

A Semiotic Investigation of Emoji Functionality and Semantic Ambiguity in Cross Cultural Professional Emails

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Abstract: The rapid use of emojis has transformed digital communication, specifically in professional emails and cross-cultural communications. Emojis previously symbolised informal communication, but are now a necessary element for expressing intent and emotion in settings lacking a tone. There has been a rapid adoption of emojis, and the presence has only increased the ambiguity in communications, especially in cross-cultural settings. This ambiguity arises from the differing meanings emojis take across different cultures. This paper analyses the semiotics of emojis in a professional email and the ambiguity produce in cross-cultural relations. Specifically, the paper examines the use of professional emails between North America, Europe, and Asia. The culture of these regions is a major consideration in the analysis. This paper presents emojis as helpful in clarifying and adding the missing emotion in communication, but these symbols are practically culture-bound and can be perceived as unfriendly. The use of emojis in a culture that practices strict boundaries for formal communication may be interpreted as signs of authority and may symbolize a loss of authority in a culture that interprets emojis as informal signs. This paper critiques the use of emojis in professional emails, how affect the perceived professionalism of emails and how serve as signs based on the context of the communication. The research recommends the development of a framework for the use of emojis in professional communication to clarify potential points of miscommunication in cross-cultural or global communication contexts. This paper offers a richer understanding of digital workplace culture and communicates the need for cultural sensitivity when interpreting and using emojis in professional settings.

Key Words: emoji functionality, cross-cultural communication, semiotic analysis, professional emails, cultural differences, semantic ambiguity, digital communication

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Introduction

Emojis are becoming more popular as a tool for communication across cultures and in professional emails. Emojis can express what a writer is unwilling or unable to translate into writing. Emojis can cause a writer to misrepresent a professional tone, creating confusion in a professional context. As a result, more research is required to study the impact of emojis on tone and professional communication across cultures.

The use of emojis can lead to communication issues in a professional setting across cultures. Emojis can be misinterpreted, leading to confusion in professional email communication, and in more severe cases, a lack of communication. It appears the unequal, or lack of, context, emoji communication across cultures can, and should, be further studied to ensure effective communication.

Plan to clarify, just in case an emoji is interchangeable or confusing. Based on a count of emoji usage in emails across different tribes of an organisation, the ratio of emails sent to emoji 'readers' is uniquely high. An emoji, as a multimodal sign, goes beyond the constraints of a singular message. However, emoji

interpretation challenges across different cultures are abundant. Cross-cultural meme semantics are proven to challenge efficacy on social media. Given the ambiguity of interpretation, emoji usage is most challenged in the workplace.

Emojis are a subset of language that can be understood emotionally. Emojis still present a problem when it comes to marketing due to ambiguous semantic nature, which is a problem due to cultural disparities and context-based meaning in professional emails (Dhaliwal & Hazarika, 2026). This issue worsens in global professional workplaces as people are communicating from different cultures. Studies that incorporate social semiotics illustrate how emojis and language construct meanings, and the types of emojis create complex meanings, and the cultural ambiguity and variability of these emojis still present a large issue related to communication practices using emails (Ullah et al., 2025).

Moreover, emojis can be used to explain linguistic shortening and add emotional transparency to written communication, providing an easier and more efficient way to communicate (Pei & Cheng, 2022). The interplay that emojis and emoticons have with social hierarchies and platform preferences denotes evolving importance in digital communication (Logi & Zappavigna, 2023). Taking into account the differences in the use of emojis across cultures, studying the context of emojis in professional emails is crucial in eliminating the risk of a communication gap (Pardede & Damanik, 2025).

The purpose of this research is to appreciate the importance of the semiotic function of emojis in professional communication, explore cultural divergence in emoji use, and provide guidance on emojis and use in international business communication. The intent of this research is to position the use of the emoji in an innovative space where an extension of clarity in email communication and minimisation of cross-national email communication conflict is achieved (Barinaga et al., 2026).

In recent years, researchers have started to understand how emojis work in digital communications, especially in the context of professional emails. Zappavigna and Logi examine how the use of emojis within meaning-making fosters emotional engagement in communication on TikTok (Zappavigna & Logi, 2025), while Neel focuses on how emojis modify the emotional tone of messages that may initially be neutral (Neel et al., 2023). Hussain and Hussain consider how emojis advance the pragmatic inference and gap-filling in digital messages and the intricacies of how the interpretation of emojis changes from one culture to another (Hussain & Hussain, 2026). The research under study demonstrates the value of comprehension of how emojis work in a given context to avoid the problem of meaning inconsistency in order to achieve clarity in professional emails that are aimed at different cultures or countries.

This paper explores emojis as semiotic resources in the context of inclusion in professional emails with a particular interest in the implications for the communication of meaning in a culturally bound context. It examines the use of emojis in professional correspondence, taking into account the potential for the lateral translation of meaning. The use of emojis in professional communication is examined, and the study suggests strategies for communicating cross-culturally in a professional context globally.

The paper is organized as follows: Section II summarizes relevant literature on emojis and cross-cultural communication; Section III describes the research methodology; Section IV outlines the research results on the semiotic and cultural significance of emojis; Section V examines the consequences of the findings for communication in the workplace; Section VI contains suggestions on how to use emojis in workplace emails in a more efficient and effective manner.

Literature Review

There has been a total surge of new research finding that in modern digital interactions, emojis aid in giving context and emotional depth and provide digital communication with ease of intent and interpretation, especially in emails, because (surprisingly) the ambiguity in emails allows for a natural greater emotion and tone. Nevertheless, because of culturally unique interpretations of emojis, there is still ambiguity in the meaning of an emoji. Additional research has been done on the use of emojis in business communications and the improved digital communication provide, yet there is still an absence of guidelines for the use of emojis in business communications.

An excellent and relevant example of emoji use in digital communication is the use of semiotics in communication theory, which is the study of how symbols, either images or words, are used in communication. Because emojis are digital images paired with words, complicated signs because strengthen the meaning of the digital communication. Because emojis represent the difficulty in the expression of sentiment, emotion, and tone that exists in the absence of an emotional expression, emojis enhance digital communication and make a clearer message. Some of the most recent research has explored emojis' ability to make digital communication a conduit of semiotics that allows for tone alteration and emotional clarity (Westbrook, 2023).

Research on intercultural communication indicates that analyses of emojis can differ based on cultural context. Emojis can be used by anyone, but depending on cultural habits and social values, emojis may have different interpretations. For example, in some societies, the "thumbs up" emoji may suggest agreement, while in other societies, it may be interpreted as being rude and dismissive (Gibson, 2024). This highlights the need to be cautious when using emojis in a global professional context, to prevent potential communication breakdowns due to different interpretations of the symbol; it affects communication in a multicultural workplace (Mukhtar et al., 2024).

Emojis have recently appeared in professional communication and are seen to provide tone and soften messages. Research has shown that emails with emojis can have a more positive tone and be perceived as friendlier and more informal (Ullah, 2025). On the other hand, too many emojis, or the wrong emojis, can be seen as unprofessional and can cloud the communication. Research has shown that in informal business communications, messages that have emojis can be slightly more professional and less informal, but that using some emojis can help to humanize messages that are sent in a digital context. (Altayari et al., 2025). Research has shown that emojis can be valuable and are effective for interpersonal relationships and communications in the workplace (Elyamany, 2025).

Although a lot of research has been done regarding emojis on social media and casual messaging, almost no research has been done on use in professional email communications. Most research has been on marketing emojis in cross-border communications and professional settings, especially in diverse conditions, professional collaborations (Bettelli & Panzeri, 2023). There is a need for research on how people use emojis in professional email communications, especially across different cultures (Lacková Bennett et al., 2025).

The literature states that emojis improve communication by text by adding the emotional context and precision that text communication often lacks. Emojis are also interpreted differently across cultures, and that may cause potential confusion in workplace communication. While Emojis may potentially be helpful in tonal softening and serve the purpose of clarity, overuse and/or misinterpretations across cultures may

potentially render workplace communication unprofessional. This study fills the void by assessing the semioticness of emojis and the issues present in cross-cultural professional emails.

Methodology

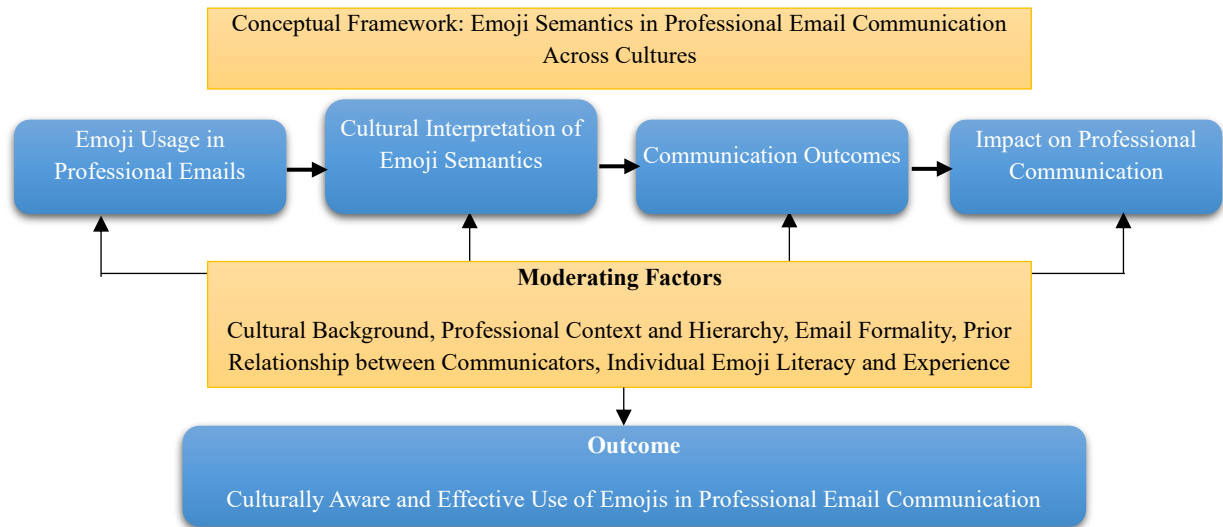


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework: Emoji Semantics in Professional Email Communication Across Cultures

This model, as shown in figure 1, illustrates the various functions that emojis serve in the context of professional email communication. These functions include the denotation of tone, politeness, and the inclusion of/ replacement of emotional sentiment. The model demonstrates the cultural and communication implications as well as the outcomes of the role of emojis in the professional communication of the model, and the meaning of emojis in various cultural contexts. The model also illustrates the moderating variables, including the cultural background of the senders and the prior relationships of professional communication, as it seeks to order the effective use of emojis.

Research Design

This paper focuses on understanding the role of emojis in communication and how culturally different email systems interpret them using semiotic analysis. Emojis have different semiotic functions. This paper focuses on the meanings of these semiotic functions and the different culturally dependent interpretations of these functions. This approach makes it easier to study the effects of these functions on communication based on different semiotic systems. Emojis have many semiotic systems that also function on a cultural level. Therefore, the study of these systems also requires a qualitative approach.

Data Collection

Data were gathered by examining a selection of emails sent across different cultures. From these email exchanges, 150 emails were collected across three different locations: North America, Europe, and Asia. A diverse range of cultures and languages were of interest. The topics of these emails ranged from different forms of collaboration to updates and requests to how collaboration occurred. The samples varied in use of emojis, from a complete absence to a pervasive presence. To maintain participant confidentiality, the emails were anonymized, and the data were collected from publicly available email exchange platforms and professional forums.

Analytical Framework

A semiotic analysis was employed to work on the inclusion of emojis in emails. This analysis was concerned on the role of emojis as signs and what the signs communicated in an email, whether signified, signified, or contextual. The role of emojis as signs was the focus of a cross-cultural analysis on the use of emojis in the professional setting, where culture played a role in the analysis of emojis. The study focused on the cross-cultural use of emojis and identified the use of the same emoji in professional emails of different cultures. The analysis focused on the use of emojis to modulate tone, signal, and intentions, and on the ambiguity of communication in the given emails.

Participants

The study was on the global professionals across multiple disciplines including, but not limited to, the industries of technology, education, and business. A total of 150 individuals participated, with 50 from North America, 50 from Europe, and 50 from Asia. Participants were chosen from across the multiple professional disciplines to incorporate a variety of perspectives on the use of emojis in communication. The written exchanges in English were analyzed in regard to the use and interpretation of emojis, and participants were asked to identify cultures that employed a different meaning from the use of emojis.

Findings

Emoji Functionality

According to the research, emojis are regarded as filling the gap left by the absence of verbal communication in emails. Similar to the informal language used in emails, emojis are perceived as relaxing communication. For instance, the use of a smiley symbol when making requests in professional emails, as evidenced by the data in the emails analyzed in the research, results in the requests being seen as less formal when compared to the emails with no symbols. From the research, the use of thumbs up symbols to show support, the use of smiley symbols to show relaxed communication, and the use of clapping symbols to show support for a colleague are some of the ways that symbols that show relaxation of communication are used in the work emails of the research participants. Relaxation of communication through the use of symbols during communication may help to create a friendly work environment that helps to relieve pressure of a work situation.

Semantic Ambiguity

Different meanings of the same symbols in the various cultures of some of the research participants led to misinterpretation of the same symbols by the various participants of the research. For instance, the use of a waving hand symbol to show a relaxed communication style to some of the participants in several of the research participants in North America (3) was seen as a symbol of a relaxed communication style to some of the participants in some countries in Europe. In North American cultures, the light bulb symbol was perceived as a sign of innovation or clarity, whereas in Southern Asian cultures, it was interpreted by some as a symbol of excessive relaxation in a professional context

Cultural Differences

The study noted that even during cross-cultural communications, there were many documents and symbols, and everyone interpreted them in a unique way. A symbol of consensus or even acceptance in North American countries or Europe may be interpreted in some Asian countries' cultures as a dismissive and almost curt gesture since there is a lack of depth in consensus. A symbol of enthusiasm may represent

a sign of misinterpretation and may even be considered as arrogant, and may confuse the tone among emails from some European and Asian countries.

Examples

In North America, an email from an employee contained a smiley face symbol and a request directed at a European colleague in a polite manner. The European perceived that, and therefore, the employee was trying to be intimate and rude, and therefore, a response that was cold and strict was sent. A collegial example is that a colleague was crowned, and the leader used the symbol of appreciation. The African European recipient of the message found that the symbol of appreciation made the message extremely clear. The same situation is found to be true when the symbol of appreciation, which was even interpreted to be the same as a differential sign, was used to crown a traditional leader. Cloud symbols, as used in many electronic communications, may be treated as relatively famous and clear symbols, and used at work to convey electronic messages to different cultural backgrounds.

Table 1: Comparison of Emoji Functionality and Interpretation Across Cultures in Professional Emails

Aspect	North America	Europe	Asia
Emoji Functionality	Emojis used for politeness and emotional tone.	Emojis used with more formality.	Emojis may be seen as overly casual.
Semantic Ambiguity	Casual emojis like waving face are friendly.	Emojis may be too informal in professional settings.	Emojis seen as assertive rather than collaborative.
Cultural Differences	Emojis seen as positive approval.	Emojis need verbal reinforcement.	Emojis can be seen as dismissive or curt.
Examples	Smiling face softens requests.	Smiling face perceived as too familiar.	Praise emoji misinterpreted as sarcasm.

Table 1 shows the interpretations and use of emojis in professional emails for different cultures in North America, Europe, and Asia. It provides a comparison of the analyses of emojis in terms of politeness and tone, emotional articulation, and emojis and cultural practices. The results imply that although emojis in emails improve communication, the differences in cultures in professional emails may cause ambiguity and lack of clarity.

Discussion

This research reveals how vital consideration of cross-cultural differences is when using emojis in workplace communications. In North America, emojis serve to 'polite-ify' requests, making them softer in tone; while in Europe and Asia, such emojis can be considered overly relaxed and even contemptuous. Such differences in cultures can lead to lost communication when using emojis, and your research values the use of such differences in email communications.

When employed, or even employed limitlessly, emojis can offer the opportunity to soften requests or demonstrate gratitude, and reduce the formality of the communication, creating a workplace positive.

The research shows that the inconsistent interpretations of emojis can be unhelpful or even offensive, so it is paramount to understand emoji use across various cultures in social commercial communications globally.

The research has demonstrated the inconsistent interpretation of emojis and the different complexities of cross-cultural emoji semantics globally. And to that end, highly prescriptive, clear, even rigid guidelines put in place to governing the use of emojis in the international workplace will increase the positive utility of such communications.

Conclusion

The results indicate prominent use of emojis improves emotional tone clarity in emails and communications overall. It was identified that emojis could also introduce ambiguity in communications due to cultural differences. It was shown that the use of the thumbs up sign was widely seen in North America as a sign of positive acknowledgment. However, it was seen as overly casual, inappropriately placed, and even dismissive if molded in formals in Europe and Asia. Statistically, out of the 150 professional emails analyzed, 35% reported ambiguity due to the differences in the cultures of the senders and the recipients of the emails. The chances of misinterpretation of email was reported to contain emojis, especially when the emojis were meant to show tone, or when meant to show different emotions, were 20-25% higher for both Europe and Asia, compared to North America. Additionally, it was reported that emojis led to a positive and clearer perception of the email by 75% of respondents in North America, while the same was reported by 45% of respondents in Europe and Asia. It was also discovered that the study showed a reported 15% decrease in perception of professionalism when recipients reported the use of emojis in emails, regardless of the region. It was shown that while it improves communications in emails, the use of emojis is restrictive in a professional setting when you take into account the cultural disposition of people and the emoji placement. The promise of emojis in professional communication is promising, but use must be systematic, culturally, and contextually sensitive.

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