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Semiotic Basis for the Use of Emoticons, Emojis and Stickers in Social Media Communication

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Abstract

Technological advancements and recent innovations and trends have affected virtually all aspects of human interactions to a great extent. An aspect of these innovations concerns the use of emoticons, emojis and stickers in instant messaging and other digital communication applications. The aim of this study is to examine the extent to which the usage of emoticons, emojis and stickers has influenced communication on social media platforms; how well students use emoticons, emojis and stickers on social media; whether there are problems associated with the usage and attachment of meaning to these devices on social media and how such problems can be addressed. Data for the study was sourced through the administration of a questionnaire on fifty very active users of the social media who were randomly selected from among undergraduate students of Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Nigeria. The responses to the questionnaire were analysed and interpreted using simple percentage, and the results are presented in tables. The findings of the study show that emoticons and emojis are prominent tools that encourage social media communications and interactions, and aid comprehension of messages among active social media users. The study recommends that measures be put in place by the controllers and administrators of social media to prevent negative or illicit usage of emoticons, emojis and stickers given that these devices can sometimes be vulgar, unofficial, misapplied and/or misinterpreted.

Key words: Key words: emoticons, emojis, stickers, social media communication, semiotics

1. Introduction

The essence of communication has its root in linguistic representation embodied in the paradigm for understanding meaning in semiotics. Danesi (2021) defines semiotics as the scientific study of signs in relation to how it affects and conditions meaning. It makes use of the principles of structural linguistics to analyse verbal, visual and spatial sign systems. Peirce (1955: 98) used the term "Semiotics" to describe the relationship that exists between sign and thought.

Chandler (2007) observed that human beings unconsciously interpret things as signs. The modern semiotics is founded on the work of the linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure (1974) and of the philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce (1965). Peirce established the relation with a referent in the real world and called this semiotic element as object. The process of representation of the

reality can be envisaged through the relation between the semiotic signs, the object that they represent and the interpretant, that basically is the meaning that the sign creates about the reality of the object. Peirce spoke of this as a triple connection of sign, thing signified and cognition produced in the mind (Atkin, 2006). Peirce is of the opinion that signs dominate the entire universe. Ramello and Silva (2006, 943) observed that a sign is a kind of label, technically termed, a 'semiotic device' that denotes some particular object. Human interactions consist of such necessary tools for communication and collective human activities." Signs exist all around us and through them we can construct our relation with the world (Johansen and Larsen, 2002).

Social semiotics studies how social icons and popular figures are viewed in relation to their style and trend. It views how the dressing and style of popular society's figures influence and affects their identity and the perspective of the general public about them. Halliday (1978) views that the semiotic resources of language are influenced by how people use them to make meaning in the social situation. He views that every sign serves three roles at the same time: they express something about the world (ideational metafunction), position people in relation to each other (interpersonal metafunction) and form connections with other signs to produce coherent text (textual metafunction). In supporting Halliday's ideas, Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress developed a more critical account of language and society (Kress & Hodge, 1979).

According to Boyd & Ellison (2007), the term social media is an umbrella term that includes internet based sites and services that function for or promote social interactions between individuals that use them as an important part of their interpersonal communication. The development of social media in its current form started in the 1980s, under the forms of Bulletin Board System (BBS), UseNet and Internet relay chat. These services, while not referred to as social media, are considered as their modern form precursors. What is more specifically referred to as social media is the range of tools that started to appear in the 1990s. One of the first sites that came out in 1995 was eBay. With the arrival of eBay, social media came in many different forms, performing different functions such as forums, blogs, wikis, content sharing and virtual worlds, which are the types of services that the users seek.

Differences in cultures, languages and locations constitute difficulties that have made global communications problematic. Interactions involving members of different cultures for purposes of business, pleasure, tourism and education present challenging situations for communication due to language barriers. This problem is partly resolved with the advances in modern communication technologies that have led to the possibility of interaction among people of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. However, these developments could not communicate the affective domains of human interactions, moreso that the means by which we pass messages across play an important role in the understanding of our intent (Bamigbola, 2020).

Murphy (2017) observed that nonverbal cues in face-to-face communication can be used to express emotion and manage the relationship between messages and meaning. In computer-mediated communications, online visual communicative elements are termed as "graphicons" (graphical icons) which include emoticons, emojis, GIFs, images, and videos (Herring and Dainas, 2017). They support the

otherwise thoroughly text-based interaction in much the same way that facial and body expressions do in face-to-face communication (Lo and Puchalski, 2008).

An emoticon, short form for 'emotion icon' is described as a pictorial representation of a facial expression using characters such as punctuation marks, numbers and letters - which allows the user to express feelings, emotions, concepts and ideas. Specifically, an emoticon is ASCII-based and typographically composed of keyboard symbols. Emoticons can be pictorial, such as (Santa Claus), or they can represent an emotional status, such as laughing (Gettinger & Koeszegi, 2015). These picture characters or pictographs are commonly used in smartphone texting and social media sharing and have become extremely popular worldwide. It is worthy to note that emoticon was indigenized in China when Chinese users creatively incorporated mandarin characters with keyboard based symbols, such as: 目 (grinning teeth face; De Seta, 2018).

The word emoji comes from the Japanese "E" meaning picture + "MOJI" meaning character. Emojis are actual pictures which do not only represent human emotions but also represent objects, actions, places and much more. Emojis require specific software support; otherwise they will appear as placeholder icons or blank spaces. Another unique feature of emojis is the high level of personalization. Many Mobile Instant Messaging (MIM) apps allow users to create their own emojis through a series of simple steps: upload pictures or capture real-time photos, then add personalized elements such as textual descriptions. History of emojis dates back to 1998, when Kurita took inspiration from weather forecasts symbols and created the first emoji based on the live expressions exhibited by people and other things that he observed in the city (Zareen et al. (2016). Commonly used emojis have

been coded in Unicode standard since 2010. As of June 2018, there were 2,823 Unicode emojis (Emojipedia, 2018).

The vast usage, popularity and significance of emoji communication can be judged by the fact that Oxford Dictionaries - global leader in language - have instead of choosing a traditional word chosen an emoji, ('Face with tears of joy') as the word of the year – 2015 (Reinhartz, 2016). Casper Grathwohl, President of Oxford Dictionaries, has rated emojis as flexible, immediate and rich form of communication that transcends linguistic borders. Emojis have revolutionized the way we communicate. Today, we tend to use emoji to describe our feelings instead of using actual words, that is, emojis have become a universal language, Zareen et al. (2016).

Stickers are described as more expressive than emoticons and emojis. They can be textual, pictorial, or a combination of both, and can be static PNG images or animated GIFs (De Seta, 2018). This study is inspired by the unprecedented prevalence of mobile instant messaging (MIM) and the increased adoption of emoticons, emojis, and stickers in MIM-supported communication. Emoticons, emojis and stickers are three substantial types of graphicons in MIM, and they are easily sent with the simple acts of clicking or tapping on smartphones. With the advancement of digital communication and instant messaging applications, the use of emoticons, emojis and stickers has gained popularity. Since in-text messaging, para-linguistic and extra-linguistic cues cannot be observed, emoticons, emojis and stickers have been seen as a way of showing the emotions and feelings. Below are sample emojis and stickers copied from students' WhatsApp platforms.

😋 🤩 👍 👍 ✊ 🙋 🙋

A sarcastic use of the word 'pardon'

Acting gentle
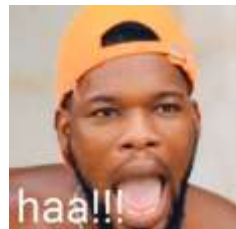
Expresses surprise

Depicting still online

This study aims at examining what popular emoticons, emojis and stickers on social media signify, determining the effects of these social media characters on communication, what problems are associated with their usage and how such problems can be addressed.

2. Methodology

Since the study is a descriptive research, facts were gathered with the use of a questionnaire. The questionnaire, see the Appendix, is composed of two parts: the first was designed to collect personal information while the second surveys the responses of respondents to a set of opinions. The questionnaire was administered to respondents and collected after they have been completed. The respondents comprise fifty undergraduates of Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Nigeria. The selection of the respondents was done randomly giving consideration to students who were very active on the social media. In the selection, it was also ensured that both males and females participated in the study, and all levels from 100 to 400 were represented. Out of the fifty students selected for the study, 24 (48%) are males while 26 (52%) are females, and 8 (16%) are in 100 level, 15 (30%) in 200 level, 16 (32%) in 300 level while 11 (22%) are in 400 level.

The questionnaire was self-developed, and primarily to elicit information on the effects the use of emoticons, emojis and stickers have on social media communication. The information gathered through the questionnaire were interpreted and analysed using percentage distribution.

3. Data Analysis and Findings

3.1 Data Analysis

The responses to items on the questionnaire were analysed and discussed below:

Table 1: Summary of responses to enquiry on whether the respondents are active on social media

Options	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	No Response	Total
Frequency	31	12	2	0	5	50
Percentage	62%	24%	4%	0%	10%	100%

The result in Table 1 shows that thirty-one, which constitutes 62% of the respondents, strongly agree that they chat actively on social media, 12, making 24% chose 'Agree' while only 2 constituting 4% disagreed and 5, making 10% did not respond to the question. It is obvious that most of the respondents are very active on social media, hence, the respondents were qualified to answer the other questions and to provide reliable information needed for this study.

Table 2: Summary of responses to enquiry on whether the respondents use emoticons, emojis and stickers more than text when sending messages

Options	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	No Response	Total
Frequency	17	19	6	2	6	50
Percentage	34%	38%	12%	4%	12%	100%

From the result in Table 2, thirty-six, making 72% of the respondents, agreed that they use emoticons and emojis than text when sending messages. Only 8, making 16%, disagreed and 6, constituting 12% did not give any response to the question.

Table 3: Summary of responses to statement on whether there are ideas that the respondents feel that emoticons, emojis and stickers can express better than texts

Options	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Frequency	9	23	16	2	50
Percentage	18%	46%	32%	4%	100%

From the result in Table 3, thirty-two, making 64% of the respondents, prefer to use emoticons and emojis to express certain ideas and thoughts that they feel texts cannot express while 18, making 36% do not agree that there are ideas that emoticons and emojis can express better than texts.

Table 4: Summary of responses to issue on whether the respondents find it more interesting to chat with people using emoticons, emojis and stickers than using text

Options	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	No Response	Total
Frequency	8	19	17	4	2	50
Percentage	16%	38%	34%	8%	4%	100%

From the result in Table 4, twenty-seven, making 54% of the respondents, agreed that they find it more interesting to chat with people who use emoticons, emojis and stickers than those who use ordinary text while twenty-one, constituting 42%, did not agree that the use of emoticons, emojis and stickers influence the people they chat with. Two of the respondents, making 4%, did not give any response to the item. This is an indication that the use of emoticons and emojis has great influence on social media interactions.

Table 5: Summary of responses to statement on whether the respondents hate emoticons, emojis and stickers because they look childish and are used to express fake feelings

Options	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	No Response	Total
Frequency	13	9	14	13	1	50
Percentage	26%	18%	28%	26%	2%	100%

From the result in Table 5, it can be observed that only 44% of the respondents agree that emoticons, emojis and stickers are childish and hence they don't use it, while 54% are of the view that emoticons, emojis and stickers are not babyish and are not used for fake expressions hence, they can be employed more in social media interactions as a means of graphically portraying what an individual implies.

Table 6: Summary of responses to enquiry on whether the respondents hate using emoticons, emojis and stickers because they are vulgar

Options	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	No Response	Total
Frequency	6	15	21	7	1	50
Percentage	12%	30%	42%	14%	2%	100%

From the result in Table 6, twenty-one, making 42% of the respondents, agree that emoticons and emojis are vulgar while 58% of the respondents disagree. The result indicates that majority of the respondents are comfortable with the use of emoticons, emojis and stickers.

Table 7: Summary of responses to opinion on whether the use of emoticons, emojis and stickers helps the respondents to express themselves easily than the use of texts

Options	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	No Response	Total
Frequency	7	18	18	6	1	50
Percentage	14%	36%	36%	12%	2%	100%

From the result in Table 7, twenty-five, making 50% of the respondents agree that emoticons and emojis help them to express themselves more than texts while twenty-four, constituting 48% disagree and 1, making 2%, did not give any response to the question. It can be deduced therefore that many social media users use emoticons, emojis and stickers to express themselves more easily than they use texts. However, from information gathered during interaction with some of the respondents, this depends on the individuals involved in the interaction, the situation involved, context of usage and the message to be passed across.

Table 8: Summary of responses to statement on whether the respondents are more active on the social media because of availability of emoticons, emojis and stickers

Options	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Frequency	22	17	6	5	50
Percentage	44%	34%	12%	10%	100%

From the result in Table 8, it can be deduced that the use of emoticons and emojis has made people more active on the social media. Thirty-nine, making 78%, agree while only 11, making 22% disagree. Hence, it has been established that the influx of emoticons and emojis has affected social media communication positively as it makes more people active on social media platforms.

Table 9: Summary of responses to enquiry on whether the use of emoticons, emojis and stickers makes it easier for the respondents to express their emotions and feelings when chatting on social media

Options	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	No Response	Total
Frequency	17	19	10	3	1	50
Percentage	34%	38%	20%	6%	2%	100%

The result in Table 9 shows that majority of the respondents easily express feelings and emotions with the use of emoticons and emojis while chatting. Thirty-six, making 72% of the respondents, agree to this while just 13, making 26% of the respondents disagree.

Table 10: Summary of responses to statement on whether the respondents understand chats better when emoticons, emojis and stickers are used than when texts are used

Options	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Frequency	13	13	20	4	50
Percentage	26%	26%	40%	8%	100%

While twenty-six, making 52% of the respondents, agree that emoticons and emojis help them to understand chats more than texts 24, making 48%, disagree with the notion. This implies that more often than not, many social media users prefer messages which contain more graphical icons than texts.

3. Findings

This study reveals that the use of emoticons, emojis and stickers has influenced communication on social media platforms in many ways, including the individuals people choose to communicate with, the way messages

are interpreted and the rate at which people interact on the social media platforms. The findings of the study show that the influx of emoticons and emojis has influenced the interest and attitude of social media users. Many of the respondents in this study agreed that they find it more interesting to chat with people using emoticons, emojis and stickers than using ordinary texts. The use of emoticons, emojis and stickers has made it easier for people to express their feelings and emotions while chatting. It was found that many of the respondents in this study prefer to use emoticons, emojis and stickers to express certain ideas and thoughts which they feel texts cannot express. Majority of the respondents are comfortable with the use of emoticons, emojis and stickers. Many social media users prefer messages which contain more graphical icons than texts. With the use of these graphical and pictorial devices, more people are active on social media platforms.

4. Conclusion

This study portrays emoticons, emojis and stickers as proficient devices for communication and interaction, which aid comprehension of messages among active social media users. However, given that some of these graphical and pictorial devices can sometimes be vulgar, unofficial and misapplied and/or misinterpreted, it is recommended that measures be put in place by the controllers and administrators of social media to prevent negative or illicit usage of the devices. With these precautions in place, emoticons, emojis and stickers can serve as aids to enrich language education.

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APPENDIX

ADEKUNLE AJASIN UNIVERSITY, AKUNGBA AKOKO
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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND LITERARY STUDIES

QUESTIONNAIRE MEASURING THE INFLUENCE OF EMOTICONS, EMOJIS AND STICKERS ON SOCIAL MEDIA LANGUAGE AND USERS

Dear respondent,

The purpose of this questionnaire is to gather information that can help the person administering it in further understanding the influence of emoticons, emoji and stickers on social media language and users. Please, every answer to be supplied should be sincere and truthful as they will all be handled with all sense of confidentiality.

SECTION A: BIODATA

Names…………………………………………………………………………………………

Age……………………..……………, Gender……………………………….,
Level……………………………………………………….

Are you active on Social Media? Yes ☐ No ☐

SECTION B

Please, tick the appropriate response to the following ten items.

SA = Strongly agree, A = agree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly disagree

SN	Questions	SA	A	D	SD
1.	I chat actively on WhatsApp.				
2.	I use emoticons, Emojis and Stickers more than I use texts.				
3.	There are ideas that emoticons, emojis and stickers can express better than texts.				
4.	I find it more interesting to chat with people using emoticons, emojis and stickers than using text.				
5.	I hate emoticons, emojis and stickers because they look childish				

	and are used to express fake feelings.				
6.	I hate using emoticons, emojis and stickers because they are vulgar.				
7.	Emoticons, emojis and stickers help one to express himself easily than the use of texts.				
8.	I am more active on the social media because of availability of emoticons, emojis and stickers.				
9.	The use of emoticons, emojis and stickers makes it easier for one to express emotions and feelings when chatting on social media.				
10.	The use of emoticons, emojis and stickers makes it easier for one to understand chats better than when texts are used.				