

Interpretation and Icon Debate: An Analysis of Emoji Usage in Textual Communication on Digital Media



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Abstract

The use of emojis in textual communication is a relatively recent phenomenon and a new development in the communications landscape with significant uptake in a short period. With the increased prevalence of emojis in modern textual communication, it is important to examine and understand whether emotions conveyed by these symbols are accorded the same meaning by individuals worldwide and the icon differences among the different platforms in their usage. Despite the growing ubiquity of emojis in textual messages, controversies associated with their meaning and icon debate exist. This study examined the controversies surrounding emoji's interpretation and icon debate in modern textual communication. The study's objective was to investigate whether emoji icons and interpretation are the same among the different digital platforms. The study was anchored on the Technological Determinism Theory. The methodology adopted was the qualitative research design with the documentary research method as a secondary data collection method. The study explored the meanings and interpretations of emojis and icon standardization among different digital platforms. Findings revealed that emojis convey a wide range of emotions and enhance the tone and context of text-based digital conversations. However, emojis used in text-based conversations are full of meaning and interpretation controversy. The study also found a lack of icon standardization among the different digital platforms leading to miscommunication and misunderstanding. Based on the findings, the researcher recommends amongst others that audiences should be conscious of how they use emojis in text-based communication as inappropriate use of emojis could be misinterpreted and lead to litigations.

Keywords: *Emoji, Textual communication, Digital media, Debate, Analysis*

Introduction

Emoji usage in text messaging is a relatively new phenomenon that has quickly gained substantial traction in the communications industry. Accordingly, Boutet *et al.* (2021) state that "Advances in digital technology have transformed how we communicate with others. This transformation is particularly salient in adolescents and young adults who now spend more time interacting digitally than face-to-face (FtF)" (p. 2). Almost similar views were expressed by Akber *et al.* (2021) who assert that, "the enormous growth of Internet gave birth to a sign language in digital textual communication called emoticons, which late evolved to present colorful emoji's" (p. 2409). Further, shedding light on the

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emergence of emojis and its transformation of the communications landscape, Sternbergh (2014) states:

Emojis – small digital images or icons used to express an idea or emotion in electronic communication – have significantly changed the way we communicate by adding nuance to a written exchange. Indeed, Emoji has become an optional, global language, “intended to illustrate, or in some cases replace altogether, the words we send each other digitally. (p.3)

Emojis are what many consider to be a rudimentary language—possibly the first language to emerge from the digital age. Emojis are little visual symbols that we use in our text, posts, and punctuation on phones and computers. These little icons add colourful paralinguistic texture and context to our daily text-based digital conversations in the form of messages and chats. Koch *et al.* (2023) inform that “emojis are paralinguistic elements that are used in computer-mediated communication to express emotions, convey tone, or simply depict objects or statements” (para 1). Several scholars have conceptualized emojis in the following context:

Emoji is an anglicised version of two Japanese words – e, a picture, and moji, a ‘character’, representing colourful, contemporary pictographic forms of facial expressions, objects and symbols, concepts and ideas from celebrations, weather and buildings, to food, plants, emotions, feelings and activities (Bliss-Carroll, 2016; Evans, 2017; Novak, Smailovic, Sluban, & Mozetic, 2015; Tandyonomanu & Tsurova, 2018).

Boutet *et al.* (2021) corroborated the above proposition when they stated that “emojis have the potential to enhance emotion communication and in particular emotion interpretation” (para 11). In the circumstances above, Emojis are used in text-based digital communication to convey a wide range of emotions, hence, its prevalence in contemporary textual communication on digital media.

Despite its ubiquity and pervasiveness, emoji usage in textual communication on digital media has generated debate and questions regarding its interpretation in terms of standardization of meaning and icon debate in recent years. Similarly, Herring and Dainas (2020) inform that “although interpretations varied significantly by emoji type” (p. 1). In today's digitally advanced age, we utilize emojis more and more in our daily interactions to convey our feelings, thoughts, and emotions. Emojis are used in text messaging more frequently these days, thus it's critical to consider and comprehend the ramifications of using them. Contributing to emoji usage in contemporary text-based digital communication:

Emojis are used more and more frequently in network communication, and the way they are used is becoming more and more diversified as well. They not only have unique semantic and emotional features, but are also closely related to marketing, law, health care, and many other areas (Bai *et al.*, 2019, p. 1).

Even if emojis are becoming more and more common, there are still disputes surrounding their usage specifically as it relates to interpretation and icon debate; variations in icons or symbols. Accordingly, Bai *et al.* (2019) stated that “emojis are platform-or system-dependent, they are often used in online communication. Due to its visual characteristics or platform differences, there would be emotional or semantic

ambiguity in communication" (p. 2). For example, a thumbs-up denotes approval, agreement, acceptance, or affirmation; a heart icon represents love; laughing emojis cover cruel jokes; and knife or gun emojis may be interpreted as threats to kill someone by stabbing them.

Research conducted by Dimson (2015) informs that "as of March 2019, there were 3,019 emoji in Unicode, with nearly half of all text messages on Instagram containing emoji, and 5 billion of them being used daily on Facebook. In 2015, emoji was named the word of the year by the Oxford English Dictionary, indicating emoji's influence in online communication". These variations in icons among the different platforms and the seeming lack of standardization of meaning as it relates to the epistemological, ontological, and axiological conceptualization of emojis use in textual communication demand a scientific investigation to unravel the truth and proffer possible solutions.

Statement of the Problem

Emojis are increasingly used daily to express our thoughts, feelings, and emotions in the digitized contemporary society. While this is a welcome development, as every new media comes with its peculiarities and shapes society in significant ways; Emoji usage in textual communication on digital media has also generated debate and questions regarding meaning standardization and icon debate (variation in icons among the different platforms) in recent years. In today's digitally advanced age, we utilize emojis more and more in our daily interactions to convey our feelings, thoughts, and emotions. Emojis are used in text messaging more frequently these days, thus it's critical to comprehend the ramifications of using them. Emojis are becoming more and more common, yet there are still some issues around their usage.

The prevalence of emoji's use in text-based digital communication also comes with its dynamics. This presupposes the fact that there is no universal interpretation of meanings associated with a particular emoji icon. Further, there is a range of differences in emoji icons among the different platforms. This calls for concern as the essence of communication is the shared meaning leading to understanding where that is not in existence, it could lead to misinformation and discombobulation among the interlocutors. The study, therefore, sought to examine emojis interpretation and the icon debate in the digital text-based communication.

Objectives of the Study

The under-listed objectives were stated to guide this study. The objectives of the study are to:

1. Examine the potency of emojis to effectively convey emotions, thoughts, and feelings in digital textual communication
2. Examine the interpretation controversy of emoji's use in digital textual communication.
3. Find out if the emoji icons are the same among the different digital platforms.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the technological determinism theory. Technological determinism theory was propounded by Marshal McLuhan in 1964. This theory denotes the approach that promotes the thesis that technology is influenced both by the user and his surroundings and, above all, by the technology itself.

Asemah (2011) posits that “the basic premise of the technological determinism theory of Marshal McLuhan is that the media are extensions of the human body. The theory holds that the media not only alter their environment but the very message they convey” (pp 214-215). The proponents of technological determinism argue that society is influenced and shaped by technological development. It has to adjust and adapt to new technologies and innovations. For instance, technology structures information in a manner typical of them (the world is structured differently in new digital media), they affect the psyche of the user, convey different emotions, causes social change, and brings changes in the mode of communication. Accordingly, Pavlik and McIntosh (2013) also affirm that “technology cause certain human behaviours” (p. 454).

Rodman (2012) states that “the introduction of every new technology changes society, sometimes in unexpected ways” (p. 60). Similarly, Boutet *et al.* (2021) while identifying with this line of argument note that “Advances in digital technology have transformed how we communicate with others. This transformation is particularly salient in adolescents and young adults who now spend more time interacting digitally than face-to-face (FtF)”. The extrapolation is that any new media in use in the evolving development of society plays a fundamental role in determining changes in the socio-economic cum political fabric of society and the mode of communication.

Methodology

The method of study adopted is documentary research. “The method is unique and requires a careful and systematic study and analysis of documented sources such as written text, visual and pictorial data” (Agbo *et al.*, 2018, p. 20). This type of research involves the analysis of documented information that is related to an intended study. Accordingly, Mogalakwe (2006) as cited in Ibrahim (2021) posits that “documentary research refers to the analysis of documents that contain information about the phenomenon to be studied” (p. 165). Thus, this study explored documented but related information on emoji’s use in digital textual communication from libraries (physical and virtual), academic journals, books, and the Internet. The researcher carefully read through, examined and analysed the contents of the selected themes as they relate to the objectives of the study.

To put up a wider narrative that gives a proper understanding of emojis interpretation or standardization of meaning, and icon variation among the different platforms, the researcher undertakes an in-depth study of various documents relevant and related to the subject matter under review. This premise is based on the fact that this study data source type is the secondary data as clearly stated earlier.

A total of 20 journal articles and publications that are relevant to the present study were reviewed. The researcher thoroughly perused through and analysed the content of each of them (publications/journal articles) and categorised them in line with the objectives of this study. The papers were arranged along the following themes:

- Emojis in communication
- Standardization or universality of Emoji's meaning and interpretation
- Emojis faces, hearts, and thumbs icons
- Emojis influence in expression of feelings, thoughts, and emotion
- Emojis icon differentiation among the different platforms and devices

The preceding themes were considered after sifting through the relevant journal articles and publications. The various components were combined into meaningful areas.

Literature Review and Analysis

The following is the literature review presented in themes and sub-themes.

Emoji: definition and its use in textual communication

Emojis are graphics, such as icons or pictures, which have their code point used to symbolize ideas or objects. They are visual representations used for digital text messages. Emojis are those tiny little graphics that participants in digital text chats utilize daily. Emojis are little graphic symbols used on computers and phones for punctuation, text, and postings. In the words of (Pujari *et al.*, 2018), "Emojis means pictograph. It is a Japanese word which means emotions or emoticons in English. Emojis are the next version of Emoticons and graphical representation. Also, it supports various colors and animations" (p. 733).

Emojis could be considered to be a rudimentary language—possibly the first language to emerge from the digital age. "Indeed, Emoji has become an optional, global language, "intended to illustrate, or in some cases replace altogether, the words we send each other digitally" (Sternbergh, 2014, p. 3).

Emojis started gaining traction in our culture since their emergence in our communications landscape. Accordingly, Bai *et al.* (2019) posit that "emoji use is structured by a combination of linguistic and social contexts, as well as cultural conventions" (p. 5).

According to a report released by Edge Hill University in the UK and the Australian Catholic University cited in (Pujari, 2018) "In today's world usage of emojis has become so important that nearly 90 percent population use them in their text and emails" (p. 734). The extrapolation is that emojis are used in text discussions by over 90% of millennials worldwide irrespective of culture, language, geographic location, and sex.

Previous research efforts have shown that emojis used in textual digital communication are an effective way of communicating emotions, feelings, and thoughts. Fischer and Herbert (2021) find that "an important function of emoji as communicative symbols is to convey emotional content from sender to receiver in computer-mediated communication, e.g., WhatsApp".

Interpretation and Universality of Meaning

Many studies have been conducted on emojis' use in textual communication, its ramifications, and its emergence, but this particular study focuses on emojis interpretation and standardization of meaning in one aspect. Here relevant literatures are reviewed and analysed. Emojis might have different interpretations and connotations based on a range of factors, including who you are communicating with, the social context, the depth of the overlapped experience, and the cultural background. "Cultural differences have a significant impact on the use of emoji. Some specific uses of emoji are closely related to cultural background" (Park *et al.*, 2014). The point of emphasis of this study which is hinged on interpretation controversy lends credence to the above assertion.

From the documents sourced and analysed Dai *et al.* (2019) study stated that "due to its visual characteristics or platform differences, there would be emotional or semantic

ambiguity in communication” (p. 2). The extrapolation is that meaning-making in any communication encounter is an active process and requires universal acceptability of the symbols used. These symbols are considered either written using the alphabet or symbols in the form of pictorials, graphics, and icons. Cohn *et al.* (2019) while contributing to the debate on the interpretation of emoji use and icon variation among the different platforms stated that:

Emojis have rapidly become a prevalent part of everyday communication for millions of people worldwide. However, we still know little about the constraints guiding their comprehension, and how they function in communicative structures. Although emojis use a vocabulary, provided through the digital interface of smartphones and computers, it is less clear whether a grammatical system guides how emojis are sequenced (p.1).

Many people view emojis as a primitive language, and they may be the first to arise from the digital era. Several studies have viewed emojis, their interpretations, and their cultural impact thus:

Emoji use has exploded in recent years in interactive digital communication. These simple images, now integrated with most digital keyboards, have become a mainstay of messaging and social media. Their broader cultural significance has rocketed them into the popular and academic spotlight, with proclamations that emoji is an ‘emerging language’ (Danesi, 2016; Lebduska, 2014; Lu *et al.*, 2016).

Emojis not only change the tone of a discussion but also improve the way that emotions, thoughts, and feelings are conveyed or expressed. Through the usage of appropriate emojis, users can add visual indicators to their messages that represent emotions they might be experiencing when communicating via text. This might be especially helpful for those who find it difficult to verbally convey their emotions. Emoji interpretations can differ from person to person and from culture to culture, so it's vital to keep that in mind and be mindful of possible misunderstandings.

Findings show that there is no consensus regarding the implied meaning of many emojis (Jaeger & Ares, 2017; Jaeger *et al.*, 2018, 2019; Weissman, 2019). Hence, it is an open question whether emojis play similar communicative functions to nonverbal cues (e.g., Feldman *et al.*, 2017; Kaye *et al.*, 2017; Tossell *et al.*, 2012; Walther & D'Addario, 2001).

Emoji usage in digital text communication has the power to change the tone of a discussion. Emojis can be added to text-based digital conversations to enhance the understanding of the interlocutors or interactants'. For example, a “heart icon” represents love. A "thumbs up" indicated approval. By definition, the thumbs-up emoji denotes acceptance, conformity, and agreement; as such, it can be seen as a type of digital signature. Emojis with knives might be interpreted as threats to kill, while those with guns can be seen as threats to shoot. Laughing emojis are used to express and hide cruel jokes. The moon, the sun, and the beaming face of sunshine. Because traditional emoticons don't have a global meaning, they could cause misunderstandings. Emojis are highly sensitive and may convey and create a wide range of emotions. They also allow for misunderstandings. An emoji for agreement, affirmation, or acceptance, for instance, is a thumbs-up, although audience members may have different interpretations. Others

smile, raise hands in prayer, or give high fives. Emojis, which are made up of different icons or symbols, are widely utilized in conversations. Emojis can be used to convey a variety of emotions, such as agreement, approval, or affirmation (thumbs up), love (heart), laughter (covering terrible jokes), and menace (threatening to stab someone to death).

Icon Variation among Digital Platforms

The second component of this study besides the universality of the meaning of emoji's use is the issues of variation of the same icon(s) among the different digital platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Youtube), and also among different makes of phones such as Apple phones, I-phones and Android phones.

Research findings such as (Mishra, 2023) reveal that Unicode does not regulate what an emoji looks like. Therefore, individual vendors like Apple and Google can decide what shape, color, and design to display. Even app developers can define their own set of unique emojis to map to Unicode. Pujari *et al.* (2018) state that different types of emojis are included in different social media applications" (p. 733). Crombie (2020) observes that:

With each software update, new emojis are added and as of June 2018 over 2,823 were listed in the Unicode Standard (the international encoding standard applied across digital platforms and programs) (Emojipedia, 2018; Novak *et al.*, 2015). This number continues to grow exponentially with their global uptake, transcending borders, representing ethnicities, gender identities, and more (p.31).

In this study, the extent of the examination predicts that emojis generally have nuanced differences among the different devices. For example, emoji icons in Android phones are a bit different from some emoji icons in Apple phones or cell phones. Accordingly, (Unicode, 2018) informs that "these emojis may have subtle visual differences to the viewer depending on what device or software is being used". Consequently, Mishra's (2023) study gave the nuanced emojis icon differences among the different types of brands of phones as follows:

Face with Rolling Eyes emoji have the following differences:



Google



Apple



Twitter



Facebook

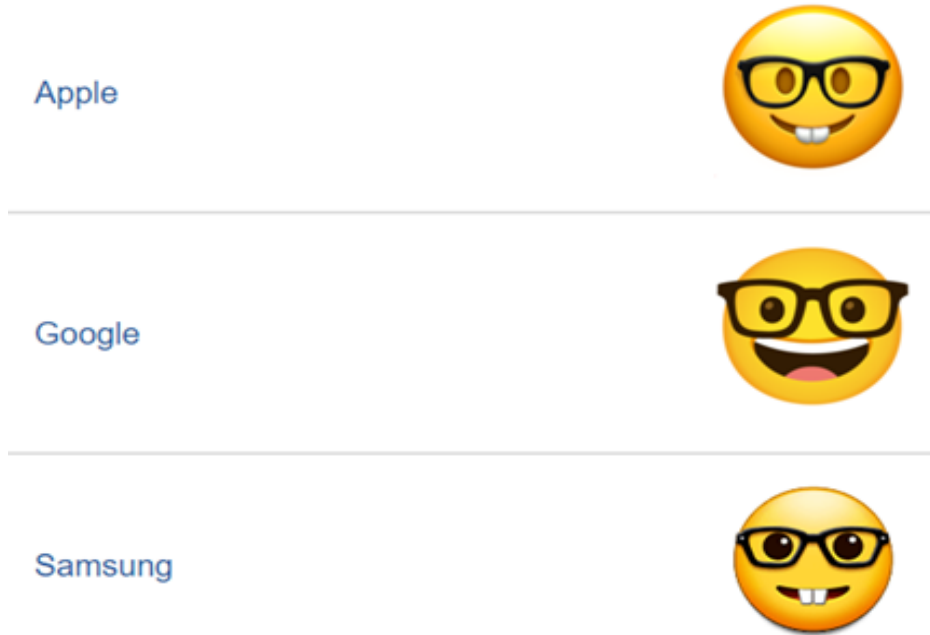
Mishra's (2023) study further reveals that "The Water Pistol" emoji is one of the most evident examples of each vendor or app using its colour and theming, so this emoji icon looks very different depending on the platform or app. For example:



This study's analysis highlighted that the Unicode Consortium - a regulatory body of emoji icons has failed to regulate and come up with uniform emoji icons among the different models and devices. The study by Fedewa (2022) supports this view when it states that "here's where things get messy. Unicode doesn't regulate what the emoji have to look like, that's up to the "vendors." In this case, the vendors are Apple, Google, Microsoft, Samsung, and other companies that create software and hardware".

The analysis highlighted that Apple has its own, Google has its style for Pixel phones, Samsung has its style for Galaxy phones, and so on. These companies want the emoji to blend in nicely with the overall look of their respective operating systems. Fedewa's (2022) study focused on the emoji icon differentiation and presented the following as demonstration and clarification:

The emoji icons for "Nerd Face" from Apple, Google, and Samsung. Apple and Samsung have a small smirk with glasses, while Google's version could be seen as laughing or smiling very big.



Next, let's look at "Person Frowning" from the same three vendors. Apple and Google appear to be sad, but Samsung's version actually looks angrier than sad.

Apple



Google



Samsung



Another expression emoji icon is "Face with Rolling Eyes." Most of the vendors have eyes looking up and a neutral mouth. However, Twitter and Facebook's faces are sort of frowning, making it a sad expression as well.

Apple



Google



Twitter



Facebook



Lastly, one of the best examples is the "Pistol" emoji. Originally, the pistol emoji was a literal gun. However, over time, it has been transitioned to a less threatening water pistol. There are still a few vendors who use real guns.

Apple



Google



Samsung



Mozilla



These are just a few examples of how emojis can vary from platform to platform. You may think you're sending a playful squirt gun, but your friend sees a revolver. Despite their differences, emojis use in digital-textual communication has enhanced the conveying of emotions, feelings, etc among interlocutors.

“Emoticons such as smiley face) to convey a smile are still widely used, especially as many laptops do not have emoji keys or shortcuts; however, as Smartphones with their extensive range of emoji options become ever-more prevalent, emoji use has become almost ubiquitous” (Kaye *et al.*, 2017).

The analysis of the reviewed articles and documents on the emoji icon showed that emojis generally have nuanced differences among the different devices. For example, emoji icons in Android phones are a bit different from some emoji icons in Apple phones or cell phones, accordingly, (Unicode, 2018) informs that “these emojis may have subtle visual differences to the viewer depending on what device or software is being used”.

Empirical review

In a study conducted by Qureshi et al. 2021 in Pakistan titled “An Analysis of the Emoji’s Impact on the Language and Expressions of Youth on Social Media”. The study aimed to find the impact of emojis on people’s language, thoughts, and expressions in social media, and their day-to-day lives. A survey method was adopted for the study. The result of the findings highlighted that the increased use of emojis in digital communication on social media has transformed it into a type of colorful friendly interface, besides reducing the use of written language on social media. Emojis serve as a tool that expresses a person’s expressions, thoughts, and feelings in text messages. And it

has now turned into a necessity without which conversation seems boring and less colorful. This aligns positively with objective number one of the current study.

Herring and Dainas (2020) in a study titled, "Gender and Age Influence on Interpretation of Emoji Functions" conducted an online survey to understand and assess how English-speaking social media users interpret the pragmatic functions of emoji in examples adapted from public Facebook comments, based on a modified version. The method of study employed was the survey, while there were no theoretical underpinnings. This study found that female and male social media users did not differ appreciably in their interpretations of emoji functions in Facebook messages. However, younger and older social media users sometimes understood emoji functions differently, and they differed in the functions they associated with particular emoji. Moreover, users over 30 tended to understand emoji functions more literally or not understand them well. These differences emerge most strongly when comparing younger females and older males. The study does not make any recommendations. This also falls within the purview of the earlier identified and categorised themes "emojis influence in expressing feelings, thoughts, and emotion".

Another study was also conducted by Pujari *et al.* in 2018 titled, "A Survey on Usage and Influence of Emoji in Social Media Communication". The study used the survey method to identify the effectiveness of the use of emojis in communication. No theory was used to peg the study. Findings show that users who communicate without emojis may perceive the correct information, emotion, and intention. However, users who use emojis together with the text have a more positive impact on their communication. Further, it was found that Emojis are a nice way to express ourselves. Today's fast paced world and dynamic technology has made us to evolve and express ourselves in a better way and emojis are the perfect tool for doing that. In social media communication usage of emojis is sufficient sometimes. While sometimes it is not. Emojis are an integral part of today's communication. Emojis have spread into our culture. This is in sync with number one of the earlier categorised theme "emoji use and communication".

In a study conducted by Bai *et al.* 2019 Research Center of Journalism and Social Development, Renmin University of China, Beijing, China titled "A Systematic Review of Emoji: Current Reviews and Future Perspectives". The review objectives were to provide a systematic review of the extant body of work on emoji, reviewing how they have developed, how they are used differently, what functions they have, and what research has been conducted on them in different domains. After the reviews, the paper summarized that emojis developed from emoticons, and have both emotional and semantic functions. The use of emoji is influenced by and varies according to factors such as individual circumstances, culture, and platforms. Ambiguity and misunderstanding may occur in different situations and cultural backgrounds. This reviewed article conforms to objective number two which is concerned with standardization and universality of interpretation or meaning.

Another study was conducted by Crombie of the Research Office, Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology, Tauranga Bay of Plenty, New Zealand in 2020 titled "Faces, Hearts, and Thumbs: Exploring the Use of Emoji in Online Teacher-Student Communications in Higher Education". The research questions raised among others were: how effective are emojis for communication purposes between teachers and students, via learning management systems and social media in a tertiary context; what are the pros, cons, and implications of emoji use in online communication with students

in a tertiary institution; and How are the most commonly used emojis in Facebook Messenger understood by the two key stakeholder groups, tutors and students.

The methodology employed in this research project took an interpretive approach. The interpretivist paradigm, which includes qualitative approaches, is described by Flick (2015) “as being derived from or arising out of social interactions, and that research in this field can begin by analysing the way subjects ascribe meaning to “objects, events, experiences...” (p. 24) or in this case, to emojis in the context of communication. Based on its findings, the study concludes as follows: In general, the benefits of using emojis in online forums include their affordance as ‘softeners’ and ‘qualifiers’, the sense of extending friendliness, welcome, and personality to an impersonal learning environment, and their ability to harness and foster a shared understanding. Also, the study further concludes that incorporating emojis with text was no guarantee of ensuring the original intent of a message was received and understood. This also supports objective number two which focuses on ambiguity in the understanding of emojis among the interlocutors.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research paper presents compelling evidence through document research and was able to establish that emoji use in digital textual communication is considered an effective way of communicating one's emotions, feelings, and thoughts. Further, based on the examination of the reviewed documents and articles, it can be established that there is a lack of standardization and interpretation of meaning in emoji's use in textual communication. This seeming lack of standardization of meaning creates ambiguity, and noise in the communication between the interlocutors. This poses a problem as it is a major determinant that leads to the sharing of meaning. Finally, the analysis highlights that there is a marked variation of emoji icons among the different devices and brands of information and communication technology used by the audiences.

Recommendations

After an exhaustive critical examination and analysis of documents and articles that crystallise into the conclusion, the following recommendations were made:

1. Audiences should be conscious of how they use emojis in text-based communication as inappropriate use of emojis could be misinterpreted and lead to litigations.
2. The Unicode Consortium and other regulatory agencies should formulate strategies towards achieving universality of meaning in emoji's icon interpretation.
3. Lastly, while the different brands of ICT devices are trying to maintain their uniqueness, they should also consider the audience members by harmonising the emoji' icon in conjunction with the Unicode Consortium

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