

ANALYSIS STUDY OF EMOJI USAGE IN TIKTOK SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the use of emojis in communication on the popular social media platform TikTok among users of various generations. Emojis serve as complements to non-verbal expressions, enhancing emotional conveyance and facilitating message comprehension. Using a qualitative descriptive method and literature study, the research reveals multiple functions of emojis as visual communication tools, cultural symbols, and bridges across language and cultural differences. The findings indicate that emoji use on TikTok not only increases engagement but also reflects generational preferences and meanings, with younger users being more creative and expressive in their emoji usage. This study provides important insights into the role of emojis in effective and meaningful digital communication in the social media era.

Keywords: emoji, TikTok, digital communication, user generation

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis penggunaan emoji dalam komunikasi di platform media sosial populer TikTok di kalangan pengguna dari berbagai generasi. Emoji berfungsi sebagai pelengkap ekspresi non-verbal, memperkuat penyampaian emosi, dan memudahkan pemahaman pesan. Dengan menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dan studi literatur, penelitian ini mengungkapkan berbagai fungsi emoji sebagai alat komunikasi visual, simbol budaya, dan jembatan antar perbedaan bahasa dan budaya. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa penggunaan emoji di TikTok tidak hanya meningkatkan keterlibatan tetapi juga mencerminkan preferensi dan makna generasional, dengan pengguna yang lebih muda cenderung lebih kreatif dan ekspresif dalam penggunaan emoji mereka. Studi ini memberikan wawasan penting tentang peran emoji dalam komunikasi digital yang efektif dan bermakna di era media sosial.

Kata kunci: emoji, TikTok, komunikasi digital, generasi pengguna

INTRODUCTION

Communication on social media has become an inseparable dimension of contemporary interactive life. The rapid development of digital technology has transformed the way individuals construct meaning, express identity, and negotiate social relationships in virtual environments. In this context, social media platforms are not merely technological tools but communicative spaces in which users continuously produce and interpret

symbolic content. One prominent feature of this transformation is the increasing reliance on visual symbols, particularly emojis, as a form of self-expression embedded within text-based interaction. As social media usage continues to grow globally, emoji usage has likewise expanded, becoming a central component of digital discourse. Emojis function as visual representations of emotions, attitudes, and intentions, enriching written messages that otherwise lack vocal tone, facial expression, and other nonverbal cues.

Social media, according to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), can be defined as a group of Internet-based applications built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content. This definition highlights the participatory nature of social media, where users are not passive consumers but active producers of content. Boyd and Ellison (2007) further explain that social networking sites enable individuals to construct public or semi-public profiles, articulate a list of connections, and traverse their networks of relationships. In this participatory digital ecosystem, communication becomes multidirectional, instantaneous, and multimodal. McQuail (2010) emphasizes that new media environments foster interactivity, personalization, and convergence, allowing users to combine text, images, video, and audio in dynamic forms of communication. Within such a framework, emojis emerge as hybrid communicative tools that blend visual and textual elements.

Among the various social media platforms, TikTok has become one of the most influential arenas for digital interaction, particularly among younger generations. Originally developed as Douyin by ByteDance in China in 2017 and later released internationally as TikTok in 2018, the platform rapidly gained global popularity due to its short-form video format and algorithm-driven content distribution. TikTok's design allows users to create 15- to 60-second videos enhanced with music, filters, captions, and visual effects. The platform's emphasis on creativity, spontaneity, and trend-based participation has cultivated a distinctive digital culture. Short videos are complemented by highly active comment sections, where users engage in discussions, jokes, emotional reactions, and debates. In these comment spaces, emojis play a significant role in shaping how messages are interpreted.

Emojis are particularly prevalent among Generation Z and Generation Alpha, who have grown up immersed in digital communication technologies. These generations frequently use emojis in messages, comments, captions, and reactions, integrating them seamlessly into everyday interaction. Emojis serve multiple communicative functions: they can intensify emotional tone, soften criticism, signal humor or sarcasm, and reinforce solidarity. In written communication, where vocal intonation and facial expressions are absent, emojis act as substitutes for nonverbal cues. Walther's Social Information Processing Theory suggests that individuals adapt their communicative strategies in computer-mediated communication to compensate for the lack of nonverbal signals, gradually developing alternative cues to convey relational and emotional meaning (Walther, 1992). Emojis can thus be understood as adaptive symbolic tools that enhance socio-emotional exchange in online contexts.

However, despite their potential to clarify meaning, emojis can also generate ambiguity and misunderstanding. The interpretation of an emoji is not fixed; it is influenced by cultural background, generational norms, situational context, and platform-specific conventions. A single emoji may carry different connotations across user groups. For example, a skull emoji may literally represent death but is often used by younger users to signify extreme laughter or embarrassment. Without shared contextual understanding, such usage may be misinterpreted as morbid or offensive. This phenomenon reflects the semiotic nature of emojis as signs whose meaning emerges through interpretation.

Semiotic theory provides a foundational lens for analyzing emoji usage. Ferdinand de Saussure conceptualizes a sign as consisting of the signifier, the material form of the sign, and the signified, the mental concept it represents (Saussure, 1916/1983). In the case of emojis, the digital icon functions as the signifier, while the emotion or concept it conveys constitutes the signified. The relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary and socially constructed. Meaning arises not inherently from the symbol itself but from shared cultural agreements among users. Consequently, when these shared conventions differ, misinterpretation may occur. Emojis, as visual signs, are therefore subject to shifting meanings shaped by evolving digital cultures.

In addition to semiotics, Visual Rhetoric Theory offers insight into how emojis operate persuasively within communication. Visual rhetoric examines how visual elements are used to convey messages and influence audiences emotionally and cognitively. Sonja Foss (2005) argues that visual rhetoric involves symbolic action, human intervention, and audience interpretation. Emojis are not neutral decorations; they are deliberately chosen symbols intended to shape how a message is perceived. For instance, adding a smiling emoji to a critical comment can soften its tone, while a rolling-eyes emoji may signal sarcasm or skepticism. The rhetorical power of emojis lies in their ability to frame interpretation, guiding the audience's emotional response to textual content.

On TikTok specifically, emojis contribute to the dynamics of engagement and conversational flow. The platform's algorithm promotes content based on interaction metrics such as likes, shares, and comments. Emojis in comments often function as rapid affective responses, enabling users to express reactions efficiently without composing lengthy text. They also act as markers of group identity and trend participation. Certain emojis become associated with specific memes, fandoms, or inside jokes, reinforcing collective belonging. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, meaning is constructed through social interaction, and emojis serve as tools in this ongoing negotiation of shared understanding.

Nevertheless, the same features that make emojis expressive also create the potential for conflict. Ambiguity arises when an emoji's intended meaning diverges from the receiver's interpretation. Cultural differences further complicate this issue. Research indicates that emoji interpretation varies across cultural contexts, influenced by social norms and communication styles (Miller et al., 2016). Generational gaps also contribute to divergent meanings, particularly when younger users adopt hyperbolic or ironic uses

of symbols unfamiliar to older audiences. Such misinterpretations can escalate into online disputes, reinforcing the need for systematic study of emoji usage on TikTok.

This study therefore seeks to examine the role of emojis in TikTok interactions, identify factors influencing user preferences and selection of emojis, and explore the ways in which emoji usage can trigger misunderstandings. By focusing on the comment sections of TikTok and analyzing interactions among Millennials, Generation Z, and Generation Alpha, the research aims to capture diverse generational perspectives. The scope is intentionally confined to TikTok in order to maintain analytical focus, recognizing that each platform develops its own communicative norms and symbolic repertoires.

The practical benefits of this research are multifaceted. First, it contributes to the classification of emoji roles in social media communication, distinguishing between emotional reinforcement, sarcasm markers, attention-getters, and identity signals. Such categorization can inform communication strategies and improve user interface design in digital platforms. Second, by examining demographic, psychological, and contextual factors influencing emoji choice, the study offers insights valuable to marketers, content creators, and moderators seeking to enhance engagement while minimizing miscommunication. Third, by identifying patterns of misunderstanding, the research provides a foundation for developing educational guidelines that promote clearer and more inclusive digital interaction.

From a theoretical standpoint, this research advances understanding of nonverbal communication in computer-mediated environments. Emojis exemplify how digital communication evolves to compensate for the absence of physical cues, illustrating the adaptability of symbolic systems. They function simultaneously as semiotic signs, rhetorical devices, and markers of social identity. In a digital era characterized by rapid technological change and cross-generational interaction, the study of emojis offers broader insight into how meaning is constructed, negotiated, and contested in virtual spaces.

In conclusion, emojis are far more than decorative additions to online messages. They represent a complex system of visual signs embedded within evolving digital cultures. On TikTok, where creativity, brevity, and emotional expressiveness are central, emojis significantly influence interaction patterns. Yet their interpretive flexibility also makes them susceptible to ambiguity and misunderstanding. By integrating semiotic theory and visual rhetoric, this study provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing emoji usage and its implications for digital communication. Understanding these dynamics is essential not only for academic inquiry but also for fostering more effective and harmonious interaction in contemporary social media environments.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method through a literature review approach to explore and interpret the phenomenon of emoji usage on the TikTok platform. A qualitative descriptive design is particularly suitable for examining social and communicative phenomena that require contextual understanding rather than numerical measurement. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research aims to explore and

understand the meanings individuals or groups ascribe to social or human problems. In this context, emoji usage on TikTok is not merely a technical feature but a symbolic communicative practice shaped by cultural, generational, and contextual factors. The literature review serves as a foundational strategy to synthesize previous scholarly discussions on digital interaction, computer-mediated communication, semiotics, and visual rhetoric, enabling the researcher to construct a comprehensive conceptual framework (Snyder, 2019).

Data collection is conducted through multiple qualitative sources to ensure depth and triangulation. Field observation of selected TikTok accounts is carried out to examine how emojis are used in comment sections, how users respond to them, and how meaning is negotiated within interaction threads. Observation in digital environments allows researchers to capture naturally occurring communication patterns without experimental manipulation (Hine, 2015). In addition, a systematic review of relevant academic literature provides theoretical grounding and comparative insight into existing findings related to emoji interpretation and online discourse. Digital documents, including screenshots of comments, platform guidelines, and publicly accessible user interactions, are also analyzed as textual and visual data. These documents function as artifacts of digital communication that reflect contemporary symbolic practices. Through this combination of observation, literature review, and digital documentation, the study aims to generate a nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of emoji usage on TikTok.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Role of Emojis in Social-Media Interaction

Emojis serve as visual communication tools that enrich users' expression on TikTok, especially in the comment section. Their functions include emotional reinforcement, meaning clarification, and building social closeness. Their use boosts *engagement* because messages feel more lively, personal, and visually appealing.

Key functions of emojis in online interaction:

1. Adding emotional nuance – an emoji can give “color” to text; for example, a smiley at the end of a sentence makes the tone warmer and friendlier.
2. Clarifying intent/context – a 😊 after a statement signals that the comment is joking, helping avoid misunderstandings.
3. Bridging language and culture – as a visual language, emojis are largely cross-cultural; 😊 or 😊 are widely understood without translation, though interpretations can vary by culture and context.
4. Increasing social-media engagement – content that includes emojis tends to be more visually and emotionally attractive, potentially raising likes, comments, and other interactions on platforms, particularly TikTok.
5. *Educating and Facilitating Communication:* Emojis can replace words or short sentences to respond quickly, such as sending a 👍 to signal approval. Moreover, in an educational context, studies have found that emojis aid language learning by

bridging visual and textual literacy, making learning materials more interactive and enjoyable.

Preferences and the meaning of emojis vary across generations:

1. Baby Boomers and Gen X tend to use emojis literally and sparingly.
2. Millennials and Gen Z are more expressive and creative, employing emojis as reactions or subtle sarcasm.
3. Gen Alpha grows up in a visual-communication culture, making emojis an inseparable part of how they comment and learn.

Geographically, emojis are universal yet still shaped by local culture. In Indonesia, emojis are woven into the “digital slang” style of language, while in larger countries such as the United States or Japan, cultural contexts can shift the meaning of specific emojis. In an educational context, emojis help bring learning messages closer and make communication feel light-hearted and inclusive. However, their use must be tailored to the context to avoid misinterpretation or diminishing the professionalism of the message.

Factors influencing TikTok users’ emoji-selection preferences

Communication Context

Users select emojis based on the *context* of the content, for example to convey:

1. Emotions (happy, sad, angry, and love)
2. Reactions (funny, amazed, disgusted, confused)
3. Double meanings or sarcasm

Example: 🥰 is often used in romantic or cute content.

Pop Culture Trends

Emojis can go viral when they are adopted by:

1. influencers / TikTok creators,
2. specific challenge trends,
3. popular memes. For example,

the 😂 emoji is now used not only to show sadness but also to express “*laughing hard*” in line with TikTok trends

Age & Generation

Emoji preferences vary across generations:

1. Gen Z tends to use emojis ironically or sarcastically (e.g., the skull 💀 to mean “dying of laughter”),
2. while older generations usually stick to the literal meanings of the symbols.

Gender and Personal Identity Users choose emojis that they feel match their style or personality.

1. Women might more often use softer or more expressive emojis such as 🥰💎.
2. Men may prefer simpler emojis like 💧👉.

TikTok Interface Design and Features

1. Suggested emojis from the keyboard or TikTok itself can influence the selection.
2. Users tend to choose emojis that are easily accessible or appear first.

How Can Emoji Usage Trigger Misunderstandings on TikTok?

The use of emojis on TikTok, especially for interactions in the comment section of any video content, serves as a complementary element to words or sentences so that the comment's meaning can be better understood by readers or the online community. Without emojis, misunderstandings can arise because emojis represent a form of *non-verbal communication*. Emojis are inherently *subjective*; since most users, especially Gen Z, often use emojis in a "hyperbolic" way, this exaggeration can create *ambiguity* between users and trigger misunderstandings during interactions.

Using the *right emoji*, one that fits the *context*, *video content*, *culture*, and *trends* like FOMO (fear of missing out), ensures that interactions in the TikTok online world remain clear and smooth.

Emojis between generations always carry different meanings. For example, Gen Z and Millennials often clash over the meaning of the 🤔 emoji.

1. For *Gen Z*, the crying emoji 🤔 is interpreted as "laughing with tears" or laughing at the maximum level.
2. However, *Millennials* see this emoji seriously, understanding it in its original meaning: "crying."

Because of these differing interpretations, emojis can cause misunderstandings and their meanings change depending on the generation.

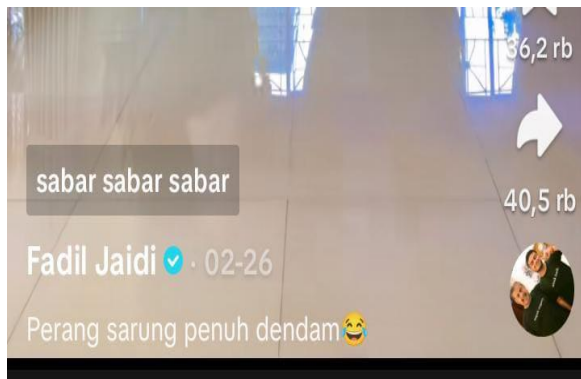
TikTok does not have features like "voice notes" or "short videos" that can be shown in the comments. Therefore, even when commenting using emojis, misunderstandings can occur because there is no actual tone of voice or facial expressions to accompany the message. Emojis only show the core expression of the written sentence.

In joke contexts, emojis often cause more misunderstandings on TikTok, such as 🤔, 🤔, and 🤔. These emojis have meanings different from their common usage. If a person does not follow TikTok trends, comments using these emojis might be viewed as strange or ambiguous.

Field Observation of a TikTok Account

Account Profile: @fadiljaidi (verified, content category: comedy)

1. 16 million followers with an average of 183 thousand comments per video, indicating high interaction levels.
2. Fadil is known for family comedy videos featuring his father, Pak Muh, often following viral trends that trigger spontaneous humorous reactions.
3. The content easily goes viral due to its family values and light humor.
4. Creator's Caption Style: Fadil often includes emojis like 😂 in captions to emphasize the humorous or playful nature of his content.



User comments show that emojis like 😂, 🤔, and 💀 are very dominant in the comments, indicating a strong response to the videos.



Emojis on the @fadiljaidi account, especially 😂, 🤔, and 💀, play an important role in shaping interactions among young generations on TikTok. They are used to express extreme laughter, stylish sadness, and to build a community that understands the "in-group language." Emojis are a vital component in mass digital communication, especially on platforms like TikTok that prioritize quick and visual reactions.

Literature Study

Currently, social media platforms are equipped with comprehensive features to support communication processes, one example being the emoji feature. Emoji usage is considered a part of fluency in social media use. Fluency is a *subjective experience* created by how information is presented or organized (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009; Greifeneder & Unkelbach, 2013). Emojis on social media can function as a way to *enhance fluency*, making messages easier to understand and thus making the content more *believable* (Daniel & Camp, 2018).

Daniel and Camp (2018) divided the conditions into three groups: neutral, congruent, and incongruent emoji usage. Participants completed 30 trials per condition. Their research showed that messages with emojis congruent to the content were easier to understand and more believable than messages without emojis or messages with incongruent emojis.

Based on Pfeifer et al. (2019) findings:

1. Sending an angry emoji conveys specific mental states characterized by negative valence and arousal among message senders.
2. Sending a happy emoji overall conveys a positive mental state or joy, without variation among different happy emojis.

Pfeifer et al. (2019) also showed that happy and angry emojis impact the text differently according to valence.

Boutet et al. (2021) found that the emotional state of the message sender is perceived as negative when negative emojis are present, regardless of the sentence valence. Positive emojis tend to enhance the positivity of positive and neutral sentences and reduce the negativity of negative messages.

Digital Communication



The emoji 😓 (downcast face with sweat) is used to express someone's feeling of awkwardness. However, if someone uses the 😓 emoji to express age, it is merely humor directed at a physical condition's sarcastic comment, not as a symbol that socially marks the user's age on the TikTok social media platform.



The emoji 🤤 (face with tongue out and squinting eyes) is very popular in the context of food to express enjoyment and excitement. This emoji depicts someone who is savoring delicious food or eagerly anticipating tasting something appetizing.



The emoji 😘 (kissing face with closed eyes and smile) is used to convey feelings of love and affection. This emoji symbolizes a sweet and warm kiss expression, often used to show affection or closeness to someone, whether in a romantic context or friendship.

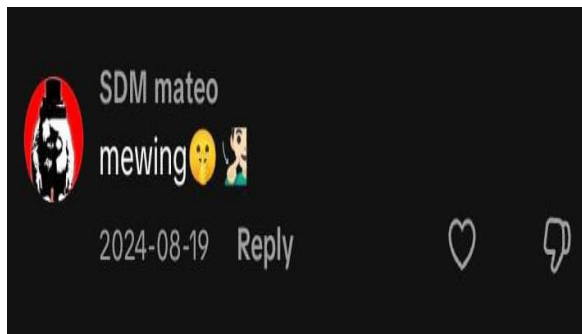


The emoji 😊 (smiling face with hearts) means an expression of love, commonly used to show affection and happiness for a partner, friend, or family. It can also be used to appreciate someone who makes you happy or is adorable. This emoji is depicted with a sweet smiling face, rosy cheeks, and several small hearts around the head.



The emoji 😄 displays a yellow face with a wide smile and a drop of sweat on the forehead. This visual expresses feelings of *awkwardness*, *nervousness*, or *embarrassing situations*. Observations from comment photos and videos above show that this emoji is frequently used by millennials.

1. In the United States, the 😄 emoji is often used to express *relief* mixed with nervousness or as a *joking apology*. It can represent feelings of *embarrassment*, awkwardness, or the impression of “*finally managing to pull through.*”
2. In China, the 😄 emoji has a unique meaning: netizens call it *liuhan huangdou* (“sweating soybean”), often used sarcastically to mean “*funny but resigned*” or “*well, speechless.*”



The emoji 👂 depicts a woman with her hand near her ear, palm facing inward and fingers slightly apart, accompanied by a wavy line ~ indicating dynamic movement.

1. Primarily represents a deaf woman or someone with a hearing impairment.
2. Serves as a symbol of support for the disability community and highlights the importance of inclusive communication on social media.
3. Commonly used informally to express "not wanting to hear," disbelief, or even joking gestures such as asking for a cheek kiss via sign language.
4. Among Generation Z, this emoji is often interpreted with the term "Mewing."

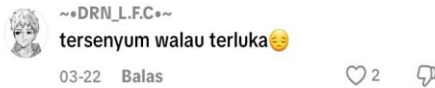


The emoji 🤞 shows a hand with the thumb and index finger forming a perfect circle, while the other three fingers are naturally extended. The color varies from bright yellow to various skin tones.

1. In Indonesia: This gesture is widely recognized as a universal 'OK' sign, conveying *agreement*, *readiness*, or *confirmation* that everything is fine.
2. In Japan: It is often interpreted as *money* or *wealth* because the circle formed by the thumb and index finger represents a coin.
3. In Germany: The OK gesture can be seen as *offensive*, implying "you are a coward/zero," as Germans interpret the circle as symbolizing (the anus), making the gesture an insult.



The emoji 💀 is often misunderstood by Generation Z. While traditionally it signifies "death," "bad luck," "poison," and other scary concepts, for Gen Z it represents "extreme hilarity," "laughing so hard you could die," "cringe," or something embarrassing to the highest degree, to the point of wanting to disappear or "die" from embarrassment. It is commonly used in the context of TikTok videos that are extremely embarrassing or awkward.



The emoji 🙄 signifies self-esteem, ego, and pride of a person. According to TikTok users, if someone is considered wise or intelligent, they deserve to be commented on with the 🙄 emoji as a form of appreciation.

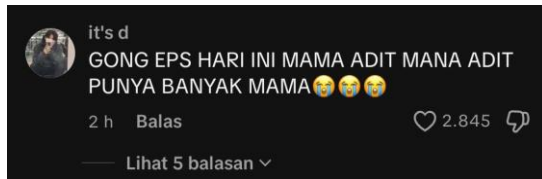


In the context of the TikTok platform, the emoji 🙄 is often misused with sexual undertones, especially in comment sections or suggestive content. Although this emoji originally represents innocence or a pleading expression, it is frequently employed to indirectly flirt or convey sensual meanings in a subtle way. For example, the 🙄 emoji may be combined with phrases or gestures that carry hidden sexual connotations, creating an ambiguous message that is easily understood by certain audiences.

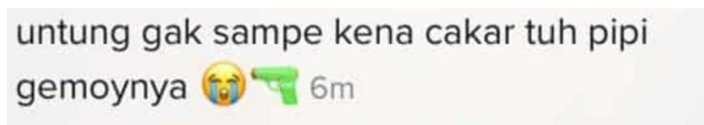


The emoji 🙄, inspired by the iconic giant stone statues from Easter Island, Chile, symbolizes stubbornness, perseverance, and strong determination. However, especially among Generation Z, its usage has evolved to express indifference or a flat, expressionless

reaction, often indicating being unbothered or unimpressed. It is also commonly used to depict a "deadpan" response to something confusing, dry, or unfunny.



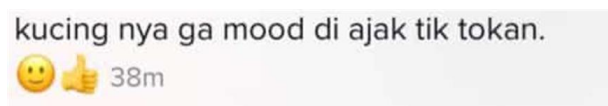
The emoji 🤪, known as the loudly crying face, traditionally represents feelings of sadness, crying, and unhappiness. However, among Generation Z, its meaning has broadened significantly. It is now frequently used to convey uncontrollable laughter, extreme joy, irony, sarcasm, humorous exhaustion, or dramatic reactions.



The emoji 🔫, representing a toy water gun, is often used to describe activities related to water such as swimming or playing in water. Beyond this, it can also symbolically express laughter at a joke that is extremely funny, to the point of "wanting to kill oneself," but this expression is not meant to be taken seriously.



The emoji 😌, known as the relieved face, generally represents an expression of *relief* in various situations. However, in another sense, this emoji can also convey a *sense of pride* or a self-satisfied attitude, often used to express a statement or feeling of personal accomplishment or contentment.



The emoji "Tersenyum Kecil" (😊) in English is referred to as "Slightly Smiling Face." This emoji generally represents a mild or gentle smile. However, it is important to highlight that in some contexts, this emoji may express *hidden feelings of disappointment or pain* that are masked by the small smile.

CONCLUSION

The use of emojis on social media, particularly on TikTok, plays a crucial role in reinforcing emotional expression within non-verbal digital communication. Emojis function as visual cues that enrich textual interaction, helping users convey tone, humor, sarcasm, or exaggeration in the absence of vocal and facial signals. Although commonly perceived as simple complements to written expressions, emojis can also be understood as cultural symbols embedded with layered meanings shaped by trends, communities, and generational practices.

A case study conducted on TikTok demonstrates that emojis are prominently used in comment sections, where users actively engage with video content and with one another. Frequently appearing emojis such as 😂, 🤯, and 🤩 are often employed as hyperbolic reactions to express intense laughter, shock, or dramatic emotion. However, the findings also reveal that emoji meanings are not fixed. For instance, 😞 may signify sadness in its literal sense, yet among Gen Z users it is often used to indicate overwhelming amusement. Similarly, 🤡 has evolved into an ironic or meme-based expression detached from its original representation. These shifting interpretations, largely influenced by generational culture and viral trends, can create confusion, particularly among Millennials or older users who may interpret emojis more literally.

Therefore, while emojis enhance engagement and emotional clarity in digital interactions, their usage requires sensitivity to cultural background, audience, and contextual nuance. Misinterpretations can arise when symbolic meanings are not mutually understood. This study highlights the importance of strengthening emoji digital literacy, encouraging users to recognize evolving meanings across generations. Social media platforms and content creators are also encouraged to promote inclusive and context-aware emoji usage, possibly through educational features or guidelines. By fostering awareness and responsible symbolic communication, misunderstandings in online discourse—especially on TikTok can be significantly minimized.

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