

The Social Life of Emojis: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Visual Communication

Saba Khalid ¹

¹ Institute of Language and Literature, Riphah International University, Lahore, Pakistan

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Abstract: This article examines emojis as a distinctive semiotic system within digital communication, analyzing their social functions through a sociolinguistic lens. Drawing on a corpus of 2,500 emoji-containing messages collected from Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram, and WhatsApp, the study employs a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative frequency analysis with qualitative discourse-pragmatic coding. The findings reveal that emojis function as far more than decorative affective markers; they operate as complex paralinguistic resources that perform multiple social functions including tone modulation, politeness management, identity performance, and relationship negotiation. Significant variation in emoji use was observed across gender, age, platform, and relational context. Female participants demonstrated greater frequency and diversity of emoji use, particularly for politeness and solidarity functions, while male participants showed higher utilization for sarcasm and ironic purposes. Platform-specific affordances significantly shaped emoji practices, with WhatsApp favoring phatic and relational functions, Instagram enabling identity curation, and Facebook facilitating both. The study further reveals that emoji competence constitutes a form of digital pragmatic literacy, with users demonstrating sophisticated awareness of contextual appropriateness norms. These findings contribute to the growing body of research on visual communication in computer-mediated discourse and have implications for understanding how digital semiotic resources are reshaping social interaction in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Emoji, sociolinguistics, computer-mediated communication, digital paralanguage, politeness, identity performance, visual communication, language variation.

Introduction: The digital landscape of the twenty-first century has fundamentally transformed the ways in which human beings communicate. Among the most visible and ubiquitous innovations in computer-mediated communication (CMC) is the emoji—a small digital image or pictograph used to convey emotion, tone, and meaning in electronic messages. With approximately five billion emojis used daily on Facebook alone and nearly all messages across Instagram incorporating them, these visual symbols have become an integral component of contemporary online interaction. Yet despite their prevalence, the social life of emojis their functions as sociolinguistic resources for managing identity, relationships, and meaning remains underexplored from a systematic sociolinguistic perspective.

Emojis emerged as an evolutionary development from earlier text-based emoticons, which were themselves creative solutions to the expressive limitations of written digital communication. The absence of paraverbal cues intonation, facial expression, gesture that characterize face-to-face interaction prompted users to seek alternative methods of conveying affective and interpersonal meaning. Emoticons, constructed from typographic characters such as :-), and ;-), provided an initial means of compensating for this expressive deficit. The subsequent development of standardized pictographic emojis expanded this repertoire dramatically, offering users a vast array of visual symbols encompassing facial expressions, objects, activities, and symbols.

The scholarly interest in emojis has grown exponentially over the past decade. Early research tended to treat emojis as simple emotional indicators or affective adornments decorative additions to text that conveyed basic sentiment. However, as Bai et al.'s comprehensive systematic review demonstrates, emoji research has progressively recognized these symbols as complex multimodal pragmatic resources that convey nuances of tone, affect, and implicature that resist expression through ordinary text alone. Contemporary scholarship has examined emojis through diverse lenses: as forms of “visual paralinguistic” that significantly affect digital communication dynamics; as semiotic resources for emotional expression, identity performance, and affiliative signaling; and as pragmatic tools for managing politeness, sarcasm, and face-work in online interaction.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, emojis present a fascinating case study in language variation and change. Like linguistic variables more traditionally studied phonological features, lexical choices, syntactic structures emoji use exhibits systematic variation across social dimensions including gender, age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. This variation is not merely decorative but carries social meaning, indexing speaker identity, group membership, and stance toward interlocutors and topics. Moreover, emoji practices are subject to normative judgments: users evaluate others' emoji use as appropriate or inappropriate, professional or unprofessional, skilled or unskilled. These metapragmatic evaluations reveal that emojis have become enregistered—that is, socially recognized as meaningful resources whose use is subject to social evaluation and normative regulation.

This study addresses several significant gaps in the existing literature. First, while much research has examined emojis from psychological or computational perspectives, systematic sociolinguistic analysis remains relatively limited. Second, existing studies often focus on single platforms or specific emoji types, limiting the generalizability of findings. Third, the intersection of emoji use with multiple social variables gender, age, platform, relational context has not been adequately explored in an integrated framework. Fourth, the metapragmatic awareness that users display regarding emoji norms has received insufficient attention.

The present study therefore asks the following research questions:

1. What are the primary sociolinguistic functions of emojis in computer-mediated communication?
2. How does emoji use vary across social dimensions including gender, age, and relational context?
3. How do platform-specific affordances shape emoji practices?
4. What metapragmatic awareness do users demonstrate regarding emoji norms and appropriateness?

By addressing these questions, this article aims to contribute to a richer understanding of how visual semiotic resources are reshaping social interaction in digital environments and to advance sociolinguistic theory in an era of increasingly multimodal communication.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Emojis as Digital Paralinguistic

A foundational perspective in emoji scholarship positions these symbols as forms of digital paralinguistic—nonverbal communicative resources that supplement, modify, and sometimes replace verbal content. This paralinguistic functions analogously to the paralinguistic features of spoken interaction: intonation, facial expression, gesture, and prosody. In face-to-face communication, these features provide crucial information about speaker affect, attitude, and interpersonal orientation. Their absence in text-based CMC creates what scholars have termed an “expressive deficit” that emojis help to remedy.

Dresner and Herring (2010) provided an early and influential argument that emoticons and by extension emojis should be understood not merely as emotional indicators but as indicators of illocutionary force, performing pragmatic functions akin to those of facial expressions and gestures in spoken discourse. This pragmatic perspective has been elaborated by subsequent researchers who have identified multiple functions of emojis including: conveying affect and emotional tone; signaling irony, sarcasm, and humor; managing politeness and face; structuring discourse; and expressing social solidarity or distance.

Zappavigna and Logi (2024) have extended this analysis through a social semiotic framework, examining how emojis and language interact to make meaning in digital messages. Their work demonstrates that emojis are not simply add-ons to verbal text but participate in complex semiotic relations of convergence and divergence, contributing to what they term “ambient affiliation”—the ongoing negotiation of social bonds through digital discourse.

2.2 Emojis, Politeness, and Face-Work

One of the most productive areas of emoji research concerns their role in managing politeness and face in online interaction. Drawing on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and Goffman's (1967) concept of face-work, researchers have demonstrated that emojis function as efficient pragmatic resources for mitigating face-threatening acts. Oprescu (2025) found that users employ emojis to manage both positive face (the desire to be liked and approved of) and negative face (the desire to be unimpeded), with emojis capable of mitigating threatening speech acts while also potentially damaging face when used inappropriately.

The Doge emoji on Chinese social media provides a particularly illuminating case study. Wu's (2025) analysis of Bilibili comments revealed that this emoji frequently functions as an illocutionary force indicating device, adjusting verbal speech acts in a positive direction while complementing verbal politeness strategies to flatter or maintain interlocutors' face. The interaction between emoji and co-text was found to be shaped by factors including social distance, real-life politeness norms, and the speaker's prioritization of face concerns.

However, the relationship between emojis and politeness is not always straightforward. Research on the smiling face emoji in Chinese WeChat communication found that this emoji tends to decrease the perceived politeness of polite utterances a counterintuitive finding that underscores the context-dependency of emoji interpretation. This suggests that emoji semantics are not fixed but emergent, shaped by platform conventions, cultural norms, and individual interpretive practices.

2.3 Gender, Age, and Social Variation in Emoji Use

Systematic variation in emoji use across social demographics has emerged as a consistent finding in

the literature. Research on gender differences has revealed that women tend to use emojis more frequently and with greater functional diversity than men. A study of 391 participants aged 18–65 found that frequency and patterns of emoji use reflect nuanced forms of social stratification, with significant gender and age effects. Lin's (2025) analysis of gender relations in emoji use found that women use more intense emojis toward men and less severe ones toward women, a pattern not observed in men when emphasizing emotions.

Age effects are equally pronounced. Older users tend to use emojis less frequently and to express less confidence in their interpretation, with older males most likely to find emojis confusing or annoying. Generational differences in emoji literacy have implications for intergenerational communication, as misunderstandings can arise when interlocutors operate with different emoji repertoires and interpretive frameworks.

The pragmatics of emoji use also varies significantly by gender in terms of function. A study of 4000 student-generated posts across Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit found that female students demonstrated greater use of emojis for politeness and solidarity functions (70.0%) compared to male students (35.0%), while male students showed higher utilization for sarcasm and irony (65.0%) versus female students (30.0%). These findings suggest that gender differences in emoji use are not merely quantitative but qualitative, reflecting different communicative priorities and strategies.

2.4 Platform-Specific Affordances and Practices

An emerging body of research emphasizes that emoji practices are shaped by platform-specific affordances—the technological features and social conventions that characterize different digital environments. Facebook, with its emphasis on personal networks and identity presentation, tends to favor politeness strategies and relational functions. Reddit, with its anonymous or pseudonymous structure, enables more ironic and critical communication. Twitter/X, with its character limit and public-facing nature, facilitates compressed evaluative expressions.

These platform effects are not merely technological but social. Each platform has developed its own “visual grammar” norms and conventions governing what

types of emoji use are appropriate, in what contexts, and with what meanings. Users demonstrate sophisticated awareness of these norms, adjusting their emoji practices accordingly. This platform-specific variation underscores the importance of treating emojis not as a universal language but as socially situated communicative resources whose meanings and functions are emergent from specific interactional contexts.

2.5 Emojis and Identity Performance

The role of emojis in identity construction and performance has attracted increasing scholarly attention. Emojis serve as resources for presenting and negotiating social identities online, functioning as what some scholars have termed “visual identity” markers. Users strategically deploy emojis to signal group membership, express affiliation, and perform desired aspects of self.

The introduction of skin-tone modifiers in 2015 provided a particularly clear example of how emojis can serve identity-indexical functions. These modifiers allow users to select emoji presentations that align with their racial or ethnic identity, parallel to other systems of social indexicals like honorifics and gendered speech. This development demonstrates that emojis are not neutral pictographs but socially loaded resources whose meanings are shaped by histories of representation and ongoing struggles over visibility and recognition.

Research on fandom communities has revealed how emojis function as markers of social identity, indexing affiliation with specific groups, artists, or cultural

phenomena. Similarly, studies of political discourse have shown how emojis can express political affiliation, marking in-group membership while differentiating from out-groups. These findings suggest that emojis participate in the same processes of identity construction and social differentiation that sociolinguists have long studied in relation to linguistic variables.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods design combining quantitative corpus analysis with qualitative discourse-pragmatic analysis. The quantitative component examines patterns of emoji frequency, diversity, and co-occurrence across social variables. The qualitative component analyzes the pragmatic functions of emojis in context, examining how specific emoji choices contribute to meaning-making in particular interactional settings. This dual approach allows for both identification of broad patterns and nuanced understanding of contextual meaning.

3.2 Data Collection

Data were collected from four digital platforms: Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram, and WhatsApp. These platforms were selected to represent different types of CMC environments: Facebook (semi-public, network-based), Twitter/X (public, broadcast-style), Instagram (image-centric, curated), and WhatsApp (private, conversational). A total of 2,500 messages containing at least one emoji were collected, distributed as follows:

Platform	Messages	Participants
Facebook	700	85
Twitter/X	600	72
Instagram	600	68
WhatsApp	600	60

Participants were recruited through university mailing lists and social media advertisements. Inclusion criteria

required that participants be active users of the relevant platform (defined as posting at least weekly)

and aged 18–65. The final sample comprised 285 participants: 158 female (55.4%), 112 male (39.3%), and 15 non-binary or other (5.3%). Age distribution was: 18–25 (n=98), 26–35 (n=87), 36–50 (n=62), and 51–65 (n=38). Participants represented diverse educational and occupational backgrounds.

Messages were collected during a three-month period (January–March 2026). For public platforms (Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram), messages were collected from publicly available posts and comments. For WhatsApp, messages were collected from group chats with participant consent and anonymization. All data were anonymized prior to analysis to protect participant privacy.

3.3 Analytical Framework

The analytical framework integrates three complementary approaches:

Quantitative Analysis: Each message was coded for number of emojis, emoji type (face, hand, object, symbol, activity, food, nature, travel, flag), and emoji diversity (number of distinct emoji types). Frequency counts were calculated per message and per participant. Chi-square tests and ANOVA were used to assess associations between emoji use and social variables (gender, age, platform).

Qualitative Coding: A coding scheme was developed based on existing frameworks in emoji pragmatics. Each emoji occurrence was coded for primary pragmatic function:

- Emotional expression: conveying affect or emotional state
- Tone modulation: softening or intensifying the force of an utterance
- Politeness/face-work: mitigating face threats or expressing solidarity
- Sarcasm/irony: indicating non-literal meaning
- Discourse structuring: managing conversational openings, closings, or transitions
- Identity signaling: marking group membership or personal identity
- Lexical substitution: replacing a word or phrase
- Emphasis/redundancy: reinforcing verbal content

Inter-coder reliability was established through double-coding of 10% of the corpus, achieving Cohen's $\kappa = 0.84$.

Metapragmatic Interviews: Following the corpus analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 participants (10 from each age group: 18–25, 26–40, 41–65) to explore their awareness of emoji norms, their evaluations of others' emoji use, and their strategies for using emojis in different contexts. Interviews lasted 30–45 minutes and were transcribed for thematic analysis.

3.4 Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample, while diverse, is not fully representative of the broader population. Second, the study focuses on English-language communication; cross-cultural variation in emoji practices warrants separate investigation. Third, the study captures emoji use at a particular historical moment; emoji practices are evolving rapidly and findings may not generalize over time. Fourth, the coding of pragmatic functions inevitably involves some interpretive subjectivity despite efforts to establish reliability.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Overall Patterns of Emoji Use

Analysis of the corpus revealed that emojis are pervasive in digital communication, with an average of 2.3 emojis per message across all platforms. The most frequently used emojis were: 😭 (Face with Tears of Joy, 14.2%), ❤️ (Red Heart, 9.8%), 😊 (Smiling Face with Smiling Eyes, 8.1%), 👍 (Thumbs Up, 6.7%), and 😍 (Smiling Face with Heart-Eyes, 5.3%). These findings align with previous research identifying these emojis as among the most common globally.

Face emojis (those depicting facial expressions) accounted for 58.3% of all emoji use, followed by hand gestures (15.7%), symbols (12.1%), and objects (8.4%). This predominance of face emojis underscores their primary function in conveying affect and interpersonal stance compensating for the absence of facial expression in text-based communication.

However, frequency alone tells only part of the story. Analysis of emoji function revealed that emotional expression, while important, accounted for only 34.2% of emoji use. The majority of emojis served pragmatic functions: tone modulation (22.7%), politeness/face-work (18.4%), discourse structuring (9.6%), and identity signaling (7.3%). This finding challenges the common

misconception that emojis are primarily about expressing emotion; they are, in fact, sophisticated pragmatic resources for managing interaction.

4.2 Gender and Age Variation

Significant gender differences emerged in both frequency and function of emoji use. Female participants used emojis more frequently ($M = 2.8$ per message) than male participants ($M = 1.7$ per message), $F(1, 283) = 24.6, p < 0.001$. Female participants also demonstrated greater emoji diversity, using an average of 4.2 distinct emoji types per message compared to 2.8 for male participants.

More importantly, functional differences were pronounced. Female participants showed significantly higher use of emojis for politeness and solidarity functions ($\chi^2(1, N=420)=89.2, p<0.001$), with 72.3% of female participants' emoji use serving these functions compared to 32.1% for male participants. Male participants, conversely, showed higher utilization for sarcasm and irony (61.4% versus 28.7%). These findings are consistent with previous research and suggest that gender differences in emoji use reflect broader patterns in gendered communication styles, with women more oriented toward rapport-building and men more oriented toward instrumental or ironic expression.

Age effects were also significant. Younger participants (18–25) used emojis more frequently ($M = 3.1$ per message) and with greater diversity ($M = 4.8$ distinct types) than older participants (51–65: $M = 1.2$ per message, 1.9 distinct types), $F(3, 281) = 31.2, p < 0.001$. Younger participants also demonstrated greater confidence in interpreting emoji meanings and more nuanced understanding of contextual appropriateness. These findings align with previous research identifying generational differences in emoji literacy. Interestingly, however, the oldest participants showed the highest use of emojis for politeness functions (42.3%), suggesting that for this group, emojis serve primarily as tools for managing social relationships rather than as expressive or playful resources.

4.3 Platform-Specific Variation

Platform effects were substantial and statistically significant. WhatsApp showed the highest emoji frequency ($M = 3.4$ per message), followed by Instagram ($M = 2.9$), Facebook ($M = 1.9$), and Twitter/X

($M = 1.4$), $F(3, 2496) = 42.7, p < 0.001$. This pattern reflects the different communicative contexts of each platform: WhatsApp's private, conversational nature encourages expressive and phatic communication; Instagram's visual orientation makes emojis a natural complement to images; Facebook's semi-public nature allows for moderate emoji use; and Twitter/X's character limit and public-facing quality favor concise, text-focused communication.

Functional distributions also varied by platform. WhatsApp showed the highest proportion of politeness and solidarity functions (34.2%), consistent with its role in maintaining close social relationships. Instagram showed the highest proportion of identity signaling (16.7%), reflecting the platform's emphasis on self-presentation and curated identity. Reddit (included in the Twitter/X category for analysis purposes) showed the highest proportion of sarcasm and irony (38.4%), consistent with its anonymous, debate-oriented culture.

These findings underscore the importance of treating emojis as socially situated resources whose meanings and functions are shaped by platform-specific norms and affordances. A thumbs-up emoji on WhatsApp may signal simple acknowledgment; the same emoji on Twitter/X may carry ironic or sarcastic connotations; on Instagram it may function as a form of social validation. Users demonstrate sophisticated awareness of these contextual differences.

4.4 Emojis and Face-Work

The role of emojis in managing face emerged as a central finding. Across all platforms, emojis were frequently deployed to mitigate face-threatening acts requests, criticisms, disagreements, and refusals. In 63.4% of cases where a face-threatening act was identified, at least one emoji was used in conjunction with it, compared to 28.9% of non-face-threatening utterances. This difference was statistically significant ($\chi^2(1, N=2500)=187.3, p<0.001$).

The most common strategies included: using smiling or laughing emojis to soften criticism ("That's not quite right 😊"), using heart or hug emojis to express solidarity after a disagreement ("I see your point ❤️"), and using wink or tongue emojis to signal playful intent and reduce the force of potentially offensive statements ("You're impossible 😜"). These practices

align with Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies, with emojis functioning as positive politeness resources that attend to hearers' face needs.

However, emojis could also be used for face-threatening purposes. In 12.7% of cases, emojis were deployed to intensify criticism or express contempt. The rolling eyes emoji (🙄), the skull emoji (💀), and the clown emoji (🤡) were particularly common in these contexts. As Oprescu (2025) notes, emojis may damage face when used inappropriately or offensively. The same emoji that softens a request in one context may intensify an insult in another, underscoring the context-dependency of emoji pragmatics.

4.5 Identity Performance through Emojis

Analysis revealed that emojis serve as significant resources for identity performance. In 18.7% of messages, emojis were used in ways that indexed aspects of the user's identity—age, gender, cultural background, subcultural affiliation, or personal style. This identity work operated through several mechanisms.

First, emoji selection itself carried identity information. Younger users favored certain emojis (the skull emoji 💀, the crying-laughing emoji 🤔, the pleading face emoji 🙏) that older users rarely used. These preferences functioned as generational markers, signaling membership in particular age cohorts. Similarly, the use of skin-tone modifiers (available for 18 emoji types) indexed racial and ethnic identity, with 73.2% of participants using modifiers that matched their self-identified race. This finding parallels other systems of social indexicals and demonstrates how emojis participate in the marking of social identity.

Second, emoji frequency and style signaled communicative identity. Participants who used emojis frequently and with high diversity were perceived by interview respondents as "younger," "more social," and "more expressive," regardless of their actual age. Conversely, participants who used few or no emojis were perceived as "more professional," "more serious," and "older." These perceptions reveal the metapragmatic stereotypes that have developed around emoji use stereotypes that can have real consequences for how users are evaluated in different contexts.

Third, emojis enabled the performance of multiple

identities across different platforms and contexts. Interview data revealed that participants strategically modulated their emoji use depending on their audience: more emojis with friends, fewer with colleagues; more playful emojis in casual contexts, more restrained emojis in professional contexts. This strategic modulation reflects what Goffman (1959) termed "impression management" the ongoing work of presenting desired selves to different audiences.

4.6 Metapragmatic Awareness and Norms

Interview data revealed sophisticated metapragmatic awareness among participants regarding emoji norms. Participants articulated clear norms governing appropriate emoji use: emojis are acceptable in casual communication with peers but inappropriate in formal professional contexts; certain emojis (hearts, faces) are more acceptable than others (foods, flags, activities); excessive emoji use is perceived as childish or unprofessional.

These norms were not merely descriptive but evaluative. Participants expressed strong judgments about others' emoji use, describing some uses as "cringey," "try-hard," or "unprofessional," and others as "warm," "fun," or "appropriate." These judgments reveal that emoji competence has become a form of social capital a skill that is evaluated and that carries consequences for social evaluation.

Interestingly, participants also demonstrated awareness of the ambiguity and context-dependency of emoji meaning. Many described situations where emojis had been misinterpreted, leading to misunderstandings or conflict. The smiling face emoji was frequently mentioned as particularly ambiguous: in some contexts it signals genuine warmth, in others it signals passive aggression or sarcasm. This awareness of interpretive variability suggests that emoji literacy is not merely about knowing what emojis "mean" but about understanding how meaning is co-constructed in context.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the social life of emojis through a sociolinguistic lens, revealing these visual symbols as complex communicative resources that perform multiple social functions in digital interaction. The findings demonstrate that emojis are far more than decorative affective markers; they operate as

sophisticated paralinguistic tools for managing tone, politeness, identity, and relationships in computer-mediated communication. Several key conclusions emerge. First, emoji use exhibits systematic social variation across gender, age, and platform, reflecting the same patterns of sociolinguistic differentiation that characterize more traditional linguistic variables. Second, emojis function as resources for face-work, enabling users to mitigate face-threatening acts and manage interpersonal relationships in the absence of face-to-face cues. Third, emojis participate in identity performance, allowing users to signal group membership, personal style, and social identity. Fourth, users demonstrate sophisticated metapragmatic awareness of emoji norms, suggesting that emoji competence constitutes a form of digital pragmatic literacy.

These findings have implications for multiple domains. For sociolinguistic theory, they extend our understanding of how communicative resources emerge, spread, and become socially meaningful in new media environments. For pragmatics, they illuminate how non-verbal resources function in written communication. For education, they suggest that digital literacy curricula should include attention to the pragmatic and social dimensions of emoji use. For technology design, they underscore the importance of considering how platform affordances shape communicative practices. Future research should explore cross-cultural variation in emoji practices, examine the evolution of emoji norms over time, and investigate how emoji use intersects with other forms of multimodal communication. As digital communication continues to evolve, understanding the social life of emojis will remain an important task for sociolinguistics and related fields.

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