

Deconstructing WhatsApp Emojis and Emotions through Semiotic Principles' Prisms

Greatandy Victor Iguoba^{1*}, Obinna Johnkennedy Chukwu, Ph.D, BL²

¹ Department of Mass Communication, Edo State University, Iyamho, Edo State, Nigeria.

^{2*} Department of Mass Communication, Edo State University, Iyamho, Edo State, Nigeria.

*** Correspondence:** Greatandy Victor Iguoba

*The authors declare
that no funding was
received for this work.*



Received: 01-October-2025

Accepted: 09-October-2025

Published: 16-October-2025

Copyright © 2025, Authors retain copyright. Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> (CC BY 4.0 deed)

This article is published by **MSI Publishers** in **MSI Journal of Arts, Law and Justice (MSIJALJ)**
ISSN 3049-0839 (Online)

The journal is managed and published by MSI Publishers

Volume: 2, Issue: 10 (October-2025)

ABSTRACT: Emojis have become an integral part of everyday digital communication, yet their deeper semiotic and emotional complexities remain underexplored. This study investigates how WhatsApp emojis function as semiotic signs, conveying and shaping emotional meaning in digital interactions. Drawing on Saussurean structural semiotics and Peircean triadic semiotics, the research examines how users encode, interpret, and negotiate emotions through emojis, considering cultural, generational, and relational contexts. A qualitative exploratory design was employed, combining digital ethnography and semiotic analysis of anonymised WhatsApp chat histories from twenty purposively selected participants aged 18–35, supplemented by semi-structured interviews. This study analysed 20 chat histories, and focused on the denotative and connotative meanings of emojis and their interaction with textual messages to convey humour, affection, frustration, and relational nuance. Findings reveal that emojis operate as multimodal communicative tools whose meanings are context-dependent, culturally mediated, and relationally nuanced. They enhance

emotional expression, complement or substitute verbal text, and function as complex signs characterised by arbitrariness, iconicity, indexicality, and social convention. The study contributes to the literature by providing a comprehensive semiotic understanding of WhatsApp emoji use among Nigerian users, grounded in authentic chat interactions, highlighting the role of visual-emotional literacy in contemporary digital communication. Practical implications include the need for emoji literacy in communication training, culturally sensitive platform design, and user awareness of context to avoid miscommunication.

Keywords: *Digital communication, emojis, emotion, meaning-making, semiotics, WhatsApp*

INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, communication has evolved from linear, text-based exchanges to multimodal interactions that incorporate visuals, sounds, and symbols as integral components of meaning-making (Chukwu. 2023; Тилепбаева, 2025). The rise of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) has redefined how individuals express thoughts, emotions, and identities in virtual environments (Kakonge et al., 2025). Among the various multimodal features embedded in contemporary digital discourse, emojis have emerged as pivotal semiotic resources that shape both the form and affective tone of interpersonal communication (Kusal et al., 2025; Fatima et al., 2025).

Emojis are graphic symbols that represents facial expressions, gestures, and objects. They extend beyond simple decoration; they are dynamic signifiers that enable emotional and pragmatic nuances to be conveyed alongside textual messages (Evans, 2017; Danesi, 2016; Fatima et al., 2025). Within instant messaging platforms such as WhatsApp, emojis function as paralinguistic cues, compensating for the absence of physical gestures and tone of voice that characterize face-to-face interaction (Ali-Chand & Naidu, 2024). Through their use, users manage relational intimacy, express empathy, and negotiate social meanings, thereby constructing what Shaari (2020) describe as “illocutionary force” in digital dialogue.

As global users engage in WhatsApp conversations, the emojis they employ increasingly transcend linguistic and geographic boundaries, creating what some scholars regard as a universal visual language (Gawne & McCulloch, 2019). Yet, this universality is not absolute. The meanings of emojis are mediated by cultural, contextual, and technological factors, often producing multiple interpretations (Miller et al., 2016; Stark & Crawford, 2015). For instance, while the “thumbs up” emoji 👍 may signify agreement or approval in Western contexts, it can carry offensive or dismissive undertones in parts of the Middle East (Riordan, 2017). Thus, emojis operate as polysemic signs—their significance is shaped by both the user’s intention and the receiver’s interpretive framework (Crystal, 2011).

From a semiotic perspective, the interpretation of emojis involves a complex process of signification, in which visual images substitute for, complement, or reinforce linguistic meaning. Semiotics, as articulated by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, provides the conceptual tools to analyse this process. Saussure’s dyadic model of the sign comprising the signifier (the form of the emoji) and the signified (the emotional or conceptual meaning it evokes) underscores the arbitrary but socially agreed nature of emoji meaning (Saussure, 1983). Peirce’s triadic model, on the other hand, conceptualizes the sign as a relation among the representamen, the object, and the interpretant (Peirce, 1931–1958), allowing for an understanding of emojis as icons, indices, or symbols depending on their functional role in context.

Applying these semiotic frameworks to digital communication, emojis can be seen as visual-emotional signs that both reflect and construct users’ affective states (Zaheer & Safdar, 2025). They serve as affective anchors that help decode the intended emotional valence of messages whether joy 😄, irony 😏, sorrow 😞, or affection ❤️ (Prada et al., 2018; Weissman & Tanner, 2018). As such, emojis are not merely aesthetic embellishments but part of a semiotic economy through which social actors negotiate meaning in mediated environments (Thurlow & Mroczek, 2011).

However, despite their widespread use, the interpretation of emojis remains ambiguous and contested. The same symbol can generate different emotional responses depending on factors such as cultural background, age, gender, and

technological platform design (Chen et al., 2024). This interpretive fluidity has prompted scholars to call for deeper investigations into how emojis function as semiotic instruments that encode and decode emotion across diverse digital ecologies (Stark, 2018).

Accordingly, this article investigates how emojis on WhatsApp embody emotional meanings when viewed through the prisms of semiotic principles, particularly those articulated by Saussure and Peirce. By analysing emojis as affective and cultural signs, the study seeks to unravel how users encode and decode emotions through these pictorial symbols within WhatsApp conversations. It further explores how semiotic processes anchored in signification, interpretation, and cultural context mediate the emotional dimensions of digital discourse in everyday communication.

Statement of the Problem

Although emojis have become integral to everyday online communication, their deeper semiotic and emotional complexities remain insufficiently explored. Many studies still treat emojis as mere emotional supplements or shorthand for facial expressions, rather than as meaningful signs that shape interpretation and interaction in digital spaces. This reductionist view overlooks the semiotic processes through which emojis communicate layers of meaning that extend beyond simple emotional display.

A major challenge lies in the ambiguity and polysemy of emoji use. The same symbol can carry different meanings across contexts and cultures. For instance, what conveys affection or humor in one setting may imply sarcasm or offense in another. Such variation often results in miscommunication and misunderstanding, revealing that emojis are not universal but context-dependent signs.

Furthermore, understanding emojis solely as emotional icons neglects their function as cultural and communicative constructs that mediate relationships, tone, and meaning in digital interaction. In the case of WhatsApp, one of the most widely used messaging platforms, emojis play a central role in expressing emotion and managing interpersonal exchange. Yet, there remains limited research on how these symbols

operate as semiotic vehicles of emotion, particularly from the perspectives of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce.

This study therefore seeks to fill this conceptual gap by deconstructing WhatsApp emojis through semiotic principles, with the aim of uncovering how users construct, convey, and interpret emotional meanings through these pictorial symbols in digital communication.

Objectives of the Study

1. Examine how WhatsApp emojis function as semiotic signs in expressing emotions.
2. Identify the relationship between emoji use and emotional interpretation among users.
3. Analyse the connotative and denotative meanings of selected emojis using semiotic principles.
4. Explore how cultural and contextual factors influence emoji-based emotional communication.

Research Questions

1. How do WhatsApp emojis operate as semiotic signs in users' emotional communication?
2. What emotional meanings do users attribute to specific emojis in their conversations?
3. In what ways do cultural and contextual variables affect the interpretation of emojis?
4. How do semiotic theories explain the relationship between emojis and emotional expression?

Scope of the Study

This study examines the semiotic and emotional functions of WhatsApp emojis in digital communication, drawing on twenty WhatsApp chat histories as the primary data source. It explores how emojis operate as semiotic signs to convey, enhance, or

modify emotions within interpersonal interactions. The research focuses on the ways users employ emojis to express feelings, attitudes, and emotional nuances that extend beyond the literal meanings of text. It also investigates how chat participants interpret these visual signs, emphasising the relationship between the emoji as a signifier and the emotional meaning it communicates. In addition, the study considers the influence of conversational context, including the nature of relationships between participants and situational factors, on the interpretation of emojis. Semiotic principles, such as denotation, connotation, and syntagmatic-paradigmatic relationships, are applied to decode the complex emotional content embedded in these digital symbols. The study is limited to text-based interactions on WhatsApp and does not encompass other social media platforms, nor does it analyse multimedia elements such as voice notes or videos.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant in advancing the understanding of digital communication, particularly the ways in which emojis function as tools for emotional expression and meaning-making. By analyzing twenty WhatsApp chat histories, the research provides insights into how users convey subtle emotional nuances, enhancing clarity and reducing the potential for miscommunication in text-based interactions. It also highlights the role of context, including cultural, relational, and situational factors, in shaping the interpretation of emojis, offering valuable perspectives for intercultural and interpersonal communication. The findings contribute to semiotic theory by extending its application to contemporary digital communication, demonstrating how visual signs operate in online interactions. Additionally, the study has practical implications for educators, digital communicators, and social media users, guiding more effective and emotionally nuanced use of emojis in personal, academic, and professional settings. Finally, this research lays a foundation for future studies on digital paralanguage, multimodal communication, and the evolving language of emotion in online spaces.

Literature Review

Emojis as Emotional Symbols

Emojis have evolved from simple typographic emoticons into sophisticated digital symbols that convey a wide range of emotional, cultural, and interpersonal meanings.

Originating in Japan in the late 1990s, emojis have become integral to computer-mediated communication, bridging the gap between verbal and non-verbal expression in text-based environments (Evans, 2017). They function as visual representations of affect, tone, and intention—elements that are often lost in the absence of physical cues such as facial expressions or vocal intonation. As Evans (2017) observes, emojis serve as a form of digital paralanguage, enabling users to project feelings and relational cues that textual communication alone cannot fully express.

Scholars have shown that emojis enrich digital discourse by providing affective and interpretive context to messages. Prada et al. (2018) argue that the inclusion of emojis helps to clarify communicative intent, reducing the ambiguity that often characterizes purely textual exchanges. In this way, emojis serve as a bridge between cognition and emotion, allowing users to communicate affective nuances in interpersonal and group interactions. They not only complement text but also act as semiotic resources through which meaning is co-constructed among users.

However, the interpretation of emojis is rarely straightforward. Their meanings are fluid, polysemous, and context-dependent, varying with user intent, communicative setting, and cultural background (Danesi, 2017). What may represent affection or approval in one context could signify sarcasm or irony in another. This interpretive fluidity aligns with the semiotic notion that signs derive meaning not from intrinsic value but from their relational position within a system of differences—a principle central to Saussure's structural linguistics. Consequently, emojis must be understood not as fixed representations of emotion but as cultural and contextual constructs whose meanings emerge through interaction.

Recent research in digital semiotics also emphasizes the multimodal nature of emoji use. Gualberto and Kress (2019) describe emojis as components of a new visual grammar that interacts dynamically with written language. They argue that emojis operate as mode-shifters, modifying the interpretive frame of the surrounding text and guiding emotional interpretation. In this sense, emojis are not merely supplements to language but integral semiotic signs that alter the texture of communication. Berlanga-Fernández and Reyes (2024) further contend that in digital

discourse, semiotic processes are increasingly visual and interactive, where emojis serve as affective and cultural markers shaping user engagement and meaning construction.

Moreover, the emotional power of emojis lies in their ability to function simultaneously as icons, indices, and symbols, reflecting the triadic model of Peircean semiotics. As icons, they visually resemble the emotions they represent; as indices, they point to users' internal states or interpersonal relationships; and as symbols, they acquire socially learned meanings that evolve through digital culture. This triadic interplay enables emojis to mediate both personal emotion and collective social meaning, positioning them as essential tools for relational expression and identity performance in digital spaces (Wagener, 2020).

Despite their ubiquity, emojis remain under-theorized in relation to emotional communication and semiotic analysis. Many studies focus on their pragmatic or affective functions, overlooking their deeper role as cultural semiotic codes that participate in meaning-making within digital ecologies.

Semiotics and Digital Communication

Semiotics, the study of signs and meaning-making, provides a critical lens through which digital communication can be analyzed. At its core, semiotics explores how signifiers (forms) relate to signifieds (concepts) and how meaning emerges through social, cultural, and contextual processes. In digital communication, signs extend beyond text to encompass visual, auditory, and symbolic elements, including emojis, memes, GIFs, and stickers, which function as multimodal semiotic resources (Berlanga-Fernández & Reyes, 2024).

Recent scholarship emphasizes that digital communication is inherently semiotic and interactive. Gualberto and Kress (2019) argue that visual signs in online environments operate within complex systems where technological affordances, social norms, and cultural conventions converge to shape meaning. In this framework, emojis are not merely affective markers but dynamic signs embedded within broader communicative ecologies. They interact with language, context, and

user intent to generate layers of meaning that are often culturally contingent and relationally negotiated.

The semiotic potential of emojis lies in their ability to function simultaneously as icons, indices, and symbols, consistent with Peircean triadic theory. As icons, emojis resemble the emotions or objects they depict; as indices, they point to users' emotional states or relational cues; and as symbols, they acquire socially learned meanings through shared digital practices (Wagener, 2020). This triadic functionality enables emojis to act as mediators of both personal affect and collective social meaning, allowing digital users to perform identity, solidarity, or ideological alignment within conversational contexts.

Moreover, semiotic analysis highlights the interpretive flexibility of emojis. Their meaning is not fixed but emerges through interaction, context, and cultural understanding. Berlanga-Fernández and Reyes (2024) emphasize that digital semiotics involves both production and reception, meaning that the sender's intent and the receiver's interpretation co-construct the communicative outcome. This is particularly relevant for platforms like WhatsApp, where conversational immediacy, group dynamics, and personal relationships influence how emojis are read and understood.

Finally, the integration of semiotics into digital communication research reveals that emojis and other visual signs are not merely ancillary to text; they are constitutive elements of meaning-making in online discourse. By encoding emotional, social, and cultural information, emojis operate as semiotic amplifiers, enhancing clarity, reducing ambiguity, and facilitating affective communication. As such, a semiotic perspective is essential for understanding how emojis function as emotional and relational tools in WhatsApp conversations, bridging textual and visual modalities while reflecting broader socio-cultural norms (Fatima, Ejaz, & Miran, 2025).

Cultural and Contextual Meaning of Emojis

Emojis, although often perceived as universal symbols, carry culturally and contextually dependent meanings that can vary across societies, age groups, and communicative settings. Research has consistently demonstrated that the same emoji

may be interpreted differently depending on cultural conventions and social norms (Miller et al., 2016; Lu, 2022). For example, the folded hands emoji (🙏) is commonly understood as a gesture of prayer in Western contexts, whereas in Asian cultures it often represents gratitude, respect, or greeting. These differences highlight that emoji meanings are not fixed, but are socially constructed and mediated through shared cultural knowledge and interactional practices.

Contextual factors, including relationship between communicators, conversational tone, generational differences, and platform-specific affordances, further influence how emojis are interpreted. Lu (2022), in a cross-generational intercultural study, found that younger and older users assign different emotional or pragmatic meanings to the same emojis, indicating that age and digital literacy play critical roles in decoding emotional intent. Similarly, Tariq (2025) emphasizes that in multicultural communication, emojis function as semiotic bridges, allowing users to negotiate meaning, express emotions, and maintain social cohesion across diverse cultural settings.

In African contexts, Udoh and Ononye (2025) examined cross-cultural online interactions and found that emojis serve distinct pragmatic functions beyond expressing emotion. They can signal politeness, agreement, or social alignment, and are particularly important in mitigating misunderstandings in multicultural digital spaces. This aligns with the view that emoji interpretation is highly situational, depending not only on cultural norms but also on communicative intent, user relationships, and the surrounding text.

From a semiotic perspective, these findings underscore that emojis function as complex signs rather than simple pictograms. Saussure's theory suggests that the connection between signifier (emoji) and signified (meaning) is arbitrary and socially mediated, while Peirce's triadic framework allows for understanding emojis as icons, indices, and symbols, simultaneously conveying resemblance, indication, and culturally learned significance. Cultural and contextual analysis, therefore, is essential for understanding the emotional, social, and pragmatic functions of emojis, particularly on platforms like WhatsApp, where diverse users interact in real-time

digital conversations (Miller et al., 2016; Lu, 2022; Tariq, 2025; Udoh & Ononye, 2025).

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Saussurean Structural Semiotics and Peircean Triadic Semiotics to analyse the role of emojis in digital communication, providing complementary perspectives on how visual symbols convey emotion and meaning.

Saussurean Structural Semiotics

Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic model conceptualises the sign as a dyadic relationship between the signifier and the signified. The signifier refers to the form of the sign. In this case, the visual representation of an emoji, while the signified represents the concept or emotion associated with that form. Saussure emphasised that meaning arises through social convention and relational differences within a system of signs, rather than inherent qualities of the sign itself. In the context of this study, Saussurean theory helps to understand how emojis gain meaning within the structured system of WhatsApp communication, where repeated social usage and shared conventions allow users to interpret emotions such as joy, irony, or affection consistently across conversations. It highlights the relational and socially constructed aspect of emoji meaning, situating emotional expression within the broader semiotic network of digital interaction (Berlanga-Fernández & Reyes, 2024).

Peircean Triadic Semiotics

Charles Sanders Peirce, in contrast, proposed a triadic model of the sign, consisting of the representamen (the form of the sign), the object (what the sign refers to), and the interpretant (the meaning derived by the interpreter). Peirce further classified signs into icons, indices, and symbols, based on how they relate to their objects. Icons resemble what they represent, indices point to an effect or presence, and symbols rely on culturally learned conventions. This triadic framework allows for a more dynamic interpretation of emoji use, capturing the interaction between the sender's intent, the symbol's form, and the receiver's perception. For instance, an emoji representing laughter may function as an icon resembling a smiling face, as an

index indicating amusement, or as a symbol representing social bonding, depending on context. Peircean semiotics thus accommodates polysemy, contextual variability, and interpretive negotiation, making it particularly suitable for analysing digital communication where meaning is fluid and co-constructed (Gualberto & Kress, 2019).

While Saussurean theory emphasises the structural and conventional dimension of emoji meaning, Peircean theory foregrounds the interpretive and contextual dimension. Together, they provide a comprehensive framework for this study. Saussure explains how emojis acquire general emotional meaning through social conventions within WhatsApp's semiotic system, while Peirce captures the dynamic and context-dependent interpretations that arise in real-time interaction.

Furthermore, contemporary digital semiotics scholarship underscores the hypertextual and interactive dimensions of visual communication, showing that emojis participate in digital storytelling, relational negotiation, and emotional construction (Wagner, 2020). By applying both Saussurean and Peircean perspectives, this study can systematically analyse how emojis encode, transmit, and transform emotional meanings, illuminating their role as both structured signs and contextually interpreted symbols within WhatsApp conversations.

Empirical Review

Chen et al. (2024) investigated "*Individual differences in emoji comprehension: Gender, age, and culture*". The study examined how individual factors such as gender, age, and culture influence emoji comprehension in digital communication. A total of 523 participants from the UK and China participated in an emoji classification task, where they identified the emotional expressions represented by emojis across four digital platforms: Apple, Android, WeChat, and Windows. Findings revealed that all three variables (age, gender, and culture) significantly affected how participants interpreted emojis. Younger participants tended to be more accurate in decoding emojis, while older participants showed greater ambiguity. Similarly, cultural background influenced emotional interpretation, as some emojis carried slightly different meanings between Chinese and British users. The study

concluded that emoji comprehension is not universal but contextually dependent on demographic and cultural variations. This suggests that digital communication across cultures may be prone to misinterpretation when emojis are used as substitutes for emotional cues.

The study recommended that digital communication platforms and designers standardise emoji representations across operating systems to reduce interpretive inconsistencies. They also emphasized the need for cross-cultural communication awareness, suggesting that online communicators should consider age and cultural differences when using emojis to express emotions.

Shaari, A. H. (2020) conducted a research on "*Accentuating illocutionary forces: Emoticons as speech act realization strategies in a multicultural online communication environment.*" Shaari explored how emoticons function as speech act realisation strategies in multicultural online communication, particularly in Malaysia. The study analysed naturally occurring Facebook conversations collected over a 12-month period, comprising a corpus of 324,362 words from 120 purposively selected participants. The analysis, grounded in Searle's (1976) five categories of illocutionary acts including assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarations was conducted using Content Analysis and Wordsmith Tools 5.0. Findings revealed that emoticons significantly enhance the illocutionary force of speech acts by clarifying the emotional and pragmatic intentions behind messages. In multicultural interactions, emoticons were found to bridge linguistic gaps, reduce miscommunication, and promote social cohesion. The study concluded that emoticons serve as semiotic amplifiers in digital communication, reinforcing or softening illocutionary force to convey meaning effectively. In a multicultural environment such as Malaysia, emoticons help users negotiate cultural nuances and emotional subtleties, enabling smoother interaction and promoting intercultural understanding. The study recommended that digital literacy education should incorporate awareness of the pragmatic functions of emoticons in online discourse.

Fatima et al. (2025) researched on "*Exploring the Role of Visual Semiotics Analysis in Digital Communication for Ideological Purposes: A Study of Memes and Emojis.*" Their study explored the ideological role of visual semiotics in digital

communication, focusing on how memes and emojis serve as tools for constructing and maintaining ideological beliefs, social commentary, and political expression in online environments. As digital platforms increasingly shape discourse, the authors aimed to uncover how these visual signs encode and transmit ideology in everyday communication. The study adopted a qualitative research design, guided by semiotic and discourse analysis frameworks. Using purposive sampling, the researchers selected various memes and emoji-based exchanges from social media and text messaging platforms. These digital texts were analyzed to determine how visual and linguistic elements interact to reinforce or challenge dominant cultural and political ideologies. The study revealed that both memes and emojis act as condensed, highly shareable communication forms that go beyond entertainment; they subtly maintain ideological narratives and shape collective identities. Emojis, for instance, often reinforce emotional or cultural alignment within specific groups, while memes serve as vehicles for political critique, satire, or resistance. Together, they play a critical role in identity formation, group belonging, and ideological solidarity. The findings also indicated that these visual symbols facilitate the creation of digital communities that share ideological viewpoints, thus extending the power of semiotic communication in shaping public opinion. The study concluded that visual semiotics especially through emojis and memes has become a transformative force in digital communication, influencing how individuals construct meaning, negotiate identity, and sustain ideological discourse. The study recommended that scholars and media practitioners pay greater attention to the semiotic dimensions of digital communication, particularly the subtle ideological messages embedded in visual signs. It urged digital users and educators to develop critical visual literacy, enabling them to recognise how memes and emojis influence social perceptions and ideological alignment. Finally, the authors encouraged further research on cross-cultural variations in visual semiotics to better understand how these digital artifacts operate in different social and political contexts.

Collectively, these empirical works highlight the expanding significance of visual semiotics in digital communication but also expose key theoretical and methodological gaps. Thus, there remains a scholarly gap concerning how emojis on WhatsApp serve as semiotic signs that embody, transmit, and transform emotional

meanings across contexts. This present study fills that gap by employing Saussurean and Peircean semiotic frameworks to deconstruct how WhatsApp users encode and decode emotions through emojis, offering a richer semiotic understanding of digital affective communication beyond surface-level emotional or cultural interpretations.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative exploratory design to investigate how WhatsApp emojis function as semiotic signs in digital communication. A semiotic analytical approach, informed by Saussurean and Peircean principles, was combined with digital ethnography to examine how users encode, convey, and interpret emotional meanings through emojis in naturalistic WhatsApp conversations. This design allowed for nuanced analysis of context-dependent and culturally mediated meanings that cannot be captured through quantitative methods.

The study involved twenty purposively selected participants, aged 18–35, comprising university students and young professionals who actively use WhatsApp and frequently employ emojis in their conversations. Purposive sampling ensured that participants had sufficient experience with emoji-based communication to provide rich and relevant data.

Data were collected over a period of six weeks through two complementary methods. Participants voluntarily shared anonymised portions of their WhatsApp chat histories containing emojis. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants to explore their intentions, interpretations, and emotional experiences related to emoji use. Ethical protocols, including informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymisation, were strictly observed throughout the study.

Data were analysed using semiotic deconstruction guided by the frameworks of Saussure and Peirce. The analysis involved identifying and categorizing emojis in chat samples according to their emotional function, such as joy, affection, irony, or sadness. Each emoji was then examined for its denotative meaning, which refers to its literal visual representation, and its connotative meaning, which reflects the deeper emotional, cultural, or contextual significance attached to its use. Peirce's triadic model of representamen, object, and interpretant was applied to interpret the

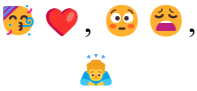
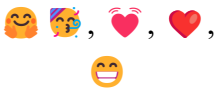
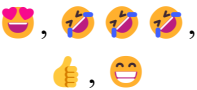
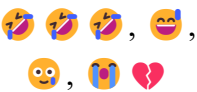
relational and contextual processes of meaning-making. Cultural, relational, and situational contexts were further considered to understand the variability in emoji interpretation across different interactions.

To ensure trustworthiness, credibility was achieved through triangulation of chat analysis and interview data. Member checking allowed participants to validate interpretations of their emoji use, while peer debriefing enhanced analytical reliability. Transparency in coding and interpretation strengthened the study's dependability and confirmability.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion of Findings

Table 1: Presentation of Twenty (20) WhatsApp Chat Histoies

No	Sample Emojis	Frequency/Key Occurrences	Communicative Function	Conversational Tone and Analysis
1.	  ,    , 	Frequent laughter, mild frustration, prayer	Humor, exaggeration, prayerful hope	Playful banter mixed with supportive encouragement; participant expresses concern and optimism.
2.	  ,  , 	Laughter & smiling	Amusement, acknowledgment	Light, humorous exchange; focus on historical trivia and teasing.
3.	 ,  ,  , 	Gratitude, friendly emoji	Affection, approval, encouragement	Polite, supportive conversation with mentorship undertone; minor humor.
4.	   ,  , 	Laughter & amusement	Humor, playful exaggeration	Casual humor about career

				choices and local references; informal and friendly.
5.		Excitement, respect, embarrassment	Enthusiasm, polite acknowledgment	Respectful and excited tone; participant shows humility and warmth.
6.		Gratitude, affection	Politeness, emotional connection	Sparse conversation; expressions of thankfulness and admiration
7.		Warmth, excitement, affection	Friendship, caring, playful engagement	Affectionate banter with check-ins; playful tone with emotional expressiveness.
8.		Laughter, approval	Humor, agreement, playfulness	Humor, joking about logistics; relaxed, friendly, playful.
9.		Laughter, mild despair	Humor, playful exaggeration, shared amusement	Focused on sports banter; playful camaraderie with teasing.
10.		Respect, affirmation	Gratitude, acknowledgment	Formal & respectful tone; blessings and affirmation.
11.		Happiness, agreement	Approval, friendliness	Relationship advice;

				supportive and warm conversation.
12.	😊, 😊, 🙌	Playful shyness, approval	Humor, politeness	Planned event confirmation; friendly and polite.
13.	🥳, 🥳, 🥳, 😊, 🐱	Excitement, surprise	Enthusiasm, mild astonishment	Informal group coordination; playful tone.
14.	😬, 😂, 😂, 🙏	Mild exasperation, laughter, prayer	Humor, hope, support	Friendly banter with admiration; playful teasing in conversation.
15.	🙏, ❤️, 😊, 😊, 🐱, 💔	Gratitude, affection, mild frustration, humor	Respect, warmth, humor, emotional exaggeration	Mentorship & business discussion; emotionally expressive with humor.
16.	😊, 😊, 😊, 🔥, 🎯, 🎥, 💰, ⚡, ✅, 🔒	Politeness, warmth, mild exasperation, excitement, info	Friendliness, engagement, promotion	Routine greetings with polite acknowledgment ; promotional content and encouragement.
17.	😊, 😊, 😂, 😂, 😊, 💕, ❤️, 😊, 😂, 😂, 😂	Gratitude, mild frustration, affection, humor	Support, playfulness, emotional closeness	Financial support discussion; humorous, appreciative, and relational tone.
18.	😬, 🔥, ❤️, 😊, 😂, 😊, 🙌, 😊, 😊, 😊	Excitement, affection, humor, playful shyness	Friendship, amusement, admiration	Playful banter, casual updates, emotional

				warmth and teasing; energetic & informal.
19.	😊, 🤔, 🤔, 🤔, 🤔, 😞, 😞, 🙏, 🙏	Humor, pleading, mild frustration, politeness	Playfulness, emotional response, respect	Teasing about age and gift; light-hearted, informal, emotionally expressive.
20.	😞, 😞, 😞, 😞, 🏃, 🔥, 😞, ☕, 🤔	Frustration, excitement, mild humor, illustrative storytelling	Exaggeration, humor, narrative	Academic humor and storytelling; playful, energetic, relatable, expressive.

Source: WhatsApp Chat of Researcher, 2025

The above table reveals the analysis of emoji use across conversations reveals distinct patterns and functions. Laughter and humor emojis (🤔, 😊, 🤔) dominate most interactions, highlighting humor as a key tool for engagement. Affectionate emojis (❤️, 💕, 🥰, 😊) are common in relational or mentorship exchanges, while politeness and gratitude are frequently expressed with 🙏. Exaggeration or dramatic emojis (😞, 😞, 😞) convey playful distress or mild frustration, and illustrative/contextual emojis (☕, 🔥, 🤔) enhance narrative or emphasize points.

Emojis serve multiple functions: they lighten conversations, express emotions, reinforce politeness, and support storytelling or emphasis. Interaction patterns indicate high emoji density in informal, playful, or mentorship exchanges, with frequent reciprocity suggesting shared emotional tone. Informal messages dominate, while formal interactions show restrained use. Overall, humor, affection, and illustrative emojis are central to meaning-making, engagement, and relational dynamics in these conversations.

Research Question 1: How do WhatsApp emojis operate as semiotic signs in users' emotional communication?

WhatsApp emojis function as semiotic signs that encode emotional states, attitudes, and nuanced interpersonal meanings within digital communication. From a Saussurean perspective, emojis operate as signifiers—visual representations that correspond to abstract emotional or relational concepts, the signifieds. These concepts range from humor and affection to gratitude, frustration, or playful exaggeration (Ali-Chand & Naidu, 2024; Fatima et al., 2025). For instance, in chat histories 1, 4, and 9, laughter emojis (😂, 😄) signify amusement and social bonding, demonstrating how users visually communicate joy and camaraderie. Similarly, emojis like 😬 or 😫 convey mild exasperation, playful despair, or dramatic exaggeration, showing how emotional nuance can be encoded and interpreted even without accompanying text. This highlights that emojis do not merely decorate messages; they operate as meaningful semiotic units that carry emotional weight and relational cues.

Through a Peircean lens, emojis can function as icons, indexes, or symbols, depending on context and user intent (Chen et al., 2024; Fatima et al., 2025). Icons, such as 🔥, visually resemble or metaphorically suggest excitement, energy, or approval. Indexical emojis, like 😊, point to emotional states such as gratitude, affection, or relief, linking signs to real-world feelings or reactions. Symbols, exemplified by ❤️, rely on culturally established conventions to signify love, care, or relational warmth. The triadic nature of Peircean semiotics underscores the versatility of emojis: a single emoji can carry multiple layers of meaning depending on the conversational environment, cultural knowledge, or relational context.

Analysis of the 20 conversation transcripts reveals that users frequently deploy emojis to complement, reinforce, or even replace verbal expressions, effectively enhancing the clarity, affective richness, and efficiency of communication. Humor, affection, gratitude, and mild frustration were among the most consistently represented emotions, indicating that emojis are central to establishing social bonds, signalling empathy, or softening critical messages. Moreover, patterns of emoji usage

demonstrate interpersonal regulation, where users mirror each other's emotional expressions through similar emoji use, creating alignment in tone and shared understanding.

Overall, the semiotic analysis shows that WhatsApp emojis are far more than decorative elements; they are dynamic communicative tools that encode complex emotional, social, and relational information. By acting simultaneously as signifiers, signs, icons, indexes, and symbols, emojis enrich digital conversations, allowing users to convey nuanced affective meanings that text alone may struggle to express. Their consistent use across varying conversations illustrates a systematic semiotic function, where emojis operate as both expressive and relational mediators in asynchronous digital communication.

Research Question 2: What emotional meanings do users attribute to specific emojis in their conversations?

The chat histories indicate that users attribute highly nuanced emotional meanings to emojis, with interpretations shaped by context, prior interactions, and relational dynamics (Chen et al., 2024; Lu, 2022). Emojis function as affective markers that enrich digital communication by encoding subtleties often difficult to convey through text alone. Humour and Playfulness are frequently signalled through 🤪, 😂, and 😹, which denote joking, teasing, or exaggeration. Chats 2, 4, 9, 19, and 20 illustrate how these emojis reinforce a light-hearted tone, foster camaraderie, and create shared laughter among participants. Affection and Relational Warmth are communicated using ❤️, 💕, 😍, and 😊, expressing love, care, friendship, or mentorship, as evident in chats 3, 7, 15, and 18. These emojis serve as relational markers, strengthening bonds and conveying emotional support beyond verbal statements. Gratitude and Politeness are primarily expressed with 🙏, signalling thanks, respect, or blessings (chats 5, 10, 17). This demonstrates how emojis function as social lubricants, maintaining politeness and reinforcing positive social etiquette. Exaggeration and Mild Distress, represented by 🤔, 😬, and 😓, convey playful frustration, minor emotional strain, or dramatic emphasis (chats 1, 20). These emojis allow users to dramatize experiences without introducing conflict, often adding

humour or empathetic nuance. Contextual Illustration, including 🍷 and 🔥, provides metaphorical emphasis or narrative embellishment (chats 18, 20), enhancing storytelling and visual interest in digital exchanges. Overall, these findings support Kusal et al. (2025), who argue that emoji use in multimodal text-emoji communication conveys emotional and semantic subtleties that text alone cannot fully express. Emojis act as affective amplifiers, enabling users to efficiently encode complex emotional states, regulate tone, and negotiate interpersonal meaning in asynchronous digital interactions. The analysis demonstrates that users actively employ emojis not just decoratively, but strategically, to convey intention, manage relational dynamics, and enrich the communicative experience.

Research Question 3: In what ways do cultural and contextual variables affect the interpretation of emojis?

Cultural norms, generational perspectives, and interactional context significantly shape how emojis are interpreted in digital communication (Lu, 2022; Chen et al., 2024). Emojis do not carry fixed meanings; rather, their interpretation depends on the cultural, social, and situational frameworks in which they are used. Generational Differences are evident in chats 2 and 19, where younger users favor emojis such as 🤪, 🐱, and 🤔 to exaggerate humour or playful dramatization. In contrast, older participants or those in more formal exchanges predominantly use 🙏 and 😊 to convey politeness, acknowledgment, or respect, highlighting generational variation in emoji expression and affective style. Cultural Influences also shape emoji use. For example, 🔥 or 😏 are employed in Nigerian digital interactions to convey blended meanings, including humour, admiration, or subtle sarcasm (chats 18, 20). Such localized interpretations demonstrate that emoji meaning is often contextually bound, reflecting shared cultural conventions and linguistic creativity among users. Relational Context further affects meaning. The ❤️ emoji, for instance, signifies respect and admiration in mentorship or professional exchanges, while in friendship chats it communicates warmth, care, or playful affection (chats 3, 7, 15). This indicates that emotional interpretation is contingent upon the closeness, status, and history of the interlocutors. Overall, these findings corroborate Ali-Chand & Naidu (2024) and Lu (2022), showing that emoji interpretation is not universal but mediated

by cultural, social, and situational factors. Contextual variables influence both decoding accuracy and emotional clarity, reinforcing the notion that emojis function as flexible semiotic tools that adapt to users' cultural backgrounds, relational dynamics, and communication purposes.

Research Question 4: How do semiotic theories explain the relationship between emojis and emotional expression?

Semiotic theories provide robust frameworks for understanding the relationship between emojis and emotional expression in digital communication. From a Saussurean perspective, emoji meanings are arbitrary yet socially agreed-upon: a symbol like 🤡 represents laughter not because of any inherent resemblance, but because of collective convention and shared understanding among users. In this sense, emojis operate as visual linguistic units, augmenting paralanguage and enriching the affective dimension of text-based interactions (Ali-Chand & Naidu, 2024).

Peircean semiotics offers a triadic lens that further elucidates the communicative roles of emojis:

- Icons visually resemble or metaphorically represent their referent, such as 🤡 for laughter or ☕ for coffee, allowing for direct recognition of meaning.
- Indexes point to underlying emotional or contextual states, such as 😊 signalling gratitude or relief, or 😡 indicating frustration or playful exasperation, linking signs to lived affective experiences.
- Symbols derive meaning from social convention and cultural norms, as seen with ❤️ (love, care) or 🙏 (respect, blessing), demonstrating that some emoji interpretations rely on shared socio-cultural knowledge rather than visual resemblance.

Analysis of the 20 chat histories reveals that emotional expression in digital communication is inherently multimodal: text and emojis interact synergistically, forming a complex semiotic system. Emojis complement and sometimes replace

verbal cues, enabling users to convey humour, affection, frustration, empathy, or relational nuance with greater clarity and emotional depth than text alone (Fatima et al., 2025; Kusal et al., 2025). By acting as visual affective codes, emojis bridge the limitations of asynchronous communication, enhancing both emotional expression and relational alignment within social semiotic systems. Overall, semiotic theories demonstrate that emojis are dynamic instruments of meaning-making, operating simultaneously as signifiers, icons, indexes, and symbols to encode, amplify, and regulate emotional expression in digital spaces.

Across the 20 conversations, WhatsApp emojis function as semiotic signs that encode complex emotions, allowing users to convey humour, affection, frustration, and relational nuance effectively. Their meanings are context-dependent, shaped by cultural norms, generational perspectives, and the closeness of interlocutors, which influences both interpretation and emotional clarity. Emojis also operate as multimodal enhancers of text, complementing or even substituting verbal expressions to enable more nuanced affective communication. The application of Saussurean and Peircean frameworks highlights the arbitrariness, iconicity, indexicality, and social convention underlying emoji use, demonstrating how these visual signs carry rich semiotic potential. These insights expand existing literature (Ali-Chand & Naidu, 2024; Chen et al., 2024; Fatima et al., 2025) by providing a comprehensive semiotic analysis of WhatsApp emoji use among Nigerian users, grounded in authentic chat histories.

Conclusion

This study concludes that WhatsApp emojis constitute a dynamic semiotic system that visually mediates emotional communication in digital spaces. Their meanings are not fixed but are constructed through the interplay of sign, context, and interpretation, reflecting both individual expression and shared social conventions. Through semiotic analysis, emojis emerge as complex signs that reveal, amplify, and sometimes reshape human emotion in virtual interactions. They embody the convergence of technology, culture, and affect, signalling a shift toward visual-emotional literacy in contemporary communication and underscoring the growing importance of multimodal semiotic competence in understanding digital interaction.

Recommendations

Based on the study findings, this study recommends

1. Educators and communicators should integrate emoji literacy into digital communication training to enhance emotional clarity and engagement.
2. App designers should consider culturally sensitive emoji interpretations to improve user experience across diverse contexts.
3. Users should be aware of context, relational dynamics, and cultural norms when using emojis to avoid miscommunication.
4. Future research should explore emoji use across different platforms and cultures to expand understanding of digital emotional expression.

References

1. Ali-Chand, Z., & Naidu, R. (2024). Exploring the impact of emojis on paralanguage in social media communication among university students. *English Language Teaching*, 17(9), 84.
2. Berlanga-Fernández, I., & Reyes, E. (2024). The digital approach to semiotics: A systematic review. *Text & Talk*, 44(1), 119–140.
3. Chen, Y., Yang, X., Howman, H., & Filik, R. (2024). Individual differences in emoji comprehension: Gender, age, and culture. *Plos one*, 19(2), e0297379.
4. Chukwu, O. J. (2023). Interrogating the online internet-based broadcast media stations: Platforms, implications and emerged paradigms. *Journal of management and science*, 13(3), 74-81.
5. Crystal, D. (2011). *Internet linguistics: A student guide*. Routledge.
6. Danesi, M. (2016). *The semiotics of emoji: The rise of visual language in the age of the Internet*. Bloomsbury Academic.
7. Danesi, M. (2017). *Understanding emoji communication*. In S. D. Langer (Ed.), *Digital Semiotics* (pp. 45–63). Routledge.

8. Evans, V. (2017). *The emoji code: How smiley faces, love hearts, and thumbs up are changing the way we communicate*. Picador.
9. Fatima, N., Ejaz, S. J., & Miran, G. (2025). Exploring the Role of Visual Semiotics Analysis in Digital Communication for Ideological Purposes; A Study of Memes and Emojis. *Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review*, 3(1), 345-364.
10. Gawne, L., & McCulloch, G. (2019). Emoji as digital gestures. *Language@Internet*, 17(1), 1–25.
11. Gualberto, C., & Kress, G. (2019). Contemporary landscapes of visual and digital communication: The interplay of social, semiotic, and technological change. In E. Margolis & L. Pauwels (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of visual research methods* (pp. 574–590). SAGE Publications.
12. Kakonge, L., Moghaddam, S., Kim, M., Phoenix, M., Di Rezze, B., Wiseman-Hakes, C., & Turkstra, L. S. (2025). How are adolescents with acquired brain injury using computer-mediated communication?: a systematic review of the literature. *Disability and Rehabilitation*, 1-21.
13. Kusal, S., Patil, S., & Kotecha, K. (2025). Multimodal text-emoji fusion using deep neural networks for text-based emotion detection in online communication. *Journal of Big Data*, 12(1), 32.
14. Lu, Y. (2022). “Do you know what I mean?” An intercultural cross-generational study on emoji interpretation (Doctoral dissertation, Radboud University).
15. Miller, H., Thebault-Spieker, J., Chang, S., Johnson, I., Terveen, L., & Hecht, B. (2016). “Blissfully happy” or “ready to fight”: Varying interpretations of emoji. *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*, 10(1), 259–268.
16. Peirce, C. S. (1931–1958). *Collected papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss, & A. Burks, Eds.). Harvard University Press.

17. Prada, M., Rodrigues, D., Garrido, M. V., Lopes, D., Cavalheiro, B., & Gaspar, R. (2018). Motives, frequency and attitudes toward emoji and emoticon use. *Telematics and Informatics*, 35(7), 1925–1934.
18. Riordan, M. A. (2017). The communicative role of non-face emojis: Affect and disambiguation. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 76, 75–86.
19. Saussure, F. de. (1983). *Course in general linguistics* (C. Bally & A. Sechehaye, Eds.; R. Harris, Trans.). Duckworth. (Original work published 1916)
20. Shaari, A. H. (2020). Accentuating illocutionary forces: Emoticons as speech act realization strategies in a multicultural online communication environment. *3L: Language. Linguistics, Literature*, 26(1), 135-155.
21. Stark, L. (2018). The emoticon economy: The cultural work of digital feeling. *Social Media + Society*, 4(1), 1–11.
22. Stark, L., & Crawford, K. (2015). The conservatism of emoji: Work, affect, and communication. *Social Media + Society*, 1(2), 1–11.
23. Tariq, M. U. (2025). Emojis and emoticons: Decoding multicultural meanings in online communication. In *Sociocultural and multicultural meanings in online communication* (pp. 23–48). IGI Global Scientific Publishing.
24. Тилепбаева, У. (2025). Multimodal communication in the digital age. *Инновации в современной лингвистике и преподавании языков*, 1(1), 115-118.
25. Udoh, C., & Ononye, C. O. (2025). Pragmatic functions of emojis in cross-cultural online communication. *Igwebuike Journal: An African Journal of Arts & Humanities*, 11(6), 101–120.
26. Wagener, A. (2020). Hypernarrativity, storytelling, and the relativity of truth: Digital semiotics of communication and interaction. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 2(1), 147–169.

27. Weissman, B., & Tanner, J. (2018). A semiotic analysis of emoji: Communication, meaning, and substitution in digital discourse. *Social Semiotics*, 28(2), 219–237.
28. Zaheer, A., & Safdar, G. (2025). Emojis as Emotional Expression in Online Communication: Replacing the Words in Digital Era. *Online Media and Society*, 6(2), 72-88.