

Nonverbal Communication: The World Trends and Cultural Differences Behind Emoji Usage

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Abstract. In the digital era, Emojis have emerged as a critical component of online communication, transcending linguistic barriers while introducing new challenges in cross-cultural conversations. This paper explores the complex ways in which cultural backgrounds influence the selection and interpretation of Emojis, providing a nuanced understanding of digital nonverbal communication. By using a comparative analysis between Eastern and Western usage of popular Emojis, the research highlights significant cultural discrepancies. The study traces Emoji popularity trends from 2019 to 2021, a period notably affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which catalyzed the global shift towards online interaction and promoted the usage of specific Emojis related to work, empathy, and emotional connection. Through a sociolinguistic lens, this study illuminates the role of Emojis as a modern pictographic language that encapsulates the inherent diversity of cultural emotion, nuance, and global digital communication. The paper's findings highlight the need to increase cultural awareness of Emoji interpretation and application to reduce misunderstandings in the increasingly connected world.

Keywords: Nonverbal communication; Emoji interpretation; Emoji usage trends; cross-cultural differences.

1. Introduction

On a TV show, a British joked about his “fear” of his Chinese friend's using of Emojis when he first messaged him; In Moments (a social function in WeChat), people who studied or live in America share their Emoji expression gap with local people there. Such instances highlight an aspect of this globalized world: the potential for misinterpretation within the universal digital languages. After noticing frequent misinterpretations of Emoji usage in conversations, focusing on how nonverbal communication reflects not only the ways people communicate but also the social origins and different cultural backgrounds. In this era where digital communication is prevalent that breaks geographical boundaries, Emojis have become a cornerstone of modern non-verbal expression. According to the data in Emoji usage statistics, a survey reveals that “92% of the online population uses emojis”, which is a very large percentage [1]. Besides they are cute icons, they are more of a way that people transfer emotions and reactions in the increasingly popular digital world.

Through the analysis of Emoji usage trends and cultural interpretation disparities, the complexity of digital communication in a multicultural context is presented. Thus, this paper will further present an examination of the nuanced ways in which cultural backgrounds shape the selection and perception of Emojis in digital conversations. This study reveals the significance of cultural dimensions in digital communication and will further explore the impact of cultural diversity on the universal language of Emojis and its implications for global digital interaction.

2. The Shift of Emoji Usage

2.1. Broad Interpretation

Table 1 provides a comprehensive overview of the shifting popularity of emojis from 2019 to 2021, marking changes in how people across the world express emotions and experiences digitally. The popularity of the pleading face (🥺) increased the most sharply from 2019 to 2021, moving from the bottom ranking to nearly the top 10, which reflects perhaps a communal sentiment to seek empathy

or connection globally. The data also shows the increasing usage of “party popper” (🎉), “smiling face with hearts” (😍), and “thumbs up” (👍) from outside the top 10 to within the top 10. “Face with tears of joy” (😂), “rolling on the floor laughing” (🤣), “red heart” (❤️), and “loudly crying face” (😭) have maintained a high usage, stable in the top 10. The popularity of “smiling face with heart-eyes” (😘), “Smiling face with smiling eyes” (😊), and “two hearts” (💕) decreased a lot, from within the top 10 to outside that.

Table 1. Rank Change of Top 15 Emojis from 2019-2021 Worldwide [2]

Emojis	Meanings	Rank in 2019	Rank in 2021	Rank Change
😂	Face with Tears of Joy	1	1	-
❤️	Red Heart	2	2	-
👍	Thumbs Up	10-15	4	↑
😭	Loudly Crying Face	Within 10	5	↑
😘	Face Blowing a Kiss	Within 10	7	↑
😍	Smiling Face with Hearts	15-20	8	↓
😘	Smiling Face with Heart-Eyes	Within 5	9	↓
😊	Smiling Face with Smiling Eyes	Within 5	10	↓
🎉	Party Popper	30-35	11	↑
💕	Two Hearts	Within 5	13	↓
😓	Pleading Face	After 95	14	↑

2.2. The Reasons behind the Shift

2019 is a special time when there were outbreaks of COVID-19 pandemic all over the world. It is important to study the reasons for the change in popularity of certain Emojis from 2019-2021 as it is also a time that marked the beginning of heavy exposure and reliance on social media around the world: “Much of the day-to-day business shifted to an online format due to restrictions on movement to contain the spread of the virus” [3]. Under this circumstance, there were increasingly unique demands for remote learning and working as well as shopping [4]. During this period, there was a high level of penetration of social media as shown by the data, 56% of individuals used social media in 2018 in the European Union of 28 member states, but according to Statista, this figure rose to 96% in 2021 in the European Union plus the United Kingdom [3]. Social media has become one of the main entertainments in this special period.

2.2.1 Increasing demand of online working

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has led to sweeping changes in how and where people work, and how they interact and connect. Working at home has the potential to reshape existing work practices in novel ways. Emojis are ubiquitous in this work-at-home communication, and they play an important role in “expressing emotions, conveying positions, and negotiating interpersonal coordination” [5]. In a survey in which participants were required to vote for the most accepted emojis at work and in professional environments, 71% of participants voted for the emoji “Thumbs Up” (👍) as the most accepted one. This emoji can be interpreted as affirmative, well wishes, or good job at online work which overall expresses and is accepted as a positive tone. With 30% of those in leadership positions regularly using this emoji, “thumbs up” is the top 1 emoji used by leaders as a symbol of positive emojis when communicating with employees and has become popular [6]. Followingly, “Red heart” (❤️) and “Face with Tears of Joy” (😂) are the top 2 and top 3 most used emojis by leaders respectively to send affirming. For responding to standard workplace messages to give recognition, “Party Popper” (🎉) is a top 2 choice to achieve the goal.

2.2.2 Increasing usage of social media

At the beginning of the lockdown, many people were unable to see their family or friends. “All social plans were canceled—practically overnight” [7]. In the early days of the pandemic, people felt more isolated and alone than ever. Social media thus became a refuge at that time to help people build the relationships they needed and find a sense of connection [7]. “Pleading Face” (🥺), “Smiling Face with Hearts” (😍), and “Loudly Crying Face” (😭) all express strong feelings of emotions and a wide range of expression. Specifically, “Pleading Face” (🥺) has a strong expressive nature that fits well with the rise of digital communication where nuances of face-to-face interaction are absent. It can represent various emotions like shyness, sadness, flirtation, or even a playful sense of urgency, which indicates its versatility in digital conversations. Similarly, the “Smiling Face with Hearts” (😍) can represent adoration or feeling touched by a loving gesture, being full of kindness and happiness overall. For the “Loudly Crying Face” (😭), it can not only express sadness but also uncontrollable laughter or overwhelming joy. These Emojis can all express a wide range of emotions, which are essential in mitigating the emotional gap created by social distancing, highlighting their significance in digital communication during times of isolation.

3. Cultural Differences between the East and West

Table 2. The Rank of Top 10 Emojis in the East and West [8]

Rank	East		West	
	Emoji	Meaning	Emoji	Meaning
1	😂	Face with Tears of Joy	😂	Face with Tears of Joy
2	😭	Loudly Crying Face	😍	Smiling Face with Heart-eyes
3	🙏	Folded Hands	😭	Loudly Crying Face
4	😘	Face Blowing a Kiss	😩	Weary Face
5	😱	Face Screaming in Fear	👌	OK Hand
6	❤️	Red Heart	💕	Two Hearts
7	😍	Smiling Face with Heart-eyes	😏	Unamused Face
8	😄	Beaming Face with Smiling Eyes	😘	Face Blowing a Kiss
9	👏	Clapping Hands	🙌	Raising Hands
10	💪	Flexed Biceps	😄	Smiling Face with Smiling Eyes

From Table 2, “Face with Tears of Joy” (😂), “Loudly Crying Face” (😭), “Face Blowing a Kiss” (😘), and “Smiling Face with Heart-eyes” (😍) are common most popular emojis in both the East and West.

The high popularity of some of the same Emojis in both the East and West can reflect cultural convergence in today's globalized context. Research in 2016 reveals that Eastern people often consider low arousal positive emotional states as happiness and Asians are more likely to be in low arousal emotional states such as relaxed, calm, and sluggish, focusing on being “solemn and reserved” [9]. By contrast, Caucasians, people who are usually in the West, are more likely to be in stimulated and excited emotional states because high arousal positive emotional states are considered happiness. Among the famous Emojis that are accepted and used by both Eastern and Western people, “Face Blowing a Kiss” (😘) gives a lively feeling, and “Smiling Face with Heart-eyes” (😍) brings a sense of activation and excitement. According to the 2016 study above, Eastern people should be much less likely to use these two types of Emojis with strong feelings to express their emotions, preferring to use more serious Emojis, such as flowers, to achieve the same effect. However, they are the top 4 and the top 7 Emojis Easterners like to use these years, highly similar to Westerners. This may be because social media has brought people from all over the world together, allowing for closer and closer

exchanges among cultures. This results in the Easterners receiving the unconscious influence of Western culture, becoming less reserved, and gradually accustomed to expressing heightened emotions.

However, although they are all popular in different regions, what they express when they are used is different. “Face with Tears of Joy” (😄), perceived by the designer according to Dictionary.com, is someone laughing so hard that tears are streaming down their face, expressing amusement and joviality when someone says or does something funny. According to a survey in Emojinerds, in the West, this Emoji is widely used to indicate something funny or pleasing. It is commonly used to mean laughter in Japan and South Korea, while in China, it could indicate embarrassment or shyness. In Thailand and Indonesia, the emoji is often used sarcastically or mockingly, and in India, it is associated with comedy and Bollywood movies. In this case, the use of an Emoji can express completely different things in different regions. Although an Emoji is as popular and used as much in the East as in the West, the reasons for its frequent use can vary wildly.

By contrast, there are also many differences among these popular Emojis between the East and West. According to Symbolplanet, people in the East consider and use “Clapping Hands” (👏) as an expression of approval, encouragement, celebration, and agreement, which is a very positive Emoji, thus making it a popular expression symbol in the East [10]. However, in Brazil, it is commonly used to convey sarcasm; in Russia, it can be seen as a competitive gesture; in Germany, it can be seen as a sign of impatience; in France, it could mean the end of a performance. In the West, this Emoji is mostly less positive. Nevertheless, in the West, “Raising Hands” (🙌) can be a powerful replacement for “Clapping Hands” (👏) in the East. In America, due to similarity, “Raising Hands” (🙌) can mean “Let’s high five!”, which is a way to express joy, celebration, appreciation, and anticipation, but according to research, in Japan, it might just mean “I surrender, don’t shoot!” [10]. “Raising Hands” (🙌) is beyond a simple hand gesture. It represents “enthusiasm, praise, celebration, or even a virtual high-five”, fitting well with the celebration way in the West.

Additionally, the “OK Hand” (👌), due to its direct expression from English “ok”, is popular in the West to be an expression of approval and validation, but the East does not have such a similar culture in languages [10]. Similarly, “Folded Hands” (🙏) is a special Emoji used most by Eastern people to express gratitude, spirituality, and begging [10]. In Japan, the emoji is used to express gratitude or apologies; Indians use it as a symbol of respect or greeting. However, in some Western countries, “it’s mistakenly taken as a high-five request.” On Twitter, the emoji is sometimes seen being used in posts praying for a deceased celebrity or wishing someone a recovery. More often, it is also common to see people confused about why anyone would “cheer” a person's death or illness.

4. Conclusion

Summarizing this comprehensive exploration of Emoji usage across different cultural landscapes, it is evident that while Emojis serve as a form of universal digital language, their interpretations have huge differences. This research has highlighted the nuanced shifts in Emoji preference, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, a key period with huge increasing online communication, which brought to the Emojis associated with work, empathy, and emotional connection.

A key strength of this research lies in its empirical approach to data analysis, revealing clear trends and discrepancies in emoji interpretation between the East and West. However, the study also has its limitations. The primary weakness is the reliance on quantitative data, which may not capture the full depth of cultural meanings and individual nuances of Emoji use. Moreover, the ever-evolving nature of digital language means that interpretations can shift rapidly, presenting a moving target for further research

For future research directions, a deeper and more meticulous examination of sub-cultural variations and the influence of context on Emoji interpretation are necessary. Qualitative studies, including questionnaire surveys and interviews, can provide richer insights into the emotional and

communicative complexities of Emojis. Additionally, as digital communication continues to evolve with new technologies and platforms, ongoing analysis is essential to better understand interpersonal interaction and global connectivity.

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