

A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF TEXTING AND EMOJIS IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION OF ND II STUDENTS OF FEDERAL POLYTECHNIC, OROGUN DELTA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study is a semantic analysis of texting and emojis in the social media communications of ND II students of Federal Polytechnic, Orogun (FEPO), Delta State. The study adopts both Charles Sanders Peirce's Semiotic Theory and George Herbert Mead's Symbolic Interactionism principles as its theoretical framework which explores signs and symbols as a significant element of communication. The research bridges the gap in the understanding of the use of certain emojis and texting as interpreted by ND II students of Federal Polytechnic Orogun-Delta State. The results revealed a dynamic linguistic landscape. Emojis function as vital paralinguistic cues, adding emotional depth and clarity. For ND II students, their academic background provides a framework for understanding and navigating these semantic complexities, even as they participate in and are influenced by the ongoing evolution of language in the digital spaces. The findings underscore the importance of being aware of the context in which emojis are employed in order to prevent misunderstanding and provides insights for researchers. As emojis continue to shape the landscape of digital communication, it is crucial to consider their legal implications and strive for effective and responsible communication in the digital age. The study recommends that digital communication studies should be incorporated into the standard minimum requirements for the teaching of diploma programmes so that students can learn the appropriate use of emojis.

Keywords: FEPO, Semantics, Social Media, Texting, Emojis and Semiotics.

1. Introduction

Emojis have come to represent a significant aspect of communication in our day-to-day life. This is because the world is gradually tilting towards digitalization and plays a vital role in our day-to-day digital communication and interaction. Communication is a daily activity that forms the basis for all human activities and existence (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008). Human interaction occurs daily with those close or distant for diverse purposes. Thus, communication is central to human life and relationships. Consequently, no society or civilization can survive without some form of communication. Media forms and communication approaches have continued to evolve over time with its development spanning several centuries. The First Media Age, for example, was traditional in its method. It included "the print media (newspaper, magazine, etc., broadcast media, (television, radio, etc.))" regarded as an analogue mode of communication. (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008; Smith, 2016; William, Brown & Gracia, 2022). However, there are some criticisms against it. One criticism, according to Littlejohn, et al. (2008), is that the impact of the first media age on communication theories was not adequately addressed. The first media age, characterized by the emergence of the print media, had a significant influence on how people communicated and accessed information (Littlejohn, et al. 2008). The media landscape continued to evolve, especially with technological advancements, ushering in a new era (Patel & Johnson, 2023, p. 213). The "Second Media Age," credited to Mark Poster and his 90s publication, marked a significant shift, giving rise to the "New Media." This era embraced digital interactive technology and network communication, notably the internet, revolutionizing media and altering media theory (Patel, 2010, p. 167). In addition, the new media integrates the following, "websites, mobile apps, streaming services, podcasts, and social media" and so on to "...create and share content" (Smith, 2016, p. 78).

Furthermore, an essential element of present-day media is computer-mediated communication, which involves communication that is simplified by social media. The domain of computer-mediated communication consists

of varied forms of social media interactions. However, its setback is the lack of nonverbal signals, such as facial expressions, intonation, and gestures. The symbols for facial expression were developed to serve as substitutes for the lack of verbal cues in computer-mediated communication. Consequently, social media texting and emojis emerged as the outcome of these “expression symbols” (Tossell, et al., 2012; Negishi, 2014).

Despite the everyday texting and use of emojis on social media as a means of communication and interaction, there has been limited research on how texting and the use of emojis have affected the way people communicate on the social media space. This study is informed by the semantic ambiguities encountered by netizens daily through social media chats. Therefore, this research explores social media texting and use of emojis among the ND II students of the Federal Polytechnic Orogun, Delta State. By examining these, this study contributes to understanding how social media shapes communication amongst this group of language users.

Thus, the objectives of this study are: to identify the effects of social media texting and emojis on communication among ND II students of FEPO; examine the meanings associated with texting and emojis within the social environment of ND II students of FEPO; and ascertain the peculiarities of texting and emoji usage in the communication style of ND II students of FEPO. Consequently, the following research questions guide the study:

- i. What is the effect of social media texting and emoji usage in the communication of ND II students of FEPO?
- ii. What do texting and emojis signify within the social environment of ND II students of FEPO?
- iii. What are the peculiarities of texting and emoji usage in the communication styles ND II students of FEPO?




2.1 Conceptual Review

2.1.1 Emojis

The concept of social media texting and use of emojis among students in the tertiary institutions is on the increase, making many of them active netizens. Despite its growing significance, there has been a limited knowledge of this innovation. This conceptual review addresses this knowledge gap by explicitly analysing the semantics involved in the social media communication, using texting and emojis as a tool.

The word “emoji” is rooted in the Japanese language (Kalaba, 2023). The ‘e’ means picture, ‘mo’ denotes write, while ‘ji’ is translated as character or letter. Emojis are visual representations of emotions, ideas, people, gestures, animals, birds, foods, drinks, and nature. According to Obu (2023), the number of emojis as of September 2020 was three thousand, six hundred, and sixty-four (3,664) on Unicode Consortium.

Emojis are computer-generated and symbolic form of communication which can be associated with many communication theories. This study however, was based on Symbolic Interactionism principles. The idea of symbolic interactionism began with an American sociologist, George Herbert Mead in the early 20th Century. Basically, the symbolic interaction theory “focuses on the ways in which people form meaning and structure in society through conversation” (Littlejohn et al, 2008 p.159). It is a social communication theory that highlights how individuals create and interpret symbols in interpersonal communication. In digital communication for example, individuals use emojis as visual symbols to communicate ideas and emotions depending on users’ intended meanings (Jaeger & Ares, 2017).

Studies (Jaeger & Ares, 2017, p. 45; Smith, 2021, p. 78) explain that emojis are expressive in themselves. In other words, emojis clearly convey messages without text. Also, they improve written communication and provide clarity to expressions (Ge & Acm, 2019). For example, when different emojis are combined, they can express deeper emotions beyond words. For instance, the emojis ‘’ and ‘’ sent alone without words convey emotions or affection and approval clearly and strongly. Similarly, the combination of “I love you” with the ‘’ emoji is emotionally richer, impactful, and more communicative as compared to a simple “I love you” text (Sampietro, 2019; Aull, 2019; Smith, 2022). Conversely, Kelly and Watts (2019) assert that emojis can cause misinterpretations without accompanying text.

While emojis are said to have universal features in terms of basic shared expressions of joy, laughter, sorrows, pains, tears, and frustrations, people from diverse backgrounds are able to identify with these feelings to achieve interpersonal and cross-cultural communication. Be that as it may, emojis do not constitute a universal language (Kelly & Watts, 2019). Thus, context should be taken into account when selecting and using emojis, because to a large extent, context determines what is considered acceptable or offensive by communicators (Njenga, 2018). Lin, Chen and Man (2008) posit that the use of emojis can be influenced by interpersonal relationships. That is, the level of nearness or distance in a relationship could affect emoji interpretations and the degree of acceptance or offense. For example, the 'gun emoji' sent from a friend to a close friend in response to a joke in a conversation may evoke laughter or be taken lightly. However, when the same emoji is sent to a colleague, a neighbor, or a distant associate, it may convey different meanings and elicit different kinds of reactions. Thus, emojis are subjective (Smith, 2020; Wang, et al., 2022). Similarly, cultural context defines the way people interpret and understand emojis. In other words, a particular emoji could mean different things for different cultures due to differences in backgrounds (Park, Barrashi, Fink & Cha, 2013; Kalaba, 2023). The 'folded hands' emoji is interpreted differently to mean many things: plea, respect, greeting, prayer, gratitude, and so on by varying cultures. Also, the 'thumbs up' is considered 'vulgar' in the Middle East but not so in Western culture. In Iraq, for example, the thumbs up is seen as an insult and must be avoided by all means. Equally, the 'smiley face' emoji is understood as 'sarcasm in China' (Sharma, 2023; Obu, 2023). Also, the 'waving hand' emoji which is largely seen as an 'innocent gesture' for expressing greeting in most cultures, mean different things in China, South Korea, and Pakistan. In China, it is employed to terminate friendship; in South Korea, it is disrespectful as only dogs and animals are waved at with palms facing outward, and for the Pakistanis, "it is perceived as a string of imaginative curses hurled at someone..." (Kalaba, 2023). One can then imagine the confusion that a simple wave of hand can cause if used in these backgrounds. In addition, Sharma (2023) reported that the middle finger emoji is "illegal, obscene, invasive, and lewd."

2.1.2. Texting

According to Hasyim and Arafah (2023) observe that from a semiotic or semantic standpoint, social media text are signs constructed on signifiers. They are textual information presented as chats. They also opine that there are two levels to texting on the media space: denotative and connotative, denotation is an informative layer that includes everything transmitted that the reader may perceive. The informative layer includes text-based interactions (chat), images, videos, and music. This informational layer is concerned with communication issues. The dissection of linguistic signals is accomplished using informational layer analysis, which happens to be the first level of semiotic analysis (denotative). Connotation on the one hand is the second layer of meaning it incorporates symbolic, sociocultural, and ideological implications. It is the second level of semiotic analysis that does not allow connotative signals conveyed by symbols. The second marking (connotation) is the meaning development from the previous marking in terms of concepts and form (metalanguage).

Therefore, a reader obtains meaning by reading a particular message with denotative and connotative lens. The first layer is the literal meaning of the information conveyed while the second which is the connotative is the philosophical meaning the message or text conveys to the reader. However, with the ever-increasing use of text on the social media space among students, especially tertiary students, there has been a growing concern among educators, parents, researchers and general public that this practice is damaging the use of language in speaking and writing and will affect the standard form in the long run. Actually, students sometimes confuse the lines between formal English and the very informal texting language. This is thought to result in spelling and grammatical errors in their assignments and tests, and makes it hard for tutors to distinguish what they intend to say.

According to Mphahlele and Mashamaite (2005), texting has overcome the requirement in language versatility and it is increasingly used in social communication, business transactions and even in advertisements. Technology plays an important role in communication today and texting is popular especially among the young generation because it provides economy of money and time. Learners have a tendency to use it as an officially

accepted and standard language and thus make different errors from incorrect spelling to even ungrammatical sentence constructions. The English language educators face great challenge due to this situation. The language of texting does not observe grammatical and syntactic rules. So, it is neither formal nor standard. Words are spelled as they are spoken. As a result, educators penalize learners for nonstandard spelling which causes loss to the students if this language is used in academic writing.










3. Theoretical Framework

No study can adequately explicate meaning from texts (written or spoken) or symbol without relating them to some theoretical perspectives. This research relies on the semiotic approach generated from the work of Ferdinand de Saussure in the early 20th century. Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols, and how they convey meaning in language, culture, and communication. It examines how people use and interpret signs such as words, images, and gestures to create and negotiate meaning. In this context of emojis, Semiotics as a theory is adopted for meaning explication. Peirce's introduction of the idea of semiotics as a triadic relationship involving the sign [the emoji], the object being represented [the situation the emoji is trying to portray] and the interpretant [the meaning that is created in the mind of the viewers]. Peirce therefore emphasizes the importance of context and interpretation. The choice of this theory is stem from the fact that Peirce's triadic model of semiotics helps to analyze symbols and the meanings embedded within semantics as well as the social and cultural contexts that shape their creation and reception.




4. Research Methodology

In order to achieve the objective of the study, a mixed method research design was adopted. The choice of this model is premised upon its basic tenets of describing, explicating and interpreting contemporary life events, practice or phenomenon at a particular time and place. This involves detailed description of a phenomenon in words and classify features, count and construct statistical model to explain what is observed (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

The data for the study were sourced from online (WhatsApp). A total of 100 (one hundred) ND II students (male and female) of the Federal Polytechnic Orogun, Delta were purposively selected for this study. The selection of the respondents was based on students with active WhatsApp profiles. The researchers displayed variety of emojis on the students' WhatsApp platforms to give meaning to what they (emojis) meant in their own understanding. The motivation for the choice of the sampled data lies in their robust engagement by students in negotiating meaning in social media chats and discourse.

S/ N	Emoji	Meaning A	Meaning B	Meaning C	Meaning D	Void	Total %
1.	 Gun emoji	Threat: 46.6% (47)	Toy: 25.2% (25)	Violence: 23.7% (24)	Offensive: 2.2% (2)	Void: 2.3% (2)	100%
2	 Knife emoji	Killing: 22.9% (23)	Threat: 36.1% (36)	Cutting veggies 35.5% (36)	Harassment: 4.4% (4)	Void:1.1% (1)	100%
3.	 Crying face emoji	Sadness:47.2% (47)	Disappointment: 17.7% (18)	Signal pain: 11.6% (12)	Heartbrokenness : 20.7% (21)	Void:1.8% (2)	100%
4.	 Palms together emoji	Pleading: 43.3% (43)	Prayer:22.2% (22)	Affirmation: 10.0% (10)	Thanks:23.5 % (24)	Void:1.0% (1)	100%
5.	 Sunglass emoji	Cool:57.6% (58)	Style: 3.1% (3)	Enjoyment: 10.4% (10)	Confidence: 24.2% (24)	Void:4.6%. (5)	100%
6.	 Relaxed face emoji	Relaxed: 30.6% (31)	Blushing: 13.6% (14)	feeling special:25.3% (25)	Joking: 26.6% (27)	Void 3.4 % (3)	100%
7.	 Face with a long nose emoji	Lying:41.7% (42)	Shocked:23.5% (24)	Disbelief:20.5 % (21)	Exaggeration:12 .8% (13)	Void: 0% (Nil)	100%
8	 Zipped mouth emoji	No words: 34.5% (35)	Silence: 19.2% (19)	No gossips:23.9% (24)	Shut up:21.6% (22)	Void:0.3% (0)	100%
9.	 Head wrapped with bandage emoji	Sick: 48.4% (48)	Confused:20.5% (21)	Unhappy: 16.7% (17)	Disoriented:13.3 % (13)	Void: 1.1% (1)	100%

5.

10	 kiss mark emoji	Seduction:45.5% (46)	Kiss: 29.4% (29)	Sexy: 14.5% (15)	No words:7.2% (7)	Void:3.4% (3)	100%
11	 Man with probing cane emoji	Blind:46.4% (46)	Alone:23.2% (23)	Take off: 24.6% (25)	Disabled:5.7% (6)	Void:0.1% (0) [Nil]	100 %
12.	 See-no-evil monkey emoji	Shyness:68.8% (69)	Don't want to see: 11.4 (11)	Shame:8.6% (9)	Embarrassment: 7.0% (7)	Void:4.2% (4)	100%

Data Presentation

D

5.1 Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings

Atkin (2008) says that Peirce's Sign Theory, or Semiotic, is an account of signification, representation, reference and meaning. Using this triadic model theory, the researchers analyze the selected emojis as seen below:

Gun emoji

Divergent interpretations of the gun emoji highlight the potential meanings by the students in conveying messages related to threat or violence. 47 students representing 46.6% say that the gun emoji means 'threat,' 25 students (25.2% of the total population of the study) say it means 'toy,' 24 students (23.7%) say it means 'violence,' 2 students (amounting to 2.2%) say it means 'offensive,' and 2 (2.2%) students say they do not know what it is used for and we tag this as void. Context becomes crucial to avoid miscommunication or perceived aggression.

Knife emoji

Similar to the gun emoji, the knife emoji has varied interpretations by the students. 23 students (22.9%) say the knife emoji means 'killing,' 34 students say it means 'threat' which represented 34.1%; 36 students (which is 35.5%) say it means 'cutting vegetables,' 4 students (which constituted 4.4%) say it means 'harassment,' while 1 student (representing 1.1%) said he did not know the meaning of the knife and that was referred to as 'void.' The potential for confusion arises, especially when the intention behind using the emoji is not clearly communicated. Again, context becomes crucial to avoid miscommunication or perceived aggression.

Crying face

The crying face emoji, generally conveys negative emotions, but the specific interpretation by the students varies. 47 students say the *crying face* emoji means 'sadness,' and represented 47.2%; 18 students which accounted for 17.7% say it means 'disappointment,' 12 students say it is Pain, this accounted for 11.6%; 21 students say it is Heart brokenness: 20.7% while just 2 students say they do not know the actual use, and this was tagged Void with 1.8%. Understanding the context and the intended emotional expression is crucial to avoid misinterpreting the sender's feelings.

Palms together emoji

The palms together emoji has varied interpretations, although the meanings are directly proportional to the context in which they are used. 43 respondents (which accounted for 43.3%) say it is 'pleading,' 22 respondents (representing 22.2%) say it means 'prayer,' 10 students (10%) say it is 'affirmation' 24 students constituting 23.5% say it means 'thanks,' while 1 student (only 1%) says they do not know what 'palms together emoji' means and the response was tagged 'void.' Therefore, for one to ascertain the meaning, it will be solely dependent on the context in which it is used.

Sunglass emoji


This emoji is generally associated with positive interpretations such as being cool, enjoyment, confidence, and style. 58 students amounting to 57.6% say it means 'cool' 3 students representing 3.1% say it is 'style,' 10 students (10.4%) say it is 'enjoyment,' while 24 students constituting 24.2% say it means 'confidence' and 5 students amounting to 4.6% say they do not know what the 'sunglass emoji' means and it was tagged as 'void.' To this end, the meaning tends to change in instances where the meaning is not so clear.

 **Relaxed face emoji**

This emoji is also associated with positive interpretations. Although the emoji conveys positive interpretation to virtually everyone, the context to which it is used is very important in order to appropriately convey intended meaning. The findings reveal that 31 students representing 30.6% say it means ‘relaxed,’ 14 respondents representing 13.6% respond that it means ‘blushing,’ 25 students (25.3%) say it is ‘feeling special,’ 27 respondents (26.6%) say it means ‘joking’ while 3 students (3.4%) do not know what it means, and were tagged ‘void.’

 **Face with a long nose emoji**

Just like other emojis, this emoji conveys different interpretations to different students. 42 students (41.7%) say it means ‘lying,’ 24 students (23.5%) say it is ‘shocked,’ 21 students representing 20.5 % say it means ‘disbelief,’ while 9 students amounting to 12.8% say it is ‘exaggeration,’ and none of the students’ response was ‘void’ as every respondent had an opinion about the ‘face with a long nose emoji.’ Further, this emoji conveys more of negative than positive interpretation. Therefore, actual meaning of this emojis is directly proportional to the context in which it is used.

 **Zipped mouth emoji**

A significant proportion of the students (35 respondents representing 34.5%) recognize this emoji as ‘having no words to say in response,’ 19 students amounting to 19.2% say it means ‘silence,’ then 24 students representing 23.9% say it means ‘no gossip,’ while 22 students (which is 21.6%) say it means ‘shut up,’ and none of the students seemed ignorant of what the “zipped mouth emoji” means, hence, ‘void’ is labeled 0.3%. The emoji conveys both positive and negative meaning. It is mostly used as a form of reaction in a discourse. Therefore, the context it is used will properly determine its meaning.

 **Head wrapped with bandage emoji**

Most netizens use the ‘bandage emoji’ to mean they are either ‘sick’ or they are ‘hurt.’ However, 48 students (48.4%) say it means ‘sick,’ 21 students representing 20.5% say it means ‘confused,’ 17 students which is 16.7% of the population say it means ‘unhappy,’ 13 respondents (13.3%) say it means ‘disoriented,’ while a lone student (1.1%) says bandage emoji is unknown to him and it was tagged ‘void.’ When the emoji is used, they are communicating an ill health or low state of mind to the person they are chatting with. Although some of the students use the emoji to mean “confused” or “disoriented”. However, a student seems not to know the meaning of the emoji, and so he doesn’t use it.

 **Kiss mark emoji**

Just like every other emoji, the ND students read different meanings to them. To some of the students, the emoji is used to indicate “seduction” or preferably, “a kiss would do.” Although, some of the students see the emoji to mean ‘an empty vessel’ that is “lips that have nothing to say.” For instance, 46 students amounting to 45.5% say it means ‘seduction,’ 29 students (29.4%) say it is ‘kiss,’ 15 respondents, that is 14.5% say it is ‘sexy,’ 7 students (7.2%) say it means ‘no words,’ while 3 students (3.4%) say they do not use it because they do not know the meaning and they were tagged ‘void.’

**Man with probing cane emoji**

The students gave different meanings to this emoji. According to the respondents, the emoji is used to indicate that someone is ‘impaired’ or ‘blind.’ However, some of the students use it to mean ‘let me simply walk away’ in pidgin it is expressed: ‘make I waka.’ It is a polite way of saying that one wants to walk away from an unpleasant situation. Some students signify that the emoji is used to indicate ‘accessibility’ or ‘disabled.’ 46 respondents constituting 46.4% say it means ‘blind,’ 23 respondents representing 23.2% say

it means 'alone,' 25 students (24.6%) say it is 'take off,' 6 students (5.7%) say it means 'disabled,' while none was 'void.'

See-no-evil monkey emoji

This emoji has different interpretations. While some of the students claim the emoji is used to indicate 'shyness,' others use it to indicate 'embarrassment or shame.' From the findings, 69 students (68.8%) say it means 'shyness,' 11 respondents and 11.4% of the population say it is 'don't want to see,' 9 respondents constituting 8.6% say it is 'shame,' while 7 respondents (7%) say it means 'embarrassment,' and finally, 4 respondents representing 4% say they do not use it because the meaning is unknown to them; this was tagged 'void.'

5.2. Discussion of findings

This study examined the socio-semiotic elements embedded in emojis shared by ND II students of Federal Polytechnic Orogun. It explores how its distribution across social media shapes and reflects perceptions and the dynamics of students within the Polytechnic community, where emojis are increasingly used to convey emotions, sentiment, and tone that are often difficult to express through text alone. For the ND II students, emojis serve as a crucial non-verbal cues that enrich textual communication, making interactions more empathetic and nuanced.

Furthermore, significant findings reveal that the semantics of emojis are highly flexible and context-dependent. What a 'palms together' emoji signifies in one context (e.g., 'thanks') might be interpreted differently (e.g. 'prayer' or 'pleading') by another, especially users that are not so familiar with the emojis. However, for the ND II students, this highlights the dynamics and fluid nature of meaning-making in digital communication, requiring a sophisticated understanding of pragmatic context.

In addition, further findings show that while emojis add significant emotional and social meaning, they generally provide an additional layer of meaning, allowing for a richer expression that aligns more closely with face-to-face interactions by compensating for the absence of traditional face-to-face cues. Although, if not handled with care, it has the tendency to lead to ambiguity and misinterpretation. This can result in distorted or loss of meaning and as such the intended meaning is not communicated.

In conclusion, the findings revealed a dynamic linguistic landscape. Emojis function as vital paralinguistic cues, adding emotional depth and clarity. For ND II students, their academic background provides a framework for understanding and navigating these semantic complexities, even as they participate in and are influenced by the ongoing evolution of language in the digital spaces. The findings underscore the importance of digital literacy and critical awareness of linguistic choices in contemporary communication.

5.3. Conclusion

This study analyzed the level of awareness and correctness regarding the use of emojis in communication among ND II students of the Federal Polytechnic Orogun, Delta State. As the population of netizens increases, so does the use of emojis which represents a significant aspect of our communication. This rapid evolution of the digital era has played a crucial role in daily online communications. It is imperative for users to adapt to this current reality.

5.4. Recommendations

The study puts forth the following recommendations:

- i. That the use of digital communication should be incorporated into the standard minimum requirements for the teaching of diploma programmes so that students can learn the appropriate use of emojis;
- ii. That deliberate efforts should be made to consistently keep to the usage of emojis across different digital platforms to minimize confusion among netizens. This will bring about a widely accepted usage of emojis amongst netizens and will minimize confusion of the usage of emojis amongst netizens.

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