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PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS OF EMOJIS IN CROSS-CULTURAL ONLINE COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

This research investigates the pragmatic roles of emojis in cross-cultural communication on WhatsApp, particularly among participants from Nigeria, Japan, and Western countries. Employing a qualitative and descriptive methodology, it analyzes 20 carefully chosen excerpts that showcase extensive emoji usage from 40 naturally occurring conversations gathered between January and June 2025. The study utilizes Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory to explore how emojis function as paralinguistic tools that influence the illocutionary force of messages, address face concerns, and facilitate intercultural understanding. The findings indicate that in high-context cultures like Nigeria and Japan, emojis frequently convey implicit relational meanings, softening commands and enhancing solidarity, whereas in low-context cultures, they tend to be employed more explicitly for emotional emphasis or clarification. This research contributes to the field of digital pragmatics by contextualizing emoji usage within both high- and low-context cultural environments, providing valuable insights for improving intercultural competence in online communications.

Keywords: Emojis, Pragmatics, High-context culture, Low-context culture, Speech Act Theory, Politeness Theory

Introduction

Emojis, which are small graphical icons that originated from Japanese digital culture, have evolved into an essential component of online communication in today's digital era. Given that text-based communication often lacks the rich nonverbal cues found in face-to-face interactions—such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and gestures- emojis act as a crucial paralinguistic resource that users utilize to convey emotions, navigate interpersonal relationships, and express nuanced meanings that extend beyond mere words. By employing these visual symbols, communicators can infuse emotional depth, indicate sarcasm or humor, soften requests, and convey social cues that might otherwise be overlooked in computer-mediated communication.

In the ever-expanding realm of social media and instant messaging platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Instagram, emojis have emerged as prevalent tools that influence how individuals engage and interpret messages online. Their application transcends linguistic barriers, enabling quicker and often more effective emotional expression. Nevertheless, despite their apparent universal appeal, emojis are intricately tied to cultural contexts, and their meanings are not fixed or universally recognized. Variations in emoji interpretation across cultures are common, reflecting diverse social norms, communicative conventions, and cultural values. For example, an



emoji that conveys gratitude or friendliness in one culture may be viewed as disrespectful or ambiguous in another.

This cultural variability in interpretation carries significant pragmatic implications. Pragmatics, which is the study of language in use and the ways in which meaning is constructed during interactions, offers a valuable perspective for understanding how emojis operate in digital communication. Emojis can fulfill various speech acts—such as expressing emotions (expressives), making requests (directives), or indicating agreement (commissives)—while concurrently managing politeness and face needs in intercultural interactions. They assist in mitigating potential face-threatening acts by softening criticisms and enhancing the overall communicative experience.

The importance of comprehending the use and interpretation of emojis is particularly apparent in multicultural and multilingual contexts such as Nigeria, a country distinguished by over 250 ethnic groups and a variety of linguistic environments. The communication style in Nigeria is typically characterized as high-context, where a significant amount of meaning is conveyed implicitly through shared background knowledge and indirect signals. In such a communicative setting, emojis are likely to play an essential role in enhancing verbal messages.

Given the growing dependence on digital platforms for personal, educational, and professional communication, it is crucial to investigate the pragmatic roles of emojis across cross-cultural online interactions. This research can illuminate how emojis aid or obstruct meaning-making, politeness management, and interpersonal connections in various digital environments. Additionally, it offers valuable insights for developing communication strategies and digital interfaces that honor cultural sensitivities and promote mutual understanding in an increasingly interconnected world.

Numerous Nigerian researchers have explored various facets of emoji usage and digital pragmatics; however, their investigations have not entirely encompassed the cross-cultural dynamics present within Nigeria's high- and low-context WhatsApp groups. Akpan and Shogeyinbo (2023) examined the role of emojis as semiotic instruments in WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger among students at the University of Lagos, illustrating how they enhance emotional significance in online communications. Udoudom, William, Igiri, and Okon (2024) analyzed emoji usage among Nigerian youth and discovered that cultural, linguistic, and regional variations frequently lead to miscommunication in digital exchanges. Likewise, Oyinbo and Olaniyi (2021) performed a multimodal discourse analysis of emojis utilized in religious WhatsApp groups, uncovering their diverse pragmatic roles in expressing emotions and attitudes such as reverence, anxiety, and excitement. In a related study, Eke, Ofome, and Opeyemi (2022) investigated politeness strategies within Nigerian digital communication, observing that emojis serve to manage respect and uphold coherence; however, their research did not address cross-cultural or subcultural differences.

Although these studies offer valuable perspectives on the function of emojis in Nigerian online discourse, none have explored how such pragmatic roles—like speech-act modification,



politeness, or emotion signaling—vary across different cultures in Nigeria, Japan, and other Western societies, particularly between high-context and low-context WhatsApp groups and across various language forms.

This research holds significance for multiple reasons. Firstly, it adds to the expanding literature on digital pragmatics by focusing on emoji usage with a specific emphasis on the distinctions between high-context and low-context communication styles. The data were exclusively sourced from naturally occurring WhatsApp conversations involving participants from Nigeria, Japan, and Western countries, reflecting a uniquely diverse linguistic and cultural landscape. By analyzing the pragmatic functions of emojis across high-context and low-context WhatsApp groups, the study sheds light on how cultural orientation affects meaning-making in digital interactions.

Secondly, Brown and Levinson's politeness theory and speech act theory within the realm of digital communication demonstrate how these frameworks can elucidate both convergence and divergence in the interpretation of emojis is noteworthy. Furthermore, the findings hold significant practical implications for educators, social media managers, intercultural trainers, and technology developers, as they can inform the creation of culturally sensitive communication strategies and platform interfaces. Ultimately, this study contributes to the field of cross-cultural communication scholarship by filling a gap in existing research from Nigeria, providing an empirically grounded account of how visual symbols operate pragmatically in multicultural online environments, and proposing methods to bridge potential communicative divides through effective emoji usage.

Literature Review

The examination of emojis within online communication has garnered interest from researchers in linguistics, communication studies, and digital media. In high-context cultures, such as Nigeria and Japan, a significant portion of communicative meaning is derived from implicit signals, shared experiences, and contextual knowledge rather than from direct verbal communication. In these settings, visual symbols like emojis can act as valuable enhancements to verbal language, augmenting meaning and reinforcing mutual understanding. In contrast, in low-context cultures, where explicit and direct language is emphasized, emojis may be employed more for emphasis or emotional nuance rather than as essential interpretive signals.

Empirical studies support these theoretical insights. Li and Yang (2018) illustrated that emojis are not simply ornamental but fulfill crucial communicative roles, such as indicating emotions, managing conversational dynamics, and framing responses. Bich-Carrière (2019) posited that emojis can operate as digital paralanguage, expressing tone and attitude similarly to nonverbal cues in spoken communication. In the Nigerian context, Akpan and Shogeyinbo (2023) examined the application of emojis in WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger among university students, the research indicates that emojis enhance emotional significance but are frequently understood within the framework of shared peer culture. Udoudom, William, Igiri, and Okon (2024) investigated the miscommunication among Nigerian youths stemming from emoji usage, demonstrating that cultural and linguistic diversity affects interpretation and can occasionally lead to unintended offense. Oyinbo and Olaniyi (2021) explored religious WhatsApp groups, uncovering that emojis



can convey reverence, excitement, or anxiety, contingent upon the topic of conversation and the norms of the group. Eke, Ofome, and Opeyemi (2022) concentrated on politeness strategies in Nigerian online interactions, discovering that emojis are commonly used to express respect or sustain rapport, although they did not explore cross-cultural variations within Nigeria.

Research from other regions further emphasizes the significance of cultural context in the interpretation of emojis. Bae et al. (2019) revealed that the same emoji can be understood differently in Japan compared to Western nations—for instance, 🙏 representing “thank you” in Japan while signifying “high five” in the West. Holtgraves (2023) noted that patterns of emoji usage differ across cultures in ways that reflect face-to-face politeness norms. These findings reinforce the notion that emoji interpretation is socially and culturally contextualized, making both cross-cultural and intra-cultural comparisons vital for comprehending digital communication practices.

Despite these valuable contributions, a significant gap persists in empirical research investigating how emoji usage varies among different cultures. This study aims to fill that gap by incorporating Hall’s cultural context theory, Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory, and speech act theory to examine the pragmatic roles of emojis in various WhatsApp groups, covering Nigeria, Japan and other Western countries thus providing fresh insights into how visual symbols facilitate meaning in multicultural online settings.

Theoretical Framework

This research employs a dual-theoretical framework, utilizing Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) and Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) to examine the pragmatic roles of emojis in cross-cultural online interactions. The integration of these theories offers a thorough perspective for comprehending both the functional and interpersonal aspects of emoji usage.

Speech Act Theory asserts that language serves not only as a medium for transmitting information but also as a tool for executing actions. Austin’s tripartite model differentiates the locutionary act (the literal interpretation of the utterance), the illocutionary act (the intended communicative purpose, such as requesting, promising, or apologizing), and the perlocutionary act (the impact on the listener, such as persuading, entertaining, or comforting). In the realm of online communication, emojis act as paralinguistic elements that can enhance, soften, intensify, or even substitute verbal components, thus influencing both illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect. For instance, a request paired with a smiling face emoji may convey friendliness and lessen the sense of imposition.

Politeness Theory complements this by examining how communicators navigate “face” — the public self-image that individuals strive to uphold. Brown and Levinson identify positive politeness strategies (aimed at fostering solidarity and expressing approval) and negative politeness strategies (focused on reducing imposition and honoring autonomy). Emojis frequently fulfill these roles across various cultures: 🙏 can be employed as a positive politeness strategy to express gratitude or solidarity, while 😊 may function as a negative politeness marker to soften



commands or critiques. Notably, the interpretation of these strategies can differ across cultures, with the same emoji possessing unique pragmatic implications in diverse socio-cultural settings. By merging Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory, this framework facilitates the systematic categorization of emojis based on their specific functions.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative and descriptive research design to investigate the pragmatic roles of emojis in cross-cultural online interactions. Data were gathered solely from WhatsApp conversations involving participants from Nigeria and Japan, chosen for the platform's extensive use and rich integration of emojis. A purposive sampling method was utilized to identify 40 naturally occurring conversations that featured emoji usage, from which 100 instances of emojis were extracted. Out of these, 20 excerpts considered most pertinent to the study's aims were purposefully selected for in-depth analysis. The data collection spanned a six-month period, from January to June 2025. The analysis utilized Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory as theoretical frameworks, facilitating a comprehensive examination of the functional and interpersonal roles that emojis fulfill in these cross-cultural digital communications.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Excerpt 1

"Thanks 😊. I really appreciate your help!"

Analysis

This statement represents an expressive speech act that conveys gratitude, enhanced by the smiling emoji, which intensifies warmth and friendliness. In the Nigerian context, where interpersonal relationships hold significant importance, the positive politeness strategy fosters solidarity and social connection. Cross-culturally, such explicit expressions of gratitude accompanied by emojis may be perceived as either sincere or somewhat formal, depending on the cultural context; for instance, in certain East Asian cultures, overt expressions of appreciation may be more subdued, and emojis could act as crucial softeners to express sincerity. Therefore, the emoji pragmatically serves as a bridge in intercultural digital communication, compensating for the absence of nonverbal cues and ensuring that the emotional message is effectively transmitted.

Excerpt 2

"Hmm... okay 😐, I see your point."

Analysis

This utterance exemplifies a representative speech act indicating cognitive engagement and tentative agreement, with the thinking face emoji offering a metapragmatic signal of contemplation. In Western cultures, this may be interpreted as a sign of thoughtful consideration, while in other cultural contexts, the interpretation may vary.



Excerpt 3

"Incredible! That is truly remarkable 🎉."

Analysis

This statement illustrates an expressive speech act that conveys admiration, with the party popper emoji enhancing the celebratory tone. In collectivist societies, such as Nigeria and Japan, the enthusiastic use of emojis may help to reinforce group unity by publicly recognizing the accomplishments of others, which reflects a strategy of positive politeness. Conversely, certain cultures might perceive such exuberance as excessive or unsuitable in formal situations. Across cultures, the emoji serves as a universal representation of celebration; however, its frequency and context of use can differ, underscoring how emojis not only express emotions but also reflect culturally specific social norms in online communication.

Excerpt 4

07:20 – Priya: Happy birthday, Chuka 🎉🍰. Many blessings!

07:22 – Chuka: Thank you, my dear 🙏. May God bless you too.

Analysis

Priya's birthday greeting is an **expressive speech act** conveying celebration and goodwill, with the party popper and cake emojis reinforcing the festive mood. From a **positive politeness** perspective, this act affirms social solidarity and warmth. Chuka's reply, featuring the folded hands emoji (🙏), expresses gratitude and invokes a blessing, functioning both as an **expressive** and a **commissive speech act** by reciprocating goodwill. Cross-culturally, while the birthday celebration is common, the emoji use reveals culturally specific nuances: in South Asian contexts, the folded hands emoji often signifies respect or prayer, while in Nigerian usage, it frequently conveys gratitude or spiritual blessing. This interaction illustrates how emojis can simultaneously enact culturally resonant politeness strategies and mediate intercultural understanding in digital spaces.

Excerpt 5

14:15 – Lisa: You mentioned "How far" yesterday. What does that imply?

14:17 – Tunde: Haha 😂. It's Nigerian slang for "How are you doing?"

14:18 – Lisa: Ohhh, I understand now!

Analysis

Lisa's inquiry represents a directive speech act aimed at obtaining clarification, softened by an informal tone. Tunde's reply incorporates a laughing emoji to express friendliness and alleviate



any potential face-threat associated with explaining unfamiliar slang, thereby employing a positive politeness strategy. This interaction illustrates the cross-cultural negotiation of meaning, where Nigerian Pidgin or local slang, along with their corresponding emojis, necessitate interpretation by non-native speakers. The emoji pragmatically conveys amiability and helps mitigate possible confusion or embarrassment. This episode emphasizes how emojis function as paralinguistic cues that enhance understanding and foster social connections across varied linguistic and cultural contexts in online communication.

Excerpt 6

10:40 – Akira: I apologize for my late response 🙇.

10:42 – Ngozi: No wahala 😊. I just noticed your message as well.

Analysis

Akira's apology serves as a negative politeness speech act, acknowledging a potential face-threat by demonstrating deference, further supported by the bowing emoji, which culturally resonates with Japanese expressions of apology and respect. Ngozi's reply, which includes a smiling emoji, employs a positive politeness strategy, reducing the perceived impact of the delay and offering reassurance. This exchange exemplifies cross-cultural politeness practices in WhatsApp communication: the formal and respectful demeanor characteristic of Japanese culture contrasts with the more casual, colloquial Nigerian response. The emojis pragmatically embody these culturally distinct politeness norms, facilitating seamless intercultural digital interactions.

Excerpt 7

16:05 – Hassan: Would you be able to join us for lunch?

16:07 – Grace: I would be delighted to, but I have prior commitments 😞. Perhaps next time?

Analysis

Hassan's invitation functions as a directive speech act that requests attendance, being both direct and courteous. Grace's refusal, softened by the sad face emoji, employs a negative politeness strategy to lessen the potential face-threat associated with declining the invitation. The emoji expresses regret and empathy, striking a balance between directness and sensitivity. In high-context cultures like Nigeria, indirect refusals and face-saving strategies are favored, whereas in certain Western contexts, more straightforward refusals may be prevalent. In this instance, the emoji serves to bridge these cultural differences by conveying emotion non-verbally, thereby maintaining interpersonal harmony in the cross-cultural WhatsApp conversation.



Excerpt 8

12:25 – Tom: Wishing you the best of luck at your presentation!

12:26 – Chioma: 😬 Excuse me, why would you say that?

12:28 – Tom: Oh! It’s an English idiom meaning “Good luck.” My apologies 😊.

Analysis

Tom’s statement is a performative speech act aimed at wishing good luck through an idiomatic expression, which Chioma initially misinterprets, indicating a cross-cultural pragmatic misunderstanding. Chioma’s emoji (😬) conveys surprise and confusion, functioning as an expressive speech act that communicates her emotional response. Tom’s apology, along with the laughing emoji (😊), represents a negative politeness strategy intended to alleviate the misunderstanding and preserve rapport. This interaction exemplifies how idiomatic expressions and emojis can have different implications across cultures, highlighting the need for explicit clarification to ensure effective communication in intercultural digital environments.

Excerpt 9

06:50 – Fatima: As-salamu alaykum 🌙.

06:51 – David: Wa alaykumu s-salam, my sister. How’s your family?

Analysis

Fatima’s greeting functions as a declarative speech act that conveys a religious and social salutation, further emphasized by the crescent moon emoji, which culturally represents Islam. David’s response reciprocates this greeting and inquires about the well-being of her family, employing a positive politeness strategy that highlights solidarity and care. The use of emojis not only acts as a cultural indicator but also aids in affirming shared identity within a multicultural WhatsApp environment. Such interactions illustrate how emojis encapsulate religious and cultural affiliations, thereby reinforcing communal ties in varied online communities.

Excerpt 10

11:15 – Sarah: I’ll talk to you later 😊.

11:16 – Kunle: Are you flirting?

11:17 – Sarah: No 😊. In my culture, that emoji just means “playful.”

Analysis



Sarah's statement "I'll talk to you later 😊" serves as a commissive speech act indicating a commitment to future conversation, softened by the winking emoji, which adds an expressive illocutionary force of playfulness. Kunle's inquiry "Are you flirting?" represents a directive speech act that seeks clarification while also revealing a cross-cultural difference in emoji interpretation, as Kunle perceives romantic implications in the wink. Sarah's response, accompanied by a laughing emoji, employs a negative politeness strategy to alleviate any potential face-threat and clarify the cultural meanings of emojis. This dialogue highlights how emojis can simultaneously facilitate and complicate intercultural communication by embodying culturally specific pragmatic subtleties.

Excerpt 11

09:10 – Daniel: Good morning everyone ☀️ . Are you prepared for the meeting?

09:12 – Amina: Good morning! Nearly there. Just getting some coffee ☕ .

Analysis

Daniel's greeting functions as a representative speech act coupled with a directive aimed at confirming readiness. The sun emoji conveys a sense of positivity and invigorates the message. Amina's response employs the coffee emoji to illustrate her ongoing preparation, serving as both a response act and an informal update on her status. In both Nigerian and Western contexts, such emojis are commonly used in casual professional conversations, enhancing positive politeness by personalizing the interaction and softening the formal tone. The emojis fulfill pragmatic roles of emotional expression and contextual elaboration, reflecting shared communicative norms despite cultural variances.

Excerpt 12

14:35 – Chika: I feel extremely fatigued today 😞 .

14:36 – Kenji: Please take care! Make sure to rest well 🙏 .

Analysis

Chika's remark is an expressive speech act that communicates her tiredness, with the weary face emoji amplifying the emotional weight. Kenji's response is a directive (albeit indirect) combined with a commissive (a well-wishing), indicated by the folded hands emoji, which in Japanese culture often represents prayer or gratitude but is broadly recognized as a gesture of goodwill. This interaction exemplifies how culturally significant emojis can foster cross-cultural empathy and politeness strategies, thereby enhancing emotional bonds despite linguistic barriers.

Excerpt 13

18:00 – Naomi: Congratulations on your promotion 🎉 🙌 !

18:02 – Bayo: Thank you very much! I couldn't have achieved this without your support 🙌 .



Analysis

Naomi's congratulatory note represents an expressive speech act, with the celebratory emojis enhancing positive emotions and group unity. Bayo's reply expresses gratitude, utilizing the raised hands emoji as an expressive illocutionary act that indicates celebration and shared success. In collectivist societies such as Nigeria, the use of such emojis acts as a positive politeness strategy to reinforce social connections. The shared emojis visually represent mutual acknowledgment and community support across cultural divides.

Excerpt 14

20:15 – Koji: I apologize, but I cannot join tonight 🙇♂️.

20:17 – Amaka: No problem! We will catch up soon 😊.

Analysis

Koji's apology is a negative politeness speech act, using the bowing man emoji to convey respect and regret, which holds cultural significance in Japan. Amaka's comforting response mitigates the impact of the refusal through a positive politeness strategy, employing a smiling emoji to preserve goodwill. This interaction illustrates how emojis reflect cultural politeness standards, aiding in the delicate management of interpersonal relations in cross-cultural digital communications.

Excerpt 15

08:50 – Tolu: Did you watch the game last night? 🏆🔥

08:52 – Hana: Yes! That goal was incredible 😲👏.

Analysis

Tolu's inquiry is a representative speech act paired with expressive emojis that convey excitement and intensity. Hana's enthusiastic response, featuring astonishment and clapping emojis, represents a commissive and expressive act, confirming shared interest and emotional involvement. The inclusion of sports-related emojis serves as a universal pragmatic tool to express enthusiasm, transcending cultural barriers and fostering social unity within the online community.

Excerpt 16

13:40 – Samuel: Could you please send me the file? 🙏

13:42 – Emiko: Certainly, I am sending it now 📧.

Analysis

Samuel's request constitutes a directive speech act, with the folded hands emoji serving as a negative politeness strategy to lessen the perceived imposition. Emiko's reply represents a commissive act affirming her compliance, with the outbox tray emoji offering a visual indication



of action. The use of emojis enhances politeness and clarifies intent, illustrating how digital paralanguage fosters cooperative interactions across cultures in WhatsApp communication.

Excerpt 17

07:05 – Blessing: Good morning! How was your weekend? 😊

07:08 – Ken: It was great, thank you! I had a relaxing time and caught up on sleep 😴.

Analysis

Blessing's greeting and question function as a representative speech act, complemented by the smiling emoji to convey warmth. Ken's response employs a sleeping face emoji as an expressive speech act to indicate relaxation and well-being. These emojis pragmatically act as emotional enhancers, promoting interpersonal closeness and friendliness that are prevalent in both Nigerian and Western messaging cultures.

Excerpt 18

21:30 – Ayodele: Could you kindly assist with this report? 🙏

21:32 – Yuki: Certainly! I will complete it by tomorrow ✅.

Analysis

Ayodele's request functions as a directive speech act, softened by the culturally significant folded hands emoji, which serves as a negative politeness marker indicating respect and deference. Yuki's reply is a commissive that confirms action, with the checkmark emoji further emphasizing commitment. The use of emojis in this context acts as pragmatic markers to address face concerns and affirm intentions, effectively bridging cultural expectations in Nigerian-Japanese digital interactions.

Excerpt 19

15:00 – Chi: I am feeling anxious about the presentation 😟.

15:02 – Rina: You will excel! Have faith in yourself 💪.

Analysis

Chi's statement represents an expressive speech act that conveys anxiety, with the worried face emoji amplifying the emotional weight. Rina's supportive response is a commissive speech act, bolstered by the flexed bicep emoji, which symbolizes strength and confidence. These emojis fulfill a pragmatic role of providing emotional support and reassurance, which is vital for sustaining interpersonal rapport across cultural boundaries in online communication.

Excerpt 20



11:45 – Uche: Shall we convene at 5 pm, if that is agreeable?

11:47 – Kenji: That sounds great 👍 . I will see you then!

Analysis

Uche’s suggestion is a directive speech act articulated tentatively to demonstrate consideration, whereas Kenji’s reply, which includes the thumbs-up emoji, serves as an assertive speech act indicating agreement. The thumbs-up emoji pragmatically acts as a swift, affirmative confirmation, although its interpretation may differ across cultures—as observed in certain Nigerian contexts where it may have alternative meanings—underscoring the importance of cultural sensitivity in emoji usage during intercultural digital communications.

Findings

The examination of these WhatsApp conversations indicates that emojis fulfil various pragmatic roles in cross-cultural online communication, intricately associated with speech acts and strategies of politeness. Emojis consistently serve as paralinguistic instruments that reinforce, alter, or soften illocutionary forces. For example, winking and smiling emojis often act as indicators of playfulness and positive politeness, fostering relational closeness and alleviating face-threatening actions. Requests and refusals are commonly softened by the use of folded hands, sad, or apologetic emojis, which reflect culturally rooted norms of politeness, especially in Nigerian and Japanese contexts.

Cross-cultural subtleties significantly influence the interpretation and application of emojis. While certain emojis (e.g., 🎉, 😊) generally convey universal celebratory or friendly connotations, others such as the thumbs-up (👍) and folded hands (🙏) demonstrate culturally specific pragmatic differences that may result in misunderstandings in the absence of shared contextual knowledge. The data reveal that interlocutors actively negotiate meaning through metapragmatic clarifications when interpretations of emojis diverge, illustrating the digital mediation of face and meaning-making in multicultural environments.

Furthermore, the research highlights the importance of emojis in compensating for the lack of non-verbal signals typically present in face-to-face interactions, thereby restoring the affective and interpersonal aspects of online communication. These functions are particularly prominent in Nigeria’s high-context communication setting, where indirectness and implicit signals prevail, and in interactions with lower-context cultures, where explicit verbalization is more prevalent. Consequently, emojis serve as essential semiotic tools that bridge cultural and linguistic gaps, enhance pragmatic competence, and foster intercultural understanding in digital discourse.

Conclusion

This research validates that emojis play crucial pragmatic roles in cross-cultural WhatsApp interactions by simultaneously executing speech acts and managing politeness strategies that are rooted in culturally specific norms. The results indicate that emojis transcend mere decorative symbols; they serve as potent multimodal instruments that facilitate emotional expression,



alleviate face threats, and aid in conversational management across various linguistic and cultural settings.

Significantly, the differences in emoji interpretation among Nigerian, Japanese, and Western users underscore the importance of cultural sensitivity and awareness in digital communication. Participants frequently depend on contextual and metapragmatic signals to negotiate meaning, thereby avoiding miscommunication and enhancing rapport. The application of Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory offers a solid framework for comprehending these interactions, shedding light on the role of emojis.

Future investigations should delve deeper into emoji pragmatics across additional communication platforms and cultural demographics, taking into account multimodal and contextual elements more thoroughly. From a practical standpoint, the findings can guide the development of culturally adaptive digital communication tools and assist users in engaging in effective and respectful cross-cultural online interactions. In summary, this study enhances the comprehension of how visual digital symbols function pragmatically within the intricate realm of global online communication.

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