is commonly assumed that males and females interact differently, and this behaviour may extend to using emojis and stickers in online communication. The results of the second last question verify this assumption, as 65.5% of respondents agree that both genders use these semiotic modes differently. Additionally, 19.5% of respondents expressed a neutral reaction, while only 15.1% disagreed that both genders use these tiny images differently (Figure: 16). The final question revealed that using emojis and stickers could help reduce misinterpretation and miscommunication in online interactions,

allowing the intended meaning of the sender to be better understood. The responses to this question showed that 48.7% of participants agreed with this idea, while 31.6% expressed a neutral viewpoint. A minority of respondents, 17.3%, disagreed with the notion that using emojis and stickers can reduce miscommunication (Figure: 17).

### Quantitative Analysis

The present research also employed a qualitative methodology and utilized in-depth semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method. A total of 10

participants, including four males and six females between the ages of 15 and 30, were selected for the study based on their frequent usage of instant messaging applications in their daily lives. The interviews were anticipated to last around 30 minutes, with the initial 10 minutes dedicated to building rapport and informing the interviewees about the study's objectives. The interviews centred on the participants' personal experiences and perceptions regarding using emoticons in instant mobile messaging.

To ensure the accuracy and relevance of the interview questions, six categories were identified based on the aim of the present study and previous research. These categories included:

Demographic information about the participants

1. The reasons for using emojis and stickers,
2. Patterns of emoticon usage in various types of social relationships,

3. The impact of conveying emotions through emoticons,
4. Gender differences in emoticon usage, and
5. The impact of impression management via emoticons

## Discussion

The interview questions aimed to explore the interviewees' motivations for using emojis and stickers, their selection criteria for choosing specific emojis and stickers, and the strategic deployment of emoticons in social contexts. Additionally, the interviewees' general emoticon usage behaviour was examined. The interviewer prompted the interviewees to elaborate on their responses through follow-up questions to understand their perspectives better. To ensure accuracy and completeness, the responses of the interviewees are transcribed without any omissions or alterations.

**Table 1**

*Usage pattern of Emoticon, Emojis and Sticker*

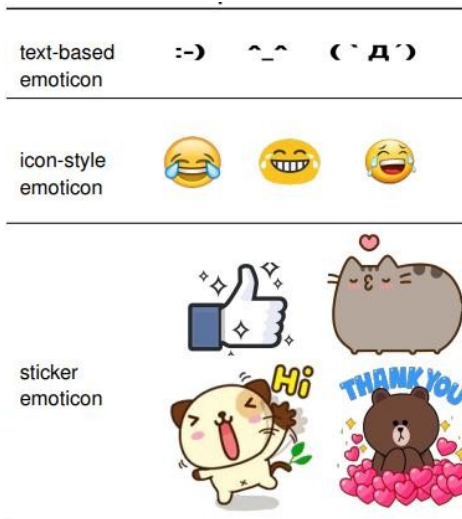
Pattern	Sub pattern
Manifestation of Emotion	Different emotions
	Strength of emotions
	Focus on emotions
	Elaborate description
Strategic use	Self-expression
	Sustaining social status
	Self-representation
	Online persona
Functional use	Establishing empathy
	Alternative for text
	social salutation
	Text addition

Table.1 displays the distinct forms of emoticon, emoji, and sticker usage patterns as reported by the interviewees. Consistent with previous research, the present study verified that users employ these semiotic forms to convey emotions and provide detailed information about the sender's mood.

Emoticon stickers enable users to express their emotions and display the intensity of their feelings through the characteristic features of stickers. Additionally, users noted that emoticon stickers allowed them to emphasize and convey minute details regarding the emotions they wished to express.

**Fig 18**

*Usage Pattern of Emoticon Example*



**Fig 19**

*Quote from Interviewee 1 (Female, age 22)*



*"I tend to choose emoticon stickers with feminine and playful features since I consider them as one of my self-representation tools"*

Our analysis revealed that users employ emoticons, emojis and stickers for strategic and functional purposes. Firstly, strategic use of emoticons refers to the use of emoticons for extrinsic social motivation. In this context, extrinsic motivations are the social motivations that stem from the relationship between social constituents. The observed

patterns of strategic use of emoticons are as follows: a) Self-representation - using emoticon stickers to portray oneself in a certain way that one desires to be perceived by others. In this case, the user may appear heavily invested in the character used. For example, Interviewee 1 (female, 22) (refer to Figure 18) reported her inclination towards selecting pastel-coloured emoticon stickers to convey a soft and gentle impression to others. b) Maintaining social status using emoticons, emojis and stickers to conform to the communicative behaviour of others and maintain social connections.

This usage pattern can be viewed as an attempt at assimilation, wherein users adjust their communication style to align with that of others or employ an appropriate emoticon, emoji and sticker to maintain social connections. Interviewee 2 (male, 26) stated that using emojis stickers facilitates his participation in group conversations and helps him maintain stable social relationships with others. He also mentioned selecting emoticon stickers based on his social relationship with the communication partner. For some interviewees, emojis and stickers serve as icebreakers in both private and group chat rooms, especially when conversing with unfamiliar participants. In addition, some users employ emojis and stickers for impression management, using them to project a specific image to others, such as appearing courteous or witty.

According to our analyses, the usage patterns of emoticon stickers can also serve functional purposes. In particular, the functional use of emoticons refers to when users have a specific goal they wish to achieve through online communication. For example, interviewee 3 (female, 20) mentioned using emoticon stickers to appear more courteous and likeable in her text messages. On the other hand, interviewee 5 (female, 24) reported using emoticon stickers to draw attention to herself in a group chat setting. Furthermore, emoticons can be used to create emotional sympathy with others, as observed when welcoming new members to a group chat using welcoming emoticons.



The study identified three patterns of functional use of emoticons. The first pattern involves using emoticons as a substitute for text when typing becomes tedious. The second pattern is using emoticons as a language itself to convey social greetings. Popular emoticons such as good night, cheer up, and the good morning were used instead of text to express a message clearly. One interviewee reported using emoticon stickers to end a conversation politely. The third pattern is using emoticons as a supplement to the text. Emojis and stickers provide additional explanation and improve accuracy by adding nuance and context to text-based messages. One interviewee reported that using emoticon stickers helps her express her feelings in more detail.

This qualitative analysis shows that users utilize emoticon stickers for expressing emotions and for strategic and functional purposes. Text-based emoticons and basic emojis can sometimes fail to convey a conversation's contextual nuances and precision. To overcome this limitation, users turn to the use of emoticon stickers.

### **Findings and Conclusion**

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The current research successfully achieved its objectives using a mixed-method approach to answer the research questions. Both analyses prove that using emojis and stickers in online communication promotes positive interactions. Social media users who incorporate emojis and stickers with their text experience a more positive impact on their communication. Our analysis highlighted that Emojis and stickers serve multiple purposes in online communication, such as expressing emotions, emphasizing points, formalizing language, reducing ambiguity, communicating the sender's mood, marking friendships, discouraging selfish behaviour, flirting, expressing boredom or sarcasm, and more. Our analysis indicates that users also

employ emoticons, emojis and stickers for strategic and functional reasons beyond expressing emotions. These include maintaining social status, managing impressions, establishing a social presence, creating emotional sympathy, and serving as an alternative or supplement to text for functional purposes. The findings of the quantitative analysis revealed that young university students increasingly use emojis and stickers to communicate their sentiments and emotions effectively, particularly when speaking rather than typing. With busy schedules, lengthy essays are only sometimes feasible. Digital semiotics offers more options for expression, making them a popular choice.

As our research is based on gender, we collected data from both male and female social media users. The qualitative analysis discovered no significant differences in how male and female social media users perceived the functions and usage of emojis and stickers in online communication. However, younger and older social media users had varying understandings of emoji functions and associated different functions with particular emojis. Furthermore, our analysis demonstrated that both genders use emojis and stickers for similar purposes. The most notable differences were seen in how younger females and males interpreted certain emojis and stickers, but both genders benefited from using these symbolic choices in their conversations. In the future, it would be beneficial to investigate why people use stickers in online communication. This could involve examining the preferences between stickers and emojis among users of different genders and exploring the rationales behind these choices. Additionally, further research could investigate whether stickers serve a speech act function or generate any unique speech act functions that have yet to be identified.

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