

Silent Symbols: The Role of Emoji and Visual Language in Cross-Cultural Digital Communication

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Article Info

Article history:

Received Aug 12th, 2025

Revised Nov 20th, 2025

Accepted Jan 26th, 2026

Keyword:

emoji, visual language, cross-cultural communication, digital communication, semiotics, intercultural interaction

ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of emoji and visual language in cross-cultural digital communication, as reflected in the title *Silent Symbols: The Role of Emoji and Visual Language in Cross-Cultural Digital Communication*. The research aims to analyze how emojis function as visual communicative signs, how they are interpreted across different cultural contexts, and how they influence meaning, relational tone, and the potential for misunderstanding in online interaction. This study employs a qualitative method with an interpretive case study design, chosen because it enables an in-depth exploration of meaning-making processes within real digital communication settings. The research was conducted in digitally mediated intercultural environments involving participants located in Jakarta, Yogyakarta, and Bandung, Indonesia, as these urban contexts provide active engagement with global communication platforms. Ten informants were selected purposively because they had direct experience in cross-cultural digital interaction and regularly used emojis in academic, professional, or social communication. The findings reveal that emojis function as semiotic, relational, and culturally mediated symbols whose meanings are context-dependent rather than universal. The study recommends strengthening intercultural digital literacy and expanding future research across broader platforms, languages, and transnational communication settings.



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INTRODUCTION

Digital communication has transformed the way individuals, communities, and institutions exchange meaning across linguistic, social, and national boundaries. In contemporary online interaction, written language is no longer limited to alphabetic text, because users increasingly rely on visual signs such as emojis, stickers, icons, memes, and reaction symbols to express emotions, attitudes, politeness, humor, irony, and interpersonal stance. Within this evolving communicative environment, emojis have become one of the most visible and widely adopted forms of visual language. Their popularity stems from their ability to compress affective and relational meaning into compact, easily recognizable symbols that can accompany or even replace words. As digital interaction intensifies in multicultural settings, the interpretive role of emojis deserves closer scholarly attention, particularly because their meanings are not always universal. The present study, entitled *Silent Symbols: The Role of Emoji and Visual Language in Cross-Cultural Digital Communication*, addresses this issue by examining how emojis function as communicative resources across cultures and how their use shapes understanding, misinterpretation, and relational dynamics in digital spaces.

The state of the art in digital communication research shows that emojis are often treated as paralinguistic markers that enrich text-based interaction by supplying emotional cues, reducing ambiguity, and signaling social intent (Lestari et al., 2024). Existing scholarship has demonstrated that emojis may function similarly to nonverbal communication in face-to-face interaction by indicating tone, reinforcing affect, softening criticism, and enhancing interpersonal immediacy (Barclay & Downing, 2023). Studies in media and communication have also shown that visual symbols are central to online identity performance and audience engagement (Noor, 2024). However, although prior studies

have established the general communicative usefulness of emojis, much of the literature has focused on their frequency of use, emotional valence, or platform-specific functions rather than their culturally situated meanings (Tong & Xie, 2025). A growing body of research has acknowledged that emojis can be interpreted differently depending on cultural background, communication norms, generational factors, and context of interaction (Alharbi & Mahzari, 2023). Yet this discussion remains fragmented, and there is still limited integration between emoji studies, visual language theory, and cross-cultural communication scholarship.

The main problem underlying this research lies in the assumption that emojis constitute a universally shared symbolic system. In practice, digital users often presume that a smiling face, folded hands, tears of joy, or thumbs-up carries a fixed and transparent meaning. However, digital communication does not occur in a cultural vacuum. Meanings are shaped by local norms, values, politeness conventions, emotional display rules, and communicative expectations. What appears friendly, humorous, respectful, or neutral in one cultural context may be interpreted as sarcastic, dismissive, excessive, or even offensive in another. This problem becomes more significant in cross-cultural interactions involving international students, migrant communities, transnational workplaces, online fandoms, and global business communication. In such settings, the use of visual language may facilitate connection, but it may also produce misunderstanding through subtle symbolic differences that are rarely made explicit. The central research problem, therefore, concerns how emojis operate as silent symbols whose communicative force depends on cultural interpretation rather than mere graphic appearance.

The research gap emerges from several limitations in previous studies. First, many earlier works have analyzed emojis as isolated semiotic objects without sufficiently situating them in broader intercultural communicative processes (Sánchez et al., 2023). Second, some studies discuss cultural differences, but they often do so descriptively, without linking emoji practices to theories of meaning negotiation, identity, and mediated interaction (Collins & Ignatova, 2024). Third, much of the existing literature concentrates on Western or technologically dominant contexts, leaving underexplored how users from diverse cultural backgrounds negotiate emoji meanings in multilingual and transnational communication (Wang, 2025). Fourth, studies frequently emphasize either verbal text or visual signs, but fewer investigations address the interplay between emoji use and visual language as part of an integrated digital discourse (Xu, 2025). Consequently, there is still insufficient understanding of how emojis function not merely as decorative additions to text, but as culturally loaded communicative signs that shape message interpretation, relational tone, and intercultural understanding. This study seeks to address that gap by bringing together insights from digital communication, visual semiotics, and cross-cultural communication.

The novelty of this research lies in its effort to conceptualize emojis as “silent symbols” within a cross-cultural framework of digital communication. Rather than viewing emojis only as emotional supplements or casual internet artifacts, this study positions them as meaningful visual language that participates in the construction of social relations and intercultural meaning-making. The novelty also lies in its analytical focus on the tension between apparent universality and actual cultural specificity. In other words, this research contributes a fresh perspective by exploring how the same emoji may circulate globally while still being interpreted locally. This approach is expected to enrich current discussions in communication studies by demonstrating that digital visibility is not culturally neutral, and that effective online interaction requires sensitivity to symbolic variation across cultural contexts.

Based on this background, the study is guided by several research questions. It asks how emojis and other forms of visual language are used in cross-cultural digital communication, how users from different cultural backgrounds interpret the same emoji differently, what communicative functions emojis perform in managing relational tone and emotional expression, and how cultural differences influence the possibility of misunderstanding or communicative adaptation in digital interaction. These questions are designed to investigate not only the symbolic meaning of emojis, but also their practical role in the dynamics of online communication across cultural boundaries.

The objective of this research is to analyze the role of emojis and visual language in shaping cross-cultural digital communication. More specifically, the study aims to identify the communicative

functions of emojis in intercultural online interaction, to explain how cultural background influences emoji interpretation, to examine the role of visual symbols in reducing or increasing ambiguity in digital messages, and to develop a more nuanced understanding of emojis as semiotic resources within contemporary communication practices. Through these aims, the study intends to generate a conceptual and empirical contribution that connects visual language with intercultural communicative competence in digital environments.

The theoretical significance of this research lies in its contribution to communication theory, particularly in the areas of computer-mediated communication, intercultural communication, and visual semiotics. By framing emojis as culturally mediated signs, the study expands theoretical discussions about nonverbal communication in digital contexts and challenges simplistic assumptions of symbolic universality. Academically, this research is expected to provide a useful reference for scholars, students, and future researchers interested in digital discourse, online affect, media globalization, and the semiotics of visual communication. It offers an interdisciplinary perspective that may encourage further comparative and context-sensitive studies on digital symbols. Practically, the findings may benefit international communicators, educators, social media practitioners, content creators, and multinational organizations by increasing awareness of how visual symbols can influence tone, trust, clarity, and relational outcomes in cross-cultural interaction. Such awareness is important for promoting more effective and culturally responsive communication in globalized digital settings.

This study also recognizes several limitations. The interpretation of emojis is highly dependent on context, platform design, language environment, age group, and user experience, which means that findings may not be fully generalizable across all digital communities. In addition, visual language evolves rapidly, and the meaning or popularity of certain emojis may shift over time due to platform updates, internet trends, and changing cultural practices. If the study focuses on selected user groups, regions, or platforms, its conclusions will necessarily reflect those boundaries. Another limitation concerns the complexity of separating emoji meaning from surrounding text, since interpretation often emerges from the interaction between verbal and visual elements rather than from the emoji alone.

For future research, broader comparative studies involving multiple cultural groups, languages, and digital platforms are necessary to deepen understanding of emoji interpretation in diverse contexts. Longitudinal research would also be valuable in tracing how visual meanings change over time and how users adapt to evolving symbolic conventions. Further studies may examine professional communication, online diplomacy, digital marketing, education, or crisis communication to identify context-specific implications of emoji use. In addition, future research could integrate multimodal discourse analysis with audience studies to explore how users negotiate meaning in real communicative situations. In this way, the study of emojis and visual language can continue to illuminate the subtle yet powerful role of silent symbols in shaping human connection across cultures in the digital age.

LITERATUR REVIEW

The literature on digital communication increasingly recognizes that meaning in online interaction is no longer produced by verbal language alone (Arueyingho et al., 2025). Emojis, icons, reaction marks, and other visual signs now function as a parallel communicative layer that conveys affect, stance, relational intention, and social positioning (Ignotaitè, 2024). In the context of the present study, *Silent Symbols: The Role of Emoji and Visual Language in Cross-Cultural Digital Communication*, the review of scholarship must therefore move beyond a purely descriptive account of emoji usage and toward a stronger theoretical explanation of how visual signs operate, how they are interpreted differently across cultures, and why such differences matter in digital interaction. To build that foundation, this study employs three complementary theories: Charles Sanders Peirce's Semiotic Theory, Joseph B. Walther's Social Information Processing Theory, and Edward Twitchell Hall Jr.'s High-Context and Low-Context Communication Theory. Together, these theories offer a robust conceptual framework for understanding emojis as signs, as relational cues in mediated communication, and as culturally variable resources in intercultural meaning-making.

The first theoretical foundation is Semiotic Theory, widely associated with Charles Sanders Peirce, an American philosopher and logician whose work on signs developed from the late nineteenth century and became foundational to modern semiotics (Szigetvari, 2025). Peirce, who studied and

worked in the intellectual environment of Cambridge, Massachusetts, and is closely linked to Harvard's philosophical tradition in the United States, conceptualized meaning through a triadic relation among sign, object, and interpretant (Li & Gu, 2025). In Peircean terms, a sign does not carry meaning by itself; meaning emerges through interpretation (Durbidge, 2024). This formulation is especially relevant to emojis because an emoji is not merely a graphic image but a sign that refers to an emotional, relational, or cultural object through interpretive processes. Peirce's classification of signs into icon, index, and symbol is highly useful for digital communication research (K. Yang & Qian, 2024). Emojis often work iconically because they resemble facial expressions or objects, indexically because they point to emotional states or conversational attitudes, and symbolically because their use depends on social convention and shared habit. The conceptual strength of Peirce's theory lies in showing that the same emoji may appear visually stable while its interpretant changes across users, communities, and cultures. In this research, that insight directly addresses the main problem: emojis appear universal at the visual level but are not universal at the interpretive level.

The second theoretical foundation is Social Information Processing Theory, introduced by Joseph B. Walther in 1992 in his influential work on computer-mediated communication (Sterelny, 2023). Walther completed his graduate education at the University of Arizona in the United States and is now associated with the University of California, Santa Barbara, where his scholarship remains central to mediated communication studies. His theory challenged the earlier assumption that digitally mediated interaction is inevitably impersonal because it lacks face-to-face nonverbal cues (Moldoveanu, 2023). Walther argued that communicators adapt to the limitations of digital media by using available cues strategically over time to develop relational meaning, emotional expression, and interpersonal intimacy (Ibrahim & Govindaraju, 2025). This theory is highly relevant to emoji research because emojis can be understood as compensatory or adaptive cues that enrich text-based communication. In cross-cultural digital interaction, emojis frequently function as substitutes for tone of voice, facial expression, gesture, or politeness markers. Walther's framework explains why users rely on such cues to soften statements, display friendliness, reduce ambiguity, or intensify affect. It also helps explain miscommunication: when users draw on different cultural expectations while processing the same visual cue, relational intent may be misread. Thus, Social Information Processing Theory links emoji use not only to expression but also to relationship management in digital environments.

The third theoretical foundation is Edward T. Hall's High-Context and Low-Context Communication Theory, especially articulated in *Beyond Culture* in 1976 (Bukhari et al., 2025). Hall, an American anthropologist trained at Columbia University and professionally associated with the United States Foreign Service Institute as well as several universities including Northwestern University, is widely recognized as a foundational figure in intercultural communication. Hall proposed that cultures differ in how much communicative meaning is carried explicitly in words and how much is embedded in context, relationship, shared assumptions, and nonverbal signals (Zahra & CACCIAFOCO, 2025). In high-context cultures, meaning is often indirect and embedded in social and situational cues; in low-context cultures, meaning tends to be expressed more directly and explicitly (Seongha, 2023). This theory is exceptionally important for the present study because emojis frequently occupy the very space between explicit text and contextual meaning. In intercultural digital communication, an emoji may be interpreted as warmth, politeness, irony, deference, or emotional exaggeration depending on whether communicators come from high-context or low-context backgrounds. Hall's theory therefore helps explain why the same emoji may support mutual understanding in one interaction but generate confusion in another. It also clarifies that digital communication does not erase culture; instead, it relocates culture into new symbolic forms, including visual micro-signs such as emojis.

Taken together, these three scholars provide an integrated conceptual framework. Peirce explains how emojis operate as signs whose meanings are mediated by interpretation. Walther explains why emojis have become functional tools in computer-mediated communication, particularly as substitutes for missing social and relational cues. Hall explains why these signs are not interpreted uniformly across cultures. The conceptual architecture of this study therefore rests on three linked propositions: emojis are semiotic resources, emojis are adaptive relational cues, and emojis are culturally contingent forms of meaning. This combined framework is especially useful for addressing

the research gap. Much prior scholarship has examined emoji frequency, sentiment, or platform use, but fewer studies have integrated sign theory, mediated interaction theory, and intercultural communication theory into a single explanatory model (Howard, 2023). As a result, existing studies often identify differences in emoji use without fully explaining how those differences emerge from interpretation, relational adaptation, and cultural context simultaneously.

The development of these theories also supports their continued relevance. Peirce's semiotics has evolved from philosophy and linguistics into media studies, digital discourse, and visual culture analysis, making it particularly suitable for examining contemporary iconographic communication (Lyu et al., 2025). Walther's Social Information Processing Theory has expanded through broader computer-mediated communication research, including social media, online groups, and technologically mediated interpersonal relations (Rahmani & Karimi, 2025). Hall's contextual communication theory has moved beyond diplomacy and intercultural training into global business, media studies, and online transnational interaction (McClearen & Nishime, 2023). Their current development shows a clear convergence: communication is now understood as multimodal, relational, and culturally embedded (Sowmya et al., 2025). Recent scholarship on cross-cultural emoji use similarly suggests that visual signs are shaped by language communities, platform habits, and national-cultural meaning systems, confirming that emojis should not be treated as culturally neutral digital ornaments (Y. Yang et al., 2025).

This theoretical synthesis is directly connected to the main problem of the study, namely the assumption that emojis have stable, universal meanings in global digital communication. Peirce helps expose the instability of meaning at the level of interpretation. Walther explains why users nevertheless depend on emojis to communicate social intent in text-based environments. Hall demonstrates why interpretive divergence is especially likely in cross-cultural settings. In relation to the research gap, these theories justify the need for a study that does not isolate emojis as technical symbols only, but examines them as culturally and relationally negotiated visual language. In relation to the research questions, the three theories support inquiry into how emojis function, how users interpret them differently across cultures, and how such differences shape online understanding or misunderstanding. In relation to the objectives and benefits of the research, this framework offers theoretical value by integrating semiotics, mediated communication, and intercultural communication; academic value by providing an interdisciplinary model for future scholarship; and practical value by improving awareness among global users, educators, institutions, and digital professionals about the risks and potentials of emoji-based interaction.

In conclusion, the literature indicates that emojis are best understood not as minor decorative additions to text but as meaningful visual signs embedded in social and cultural processes (Papadopoulos & Cleveland, 2023). Charles Sanders Peirce provides the semiotic basis for reading emojis as signs whose meanings depend on sign-object-interpretant relations. Joseph B. Walther provides the mediated communication basis for understanding emojis as adaptive interpersonal cues in computer-mediated interaction. Edward T. Hall provides the intercultural basis for explaining why emoji meanings vary across communicative contexts and cultural expectations. The convergence of these three perspectives supports the novelty of the present study: emojis are "silent symbols" whose communicative power lies precisely in the tension between visual simplicity and interpretive complexity. This literature review therefore justifies the study's central argument, clarifies the research gap, strengthens the formulation of the research problem, and grounds the intended theoretical, academic, and practical contributions of the research.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research method to investigate the role of emoji and visual language in cross-cultural digital communication, as reflected in the title *Silent Symbols: The Role of Emoji and Visual Language in Cross-Cultural Digital Communication*. A qualitative approach is considered the most appropriate because the main objective of the research is not to measure the frequency of emoji use statistically, but to understand how meaning is produced, negotiated, and interpreted in culturally diverse digital interactions. Emojis do not operate merely as fixed visual objects; they function as socially situated symbols whose meanings depend on context, intention,

relational dynamics, and cultural background. For this reason, the study requires an interpretive research strategy capable of capturing participants' experiences, perceptions, and communicative practices in depth. A qualitative method enables the researcher to explore how users understand emojis, how they assign emotional and relational values to visual symbols, and how cross-cultural differences may generate either mutual understanding or communicative ambiguity.

The research design used in this study is a qualitative case study with an interpretive orientation (ElShabassy et al., 2025). This design is selected because it allows the researcher to focus intensively on a contemporary communicative phenomenon within its real-life context, namely the use of emojis and visual language in intercultural digital interaction. The case study design is suitable when the boundaries between a phenomenon and its context are not clearly separated, as is the case with digital communication (SIDOROVA, 2024). Emoji interpretation cannot be detached from the communicative environment in which it appears, including platform culture, interpersonal relationships, linguistic background, and cultural norms. An interpretive case study is particularly relevant because the study aims to examine subjective meanings rather than to test causal relations in a positivist sense. Through this design, the researcher is able to analyze how digital users understand "silent symbols" in daily online communication and how these symbols shape interpersonal tone, emotional nuance, and cross-cultural comprehension.

The research is conducted in a virtual communicative setting rather than in a single physical institution, because the phenomenon under investigation naturally occurs in digital spaces. Nevertheless, for contextual grounding, the study is anchored in urban Indonesian academic and professional environments, particularly in Jakarta, Yogyakarta, and Bandung, where intercultural communication is increasingly mediated through global platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Telegram, Line, and email. These locations are selected because they represent active centers of education, transnational networking, digital labor, and intercultural exchange in Indonesia. Participants located in these cities are more likely to engage in communication with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, including international classmates, colleagues, online collaborators, and social media communities. The choice of these research locations is therefore based not merely on geographical convenience, but on their relevance to the communicative phenomenon being studied. Since this research concerns cross-cultural digital interaction, the most meaningful "site" is the digital environment itself, while the selected urban contexts provide access to participants with rich intercultural communication experience.

Because this study is qualitative, the focus is placed on informants rather than respondents in the statistical sense. The participants are selected through purposive sampling, which is appropriate for qualitative inquiry because the goal is to recruit individuals who possess direct experience with the phenomenon under study. The criteria for selecting informants include active use of digital communication platforms, regular use of emojis or visual language in online interaction, and documented experience communicating with individuals from different cultural or national backgrounds. In addition, variation is sought in terms of professional or academic role, age category, and communication context in order to enrich the depth of interpretation. Purposive sampling is combined with maximum variation logic so that the study does not rely on a single type of user (Nguyen, 2023). The aim is not numerical representativeness, but analytical richness and conceptual relevance.

This study involves ten informants, a number considered sufficient for in-depth qualitative exploration while still allowing the researcher to engage carefully with each participant's communicative experience. The first informant, identified by the pseudonym Alya, is an Indonesian postgraduate student who frequently communicates with international classmates through WhatsApp and Zoom-based academic groups. The second informant, Bima, is a marketing officer in a multinational company who uses emojis in daily workplace messaging with colleagues from Southeast Asia and Europe. The third informant, Clara, is a content creator managing multicultural followers on Instagram and TikTok, where visual expression plays a central role in audience engagement. The fourth informant, Dimas, is a customer relations staff member in a technology startup who communicates with global clients through email and messaging applications. The fifth informant, Elsa, is a lecturer involved in international academic collaboration and online supervision. The sixth informant, Farhan, is a

freelance graphic designer who often interacts with foreign clients through Telegram and Discord. The seventh informant, Gina, is an undergraduate student active in international online communities and fandom spaces. The eighth informant, Hadi, is an NGO program assistant who participates in intercultural communication for project coordination. The ninth informant, Intan, is a public relations officer responsible for managing multilingual digital interaction. The tenth informant, Jovan, is a remote worker in an international digital team. These pseudonyms are used to protect participant confidentiality and to comply with ethical standards in qualitative research (Santana & Pernikov, 2025).

The selection of these informants is based on their capacity to provide rich and relevant data regarding the use and interpretation of emojis in intercultural contexts. They are not chosen randomly, but because they regularly encounter situations in which visual language becomes meaningful, ambiguous, strategic, or potentially problematic. Their different positions also allow the researcher to observe emoji use across academic, professional, creative, and social settings. This diversity is important because cross-cultural digital communication does not occur in only one domain. Emojis may perform different functions when used among friends, within international classrooms, in workplace coordination, or in public-facing digital communication. By involving informants from varied communicative environments, the study strengthens its interpretive breadth while maintaining a coherent focus on the same phenomenon.

The primary techniques of data collection are in-depth semi-structured interviews, digital communication observation, and document analysis of selected chat excerpts voluntarily shared by participants. Semi-structured interviews are used because they allow the researcher to prepare guiding questions while still leaving room for participants to explain their experiences in their own words (Fan, 2025). Through interviews, the researcher explores how participants understand specific emojis, what meanings they intend when using them, how they perceive emoji interpretation by interlocutors from different cultural backgrounds, and whether they have experienced misunderstanding, adaptation, or negotiation of meaning in digital communication. Observation is conducted on the communicative patterns described by participants, especially in relation to platform norms, emoji combinations, and contextual use. Document analysis is limited to ethically approved excerpts of anonymized chats or screenshots that participants are willing to share. These materials serve as contextual evidence to support participants' narratives and to illustrate how visual language functions in real interaction.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study applies several qualitative validation strategies. Credibility is strengthened through triangulation of interview data, observational notes, and digital text evidence (Zhang et al., 2023). Member reflection is also used by allowing participants to confirm the general accuracy of their statements and interpretations during follow-up clarification (Hu & Chen, 2023). Transferability is enhanced by providing thick description of the communicative contexts, participant roles, and patterns of emoji use (Gawne & Cooperrider, 2024). Dependability is addressed through systematic documentation of research procedures, from sampling criteria to coding stages (Adu-Mensah et al., 2024). Confirmability is supported by analytic transparency, reflexive note-taking, and attention to the researcher's interpretive position when analyzing culturally sensitive meanings (Letsoalo & Ngoepe, 2025).

The data are analyzed using thematic analysis with an interpretive and inductive emphasis (Althobiti, 2024). First, all interview recordings are transcribed verbatim and read repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the data. Second, the researcher conducts initial coding by identifying recurring expressions, meanings, and experiences related to emoji interpretation, emotional tone, politeness, misunderstanding, cultural adjustment, and visual communication strategies. Third, these codes are grouped into broader thematic categories, such as emojis as emotional cues, emojis as politeness markers, emojis as sources of ambiguity, and emojis as culturally negotiated symbols. Fourth, the themes are interpreted in relation to the conceptual framework of semiotics, social information processing, and intercultural communication. The analysis does not aim to reduce communication to fixed variables; rather, it seeks to explain how participants construct meaning through visual signs in specific digital and cultural situations.

The technique for drawing conclusions in this study follows an iterative qualitative logic. Conclusions are not produced only at the final stage, but developed gradually through continuous

comparison between raw data, emerging codes, themes, and theoretical interpretation. The researcher moves back and forth between empirical findings and conceptual reflection in order to identify consistent patterns and meaningful contrasts. A conclusion is considered analytically valid when it is supported by repeated thematic evidence across informants, contextual examples from digital interaction, and coherent interpretation in light of the research questions. In this sense, the process of conclusion drawing involves data reduction, thematic categorization, interpretive synthesis, and critical verification. The final conclusions are therefore grounded in the lived experiences of informants and in the broader communicative logic of cross-cultural digital interaction.

Overall, the qualitative case study design employed in this research is methodologically appropriate for examining emojis as “silent symbols” in cross-cultural digital communication. By focusing on purposively selected informants in digitally active intercultural environments, and by combining interview, observation, and document analysis, the study is able to generate nuanced insights into how visual language operates beyond textual communication. The method is especially relevant to the main problem of the research because it captures the interpretive complexity, contextual fluidity, and cultural sensitivity that characterize emoji use in contemporary digital life.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that emojis and visual language function as meaningful communicative resources in cross-cultural digital interaction, yet their meanings are neither fixed nor universally shared. Based on in-depth interviews, contextual observation, and the analysis of anonymized digital communication excerpts, the study reveals that emojis operate simultaneously as semiotic signs, relational cues, and culturally mediated symbols. This finding directly addresses the main research problem, namely the widespread assumption that emojis are universally understood in global digital communication. In practice, participants reported that the same emoji could signal warmth, irony, deference, hesitation, friendliness, or passive aggression depending on the communicative context and the cultural background of the interlocutors. Thus, the results confirm that visual simplicity does not guarantee interpretive stability. Instead, emojis act as “silent symbols” whose meanings emerge through social usage, contextual framing, and cultural interpretation.

The first major finding concerns the semiotic instability of emojis in intercultural settings. Several informants explained that emojis which appeared visually obvious were often interpreted differently by interlocutors from different national or linguistic backgrounds. For example, the folded hands emoji was interpreted by some participants as gratitude or prayer, while others perceived it as politeness, apology, or a greeting gesture. Similarly, the smiling face emoji was sometimes received as sincere friendliness, but in other cases was interpreted as forced politeness or emotional distance. This finding strongly supports the relevance of Charles Sanders Peirce’s Semiotic Theory. From a Peircean perspective, the emoji as a sign does not contain meaning inherently; rather, meaning is generated through the relationship between sign, object, and interpretant. In this study, the same visual sign produced different interpretants depending on the cultural and relational position of the user. The implementation of semiotic theory in this finding lies in demonstrating that emoji meaning is not guaranteed by graphic design alone. Instead, it depends on interpretive communities and shared conventions that vary across cultures.

A second major finding shows that emojis play an important role in compensating for the absence of face-to-face cues in digital interaction. Participants consistently reported using emojis to clarify tone, soften requests, reduce ambiguity, indicate humor, and maintain interpersonal warmth in text-based communication. In workplace settings, emojis were often used to make short instructions appear less rigid. In academic interaction, they helped reduce social distance. In friendship networks and online communities, they signaled emotional alignment and relational closeness. This pattern aligns closely with Joseph B. Walther’s Social Information Processing Theory, which argues that digital users adapt to cue-limited communication by relying on available symbolic resources. The results demonstrate that emojis are not merely decorative additions to messages; rather, they are adaptive communicative tools that help users manage relational meanings in computer-mediated contexts. The implementation of this theory becomes clear in the data: participants strategically selected emojis in order to perform empathy, friendliness, reassurance, and informality. This confirms that digital

communication is not necessarily impoverished. Instead, users actively rebuild social meaning through visual micro-signs.

A third finding indicates that cultural communication styles significantly influence emoji interpretation and usage. Informants with more indirect or high-context communicative tendencies tended to use emojis to imply politeness, soften disagreement, and preserve relational harmony. By contrast, participants who interacted frequently with more direct communicators noted that emojis were sometimes used sparingly, more functionally, or with narrower affective intent. This result is highly consistent with Edward T. Hall's High-Context and Low-Context Communication Theory. The study found that in high-context interaction, emojis often carried subtle relational and emotional meanings that went beyond the literal text. In low-context-oriented exchanges, meaning tended to remain more dependent on explicit wording, with emojis serving a supplementary rather than central function. The implementation of Hall's theory in this research lies in showing that culture remains active in digital communication even when interaction occurs on global platforms. Emojis do not erase cultural difference; rather, they become a new site where cultural expectations about emotion, politeness, and indirectness are negotiated.

The following table summarizes the principal findings based on the qualitative method employed in this study.

Theme of Findings	Empirical Indication from Informants	Related Theory	Theoretical Interpretation	Practical Implementation
Emojis as unstable signs	One emoji received multiple meanings across users and contexts	Peirce's Semiotic Theory	Meaning depends on interpretant, not only on sign form	Users need contextual awareness before assuming common meaning
Emojis as relational cues	Emojis soften tone, signal friendliness, and reduce ambiguity	Walther's Social Information Processing Theory	Visual cues substitute for missing face-to-face nonverbal signals	Useful in workplace, academic, and interpersonal digital interaction
Emojis as culturally mediated symbols	Interpretation varies according to politeness norms and communication style	Hall's High-/Low-Context Theory	Cultural context shapes how implicit meanings are produced and decoded	Important for intercultural communication training and global teamwork
Emojis as tools of adaptation	Users adjust emoji choice depending on audience background	Walther and Hall	Cue adaptation is shaped by cultural sensitivity	Supports audience-aware messaging practices
Emojis as sources of misunderstanding	Friendly intent may be read as sarcasm, distance, or excessiveness	Peirce, Walther, and Hall combined	Misinterpretation emerges from semiotic ambiguity, cue limitation, and cultural variance	Calls for reflective digital literacy and intercultural competence

In relation to the research gap, the findings clearly confirm that earlier studies have not sufficiently integrated semiotic, relational, and intercultural perspectives when examining emojis in

digital communication (Berio et al., 2023). Previous research often focused on emoji frequency, sentiment classification, or platform-specific popularity (Bonfante, 2023). While useful, such approaches tended to overlook the deeper communicative problem revealed in this study: emojis are interpreted through layered social and cultural processes. The present findings therefore respond directly to the identified gap by showing that emojis cannot be understood adequately through descriptive usage patterns alone. They must be analyzed as signs whose meanings are negotiated, as cues used to manage online relationships, and as visual resources shaped by intercultural communication norms. The three theories used in this study together provide the explanatory depth needed to address that gap. Peirce explains why meanings diverge, Walther explains why users rely on emojis despite such divergence, and Hall explains why the divergence becomes especially visible in cross-cultural communication.

The findings also answer the research questions formulated in the study. The first research question asked how emojis and visual language are used in cross-cultural digital communication. The study found that emojis are used to clarify tone, express emotion, regulate politeness, maintain social connection, and support indirect communication. The second question asked how users from different cultural backgrounds interpret the same emoji differently. The results show that interpretation varies according to cultural communication style, relational closeness, professional context, and platform habits. The third question asked what communicative functions emojis perform in managing relational tone and emotional expression. The findings indicate that emojis act as cues of reassurance, friendliness, hesitation, humor, and empathy, especially in environments where written text alone may appear emotionally flat. The fourth question asked how cultural differences influence misunderstanding or adaptation in digital interaction. The study demonstrates that users frequently modify emoji choice when communicating across cultures, and that failure to recognize cultural nuance can lead to misreading. Each of these findings is strengthened by the integration of the three theoretical perspectives and their practical implementation in the analysis.

The results also support the research objectives. The first objective was to identify the communicative functions of emojis in intercultural online interaction. This objective is fulfilled by the evidence showing that emojis are used as tone markers, emotional amplifiers, relational softeners, and context-building devices. The second objective was to explain how cultural background influences emoji interpretation. This is achieved through the finding that communicators from different interactional traditions assign different meanings to identical symbols. The third objective was to examine whether visual symbols reduce or increase ambiguity in digital communication. The findings reveal that emojis can do both: they reduce ambiguity when users share communicative expectations, but they increase ambiguity when symbolic interpretation is culturally misaligned. The final objective was to develop a more nuanced understanding of emojis as semiotic resources in contemporary communication. This objective is also achieved, since the findings show that emojis should be understood not as fixed universal icons, but as negotiated visual language embedded in social and cultural practice.

The theoretical benefit of the study lies in its successful combination of three theories that are often used separately. Peirce's semiotics contributes an interpretive framework for understanding emojis as signs whose meanings depend on social decoding. Walther's theory contributes a relational framework for understanding why emojis are essential in text-based digital communication. Hall's theory contributes a cultural framework for explaining why meanings vary across communication traditions. Their integration offers a stronger conceptual model for digital communication studies, especially for scholarship concerned with multimodality, nonverbal communication online, and intercultural discourse. In theoretical terms, the study advances the novelty of treating emojis as "silent symbols" that are globally circulated but locally interpreted.

The practical benefit of the study is equally important. The findings suggest that individuals involved in multinational work, transnational education, online community management, digital marketing, and intercultural collaboration should avoid assuming that emojis are automatically harmless or universally understood. Strategic awareness of audience, context, and culture is necessary. In implementation terms, digital communicators should use emojis with reflexivity, especially in sensitive

or formal contexts. Training in intercultural digital communication can include visual language literacy, teaching users to consider tone, symbolic ambiguity, and cultural communication norms. For organizations, the findings may inform digital communication guidelines, especially in global teams where short-form messaging increasingly shapes collaboration.

The academic benefit of the study lies in providing a useful reference point for future researchers in communication, media, digital culture, sociolinguistics, and intercultural studies. The findings open a pathway for more nuanced qualitative and comparative research on emojis and other forms of visual language. Academically, the research contributes by connecting classical theories to contemporary digital realities. Rather than treating semiotics, computer-mediated communication, and intercultural communication as isolated fields, the study demonstrates their productive intersection. This interdisciplinary value is especially relevant for journal audiences interested in how emerging communication practices can be understood through established theoretical traditions.

In the discussion of the main problem, the findings resonate with previous research showing that digital symbols often appear universal while remaining socially and culturally variable (Oko & Mbey, 2025). Earlier studies have noted that emojis can enrich affective communication and reduce the flatness of written text (Abdelhadi & Bellag, 2024). However, the present study extends those findings by showing that enrichment is not always equivalent to clarity. A symbol that helps one interlocutor appear warm may make another appear insincere. In that sense, the current results refine previous scholarship by demonstrating that the usefulness of emojis depends on alignment between semiotic expectation, relational intention, and cultural context. This deepens prior findings in computer-mediated communication by highlighting that relational cue adaptation is not merely technical but culturally negotiated.

Regarding the problem gap, earlier research frequently identified cultural variation in emoji use but did not always explain it through a coherent theoretical synthesis (Loiko, 2023). The present study fills that gap by showing how semiotic theory explains variability of meaning, how social information processing explains functional adaptation, and how context theory explains intercultural divergence. Compared with prior studies that focused narrowly on sentiment or frequency, the present findings offer a richer interpretive account. This is where the novelty of the research becomes visible: emojis are understood as communicative sites where meaning, relationship, and culture intersect.

In relation to previous studies on research questions and objectives, the current findings are consistent with earlier work indicating that emojis perform emotional and relational functions (Adiego & Valério, 2023). Yet this study goes further by demonstrating that those functions cannot be separated from cultural interpretation. Previous scholarship has also suggested that digital users creatively compensate for absent nonverbal cues (Gainotti, 2023). The present results support that claim but show that such compensation is not equally effective across cultures. Thus, the discussion strengthens existing literature while adding an intercultural dimension that has often remained underdeveloped.

The discussion of theoretical, practical, and academic benefits also gains support from earlier findings in digital media research. Previous studies on visual communication, online discourse, and intercultural misunderstanding have all pointed to the growing importance of symbolic literacy in digitally mediated interaction (Nephew et al., 2023). The present study confirms and deepens that direction by showing that emoji competence is part of broader communicative competence in the digital era. Theoretically, the research contributes an integrated framework; practically, it supports more culturally sensitive digital communication; academically, it expands the field of emoji studies beyond descriptive trends toward critical interpretive analysis.

Overall, the results and discussion demonstrate that emojis are not trivial accessories of online communication. They are active semiotic, relational, and cultural instruments that shape how messages are produced, interpreted, and negotiated in cross-cultural digital settings. The main problem of presumed universality is therefore challenged by empirical evidence showing interpretive diversity. The research gap is addressed through the integration of three theories that together explain signification, relational adaptation, and cultural context. The research questions are answered through findings on usage, interpretation, function, misunderstanding, and adaptation. The research objectives are fulfilled

through a nuanced understanding of emojis as visual language in intercultural communication. The benefits of the study emerge at theoretical, practical, and academic levels. Most importantly, the novelty of the research lies in establishing emojis as “silent symbols” whose communicative force depends not on visual appearance alone, but on the dynamic interaction of sign, relationship, and culture.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that emojis and visual language play a significant and complex role in cross-cultural digital communication. Far from functioning as simple decorative additions to text, emojis operate as meaningful symbolic resources that shape tone, emotion, relational intent, and interpretation in online interaction. Based on the findings and discussion, the research demonstrates that emojis are best understood as “silent symbols” whose communicative power lies in their ability to convey meanings beyond words while remaining open to multiple interpretations. The study confirms that the visual accessibility of emojis often creates the impression of universal understanding, yet actual communication practices reveal that their meanings are shaped by context, culture, and interpersonal dynamics. In this regard, the main problem identified in the study the assumption that emojis are universally understood across cultures has been critically addressed through empirical analysis.

The results show that emoji interpretation is not fixed, but negotiated. The same symbol may communicate sincerity, politeness, irony, warmth, emotional restraint, or even passive aggression depending on who uses it, in what context, and within which cultural frame it is read. This finding is central to the overall conclusion of the study because it demonstrates that visual similarity does not guarantee interpretive equivalence. In digital interaction, meaning is not located in the image alone, but in the social and cultural process through which the image is decoded. Therefore, emojis should be treated as context-dependent signs rather than universally stable expressions. This conclusion is especially important in intercultural communication, where participants often rely on quick visual symbols while simultaneously carrying different assumptions about emotion, politeness, and social intention.

The study also concludes that emojis perform an essential interpersonal function in digitally mediated communication. The findings indicate that users employ emojis to soften messages, express friendliness, clarify tone, signal humor, and reduce the emotional flatness of text-based interaction. In online environments where facial expression, gesture, and voice are absent, emojis become practical substitutes for nonverbal cues. As shown in the discussion, participants used emojis strategically to maintain social connection and to make communication appear more cooperative, empathetic, or less confrontational. However, the study further concludes that this adaptive function does not always guarantee successful communication. Instead, the same cue that strengthens relational clarity in one interaction may create ambiguity in another, especially when communicators come from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds. Thus, emojis function both as tools of connection and as potential sites of misunderstanding.

Another major conclusion is that culture remains deeply influential in digital communication, even within globally shared platforms. The findings confirm that communicative norms associated with directness, indirectness, emotional display, and politeness shape how emojis are used and interpreted. Users from different cultural backgrounds do not necessarily assign the same meaning to identical symbols, and they do not always use emojis with the same frequency, intensity, or communicative purpose. This means that digital communication should not be understood as culturally neutral simply because it occurs through standardized applications or platforms. Instead, culture continues to shape meaning at the micro-level of visual interaction. The study therefore concludes that emojis are not only digital symbols, but also cultural signs embedded in specific communicative expectations.

In relation to the results and discussion, this study further concludes that the integration of semiotic theory, social information processing theory, and cross-cultural communication theory provides a strong explanatory framework for understanding the phenomenon under investigation. The findings support the view that emojis are semiotic signs whose meanings depend on interpretation, relational cues used to compensate for missing face-to-face interaction, and culturally mediated symbols shaped by different communication styles. The combination of these perspectives makes it possible to explain why emojis are widely used, why they are communicatively effective, and why they are also

vulnerable to cross-cultural misreading. As such, the study successfully connects theory with empirical evidence and demonstrates that emojis must be analyzed through a multidimensional communication framework.

Overall, the conclusion of this research is that emojis and visual language have become essential components of contemporary digital interaction, but their effectiveness depends on interpretive sensitivity and cultural awareness. The study affirms that emojis can facilitate emotional expression, relational maintenance, and communicative adaptation, yet they can also create ambiguity when their meanings are assumed rather than negotiated. The title *Silent Symbols* is therefore fully supported by the findings: emojis are silent because they do not speak in words, but they are powerful because they shape how words are understood. In cross-cultural digital communication, their significance lies not only in what they show, but in how they are read. This conclusion highlights the need for more reflective, culturally informed, and theoretically grounded approaches to visual language in the digital era.

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