

# The Semiotics and Psychology of Emojis in Social Media: A Cinematic and Survey-Based Exploration

*Eshanvi N Samaga*

*Computer Science Engineering Student at RNS Institute of technology*

## **Abstract**

*Methodologically, this study combines qualitative and quantitative insights. A structured questionnaire was distributed digitally to various participants across a wide age range and geographic locations. Findings were triangulated with cultural representations in cinema and analyzed using basic thematic coding. The central aim is not only to understand how emojis function semiotically but also to unpack their emotional resonance and generational perception.*

*In the age of digitized expression, emojis have become central to nonverbal communication on social media. Far from being mere embellishments, these visual symbols encapsulate emotions, intentions, and social cues. Through an interdisciplinary lens, this paper examines the role of emojis in online communication by referencing popular cultural texts such as *The Emoji Movie* (2017), *Inside Out* (2015), and Google's short film *Mummy, Selfie, Dad* (2023). Additionally, this study integrates survey-based insights to reveal generational attitudes and psychological associations with emoji use. The aim is to humanize the emoji phenomenon while grounding it in semiotic theory, communication psychology, and digital culture.*

## **1. Introduction**

Language is evolving, and emojis are at the frontier of this transformation. As digital natives increasingly rely on visual shorthand to convey tone and emotion, emojis serve as essential tools in online conversations. Despite their playful appearance, emojis operate within complex cultural, emotional, and psychological frameworks. This paper explores how emojis function beyond aesthetics and humor, functioning instead as emotional proxies, identity markers, and even tools for cross-cultural communication.

By drawing from cinematic narratives like *The Emoji Movie*, which personifies emojis within a hierarchical society, and *Inside Out*, which visualizes emotional complexity, we ground our understanding of emojis not just as tools but as symbols of human cognition and connection. Google's *Mummy, Selfie, Dad* adds a generational lens, showing the divide and unifying power of emojis across age groups.

## **2. Literature Review**

Emojis are rooted in the concept of semiotics, where signs (emojis) signify meanings shaped by context. According to Saussure and Barthes, signs gain significance through cultural codes. Emojis thus carry denotative meanings (e.g., a heart symbolizing love) and connotative layers (e.g., different meanings of 🤔 depending on subculture or context).

Academic research indicates that emojis enhance message clarity, mitigate miscommunication, and even substitute tone in text-based messages. Furthermore, studies in communication psychology suggest that emojis can increase empathy and improve digital relationships by mimicking face-to-face nonverbal cues.

**Derks, D., Bos, A. E. R., & von Grumbkow, J. (2008)** This research examines the employment of emoticons in computer-mediated communication (CMC), i.e., how they are used to pursue social motives and differ in the social situation. Derks et al. contend that emoticons are not simple decorations or frivolous tools; instead, they also serve significant functions in expressing emotional tone, clarifying intention, and sustaining social harmony in online interactions. Emoticons assist in replacing the absence of non-verbal cues (e.g., tone of voice and facial expressions) for communications on the net. Frequency of use of emoticons was much higher in socio-emotional messages (e.g., humor, encouragement, support) than in task-oriented or factual messages. Women were used more often by female subjects compared to male subjects, corroborating prior studies indicating differences based

on gender for the expression of emotions on the net. Formal/informal context as well as the social relationship between the communicators (stranger/friends) were also among the determinants of emoticon use.

**Kelly, R., & Watts, L. (2015)** Emojis are not just employed to signify emotion, but also social memory reinforcement, creating personal meaning, and relational identity within users. Users will recycle standard emojis to convey a fresh meaning in their relationship in a similar way that private languages or nicknames function in close relationships. The article reports qualitative findings, in the form of user interviews and case studies, demonstrating how friends and couples employ emoji to produce presence and continuity in ongoing communication.

**Highfield, T., & Leaver, T. (2016)** The authors contend that emojis, along with other visual signals, are integral to the way users generate meaning, feeling, and personality in online discourse. Emojis are regarded as cultural artefacts—not only symbolizing emotion but contributing to cultural discourse. The research identifies sites such as Instagram as multimodal, where image, text, and emoji occur together to build rich meanings. It refers to the importance of digital methods (e.g., hashtag studies, metadata analysis, visual ethnography) in exploring the usage and evolution of emojis on platforms like Instagram.

**Evans, V. (2017)** Emojis are a "non-verbal code"—a visual mechanism that supplements and elaborates the verbal, such as tone of voice or face in face-to-face communication. Evans contests that emojis are not a language but are included in a "paralanguage" used to help infer intention and feeling behind words. The book illustrates how emojis can avoid misunderstandings, make messages gentle, and enhance interpersonal relationships online. It also touches briefly on cross-cultural interpretations of emojis, noting that although emojis may appear universal in nature, their meaning is frequently contextually determined and culturally nuanced.

**Danesi, M. (2016)** Emojis are regarded as a new kind of pictographic communication, similar to the beginnings of symbolic writing systems (i.e., Egyptian hieroglyphic writing or Chinese ideograms). Danesi categorizes emojis as "semiospheres", where meaning is derived from cultural, contextual, and affective cues. He explores how emojis are not just emotional messages but also narrative devices, identity tags, and culture markers. The volume addresses ambiguity and polysemy (multimodal meaning) in emoji meaning, noting that their meaning can shift by culture, platform, and person. Emphasis is placed on how emojis fill the emotional gap in digital text-based communication and enhance relational warmth and communicative transparency.

### **3. Emojis Through a Cinematic Lens**

#### **3.1 The Emoji Movie (2017)**

In *The Emoji Movie*, each emoji character is programmed to express a single emotion—except for Gene, who is “multi-expressional.” This conflict mirrors real-life resistance to binary expression in a world where emotions are fluid. The movie allegorizes societal pressures to conform, identity construction, and emotional diversity—key themes in online self-expression.

#### **3.2 Inside Out (2015)**

Pixar’s *Inside Out* anthropomorphizes core emotions—Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear, and Disgust—to explore how humans process complex emotional states. This framework resonates with emoji usage, as users often deploy multiple emojis to reflect emotional nuance. For instance, combining 😊 with 😞 may suggest bittersweet amusement rather than pure joy.

#### **3.3 Google’s Mummy, Selfie, Dad (2023)**

This poignant short film showcases generational gaps in digital communication. A father tries to understand his daughter’s social world through emojis and selfies, eventually bonding through mutual learning. The film illustrates emojis’ potential to transcend generational and emotional barriers, aligning with the idea that digital symbols can foster genuine human connection.

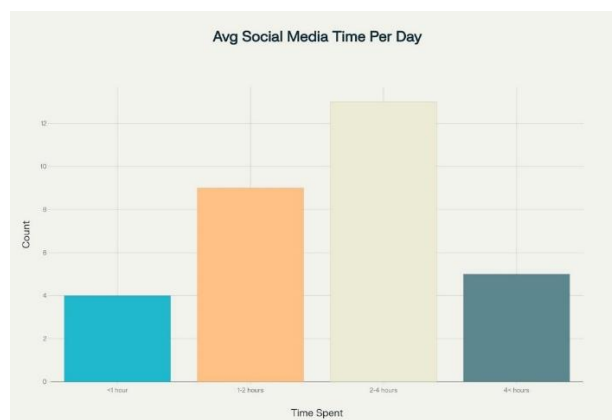
### **4. Analysis and interpretation**

#### **4.1. Demographics and Social Media Usage**

- **Age groups:** Participants range from 18 to 51 years, with a concentration in the 18-25 age group.
- **Gender:** Two categories, Male and Female, with females being the majority.
- **Education:** Mostly Graduation and Post-graduation levels.

- **Average time spent on social media per day:**
  - Majority spend between 2-4 hours daily (13 respondents).
  - Others range from less than 1 hour to more than 4 hours.

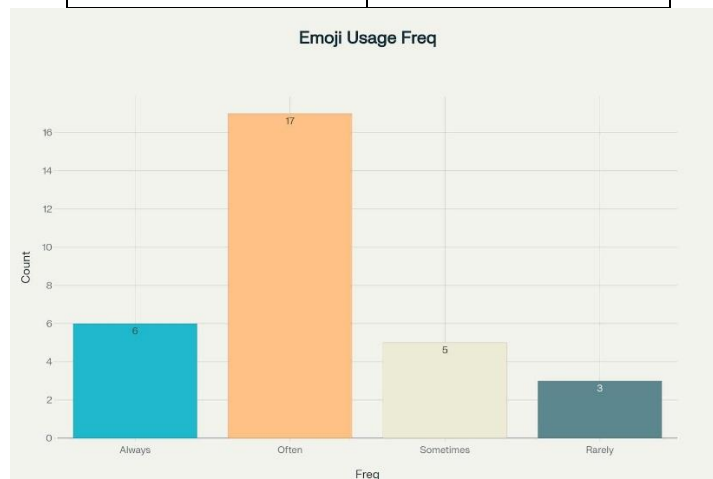
Average Time Spent on social media per Day	Number of Respondents
2-4 hours	13
1-2 hours	9
4+ hours	5
<1 hour	4



#### 4.2 Emoji Usage Frequency

- Most respondents use emojis **often** (17) or **always** (6) in social media communication.
- Some use emojis **sometimes** (5) or **rarely** (3).

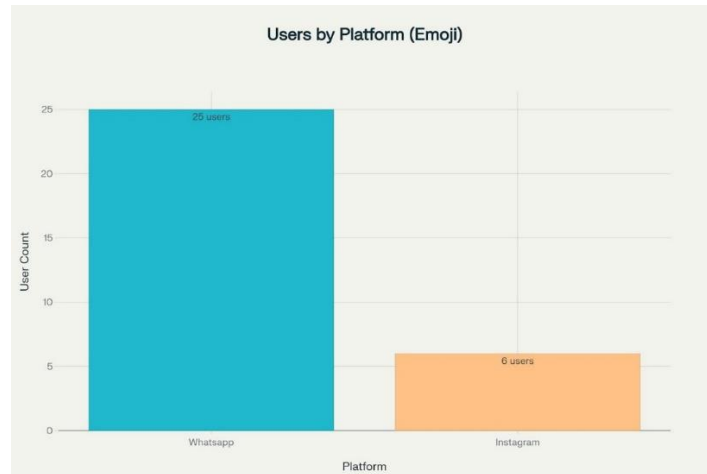
Emoji Usage Frequency	Number of Respondents
Often	17
Always	6
Sometimes	5
Rarely	3



**4.3 Platforms Used for Emoji Communication**

- **WhatsApp** is the dominant platform for emoji use (25 respondents).
- **Instagram** is the next most common platform (6 respondents).

Platform	Number of Respondents
WhatsApp	25
Instagram	6



**4.4 Purpose of Using Emojis**

Participants use emojis primarily to:

- Express emotions
- Add humour
- Replace words
- Clarify tone

This shows that emojis play a major role in expressing nuances in digital communication

**4.5 Interpretation and Cultural Influence of Emojis**

- Most respondents believe emoji interpretation **changes depending on context**.
- Majority have **experienced misunderstandings** due to emoji use.
- On a scale of 1 to 5, most rate the **cultural influence on emoji interpretation** as moderate to very high.
- Emojis are generally seen as helpful in **accurately expressing feelings** (average rating around 4 out of 5).
- Most agree that emojis **reduce emotional misunderstandings** in text communication.

**4.6 Emotional Associations with Emojis**

- **Positive Emotions:** Emojis like 😊 😄 😍 🍷 ❤️ 😌 are commonly linked with happiness and positivity.
- **Negative Emotions:** Emojis such as 😞 😡 🧐 🙄 😠 are associated with sadness or anger.

This reflects strong intuitive and symbolic associations with facial and expressive emojis.

**4.7 Summary Interpretation**

- The survey indicates that emojis are widely used, especially on WhatsApp, primarily to express emotions and add humor.
- Emoji use is frequent among young adults with higher education.
- There is a strong belief that emojis help convey feelings more accurately and reduce misunderstandings, though context and cultural background significantly influence interpretation.

- Positive emojis are associated with happiness and friendliness, while negative emojis convey sadness or anger.
- Interest exists in exploring emojis' emotional and cultural meanings further, with many open to documentaries or films on the topic.

This analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of emoji use patterns, perceptions, and cultural impact in social media communication among the surveyed group.

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1 Emotional Encoding and Empathy**

Drawing from *Inside Out*, we understand that emotions are not isolated—they blend. Emojis offer a canvas for this blend, enabling users to layer feelings without extensive explanation. This aligns with emotional intelligence theories, suggesting emojis can promote emotional literacy in young users.

### **5.2 Identity and Non-Conformity**

Gene's journey in *The Emoji Movie* symbolizes resistance to emotional stereotyping. Similarly, emoji users often resist the “one emoji per emotion” model. For instance, someone might use 🙄 ironically to convey confidence, boredom, or sarcasm depending on the context—a practice especially prevalent among Gen Z.

### **5.3 Intergenerational Dialogue**

As shown in *Mummy, Selfie, Dad*, emojis serve as a bridge across generations. While older adults may initially misunderstand emoji meanings, consistent exposure fosters emotional fluency. This reflects Vygotsky's theory of social learning—digital tools like emojis can be internalized through interpersonal engagement.

## **6. Conclusion**

Emojis are not mere digital novelties—they are cultural artifacts that reflect and shape human emotion, identity, and connection. Through cinematic metaphors and survey insights, this paper illustrates how emojis are evolving into a dynamic visual language. As our modes of communication continue to digitize, the humble emoji stands as a powerful symbol of the human desire to feel seen, heard, and understood.

## **References**

1. Derks, D., Bos, A. E. R., & von Grumbkow, J. (2008). Emoticons in computer-mediated communication: Social motives and social context. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 11(1), 99-101.
2. Kelly, R., & Watts, L. (2015). Characterising the inventive appropriation of emoji as relationally meaningful in mediated close personal relationships. *Experience Design*, ACM.
3. *The Emoji Movie*. Directed by Tony Leondis, Sony Pictures Animation, 2017.
4. *Inside Out*. Directed by Pete Docter, Pixar Animation Studios, 2015.
5. Google. *Mummy, Selfie, Dad*. 2023. [Short Film].
6. Highfield, T., & Leaver, T. (2016). Instagrammatics and digital methods: Studying visual social media, from selfies and GIFs to memes and emojis. *Communication Research and Practice*, 2(1), 47–62.
7. Evans, V. (2017). *The Emoji Code: The Linguistics Behind Smiley Faces and Scaredy Cats*. Picador.
8. Danesi, M. (2016). *The Semiotics of Emoji: The Rise of Visual Language in the Age of the Internet*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.