EXPLORING CULTURAL AND GENDER-BASED VARIATIONS IN EMOJI INTERPRETATION AMONG MALAYSIAN YOUTH

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Abstract

The study investigates how culture and gender shape the interpretation and usage of emojis among Malaysian youth. Data was collected through a pre-survey to identify frequently used and ambiguous emojis, along with in-depth interviews with eight participants representing different ethnic and gender groups. The analysis employed Social Semiotics to interpret emojis as semiotic resources situated in cultural and digital practices, alongside Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to examine their ideational, interpersonal, or textual meta-functions. Findings reveal that while certain emojis retain culturally embedded meanings, online culture and digital trends exert a stronger influence on interpretation and usage. Emojis are frequently employed as substitutes for sensitive or taboo topics, with interpretations shaped by global trends, peer influence, and shared social contexts. Gender differences also emerged, with female participants displaying greater caution and sensitivity in emoji use by employing them as politeness markers and face-saving devices more often than their counterparts. This study extends prior research by showing how localized cultural practices persist but increasingly blend with inline subcultural norms. These findings contribute to the understanding of emojis as dynamic meaning-making resources in multicultural digital communication.

Keywords: Malaysia, emoji, Malaysian culture, gender, digital communication, internet culture, slang, substitution, politeness strategies, metafunctions

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Introduction

In an increasingly digital world, emojis have been enriching online communication by enabling users to convey ideas visually. Since their origins in Japan, these symbols have come a long way from simple keyboard-based emoticons to distinct pictorial emojis designed to convey specific emotions, ideas, and objects that transcends language barriers in digital exchanges (George et al., 2023). Yet, their interpretations are not universal as it often coincides with each user's varying cultural and gendered perspectives. Thus, in a country known for its rich cultural diversity such as Malaysia, these variations could then create challenges in understanding emoji meanings across different ethnic and gender groups.

1.1 Background of Study

Communication occurs in two (2) ways: verbal communication, which involves spoken or written language, and non-verbal communication, which encompasses gestures, facial expressions, and other visual cues. In today's digital age, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, technology has increasingly replaced face-to-face communication with online platforms (DeFilippis et al., 2022). Computer-mediated communication (CMC) became essential for maintaining connection with others and continues to be advocated for use in other areas such as teaching and more (Osler & Zahavi, 2022). As digital communication continues to advance and transform, emojis have become an integral part of expressing emotions, ideas, and intentions in everyday text-based interactions. This is valuable because extra linguistic elements like intonation,

hand gestures, and other visual cues provide additional contexts that are not present in writing without using many additional words (Chaudhary, 2022).

Emoticons, created by Scott Fahlman in 1982, were early keyboard-based symbols designed to convey facial expressions in computer-mediated communication (Riordan & Kreuz, 2010; Walther & D'addario, 2001). Whilst "emoji" combines two Japanese words, *e* meaning picture and *moji* meaning character. It refers to graphic symbols that have specific names, IDs, and a unique Unicode code (Rodrigues et al., 2018). Emojis originated in Japan in the late 1990s, with Shigetaka Kurita developing a set of 176 12-bit symbols for a mobile company that consisted of only a few facial expressions and primarily focused on icons related to sports, weather, transportation, and other practical symbols. Although emojis were originally created as a way to provide a compact yet expressive means of communication due to limited email space, this initial set of emojis marked the beginning of a visual language and is accredited to inspiring today's emojis (Berard, 2018; Graham, 2024). Unlike emoticons, emojis feature vibrant images that express specific and complex emotions.

Emoji interpretation is often complex and context dependent. Despite their widespread use, emojis can differ in meanings, with their ambiguity intentionally supported by the Unicode Standard to enable varied interpretations (Graham, 2024). The fact that different cultures and individuals have diverse backgrounds means that the same emoji might have distinct meanings, as noted by Graham (2024). Thus, these variations in meaning could be apparent in Malaysia. While gender variations also influence how emojis are perceived, with Jones et al. (2020) discovering that women showed a higher negativity bias in facial processing, which influenced their negative connotation of both neutral and negative emojis.

In conclusion, emoji misinterpretations are due to their inherent ambiguity. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate how culture and gender affect how Malaysian youths interpret and use emojis to improve digital communication practices.

1.2 Statement of Problem

There is still a lack of research on cross-cultural emoji interpretation within the same country (Miller et al., 2016, as cited in Amalina & Azam, 2020). Despite the vast cultural diversity of Malaysia, this background is frequently overlooked in studies. Amalina and Azam (2020), observed that although emojis are meant to have universal meanings, the interpretation of the three (3) major ethnic groups in Malaysia differs. Furthermore, studies that have looked at disparities in gender in relation to other variables like age and other cultural contexts have tended to focus on only facial emojis (Chen et al., 2024; Herring & Dainas, 2020). Similarly, Jones et al. (2020) explored how gender affected difference in how emojis are perceived and used. They discovered that women use emojis more often than men, view neutral and negative emojis as being more negative, and are more familiar with them. These gaps in research highlight the need for further research into how ethnicity and gender affect emoji interpretation and use in Malaysian contexts.

1.3 Research Objectives

1. To identify the ambiguously interpreted emojis.
2. To investigate how ethnicity influences the interpretation and usage of the (selected) facial and non-facial emojis.

3. To investigate how gender influences the interpretation and usage of the (selected) facial and non-facial emojis.

1.4 Research Questions

1. What are the ambiguously interpreted emojis?
2. How does ethnicity influence the interpretation and usage of the (selected) facial and non-facial emojis?
3. How does gender influence the interpretation and usage of the (selected) facial and non-facial emojis?

1.5 Significance of Study

The study holds significant potential to benefit scholarly research and practical applications in digital communication. For scholars, it provides insights into how gender and cultural contexts influence emoji usage and interpretation among Malaysian university students. The findings could enrich the understanding of language, communication patterns, and digital symbols, shedding light on how digital language reflects cultural nuances and supports broader cross-linguistic and cross-cultural studies. Furthermore, these findings could also potentially inspire further research on the broader implications of emoji perception and usage in cross-cultural communication, including whether emojis reinforce social stereotypes or hierarchies thereby expanding theoretical discourse in both linguistics and gender studies.

In practical terms, the study would benefit the professionals in digital marketing, brand communication, and social media management, especially for those aiming to engage and resonate with Gen Z audiences because it is able to transcend language barriers, improve engagement rates,

has visual power, et. cetera (Kadry, 2021). Younger audiences, from those that are at university age, are not only digital natives but also the major trendsetters in digital communication. Thus, through understanding how these groups interpret emojis across gender and cultural lines, companies could more effectively design content that resonates with this demographic. Moreover, organizations or brands might be able to avoid potential missteps in communication or campaigns where emoji meanings may vary across cultural contexts, thus helping reduce the risk of misinterpretations or para-crises that could damage their reputations.

Lastly, the study could enhance university students' text-based communication skills. Since emojis often substitute facial expressions and other visual cues, awareness of how diverse peers interpret these symbols could reduce misunderstandings. This awareness would aid students in making intentional choices in emoji usage so that they are able to convey their intentions more clearly and thoughtfully. In the context of multicultural academic settings, these insights could help students engage more effectively with each other.

1.6 Definition of Terms

1. Facial Emoji – Digital icons and/ or symbols depicting stylized human facial expression that are used to convey emotions or reactions in text-based communication (Kaiser & Grosz, 2021). This study adopts the same definition.
2. Non-Facial/ Action Emoji – Digital icons and/ or symbols representing objects, actions, or abstract concepts, rather than human facial expressions (Kaiser & Grosz, 2021). This study adopts the same definition.
3. The Unicode Standard – A global system that encodes, represents, and manages text across various platforms and devices. It assigns a unique code to every character, symbol, and

emojis from all languages, ensuring consistency in appearance and functionality across different devices and software which facilitates global communication (The Unicode Standard, n.d.).

4. Malaysian Culture – This study adopts the definition provided by Amalina and Azam (2020), which identifies the three (3) primary cultural groups in Malaysia: the Malays, Chinese, and Indians.
5. Gender – This study's definition of "gender" refers to the way in which participants identify themselves as male or female and how this influences their interpretation and use of emojis.
6. Malaysian Youth – The Institute for Youth Research Malaysia (2023) defines Malaysian youth as individuals aged 15 to 30, but this study focuses specifically on the population aged 18-25 in Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR).

1.7 Scope and Limitations of Study

The scope of the study focuses on exploring how those aged 18 to 25 interpret and use emojis. The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (2023) reports that 92.7% of Malaysians use the internet, with only 0.3% of individuals in their 20s and 1% of those under 20 not being internet users in 2022. This high level of online activity among young adults justifies the focus on this demographic in analyzing their emoji interpretations and usages. Moreover, the study will focus exclusively on emojis and their interpretations, specifically exploring how they are influenced by Malaysian culture and different genders through qualitative methods without considering any accompanying texts.

However, the study is subject to certain limitations. Focusing exclusively on Malaysian university students may limit the generalizability to other groups in Malaysia, such as children or

older adults. Furthermore, another limitation of emojis is their flexible nature because as new emojis and cultural trends are introduced, they influence user behavior. Additionally, while the study's findings may lose significance over time, there is still a need to keep up to date and track these changes in interpretation for future studies. In addition, since it is observed that variations in emoji visuals across platforms introduce variability in interpretation regardless of if it is the same emoji, participants may perceive and use emojis differently depending on their designs on differing platforms (Bai et al., 2024). For this reason, the study will use Apple-rendered emojis to reduce cross-platform limitations in emoji visuals. Additionally, Apple's emojis are also widely recognized which further makes them a practical choice to ensure participants feel a sense of familiarity as well as ensuring consistency in interpretations.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Social Semiotics

Social semiotics is a fundamental theory in semiotics which emphasizes how signs and symbols are understood in relation to social contexts. Developed by Kress and Leeuwen (2006), this theory contends that meanings are produced by the way signs are used in social and cultural contexts and recognizes that meaning in sign-making changes alongside cultural shifts. This framework is chosen because it provides a lens to view Malaysian emoji interpretations. Through the application of social semiotics, the meanings that Malaysians ascribe to emojis can be understood in relation to their backgrounds. This theory is chosen as it not only considers written language accompanied by emojis but could also be applied into the changing nature of sign-making and the impact of multimodality by looking into emojis solely as a mode of communication.

2.2 Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)

Systemic Functional Linguistics is developed by Michael Halliday. Although emojis are visual rather than verbal, they convey meaning, manage social relationships, and organize discourse like language. SFL focuses on ideational, interpersonal, and textual roles to analyze how language functions in social contexts (Halliday, 1978, as cited in Logi & Zappavigna, 2021). Firstly, the ideational meta-function is concerned with experiential meaning, reflecting how language represents experiences and ideas. While the interpersonal function deals with enacting relationships and social interactions, and the textual function describes how meaning is organized into a coherent structure. Thus, SFL acts as the theoretical framework that provides a structured approach to analyze how emojis function similarly to language and reflect diverse social and cultural practices in digital communication.

2.3 Review of Related Literature on Social Semiotics, SFL, and Emoji Functions

Emojis in digital communication has various scholars offering different perspectives on their ability to convey meaning in written language or as a language on its own. However, studies focusing solely on emojis as a means of conveying messages and their subsequent interpretations are less frequent and is an area that is underexplored and presents a significant gap in literature.

Firstly, Danesi (2016) classified emojis into two (2): adjunctive emojis, which accompany and complement written language, and substitutive emojis, which replace written words altogether. It is noted that as emojis become more independent from an accompanying text, their comprehensibility decreases due to ambiguity, indicating that while emojis enhance a message's meaning, they do not yet have the capacity to fully replace written language (Danesi, 2017; Kerslake & Wegerif, 2017). While the point about misinterpretation from substitutive emojis continues to hold relevance as highlighted prior, new emojis have been introduced since then. As of September 2024, the Unicode Standard has a total of 3,790 emojis, an increase from over 3,300 in 2021, which improves the overall communication function of emojis (Emojipedia, n.d-b.; Logi & Zappavigna, 2021). Taking the same stance but through a different approach, Sampietro (2016) explores the role of emojis in communication by drawing comparisons to punctuation marks and referring to them as 'clear verbal anchorage.' The author argues that while emojis signal tone and emotion in informal contexts, their interpretive significance is limited in formal settings as it is used less, which suggest that an emoji's meaning relies on surrounding words, making it prone to ambiguity when on its own. Additionally, the notion of emojis as a paralanguage also suggests that they function similarly to non-verbal elements of communication that accompany written messages to add further context (Zappavigna & Logi, 2024).

Offering a different perspective, emojis have the capacity to function independently and occasionally fully replacing written language (Ge & Herring, 2018). They observed that by including emojis in the form of subjects, verbs, and objects, the "emoji sequence" functions as a whole sentence. An "emoji sequence" being a combination of different emojis used together to convey meaning or an idea without the use of written language. This notion contradicts the idea that emojis are purely supplementary to text. Complementing this, Logi and Zappavigna (2021) highlighted the potential of emojis to function as standalone communicative tools. They suggested that their framework which integrates systemic functional linguistics (SFL) could be extended into substitutive emojis.

2.4 Emojis as a Form of Communication

Emojis have evolved from basic keyboard symbols to visual icons that improve online communication and are now an essential part of text-based communication. Initially, their significance came from their capacity to fill in language gaps by providing visuals to represent emotions, objects, actions, and abstract concepts. In text-based communication, these visual representations' aim is to help in making the intended messages clear and minimize misunderstandings. Emoji meanings, however, are not static, shifting over time with new meanings and connotations within different cultural contexts. Emojis such as the "skull," "loudly crying," and even the "chair" has largely replaced the "face with tears of joy" emoji, which was popular among teenagers in the 2010s to represent the reaction of laughing (Graham, 2024; Kostadinovska-Stojchevska & Shalevska, 2024).

As the meanings of emojis continue to shift, they inherently gain the capability to convey indirect meanings such as sarcasm, irony, and politeness in digital communication. However, this increased versatility in meaning also introduces ambiguity because their interpretation depends heavily on context. Emojis are not only influenced by their surrounding text as shown in previous studies, but also by pragmatics such as social cues from both the sender and receiver and other contextual factors like culture and gender. Additionally, it is also highlighted that emojis can influence the perceived valence of messages, this further demonstrates how emojis can extend beyond direct meanings (Holtgraves & Robinson, 2020).

2.5 Culture and Emoji Interpretation

Culture influences communication practices, with research showing that cultural differences impact how emojis are both used and interpreted. For example, Würtz (2017), who draws on Edward Hall's Intercultural Framework, points out that individuals from high-context cultures tend to use emojis to express subtle emotions while those from low-context cultures are more likely to interpret them more literally. This is further reinforced by Togans et al. (2021) which observed that East Asians consistently used more communication cues in text-based interactions as compared to Americans. These examples, however, mostly focus on East Asians and Americans, which overlooks other cultural groups and potentially leads to a biased or skewed understanding of communication cues. Therefore, including a broader range of cultural perspectives is essential for a more accurate depiction of how communication cues like emojis function in the context of Malaysia, which is the aim that this study intends to contribute knowledge to.

Given the interrelation of communication and Malaysia's social context, the country's high level of digital engagement further highlights the need for understanding emoji communication within this cultural framework. The Digital News Report 2024 highlighted that 94% of Malaysians have access to the internet as of 2024, ranking third within the Asia-Pacific region for internet penetration (Newman et al., 2024). This marks a steady increase from 92.7% in 2022 and 85.7% in 2018 (Sabri et al., 2021; The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2023). Alongside this trend, 89.29% of Malaysians now own smartphones, reflecting the increasing reliance on communication platforms such as WhatsApp, which is actively used by 93% of Malaysian internet users (OOSGA, 2023; Siddharta, 2024).

Altogether, as these trends illustrate the expanding role of digital platforms and communication in Malaysia, it also highlights the importance of investigating emoji interpretations to better comprehend communication across the different cultures. Building on this, Amalina and Azam (2020) and Sabri et al. (2021) collectively offer valuable insights into how emojis function within Malaysia's multicultural environment.

Firstly, Amalina and Azam (2020) highlighted how emojis, while universally understood to an extent, often carry unique cultural interpretations. Using the "face with tears of joy" emoji as an example, participants across three cultures had different interpretations. Malay participants associated it with the action of crying and to signify the question of 'why,' Chinese participants associated it with awkwardness, and Indian participants interpreted it as a sign that something is lame. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the "screaming face" emoji had a consistent meaning in all three cultures. However, despite this shared meaning, each culture also ascribes it with a unique meaning and differing perspectives: Malays related it with excitement and being impressed, Chinese to disbelief, and Indians to denial. These variations in interpretation are a prime example

of intracultural interpretation, which occurs when individuals within the same cultural group interpret symbols, signs, or messages based on their cultural background.

Secondly, according to Sabri et al. (2021), emojis also function as cultural symbols or expressions to foster harmony or unity on WhatsApp and other platforms. Emojis are valued by the Malaysian undergraduate participants for improving communication, maintaining relationships, and expressing emotions. Furthermore, the study discovered that a lack of emojis may be misunderstood as a lack of sincerity. Additionally, their inclusion also contributes to communication convenience, to show empathy, and to express simple emotions like anger without the need for explicit explanation in communication. All in all, it confirms the Media Features theory, which contends that emojis are interpreted as being playful and can foster social connectedness (Hsieh & Tseng, 2017, as cited in Sabri et al., 2021).

2.6 Gender Differences in Communication and Emoji Interpretation

Gender differences in communication have long been acknowledged as a significant factor in influencing how individuals interact with one another. According to Tannen (1990), men and women often had distinct communication styles, with women prioritizing connection and empathy, whereas men often prefer to be direct and task-oriented in communication. Building on this, Edwards (1998) noted that women are more likely to interpret messages as expressions of support or concern while men see them as attempts to exert control or dominate. Interestingly, such interpretations are not exclusively tied to a person's biological gender; an individual's gender-role identity and personal values can independently determine whether they perceive certain behaviors as controlling or helpful.

These early findings are still supported by recent research. For instance, Simon (2021) observed that female students emphasized emotional intensity through the use of adjectives and adverbs in their vocabulary. In contrast, male students preferred more straightforward phrases such as “very good” and “very bad.” Additionally, women were more likely to express empathy through supportive phrases such as “get well soon!” or “you will be fine,” whereas men exhibited this behavior less frequently.

Gender differences also extend into digital communication, particularly in the use of emojis. Research has shown that women generally use emojis more often and with a broader range of emotions as compared to men. According to Herring and Dainas (2020) and Jones et al. (2020), women are more likely than men to exhibit a stronger emotional negativity bias and have a heightened ability to process facial emotions, especially in younger generations. Furthermore, Chen et al. (2024) relates the gender variation in emoji interpretation to the primary caretaker hypothesis, positing that the capacity to promptly and precisely recognize infant emotions from facial expressions may have arisen as a result of historically high infant mortality rates.

Thus, this study’s incorporation of gender should be considered as it affects communication preferences and dynamics. Hence, by identifying and addressing biases in emoji design and usage, this variable contributes to the development of more inclusive and effective communication tactics.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research (MMR) design because it aims to combine both quantitative and qualitative approaches to address the research objectives. The rationale behind this combination is to build on previous findings and to provide a deeper understanding on the topic (Farsani & Riazi, 2024).

The quantitative aspect comes from the implementation of an online survey to address a gap in previous research, such as Amalina and Azam's (2020) study, which relied on an outdated source of popular emojis from 2015. With no reliable recent sources currently available, this highlighted a need for up-to-date data. Thus, to meet this need, a survey comprising of 195 emojis was developed to identify a relevant set of emojis that Malaysians frequently used and perceived to be ambiguous. Of these, 130 facial emojis represented the most recent and complete set of smileys available in iOS 18.4; 35 were non-facial emojis depicting only hand gestures, chosen as the study focuses on computer-mediated communication (CMC) where physical gestures common in face-to-face interactions are absent; and 30 outlier emojis were selected for their potential to carry ambiguous or implied meanings that may vary depending on the study's variables. From this pool, a final set of emojis will be identified based on their frequent use in conveying three (3) emotions: joy, sadness, and anger as well as their perceived ambiguity.

This refined set will then serve as the basis for the qualitative phase of this study, which will be employed through semi-structured individual interviews to gain a thorough understanding of how Malaysian youth interpret and use emojis, with a focus on culture and gender influences. The semi-structured format allows for flexibility in being able to explore emerging ideas or to

probe further during discussions, while still maintaining structure and a focus on the research topic at hand. Moreover, the interviews would also provide an opportunity to confirm, challenge, and expand the online survey's findings, allowing for a deeper exploration of the nuances in emoji interpretations and usage.

3.1.1 Research Material

The research material includes the online survey administered via Google Forms to collect data on emojis that are frequently used and perceived to be ambiguous by Malaysian youths. As outlined in the section above, this questionnaire serves to identify the emojis that will be selected as assets for the interview questions and subsequent data analysis. Thus, to ensure quality and accurate visual representation, the questionnaire incorporates images of 195 emojis sourced from Emojipedia (Emojipedia, n.d.-a). As such, this survey not only ensures that the study focuses on emojis that are relevant in time and in the context of Malaysia but also helps identify a smaller subset that will later serve as stimuli for the qualitative interviews and subsequent data analysis. A copy of the entire questionnaire is referenced in the appendices (refer to Appendix A).

3.2 Research Instrument

The study uses a semi-structured interview guide as its research instrument. The guide has five (5) sections, each designed to fulfill specific research objectives through a total of 16 open-ended questions. The semi-structured guide is chosen because it will provide a consistent structure across interviews while also allowing the researcher to pursue unanticipated but relevant insights raised by participants. Given that no existing interview guide was identified for studies of this nature, the instrument was developed from the ground up for this research to align closely with its

objectives. A copy of the semi-structured interview guide is referenced in the appendices (refer to Appendix B).

The first section gathers interviewee background information through four (4) questions designed to safeguard the validity of participant responses. The screening questions assessed English fluency, daily use of digital platforms, experience with mobile devices or computers, and proficiency in digital communication platforms. Participants that indicate limited engagement or unfamiliarity with these requirements were excluded, as they would not adequately represent the community relevant to this research.

The second section, Interpretations and Ambiguity, uses outlier emojis as stimuli (refer to Appendix C). It contains four (4) main questions with three (3) additional prompts provided when participants need clarification or further direction. This section explores participants' first impressions of each emoji, their experiences of differing interpretations across contexts, and the factors such as culture, gender, age, et cetera. contributing to these differences. Drawing on the theoretical framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), it is designed to elicit insights into the ideational meta-function, which is the representational meaning of said-emojis, and to examine potential breakdowns in interpersonal meta-functions, where ambiguity may lead to misinterpretation or communicative risks (Halliday, 1978, as cited in Logi & Zappavigna, 2021). Furthermore, participants will be asked to identify emojis they find difficult to interpret or avoid using, revealing the boundaries of shared understanding and the risks associated with ambiguity in digital communication.

The third section, Daily Use and Communication Contexts, uses the highest-frequency facial and non-facial emojis identified for expressing three (3) emotions: joy, sadness, and anger

(refer to Appendix D). It contains four (4) main questions with six (6) prompts. This section examines how participants incorporate these emojis into daily communication, the context in which they are most frequently used, and any patterns of avoidance. Drawing on the Systemic Fucntional Linguistics framework, it explores the textual meta-function in emoji use through placement within messages. Moreover, it also investigates the interpersonal function, such as whether certain emojis are used more frequently in specific relational contexts and the pragmatic functions they serve in communication (Halliday, 1978, as cited in Logi & Zappavigna, 2021).

The fourth section, Cultural and Ethnic Contexts, uses emojis from the full set that participants from different variable groups self-identified as being interpreted differently with the final selection reflecting clear patterns across participant responses (refer to Appendix C & D). It contains four (4) main questions with four (4) prompts, which support participants in reflecting on culturally specific interpretations. This section explores whether certain emojis have culturally unique meanings, how usage patterns vary across social groups, and how these meanings may have changed over time. Drawing on the social semiotic perspective that meaning is context-dependent, it examines how cultural and ethnic backgrounds shape the semiotic resources available to emoji users (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006). Furthermore, it also considers how emojis can serve as markers of identity, linking both ideational and interpersonal meanings.

Similarly, the fifth section, Gender and Emoji use, also uses the full set of emojis that the different variable groups self-identified as being associated with gendered expectations (refer to Appendix C & D). This section contains four (4) main questions and five (5) prompts, which are focused on the interpersonal meta-function by examining how gender norms influence emoji choice, etiquette and interpretation. It also explores whether gender is considered when sending emojis and how this shapes the meaning-making process.

3.2.1 Validity and Reliability of the Research Instrument

To ensure validity of the research instrument, the interview questions have gone through an expert review from a lecturer from the Department of Linguistics. This evaluation ensures that the questions effectively address the research objectives to capture relevant data.

As all interviews are recorded and transcribed to maintain the accuracy and consistency of data collection and analysis, the reliability of the instrument's data is supported through an audit trail. Prior to the interview process, participants are given a consent form outlining the option to review their transcribed responses for accuracy (refer to Appendix E). Those who consented and agreed will have had the opportunity to review their transcribed responses and request corrections where necessary. Additionally, the transcriptions and analysis will have been verified with a lecturer to confirm that the findings accurately reflected the participants' responses.

3.3 Research Sample

The study will employ a non-probability sampling design, specifically purposive sampling. According to Bullard (2024), purposive sampling is a method in which participants are deliberately selected based on characteristics relevant to the research. This approach ensures that the sample reflects the variables under investigation, rather than being determined by random. This is because the study involves a total of eight (8) participants, each taking part in individual interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams or Zoom, with the choice of conference platforms based on participant preferences to provide flexibility and accommodate different schedules and locations. The final sample consists of an equal number of males and females within each ethnic group, with two (2) Chinese, one (1) Malay, and one (1) Indian participant per gender, reflecting the

distribution of respondents in the online questionnaire. Additionally, participant selection will also be based on two (2) key characteristics, drawn from the four (4) background questions provided to the interviewees:

1. Familiarity with WhatsApp and technology – to ensure that participants engage with emojis in daily communication and minimizes variations caused by limited experience with smartphones or messaging apps.
2. Language proficiency in English, with a preference for participants who are bilingual or multilingual – to ensure that differences in emoji interpretation stem from cultural or gender influences rather than language barriers.

In addition, Malaysian youth, defined earlier as individuals aged 15 to 30, represent a digitally immersed generation, having either grown up or been fully integrated into an increasingly connected world (The Institute for Youth Research Malaysia, 2023). Among internet users, the majority have been online for over a decade, with 52.3% users having had access for more than 10 years and 26.3% having been online for 5 to 10 years. Notably, only 1% of those under 20 and 0.3% of those in their 20s being offline. Daily internet use is also prevalent with 40.6% of those under 20 and 30% of individuals in their 20s reporting that they spend 5 to 8 hours online daily (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2023).

These statistics highlight how intertwined the lives of Malaysian youth are with the internet. Thus, this study focuses on the age group of 18 to 27, as they are the demographic most likely to engage with emojis in their daily communication.

3.4 Data Collection

For the quantitative phase, this research will distribute the online survey within Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR) via Microsoft Teams and through email blasts from the institution's IT Infrastructure and Support Centre (ITISC), targeting all faculties across both the Kampar and Sungai Long campuses. This distribution aims to determine the emoji samples for the research. Once the emoji set is identified, the researcher will further refine the interview guide based on feedback and suggestions from a lecturer in the Department of Linguistics. Simultaneously, the researcher will identify suitable participants through the Google Forms online survey. Lastly, qualified and consenting participants will be contacted via email and WhatsApp to arrange suitable time slots and the online platform for the individual interview sessions.

Prior to the interviews, participants will be provided with an interview protocol that includes the general agenda such as the aim of the research, the estimated duration of the interview, a consent approval section, and the list of emojis to be used as stimuli during the interview. The researcher will review the consent form with participants before beginning and reiterate that they have the right to pause or stop the interview at any time. All interviews will be recorded and transcribed, the transcriptions will be shared with participants prior to the analysis to verify its accuracy and allow for correction of any potential misinterpretations.

3.5 Plans for Data Analysis

For data analysis, this study will utilize content analysis to systematically examine the data collected from the semi-structured interviews. Content analysis is chosen as it allows for a structured approach to identify specific themes and patterns related to emoji interpretation,

ambiguity, and the influence of culture and gender. The analysis will be guided by the theoretical frameworks of Social Semiotics and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to support and validate findings from both the quantitative and qualitative data. Lastly, participants will also be anonymized and assigned identifiers starting from P1 to P8. The P denotes participant, while the numbers were assigned from 1 to 8 at random.

Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

4.0 Introduction

This chapter presents and analyzes the findings obtained from both the Google Forms survey and the interview data. It will begin by presenting the demographic data, followed by the main findings of each research question. The findings will follow a sequential approach, beginning with the survey to identify overall patterns and trends, then by the interviews to clarify these findings in greater depth. Furthermore, for clarity and ease of reading, all numerical values in this chapter below will be expressed only in digit form.

4.1 Demographic Data

The survey included 116 respondents that was primarily composed of younger Gen Z members aged 18-23, with fewer older Gen Zs aged 24-27. The largest group was 22-23 (33.6%), followed by 18-19 (29.3%), and 20-21 (26.7%). Smaller proportions were age groups 24-25 and 26-27 with 6.9% and 3.4% respectively (refer to Appendix F). Moreover, females comprised 69.8% of the sample, consistent with literature noting that women generally use emojis more often and with greater range than men, while males comprised of 30.2% (refer to Appendix G). In terms of ethnicity, the sample was predominantly Chinese (81%), with Malay and Indian respondents each comprising 9.5% (refer to Appendix H). Thus, the interview phase involved 8 participants selected to ensure a more balanced representation during the interview phase.

The majority of respondents had long-term experience with mobile devices and vice versa, with 56.9% reporting over 10 years of use and 35.3% reporting 6-9 years (refer to Appendix I). They also reported high levels of technological familiarity, with 37.9% being extremely familiar

with digital communication applications, 51.7% very familiar, and 10.3% somewhat familiar. None selected “slightly familiar” or “not familiar at all” (refer to Appendix J). Lastly, daily messaging activity was generally high as from a scale of 1-7, 29.3% of respondents rated 7, 30.2% rated 6, and 28.4% rated 5, while fewer rated 4 and 3 and none rated 2 or 1 (refer to Appendix K). This data indicates that most respondents were highly capable and adept in digital communication as identified in Chapter 3, and that their high level of digital engagement aligns with the study’s focus on emoji use.

4.2 Determining the Emoji Set for Analysis

From the survey, a total of 35 emojis were initially identified for use in the study. However, 2 emojis appeared in the top selections for more than one emotion, resulting in a final set of 33 emojis. Of these, 9 facial emojis and 12 non-facial emojis were selected based on respondents’ frequent use to convey 3 emotions: joy, sadness, and anger. While 12 outlier emojis were selected due to their tendency to carry multiple meanings or context-dependent meanings, as well as being flagged in the survey for having varied interpretations across respondents.

4.3 Research Question 1: Ambiguously Interpreted Emojis

The following section’s sub-headings and tables addresses the stated RQ1 by summarizing the selected emojis used for further analysis as so: high frequency facial emojis and non-facial emojis for the 3 emotions, as well as high frequency outlier emojis identified from the survey’s questions on double meanings, ambiguity, and the open-ended responses section.

4.3.1 Survey Findings

Selected Facial Emojis. The following tables present the top 3 facial emojis selected by survey respondents to express joy, sadness, and anger. Table 1 to 3 not only highlights the most frequently chosen emojis for each emotion but also breaks down frequency by gender and ethnicity to provide insight into potential patterns across demographic groups. The full tables with all facial emojis from the survey are available in Appendices L, M, and N.

Emoji	Total Frequency	Chinese (F)	Malay (F)	Indian (F)	Chinese (M)	Malay (M)	Indian (M)
Rolling On the Floor Laughing	66	34	5	6	18	2	1
Grinning Squinting Face	65	42	3	2	16	1	1
Face with Tears of Joy	57	26	3	5	19	2	2

Table 1. Top frequency facial emojis used to express joy

Emoji	Total Frequency	Chinese (F)	Malay (F)	Indian (F)	Chinese (M)	Malay (M)	Indian (M)
Smiling Face with Tear	73	45	5	3	17	2	1
Loudly Crying Face	62	37	3	4	16	1	1
Melting Face	55	35	0	4	14	2	0

Table 2. Top frequency facial emojis used to express sadness

Emoji	Total Frequency	Chinese (F)	Malay (F)	Indian (F)	Chinese (M)	Malay (M)	Indian (M)
Enraged Face	69	37	3	4	20	1	4
Face with Symbols on Mouth	48	25	4	2	14	0	3
Angry Face	38	20	3	3	9	1	2

Table 3. Top frequency facial emojis used to express anger

Firstly, as indicated in Table 1, the 3 emojis selected to convey joy indicate a consistent preference for highly expressive emojis that effectively communicate happiness and humor in

online interactions. Similarly, the emojis chosen to express sadness and anger in Tables 2 and 3 demonstrate a tendency to favor visually striking and emotionally intensified representations. This is likely due to their exaggerated facial features and vibrant colors. While minor variations in selection frequency exist across ethnic groups, such as the “Melting Face” emoji for sadness was chosen more by Chinese respondents and not selected by Malay female and Indian male respondents, the choices of their counterparts helped to balance the overall totals, indicating broadly shared interpretations of facial emojis among participants.

Selected Non-Facial Emojis. The following tables present the top 3 non-facial emojis selected by survey respondents to express joy, sadness, and anger. Tables 5 to 6 highlight the most frequently chosen emojis for each emotion and break down frequency by gender and ethnicity to identify potential demographic patterns. The full tables with all non-facial emojis from the survey are available in Appendices O, P, and Q.

Emoji	Total Frequency	Chinese (F)	Malay (F)	Indian (F)	Chinese (M)	Malay (M)	Indian (M)
Victory Hand	72	47	5	3	16	0	1
Thumbs Up	70	42	1	6	19	1	1
Heart with Index Finger and Thumb Crossed	61	37	6	4	11	1	2
Heart Hands	56	43	2	5	5	0	1
Waving Hand	41	21	3	0	13	1	3
OK Hand	34	17	0	2	11	2	2

Table 4. Top frequency non-facial emojis used to express joy

Emoji	Total Frequency	Chinese (F)	Malay (F)	Indian (F)	Chinese (M)	Malay (M)	Indian (M)
Thumbs Down	89	54	4	5	22	2	2
Folded Hands	64	39	5	3	14	0	3
Backhand Index Pointing Right/ Left	44	32	1	4	7	0	0
Middle Finger	42	19	3	1	16	0	3

Table 5. Top frequency non-facial emojis used to express sadness

Emoji	Total Frequency	Chinese (F)	Malay (F)	Indian (F)	Chinese (M)	Malay (M)	Indian (M)
Middle Finger	94	53	7	4	25	1	4
Thumbs Down	74	39	5	5	22	1	2
Oncoming Fist	65	37	4	7	13	1	3
Index Pointing at Viewer	64	33	3	5	20	1	2

Table 6. Top frequency non-facial emojis used to express anger

The usage patterns for non-facial emojis show that respondents tend to use gestures that are widely recognized and commonly understood to a certain extent, even if they are visually less expressive than facial emojis in nature. Notably, 2 emojis appear in multiple emotion categories, such as the “Middle Finger” and “Thumbs Down,” which appeared in the sadness and anger category. Additionally, some emotion categories include more than 3 emojis due to visible frequency differences in top selections across genders. For example, “Heart Hands” were favored by females, while “Waving Hand” and “OK Hand” appeared more frequently among males to signify joy and happiness; “Middle Finger” was also the common choice in the sadness category, while “Index Pointing at Viewer” led the anger category amongst male respondents.

Selected Outlier Emojis. The following tables present the top 12 outlier emojis selected by survey respondents that depict double meanings or ambiguity. The 30 total outlier emoji choices in the survey were drawn from a mix of Apple emoji categories such as people, animals and nature, food and drink, objects, and flags (Emojipedia, n.d.-a).

Emoji	Total Frequency	Chinese (F)	Malay (F)	Indian (F)	Chinese (M)	Malay (M)	Indian (M)
New Moon Face	138	85	5	6	32	1	4
Eyes	112	41	5	5	34	4	2
Sweat Droplets	106	53	8	7	33	1	4
Full Moon Face	81	57	4	1	17	1	1
Peach	74	32	8	3	24	1	6
Teacup without Handle	52	41	0	5	6	0	0
Eggplant	66	29	6	3	23	1	4

Table 7. Top frequency outlier emojis with double meanings

The findings in Table 7 are based on the 2 survey questions that asked respondents to (1) identify emojis that carry double meanings or are used to express more than one idea or emotion, and (2) select emojis that they consider commonly misunderstood or interpreted in different ways in digital communication. Some emojis appeared more frequently for different genders, which resulted in a slightly larger set. For instance, the “Teacup without Handle” ranked among the top 5 for females, with makes accounting for only about 11% of its use. By contrast, the “Eggplant,” although chosen by both genders, was relatively more prominent among male respondents, making up around 42% of its total frequency. The full table with all outlier emojis that are depicted in the 2 survey questions can be found in Appendix R.

Emoji	Total Frequency	Chinese (F)	Malay (F)	Indian (F)	Chinese (M)	Malay (M)	Indian (M)
Ear of Corn	20	3	3	3	7	1	3
Grape	13	4	2	3	4	0	0
Ninja	47	19	8	4	13	1	2
Moai	62	33	5	3	19	0	2
Hot Beverage	25	12	3	5	4	0	1

Table 8. Top frequency and notable outlier emojis from the open-ended responses

The findings in Table 8 presents outlier emojis from the open-ended section. Here, respondents provided explanations for why they considered certain emojis ambiguous or prone to multiple interpretation.

A notable theme across responses is that certain emojis are often employed not only as literal substitutes for words, but for censored or culturally sensitive words such as taboo expressions and terms carrying offensive and derogatory undertones on social media platforms. For example, the "Ear of Corn" was noted to rhyme with "porn" and is frequently used on social media as a substitute to refer to pornography in more censored contexts. Similarly, "Grape" has also been associated with the word "rape," functioning in the same way as a replacement term typically used to initiate or navigate discussions around sensitive topics. Beyond these wordplay-based substitutions, cultural differences were also highlighted. For example, the "Ninja" emoji was linked by some respondents to an African American racial slur. In addition, a respondent also further highlighted the "Watermelon" emoji, though not part of the study's set list, as an instance of how emojis can be appropriated in politically or racially charged ways. Specifically, it has been used both as a pro-Palestinian symbol in digital activism and in negative racist depictions targeting African Americans at the same time. Thus, while the "Ear of Corn" or "Grape" substitute taboo

words through phonetic resemblances, the “Ninja” illustrates how emojis can carry multiple cultural meanings that parallel how the “Watermelon” operates in broader digital contexts.

Furthermore, some emojis such as the inclusion of the “Moai” emoji reflects its past popularity as part of online trends, particularly on platforms like TikTok (Allen, 2022). Its presence in the outlier set is prompted by whether it continues to hold its initial meaning or has simply fallen out of use. In contrast, the “Hot Beverage” was selected because of its visual similarity to the “Teacup without Handle” emoji. While the “Teacup without Handle” is often tied to Asian contexts, such as green tea and ceremonial traditions, the “Hot Beverage” is more commonly interpreted in a literal sense, representing coffee and at times overlapping in meaning with the “Teacup without Handle.” Hence, its inclusion in the outlier set aims to explore whether minor visual differences within a shared concept, whereby both emojis depict a cup containing a liquid with differences in the type of cup and the color of the liquid, influences both usage choices and interpretations. The full table with all open-ended answers is available in Appendix S.

4.4 Research Question 2: Ethnicity and Emoji Interpretation

This section presents the main findings and summarized data derived from the interview transcriptions with participants P1 to P8, while complete transcripts are included in appendices T to AA.

4.4.1 Emojis Linked to Cultural Practices

Several outlier and non-facial emojis were directly tied to cultural and religious beliefs, particularly among Chinese and Malay participants. For Chinese participants, the “Teacup without Handle” emoji was associated with traditional tea ceremonies or invitations to ‘yum cha’, which

means to drink tea in Cantonese. The “Peach” was also linked to Chinese cultural beliefs, symbolizing longevity. Similarly, the “Folded Hands” emoji was also described by both Chinese and Malay participants as a gesture of prayer or well-wishing. Lastly, cultural nuances were also reflected in specific Malaysian norms. For instance, the “Index Pointing at Viewer” was regarded as inappropriate in literal use, as pointing with the index finger instead of the thumb is discouraged and seen as rude in Malaysian culture.

These examples highlight how certain emojis become localized as markes of shared cultural rituals and values. However, cultural interpretations were not as prevalent as initially expected. Instead, online culture and dgital trends were found to exert a stronger influence on emoji usage and interpretation among Malaysian youth, which is a theme that will be further elaborated on in the following section.

4.4.2 Emojis Linked to Online Culture

Many participants emphasized that their interpretations of emojis were shaped by the lens of online culture rather than ethnic traditions or influences. Through analyzing interview transcripts, several clusters of meaning emerged, reflecting how internet slang, memes, and platform-specific trends strongly influence interpretation.

Internet Meme Culture and References. Ambiguous outlier emojis are frequently associated with everyday digital communication. The “New Moon Face” was commonly described

as creepy, unsettling, or perverted, and in some cases explicitly linked to a satirical character named popularized by the YouTube channel, Smosh. Along with the "Full Moon Face" and "Eyes," these emojis were often regarded as ambiguous and although frequently used by some, certain emojis are sometimes avoided or substituted with alternatives due to fears of misinterpretation.

Similarly, the "Oncoming Fist" was associated with YouTube personality, PewDiePie's "bro fist," demonstrating how shared references within online communities shape the meaning attached to emojis in general. Moreover, the "Backhand Index Pointing Left and Right" emojis were likewise connected to references originating from TikTok, with participants noting their use to convey shyness, awkwardness, or a pleading tone.

Internet Slangs. Interpretations and usage of certain emojis were shaped by online slang as well as online culture. The "Teacup without Handle" and the "Hot Beverage" were frequently cited as symbols for gossip or drama, rooted in the popular expression "spilling the tea." The teacup emoji also carried negative connotations online aimed at certain types of females, labelled as

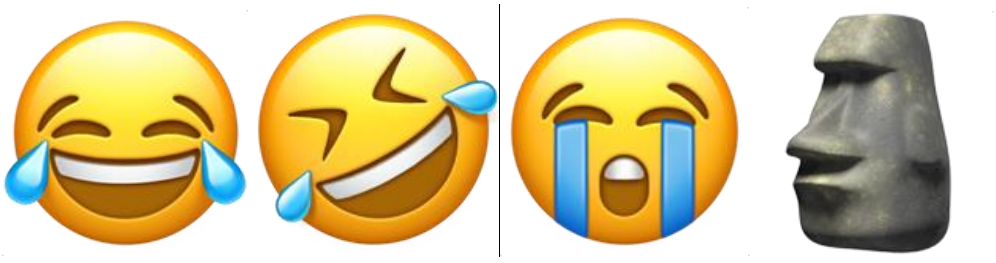
“green tea girl. At the same time, the hot beverage carried an additional layer of meaning, being perceived as more professional and suitable for formal work contexts.

Censorship and Substitution. While more familiar, suggestive emojis were consistently attributed to Western internet slang, before spreading globally. The “Peach,” “Eggplant,” and “Sweat Droplets” were repeatedly identified as explicit symbols with humorous, flirtatious, or offensive undertones. The consistency of these interpretations across participants highlights how emojis with coded suggestive undertones have become normalized through online culture.

However, a notable finding that was confirmed by some participants was that several emojis are used as substitutes for censorship, functioning as euphemisms for sensitive or taboo words. The “Grape,” “Ear of Corn,” and “Ninja” were commonly cited examples, though unlike the more universally recognized suggestive symbols, these emojis that act as word substitutions often relied on familiarity with specific online subcultures. It is observed that without prior exposure to such contexts, the intended meanings could be misunderstood. For example, a

participant used the “Grape’ emoji simply as a rhyme for “great,” others associated corn with agriculture, and some interpreted the “Ninja” as representing someone suspicious or sneaky.

Shifting Online Trends. Lastly, some participants noted how the usage of emojis evolves in line with shifting online trends. Emojis that depict laughter were a clear example: while the “Face with Tears of Joy” once dominated, the introduction of the “Rolling on the Floor Laughing” allowed for finer distinctions, and some users now often substitute the “Loudly Crying Face” to signal intense laughter instead of sadness. Furthermore, emojis were also seen as subject to cycles of popularity and decline. For instance, the “Moai” emoji, once widely used online as a symbol of exasperation or stoicism, is now rarely seen, which is a trend mirrored by the “Cap” emoji which similarly gained prominence through slang before eventually fading.

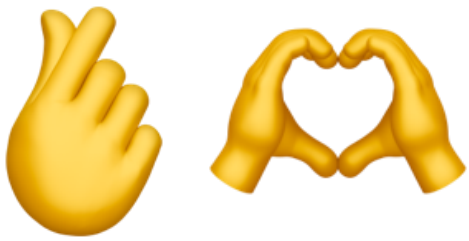


4.5 Research Question 3: Gender and Emoji Interpretation

Drawing on the same set of interview transcripts, the following section presents additional themes that emerged across participants P1 to P8. The complete transcripts are included in appendices T to AA.

4.5.1 Gendered Caution

Across participants, gender emerged as a key factor that shaped how emojis were used with different recipients. Female participants consistently expressed greater caution, especially with emojis carrying hearts or intimate connotations. Such emojis were reserved for close friends or same-gendered since sending them to males risked romantic misinterpretation. For instance, “Heart with Index Finger and Thumb Crossed” was described as cheesy and only used with very close friends or family, while the “Heart Hands,” though less intimate, was also avoided with male participants. Moreover, female participants also noted that sending suggestive emojis to male recipients could lead to unintended implications, whereas the same emojis shared among female peers were understood as being playful or being used jokingly, a view that male participants also shared when reflecting on suggestive emojis.



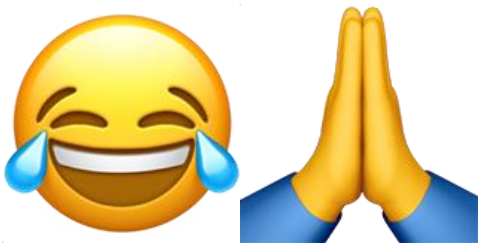
In contrast, male participants were generally less restrained in their emoji use. While some male participants explained that their choices depended on the relationship with the recipient, others did not view intimate emojis as carrying strong romantic implications and would not infer

such meaning from either gender in casual settings. However, both female and male participants consistently avoided suggestive emojis with the opposite gender. Overall, female participants tended to manage impressions and relational boundaries more actively, while males applied similar caution only in specific contexts.

4.5.2 Politeness, Sensitivity, and Face Protection

Female participants also emphasized being more considerate and sensitive in emoji use, often "reading into" messages that incorporate emojis and carefully selecting emojis to manage tone. This reflects a heightened awareness of how messages may be interpreted and a greater effort to maintain good impressions in digital interactions. Facial emojis were particularly important in this regard. For example, when the "Face with Tears of Joy" is not being used in its literal sense or even sarcastically to downplay irritation or frustration, it was frequently used to ease awkwardness for both parties during communication or even as a polite response to something unfunny, with the only purpose of maintaining politeness and smooth interactions.

Similarly, the "Folded Hands" emoji was also highlighted by females to soften requests, express respect, and protect face in conversations. A small number of male participants also reported it in this way, and some also framed it more as a gesture of blessing and to express thanks. However, overall, female participants tended to frame their use more in terms of sensitivity and emotional management while male participants were less likely to stress over misinterpretations as they tended to take messages more at face value.



Conversely, some emojis also conveyed rudeness. The “Middle Finger” emoji was universally recognized as a symbol of insult or provocation, while some female participants noted that the “Thumbs Down” emoji could similarly convey rudeness in certain contexts. The “Index Pointing at Viewer” emoji was also considered potentially rude overall due to its direct or confrontational nature, depending on context. Overall, female participants tended to frame emoji use more in terms of sensitivity and emotional management, whereas male participants were less likely to stress over misinterpretation. This suggests a gender difference in attentiveness to tone in digital communication.

4.5.3 Simplification and Efficiency in Communication

Participants of both genders also used emojis as efficient communication tools to simplify responses and to provide quick acknowledgement. Emojis like “Thumbs Up,” “OK Hand,” and “Thumbs Down” were frequently used to agree, confirm receipt of message, or to disagree across all participants. Furthermore, the “Victory Hand” emoji was used in playful and celebratory contexts, such as marking an achievement, representing a pose that is typically depicted in photos, or even as a farewell to signify “peace out,” while the “Waving Hand” emoji primarily functioned

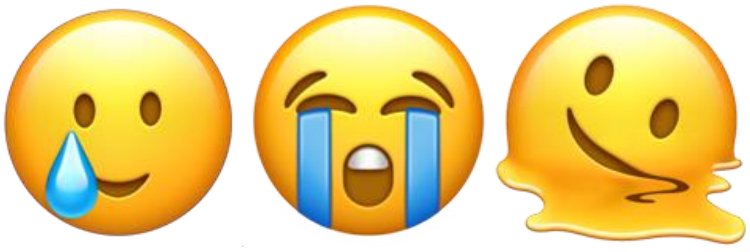
as a greeting and farewell, with the occasional use to draw attention or prompt a reply. Both of these non-facial emojis appeared among the top selections in the survey, particularly the "Waving Hand" for male respondents, though their interpretations remained largely consistent across genders. In many cases, the emojis here functioned as a stand-alone reaction to messages, while in others some accompanied texts as a softening device, though not to the same extent as the "Folded Hands" emoji. These patterns highlight how participants use said emojis to simplify communication with visual aids through emojis instead, a theme that connects to how emoji choices vary between professional and casual contexts.

Professional versus Casual Contexts. Participants consistently distinguished between professional or academic and casual contexts in their emoji use, though this distinction was expressed differently across genders. Neutral emojis such as the "Thumbs Up," "OK Hand," and even the "Folded Hands" emoji were the most acceptable in professional settings, as mentioned earlier, and served as polite acknowledgement or signals of agreement.

By contrast, more expressive emojis in the joy-related emojis were largely reserved for casual contexts among acquaintances and peers, where they conveyed laughter and excitement. Notably, one female participant described using the "Grinning Squinting Face" even in work-related contexts with older colleagues, explaining that it projected friendliness and innocence. This stands out as no male participants reported adapting expressive emojis for professional settings in

this way as they described these emojis in more straightforward terms, typically focusing on severity of laughter or amusement rather than layered pragmatic functions.

Secondly, sadness-related emojis were commonly used by females in casual conversation to express disappointment, hopelessness, or as a response to bad news. In casual settings, the "Loudly Crying Face" also extended beyond sadness to convey an exaggerated but genuine laughter, showing its flexibility in informal interactions. However, these same participants explicitly noted that such emojis would not be used in professional contexts, as they were considered unprofessional, potentially undermining one's image. Male participants likewise did not use these emojis in professional settings, suggesting broad agreement across genders. However, they did not elaborate on the rationale behind this avoidance, offering little reflection on how professionalism shaped their choices. This contrast suggests that while both genders regulate their use of sadness-related emojis depending on context, females were more aware of these boundaries and highlighted greater sensitivity to self-presentation.



While joy and sadness-related emojis were more directly tied to professional versus casual boundaries, anger-related emojis functioned in a different manner. Thus, rather than being marked as inappropriate for professional contexts, these emojis were often reinterpreted in casual conversations as humorous exaggerations or playful satire. This dimension of angry emojis, and how they functioned in teasing or joking contexts, will be further explored in the following section.

4.5.4 Playfulness, Teasing, and Satire

Anger-related emojis were found to be commonly used to convey playfulness, teasing, or satire, often employed humorously to exaggerate annoyance in lighthearted exchanges with friends. Gendered nuances were evident, with some female participants emphasizing caution when using these exaggerated emojis, aware that they could easily be misinterpreted. They noted that angry emojis received from other females were more likely to infer genuine anger, whereas the same emojis sent by males were often perceived as playful, though interpretations remained subject to context. More broadly, all participants agreed that these emojis can convey varying degrees of genuine anger, but they are rarely used in situations involving serious conflicts. Moreover, regardless of gender, some noted that older users tended to interpret and employ angry emojis more literally, highlighting how both social and age-related contexts shape emoji usage.

4.5.5 Peer Influence and Shared Meanings

Peer influence strongly influences emoji use, with female participants especially highlighting how shared interpretations shaped their own practices. While emojis that carry inherently neutral or positive connotations such as the “Thumbs Up” and “OK Hand” remain widely acceptable across contexts across participants, several participants noted that they only adopted certain emoji meanings after seeing them used in their peer groups. For example, a female participant described reintroducing the “Face with Tears of Joy” and the “Rolling on the Floor Laughing” emojis again after her peers began using them again, despite previously dropping their use for the “Loudly Crying Face” as per the trend. Another explained that when encountering unfamiliar emojis, they could usually infer their meaning from the surrounding text or context and would then experiment with them in similar situations with said recipients to confirm her understanding. These examples highlight how female participants do rely on peer interactions as a reference point for negotiating emoji meanings and adapting their usage in line with shared group norms, whereas male participants were less likely to describe their emoji use practices in terms of peer influence.

Lastly, perceptions of gendered emoji use also emerged within these peer contexts. Several female participants viewed emojis as universal but pointed out distinctions in usage, whereby females were described as using more facial emojis, some non-facial and outlier emojis, and even eccentric emoji with symbols of flowers or animals while males were associated with gesture-based emojis rather than facial emojis. Moreover, a female participant also observed that males often avoided emojis that carried hearts or intimate connotations to prevent appearing overly sentimental, instead preferring emojis with negative double meanings which was a pattern that other male participants also affirmed. Similarly, some male participants also described emojis as

largely universal, though few observed that females favored more expressive facial emojis, as well as specific ones such as the “Teacup without Handle” and the “Heart Hands.”

Overall, while peer influence shaped emoji practices across both genders, women more openly described adapting their usage to align with group norms, whereas men tended to present their usage as universal or unaffected.

4.6 Conclusion of Data Findings

This chapter identified patterns of emoji interpretation and usage among Malaysian youth, using a quantitative survey to identify overall trends and qualitative interviews to provide deeper insights. The survey revealed 33 emojis of several types frequently used emojis used to express joy, sadness, and anger, while also identifying emojis that carried ambiguous or context-dependent meanings. Gender differences were primarily observed in selection preferences and construed meanings, while outlier emojis demonstrated how certain symbols carry multiple interpretations or are influenced by online subcultures. Moreover, although some ethnicity-based associations were noted, cultural influences were more strongly tied to online-internet culture rather than traditional norms and meanings. The combined findings indicate that emoji interpretation and usage is in shaped by a complex interplay of social, cultural, and relational factors as participants navigated between efficiency, emotional expression, and social awareness, with emojis functioning not only as expressive tools but also as markers of social nuance and interpersonal management.

Building on these findings, Chapter 5 will apply Social Semiotics and Systemic Functional Linguistics, including an analysis through the 3 meta-functions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual, to explore how these emojis operate as semiotic resources in digital communication.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

5.0 Introduction

This chapter addresses the identified findings from Chapter 4 through the theoretical frameworks of Social Semiotics and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). While the previous chapter outlines participants' reported emoji use and interpretations, the present discussion moves beyond description to contextualize how these findings can be understood in relation to broader meaning-making processes. The discussion that follows is organized around 2 of the research questions, with themes corresponding to the subsections in Chapter 4, and followed by a concluding section that then synthesizes the overall insights of the research.

5.1 Research Question 2: Ethnicity and Emoji Interpretation

This section examines cultural and online interpretations of emojis among Malaysian youth, analyzing how meanings are shaped by both tradition and digital subcultures.

5.1.1 Cultural Practices as Semiotic Practices

The analysis reveals that certain emojis are closely tied to cultural practices, where their meanings extend beyond universal or platform-based definitions to take on localized and generational significance. For instance, the "Teacup without Handle" emoji was interpreted by Chinese participants as symbolizing cultural traditions such as tea ceremonies and is extended to requests to go 'yum cha' while non-Chinese participants associated it with matcha and similarly used it as a way of inviting someone to go out for a matcha drink. Similarly, the "Peach" emoji reflected double meanings as well with 1 Chinese participant linking it to the symbolic meaning of longevity in tradition, yet most participants connected it to the globalized online slang meaning.

These findings illustrate how emoji meanings can draw from cultural heritage while also taking shape within global digital discourse, reflecting their layered and shifting nature of emojis as semiotic resources as understood in Social Semiotics. At the same time, both emojis carry additional online slang meanings which will further be discussed in later sections.

This finding also tabulates with prior research by Danesi (2016), who emphasized that emojis can function both as adjuncts to written text and as substitutes standing alone, while also highlighting their polysemous potential across cultures. Moreover, when emojis act adjunctively, they can perform a punctuation-like role, such as signaling closure in the way a full stop would (Sampietro, 2016). Participants in this study demonstrated both uses; the emojis could accompany written invitations or stand alone, though in the latter cases, they relied on shared understandings or contextual clues. Extending this work (Miller et al., 2016, as cited in Amalina & Azam, 2020), the Malaysian context illustrates how cultural symbols like the “Teacup without Handle” and “Peach” emoji could retain traditional associations while also taking on online interpretations in digital youth culture, allowing more than one meaning to coexist. Through the lens of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), both emojis realize the ideational meta-function by representing experiences and ideas that bridge cultural heritage with contemporary practices. They also enact the interpersonal meta-function when used to negotiate relational meanings and maintain relationships, whether inviting someone for an outing, expressing wishes for longevity, or signaling closeness in social interactions. Furthermore, their textual meta-function emerged in the ways they accompany invitations or stand alone as shorthand, depending on differing contexts.

Other emojis in this regard also revealed how social etiquette strongly shaped emoji interpretations in the Malaysian context. The “Folded Hands” emoji was primarily associated with prayer or blessing, particularly in sensitive exchanges such as condolences. In this context, the

emoji was used more frequently as an adjunctive, adding emphasis or reinforcing the accompanying text, though it could also occasionally serve as a substitute in place of words. From the SFL perspective, it realizes ideational meaning by representing the act of praying, while its interpersonal function lies in expressing appropriate levels of empathy with the degree of emphasis varying according to the situation and the relationship between interlocutors. At the same time, its textual function emerges in how it is positioned within digital discourse, often occurring at the end of condolences or supportive messages to reinforce the overall tone of sincerity.

By contrast, the "Index Pointing at Viewer" emoji was largely avoided in Malaysian contexts, except when used playfully among close friends in niche situations. This is because participants viewed it as potentially rude or overly confrontational. This reflects etiquettes and norms that discourage overt pointing, which extends beyond local practice to many Asian cultures. Unlike in some Western contexts, where pointing may be neutral (Aleksandrovna, 2021), in Malaysia it is considered impolite, with 1 participant explicitly noting that people may instead gesture using their thumb or entire hand instead. Simultaneously, this avoidance also aligns with Sabri et al. (2021), who emphasized how emojis function as cultural symbols that foster harmony. In SFL terms, the avoidance of this emoji is itself an interpersonal strategy, reflecting sensitivity to face-saving practices, while at the level of register, field (topic and activity) and tenor (closeness of relationship) would determine whether the emoji is omitted or playfully used. Thus, by deliberately omitting a potentially face-threatening gesture, Malaysian youth demonstrate sensitivity in emoji usages online to maintain social harmony and minimize the risk of interpersonal conflicts.

These 4 emojis reflect the blending of cultural meanings and polite etiquette practices that enact SFL's 3 meta-functions while navigating online communication.

5.1.2 Online Culture and Semiotic Innovation

Given the research sample's digital immersion, they primarily understood emojis through online culture, with traditional or ethnic influences playing a secondary role. This aligns with findings that Malaysian youth aged 18 to 27 spend significant number of hours online daily and have long-term exposure to the internet and its trends (The Institute for Youth Research Malaysia, 2023; Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2023). Through findings and analyses, emoji interpretations and usages were strongly influenced not only by general internet memes and slang but also by platform-specific conventions such as norms, trends, and affordances unique to each digital platform like WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok. These conventions shaped how certain emojis are used, understood, and even repurposed in playful or context-dependent ways, creating shared meanings within specific online communities.

Consequently, emojis were found to act as semiotic innovations that facilitate creativity, peer negotiation, and subcultural expression, which often took precedence over culture-associated meaning. This emphasis on online-driven interpretations forms the basis for the upcoming discussions below.

Meme Culture and Slangs as Interpersonal Meaning. The chosen emojis can be categorized into thematic sets that reflect different aspects of online culture. Both outlier and non-facial emojis that are seen as ambiguous such as the "New Moon Face," "Full Moon Face," "Eyes," along with gesture-based emojis like the "Oncoming Fist," and the "Backhand Index Pointing Left and Right" all drew on recognizable memes, personalities, or inside jokes from platforms like YouTube and TikTok. Meanwhile, slang-driven emojis, including the "Teacup without Handle"

and “Hot Beverage,” signaled gossip or drama with the “Hot Beverage” additionally marking semi-casual to more formal contexts where emoji use was minimal but deliberate.

These practices illustrate the interpersonal meta-function of emojis, as participants deploy them to manage social relationships, convey humor, or signal belonging within peer groups. They also realize the ideational meta-function by representing shared prior knowledge and the textual meta-function by shaping the structure of digital messages. The findings also align with the notion of emojis as a paralanguage that functions similarly to non-verbal cues that accompany texts to add context (Zappavigna & Logi, 2024) and extend existing research by showing that emojis convey indirect meanings such as sarcasm, irony, and politeness while simultaneously introducing ambiguity that relies on cultural and social cues (Holtgraves & Robinson, 2020).

Moreover, the Malaysian context demonstrates how high-context cultures’ communication practices shapes emoji use, echoing observations that subtle social cues are emphasized in cultures with dense interpersonal norms (Würtz, 2017; Togans et al., 2021). This extends prior research beyond East Asian and Western samples, providing insight into how emojis serve as semiotic innovations that allow digitally immersed youth to bend emoji meanings to convey humor, satire, or peer-specific references. Furthermore, they collectively co-construct shared interpretations within their online communities that may not be obvious to those outside their digital social circles.

Censorship as Semiotic Strategies. Certain emojis function as euphemistic substitutes for taboo, offensive, or suggestive language, softening otherwise direct references while still conveying meaning. In this study, the “Peach,” “Eggplant,” and “Sweat Droplets” were commonly used to replace sexualized or explicit terms, often in humorous or playful contexts. This emoji set sometimes appears or are used in sequences without accompanied texts, yet their intended

interpretation is consistently understood, reflecting shared conventions and understanding online (Ge & Herring, 2018). Additionally, the “Grape,” “Ear of Corn,” and “Ninja” were identified as substitutive emojis for sensitive and offensive words, with some referenced online contents even referring to the emoji names verbally. This highlights how these symbols transcend simple visual substitutions become culturally embedded markers within digital communication.

From a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) perspective, these emojis realize multiple meta-functions. The ideational function is evident as the emojis represent concepts indirectly, allowing users to communicate ideas without explicit wording. The interpersonal function emerges in how these emojis navigate politeness, face-saving, and relational sensitivity, which enables participants to discuss more taboo topics while maintaining social harmony. Meanwhile, their textual function is seen in how emoji sequences or combinations create meaning on their own and how emojis are substitutes for certain terms in digital discourse.

This further aligns with prior research by Amalina and Azam (2020), which noted that although emojis are intended to have universal meanings, interpretations can vary across the country’s major ethnic groups. In the present study, online cultural influences operate alongside cultural meanings, highlighting how Malaysian youth rely on shared understandings within online communities. Emojis thus function as semiotic tools that manage humor, social norms, and meaning in contemporary online communication.

Shifting Trends and the Textual Function of Emojis. The findings show that emoji usage among Malaysian youth did evolve alongside broader online trends, supporting prior research that emoji meanings are dynamic (Graham, 2024; Kostadinovska-Stojchevska & Shalevska, 2024).

The “Face with Tears of Joy,” while still widely used in Malaysia, its function has shifted. Some participants still use it to signal a degree of amusement, rather than omitting it entirely as seen in Western trends. While others prefer the “Loudly Crying Face” or the “Rolling on the Floor Laughing” to be more genuine or to convey a more exaggerated reaction. In addition to expressing humor, the “Face with Tears of Joy” was also observed to serve pragmatic functions, such as conveying politeness or softening responses. However, other emojis, such as the “Moai,” did reflect cycles of popularity and decline fully, illustrating how the youth adapt to changing online conventions.

Overall, these patterns partially align with previous findings on the fluidity of emoji meaning and suggest that usage also varies by context, and in some cases, by gender, which will be discussed in the subsequent section.

5.2 Research Question 3: Gender and Emoji Interpretation

This section examines gendered interpretations of emojis among Malaysian youth, analyzing how meanings are shaped by differences in expression, relational dynamics, and differing communication practices across male and female participants.

5.2.1 Gendered Caution and Interpersonal Meaning

Firstly, outlier emojis that are seen as universally suggestive were recognized by both male and female participants as carrying flirtatious or sexual innuendos. As a result, both genders reported feeling more comfortable using them within same-gender interactions, where the shared context reduced the likelihood of misinterpretation. When directed toward the opposite gender, however, these emojis were often seen as risky because they could easily be interpreted as carrying

intentions beyond humor. Moreover, some female participants further noted that receiving such emojis from the opposite gender felt offensive, describing it as resembling harassment or an inappropriate abrupt derailment of the conversation.

Conversely, a more distinct gendered difference emerged in the use of heart-related non-facial emojis such as the "Heart with Index Finger and Thumb Crossed" and the "Heart Hands." Female participants expressed notable caution in sending these to males, explaining that they are seen as more intimate and could unintentionally imply romantic interest. As within female-to-female exchanges, these emojis were more safely interpreted as supportive, loving, and as an expression of closeness. Most notably, some female participants highlighted difference even between these gestures: the "Heart with Index Finger and Thumb Crossed" was regarded as highly intimate, partly due to its exaggerated nature from its popularization through online content such as K-pop culture, whereas the "Heart Hands" emoji was considered comparatively less emotionally charged and safer to use among female peers. Male participants, on the other hand, generally interpreted both gestures at face value without attributing deeper relational meanings, with only a few noting that their interpretations and usage would depend on familiarity with the recipient.

Therefore, within Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), the most salient function of these emojis lies in the interpersonal meta-function where they serve to build or affirm relational closeness, though the female participants articulated this function more explicitly and approached it with greater caution than their male counterparts. This is particularly evident with the non-facial emojis that depicted hearts through gestures, in which women stratified these emojis according to varying degrees of intimacy, whereas men tended to interpret them in more neutral or context-dependent ways.

This divergence in usages and interpretations resonates back to Tannen's (1990) observation that women's communication styles tend to prioritize connection and relational nuances as well as Edwards' (1998) observation that women are more likely to interpret messages as supportive. Although these earlier works focused on verbal exchanges, the present study shows that their insights extend even into emoji use, where gendered patterns of caution and interpretation continue to shape online communication.

5.2.2 Politeness and Face Protection as Semiotic Practice

The findings show that emojis such as the "Face with Tears of Joy" and "Folded Hands" functioned as important resources to emphasize politeness and for face protection, particularly among female participants. They frequently employed these emojis to downplay irritation and soften requests respectively in order to maintain smooth conversational flow while male participants were less likely to emphasize these concerns. Their function parallels what Simon (2021) observed in women's communication, where adjectives and adverbs are employed to intensify meaning, provide nuance, and convey empathy. Similarly, emojis here operate as modifiers at the end of the written text, adding tone and maintaining a sense of politeness that often expresses relational subtleties that would be difficult to convey through words alone.

This tendency reflects the broader gendered patterns noted by herring and Dainas (2020) and Jones et al. (2020), who highlighted women's stronger emotional negativity bias and greater sensitivity to relational risks. Female participants in this study mirrored that pattern by deploying these emojis with their relational functions in mind, using them strategically to avoid misinterpretations and to protect both their own image and others' face. Their use of these emojis as an example often served to maintain politeness and present themselves as equal rather than

demanding. This contrasts with the more neutral or pragmatic approaches described by male participants, again reflecting Edwards' (1998) observation that men were less likely to emphasize such considerations and instead approach communication in terms of control or dominance, whereas women were more likely to interpret and therefore frame messages in a more considerate manner. From an SFL perspective, this underscores that the interpersonal meta-function is more explicitly realized in female participants' practices than their male counterparts.

Shifting to more negative expressions, emojis such as the "Middle Finger" and "Index Pointing at Viewer" were broadly associated with rudeness and confrontation, with the former being universally regarded as offensive and the latter often interpreted as confrontational or impolite in most contexts. In contrast, the "Thumbs Down" revealed a clearer gender divide whereby some female participants did interpret it as rude due to its dismissive tone, while male participants tended to regard it as neutral feedback or simple evaluation. This suggests that even seemingly straightforward emojis are subject to gendered difference in interpretation and use, which maintains consistency with the literature on gendered communication as mentioned earlier.

5.2.3 Simplification of Communication and Contextual Appropriateness

Neutral emojis such as the "Thumbs Up," "OK Hand," "Victory Hand," and "Waving Hand" commonly functioned as efficient substitutes for written responses, either as standalone reactions in contexts where brevity was valued or as an adjunctive placed after written texts to soften tone. Meanwhile, the "Thumbs Down," though perceived as dismissive by some female participants, was nevertheless generally still understood as a means of conveying disagreement or refusal in a straightforward manner.

However, based on findings, context strongly shaped how these emojis were used. For example, emojis like the “Thumbs Up,” “OK Hand,” and the “Folded Hands” were consistently regarded as most polite and neutral and still seen as appropriate in professional communication, where they served as polite acknowledgments or signals of agreement. By contrast, the chosen expressive joy-related or sadness-related emoji sets were confined to casual interactions, where they functioned to respectively convey varying degrees of laughter and disappointment. These emojis were explicitly mentioned to be avoided in professional settings by female participants, who emphasized appropriateness and self-presentation. Male participants similarly refrained from using these emojis in professional contexts but offered minimal reflection on their rationale. These findings do indicate that while both genders regulate their emoji use according to contexts, females demonstrated heightened sensitivities to interpersonal tone. However, a single exception was reported by a female participant, who used the “Grinning Squinting Face” with older colleagues to project friendliness in the workplace, paralleling to earlier discussions on how other female participants used emojis like the “Folded Hands” to maintain politeness and rapport.

From an SFL interpersonal meta-function perspective, these findings highlight how emojis act as resources to enact social relationships, manage tone, and convey politeness. Gendered differences show that women’s heightened sensitivity informs their choice of certain emojis as tools for face protection, whereas men’s choices were more literal. These choices and interpretations align with Tannen (1990) and Edwards’ (1998) studies respectively while also staying consistent with more recent research that observed women using emojis more frequently and across a broader emotional range (Herring & Dainas, 2020; Jones et al., 2020). Overall, emojis function as flexible linguistic modifiers that are contingent on both gendered norms and differing types of contexts.

5.2.4 Playfulness, Teasing, and Satire as Interpersonal Strategy

Building on the contextual sensitivity of emoji use in professional and casual settings, anger-related emojis, similarly, were also primarily used in casual contexts with some female participants deliberately omitted their use of them due to negative connotations. However, when used and interpreted among this research's sample across both genders, they were often meant and interpreted as humorous exaggerations or used satirically amongst peers rather than genuine hostility or anger. This interpretation was less evident when older generations used the same emojis to convey anger; some participants mentioned that such uses were perceived by them to be less serious despite their recognition that older individuals mean them more seriously.

These findings reinforce the idea that anger-related emojis, while able to convey degrees of anger in the literal sense, also function as a form of digital paralanguage, akin to non-verbal cues in face-to-face communication, allowing participants to further convey humor and manage interpersonal meaning (Zappavigna & Logi, 2024).

5.2.5 Peer Influence and Shared Meanings Across Groups

As a whole, the findings also indicate that peer influence also plays a significant role in shaping emoji use, particularly along female participants. While neutral emojis maintained broad acceptability across different contexts and groups, several female participants reported adapting their emoji practices in response to peer usage patterns, such as reusing previously "outdated" emojis when their peers used them or aligning their use of certain emojis with how their peers assign meaning to them. Male participants, by contrast, were less likely to describe their emoji usage in terms of peer influence, often framing their practices as universal or guided by general online emoji trends.

Across both genders, distinctions in emoji preferences were noted: females favored more expressive facial emojis while males generally preferred gesture-based non facial emojis and suggestive outlier emojis, a preference recognized and commented on by participants both within their own gender group and when discussing the opposite group's tendencies. These patterns may be underpinned by gendered emotional processing, whereby women tend to exhibit a greater sensitivity to facial cues, a tendency also further explained by the primary caretaker hypothesis (Jones et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2024).

5.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings and analysis demonstrated that all 3 research questions were addressed, with all variables playing a meaningful role in shaping emoji interpretation and usage among Malaysian youth. Notable findings include the blending of cultural backgrounds being able to influence the meaning of emojis, while online culture played a more dominant role that allows shared interpretations to merge across groups with differing ethnicities, genders, and social contexts. Gendered variations were also evident with females demonstrating greater relational sensitivity and adaptations while males tended to either use emojis more sparingly and interpret them in a more limited manner. Additionally, online culture and platform-specific conventions were found to drive creative reinterpretations and uses of emojis. Across contexts, emojis still function as flexible semiotic tools, serving as a digital paralanguage to convey humor, sarcasm, and politeness to manage different types of relationships and to signal belonging within a group. These outcomes validate the study's significance by highlighting how digital communication reflects both cultural nuances and gendered communication strategies.

Further research could focus on smaller or more targeted groups to allow for deeper qualitative insights, particularly by narrowing the focus to specific emoji sets to examine their interpretation, relational functions, and social significance. Furthermore, future studies could also incorporate texts with emojis directly into research instruments to observe how people use and interpret them in context. Moreover, building on these findings, studies could also expand the scope to include a broader range of non-facial emojis beyond gestures, explore platform-specific variations like other Android emojis, or investigate the influence of digital culture in greater depth. Such approaches would collectively provide a more comprehensive understanding of emoji use, highlighting both conventional and unconventional ways individuals utilize emojis in digital communication.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Google Forms questionnaire research material

Copy of FYP Questionnaire - Google Forms.pdf

Appendix B – Semi-structured interview guide

Semi-structured Interview Guide

Interviewee Background:

1. Are you fluent in English? (e.g. communicate in English fluently?)
2. On average, how much do you use digital communication daily? (e.g. Whatsapp)
3. How long have you been using smartphones/ tablets/ computers?
4. Are you familiar with technology? (e.g. you find no difficulty in using Whatsapp)

Questions:

Section: Interpretations and Ambiguity

Stimuli: Top outlier emojis (12)

1. For each of these emojis, what's your first interpretation?
2. Can you think of a situation where the same emoji was interpreted differently by different people?
    - What do you think contributed to those differences in interpretation? (e.g. age, culture, context)
3. Which of the emojis do you personally find most difficult to interpret or use "correctly"?
    - What about these emojis that make them ambiguous or confusing?
4. Are there any emojis you avoid using or dislike?
    - Why do you avoid or dislike them? (e.g. fear of misinterpretation, unclear tone, bad connotation)

Section: Daily Use and Communication Contexts

Stimuli: Top Facial Emojis and Non-Facial Emojis in 6 sub-sections

5. Can you describe how you typically use the selected emojis identified in the survey during your daily communication?
    - Are there specific contexts where you use these emojis more frequently?
6. Do you use any of the emojis more in certain situations or with certain people?
    - What kind of situations (e.g. casual chats, jokes, serious messages? Friends, family?)
7. Are there any emojis you avoid using or dislike here?
    - Why do you avoid or dislike them? (e.g. fear of misinterpretation, unclear tone, bad connotation)
8. How do you usually use emojis in your communication?
    - Do you typically use them with text or on their own?

- Does placement (e.g. beginning, middle, end) affect the message's tone or meaning?
- How do you decide when to include them? Could you give an example and explain?

Section: Cultural and Ethnic Contexts

Stimuli: Full emoji set

9. Are there any emojis that hold meanings in your cultural or ethnic background that might not be understood by others?
    - Can you provide examples using the emojis from the survey, or any outside?
10. Do you notice the same/ different emoji usage patterns across social groups (e.g. family, friends, classmates, colleagues)?
    - How do these group norms influence your use of emojis? (e.g. in general, and within different social groups)
11. Have you noticed any changes in how you and/or others use certain emoji over the years?
    - What do you think influenced these changes (e.g. trends, new emojis, peer influence)?
12. When you receive emojis like these, do you ever form impressions about the sender's identity (e.g. cultural background, age, gender, vice versa)?
    - Can you describe how these impressions influence your response or interpretation?

Section: Gender and Emoji Use

Stimuli: Full emoji set

13. Are there any unspoken rules or etiquettes you follow when using emojis?
    - Do these rules change in different settings, like between friends versus formal communication?
    - What kinds of emojis do you think are considered rude or polite?
14. Do you feel your gender affects your choice and interpretation of these emojis?
    - Or are there any emojis you feel are commonly used by one gender?
    - Are there certain emojis you associate more with one gender?
15. When selecting emojis, do you consider the gender of the recipient?
16. Does this consideration impact your choice of emoji use? How do you interpret the selected emojis when you receive them from others?
    - Do you find that your interpretation varies depending on the sender's gender?

Appendix C – Outlier emoji assets used in the interviews

New Moon Face 	Eyes 	Sweat Droplets 	Full Moon Face 	Peach 
Teacup Without Handle 	Eggplant 	Ear of Corn 	Grape 	Ninja 
Moai 	Hot Beverage 			

Appendix D – Facial and non-facial emoji assets used in the interviews

Rolling On the Floor Laughing	Grinning Squinting Face	Face with Tears of Joy	Victory Hand	Thumbs Up
Heart with Index Finger and Thumb Crossed	Heart Hands	Waving Hand	OK Hand	
Smiling Face with Tear	Loudly Crying face	Melting Face	*Thumbs Down*	Folded Hands

Backhand Index Pointing Right/ Left	*Middle Finger*			
Enraged Face	Face with Symbols on Mouth	Angry Face	*Middle Finger*	*Thumbs Down*
Oncoming Fist	Index Pointing at Viewer			

(35 emojis in total)

Appendix E – Interview consent form

Interview Consent Form

Research project title:

Exploring Cultural and Gender-Based Variations in Emoji Interpretation Among Malaysian Youth

Research investigator: Gabriel Gan Ee Qi

The interview will take around 40 minutes. We don't anticipate that there are any risks associated with your participation, but you have the right to stop the interview or withdraw from the research at any time.

I also understand that my words may be quoted directly. With regards to being quoted, please initial next to any of the statements that you agree with:

	I wish to review the notes, transcripts, or other data collected during the research pertaining to my participation.
	I agree to be quoted directly.
	I agree to be quoted directly if my name is not published and a made-up name (pseudonym) is used.
	I agree that the researchers may publish documents that contain quotations by me.

All or part of the content of your interview may be used;

- In academic papers, policy papers or news articles
- In other media that we may produce such as spoken presentations
- On other feedback events; In an archive of the project as noted above

By signing this form, I agree that;

1. I am voluntarily taking part in this project. I understand that I don't have to take part, and I can stop the interview at any time;

2. The transcribed interview or extracts from it may be used as described above;

3. I have read the Information sheet;

4. I don't expect to receive any benefit or payment for my participation;

5. I can request a copy of the transcript of my interview and may make edits I feel necessary to ensure the effectiveness of any agreement made about confidentiality.

6. I have been able to ask any questions I might have, and I understand that I am free to contact the researcher with any questions I may have in the future.

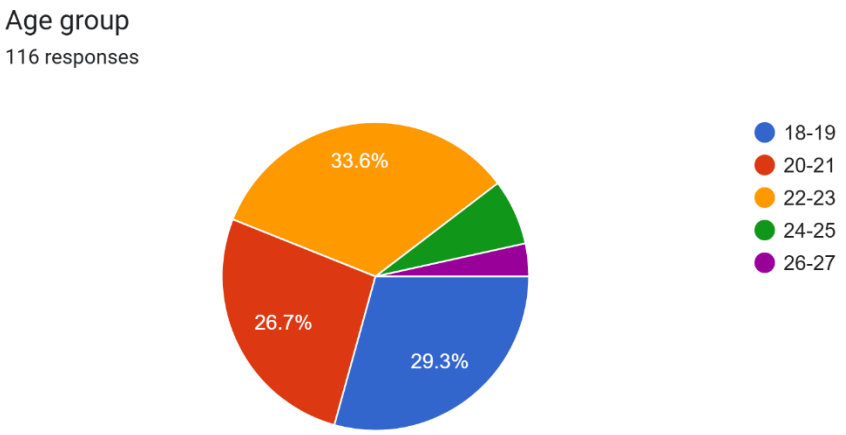
_____

Participant signature

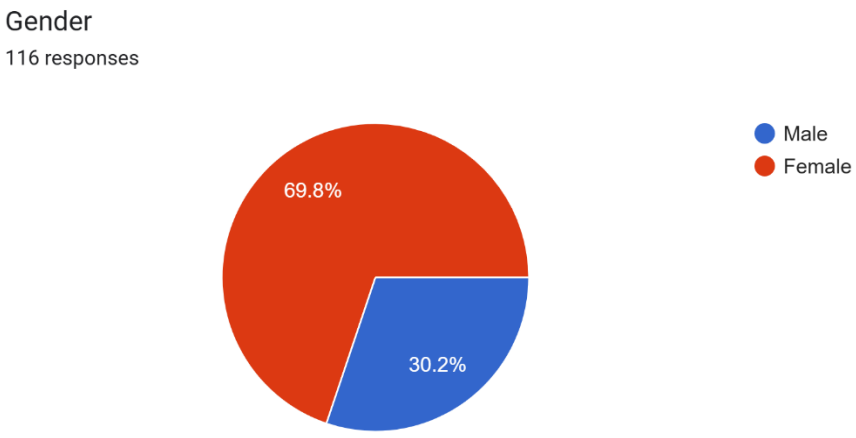
_____

Date

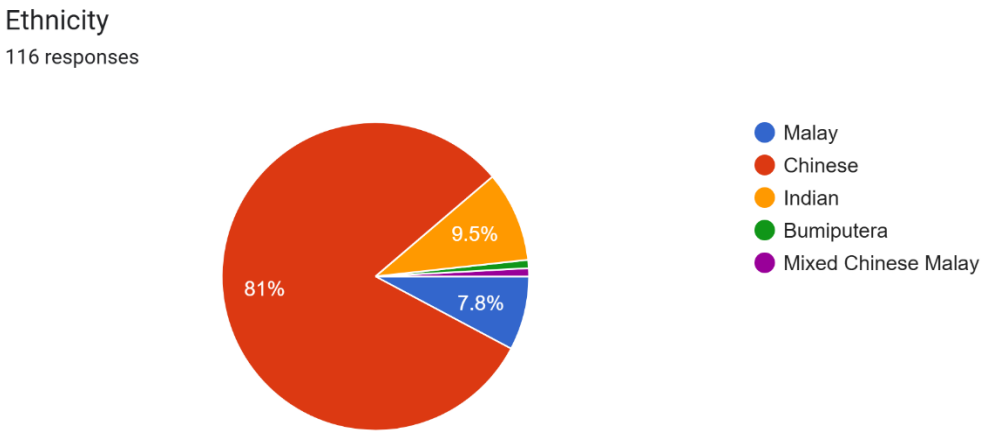
Appendix F – Age of respondents in the Google Forms survey



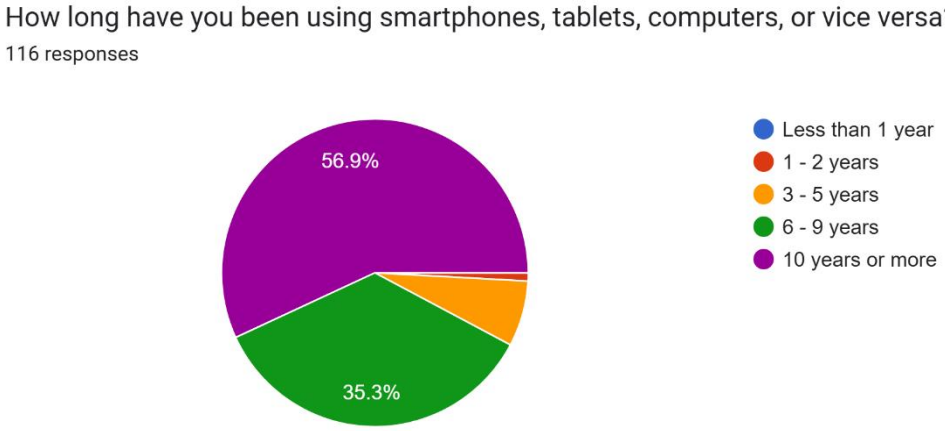
Appendix G – Gender of respondents in the Google Forms survey



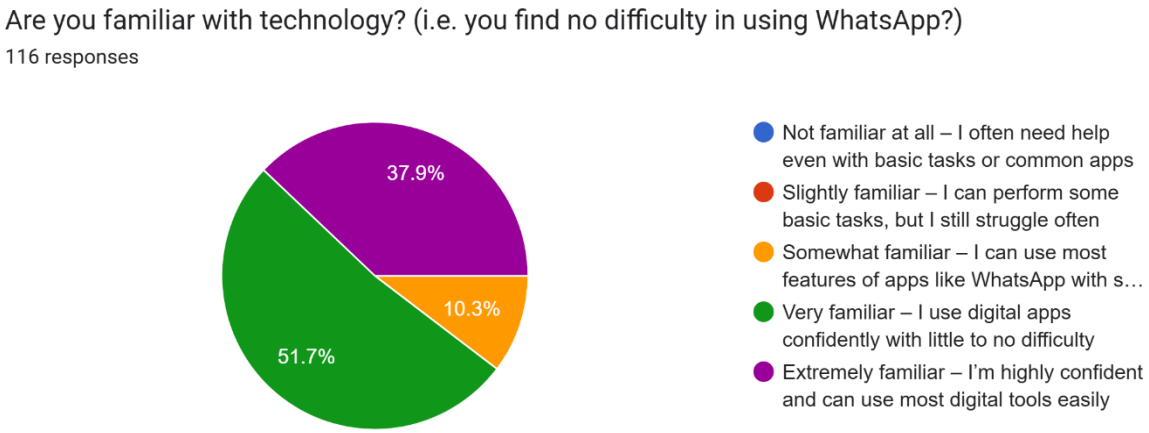
Appendix H – Ethnicity of respondents in the Google Forms survey



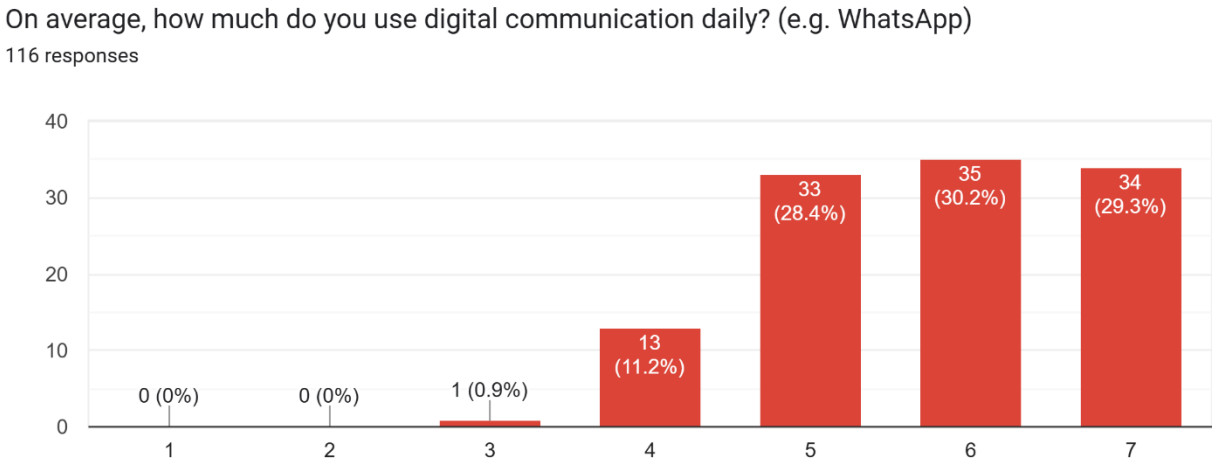
Appendix I – History of device use among respondents in the Google Forms survey



Appendix J – Technological familiarity among respondents in the Google Forms survey



Appendix K – Daily communication habits among respondents in the Google Forms survey



Appendix L – Excel table of facial emojis used to express joy

Emoji	Total Frequency	Female	Chinese	Malay	Indian	Male	Chinese	Malay	Indian
Beaming Face with Smiling Eyes	39	23	17	4	2	16	13		3
Rolling on the Floor Laughing	***66***	***45***	***34***	***5***	***6***	***21***	***18***	***2***	***1***
Grinning Squinting Face	***65***	***47***	***42***	***3***	***2***	***18***	***16***	***1***	***1***
Face with Tears of Joy	***57***	***34***	***26***	***3***	***5***	***23***	***19***	***2***	***2***
Grinning Face with Smiling Eyes	32	19	15	1	3	13	9		4
Grinning Face	12	4	4			8	6		2
Grinning Face with Big Eyes	18	8	7		1	10	8		2
Smiling Face With Halo	6	1	1			5	5		
Grinning Face with Sweat	4	1			1	3	3		
Winking Face	8	4	4			4	3	1	
Smiling Face With Heart-Eyes	23	20	16	2	2	3	2	1	
Squinting Face with Tongue	8	5	5			3	3		
Smiling Face With Hearts	38	34	26	4	4	4	3		1
Smiling Face with Smiling Eyes	20	15	11	1	3	5	3		2
Grimacing Face	2	1	1			1	1		
Slightly Smiling Face	5	2	2			3	2	1	
Zany Face	7	4	4			3	3		
Star-Struck	36	32	29	3		4	4		
Face Savoring Food	10	9	6	3		1	1		
Face Blowing a Kiss	16	12	10	1	1	4	2	1	1
Winking Face with Tongue	2	0				2	2		
Expressionless Face	2	0				2	2		
Smirking Face	3	2	2			1	1		
Cowboy Hat Face	4	3	3			1	1		
Dotted Line Face	2	0				2	2		
Woozy Face	2	1		1		1	1		
Face with Open Mouth	1	0				1	1		
Face with Raised Eyebrow	1	0				1	1		
Face Holding Back Tears	6	4	4			2	2		
Smiling Face with Horns	1	0				1	1		
Skull	3	2	1	1		1	1		
Smiling Face	12	9	7		2	3	2		1
Partying Face	16	15	13	1	1	1	1		
Kissing Face With Smiling Eyes	1	1	1			0			
Grinning Cat	1	1	1			0			
Grinning Cat with Smiling Eyes	2	2	2			0			
Smiling Cat with Heart-Eyes	3	3	2	1		0			
Cat with Wry Smile	1	1	1			0			
Kissing Cat	1	1	1			0			
Smiling Face with Open Hands	2	2	1	1		0			
Head Shaking Horizontally	1	1	1			0			
Head Shaking Vertically	4	4	2	2		0			
Saluting Face	1	1	1			0			
Nerd Face	4	3	2	1		1	1		
Face with Hand Over Mouth	6	5	4		1	1		1	
Drooling Face	3	3	2	1		0			
Kissing Face	4	4	2	2		0			
Kissing Face with Closed Eyes	3	3	3			0			
Face with Peeking Eye	1	1	1			0			
Hear-No-Evil Monkey	1	1	1			0			
See-No-Evil Monkey	1	1	1			0			
Face with Tongue	3	3	2	1		0			
Smiling Face with Sunglasses	2	2	2			0			
Face in Clouds	1	0				1	1		
Pensive Face	1	0				1	1		
Melting Face	1	1			1	0			
Loudly Crying Face	1	1		1		0			
Hot Face	1	1	1			0			
Face with Bags Under Eyes	1	1		1		0			
Sneezing Face	1	1		1		0			
Relieved Face	1	1	1						
Total	**580**	**405**	**325**	**45**	**35**	**175**	**145**	**10**	**20**

Appendix M – Excel table of facial emojis used to express sadness

Emoji	Total Frequency	Female	Chinese	Malay	Indian	Male	Chinese	Malay	Indian
Grinning Face	9	7	4	3		2	1		1
Grinning Face with Big Eyes	5	3	1	2		2	1		1
Grinning Face with Smiling Eyes	5	3	1	2		2	1		1
Beaming Face with Smiling Eyes	5	3	1	2		2	1		1
Grinning Squinting Face	3	2	1	1		1			1
Slightly Smiling Face	14	9	6	3		5	4		1
Smiling Face with Halo	3	3	2	1		0			
Upside-Down Face	23	15	14		1	8	7		1
Loudly Crying Face	***62***	***44***	***37***	***3***	***4***	***18***	***16***	***1***	***1***
Smiling Face with Tear	***73***	***53***	***45***	***5***	***3***	***20***	***17***	***2***	***1***
Expressionless Face	19	11	8	1	2	8	6	1	1
Face with Rolling Eyes	6	4	3	1		2	1		1
Melting Face	***55***	***39***	***35***		***4***	***16***	***14***	***2***	
Neutral Face	9	5	4	1		4	3	1	
Sneezing Face	4	3	3			1	1		
Slightly Frowning Face	13	8	5	3		5	5		
Pensive Face	41	32	26	3	3	9	9		
Frowning Face	29	21	13	4	4	8	7	1	
Face Holding Back Tears	30	26	23		3	4	4		
Grinning Face with Sweat	1	1	1			0			
Downcast Face with Sweat	1	0	0			1	1		
Grinning Face with Sweat	1	1	1			0			
Grimacing Face	2	1	1			1	1		
Face Exhaling	9	7	7			2	2		
Face Without Mouth	2	2	2			0			
Face with Diagonal Mouth	5	2	1	1		3	2		1
Dotted Line Face	10	7	6	1		3	3		
Face in Clouds	6	3	3			3	2	1	
Shaking Face	1	0	0			1	1		
Unamused Face	6	4	3	1		2	1		1
Crying Cat	3	2	0	2		1	1		
Saluting Face	2	1	0		1	1			1
Face with Head-Bandage	5	3	3			2	2		
Crying Face	33	22	20	1	1	11	9	1	1
Weary Face	5	3	3			2	2		
Enraged Face	1	0	0			1	1		
Face with Spiral Eyes	3	2	2			1	1		
Tired Face	1	1	1			0			
Face with Open Eyes and Hand Over Mouth	1	1	1			0			
Woozy Face	1	1	1			0			
Face Vomiting	1	0	0			1	1		
Worried Face	6	4	2	1	1	2	1		1
Pleading Face	17	11	7	1	3	6	4		2
Disappointed Face	11	9	6	1	2	2	1		1
Thinking Face	1	0	0			1	1		
Head Shaking Horizontally	3	3	3			0			
Sleepy Face	4	4	2		2	0			
Face with Bags Under Eyes	1	1	1			0			
Sad but Relieved Face	6	4	3		1	2	2		
Persevering Face	3	2	2			1	1		
Relieved Face	2	1	1			1	1		
Confounded Face	2	2	2			0			
Confused Face	5	2	2			3	2		1
Anxious Face with Sweat	2	1	1			1	1		
Cold Face	2	1	1			1	1		
Face with Steam From Nose	1	1	1			0			
Anguished Face	1	1	1			0			
Face Screaming in Fear	2	1	1			1	1		
Skull	1	0	0			1	1		
Face with Crossed-Out Eyes	1	1	1			0			
Cowboy Hat Face	1	1	0	1		0			
Total	**580**	**405**	**325**	**45**	**35**	**175**	**145**	**10**	**20**

Appendix N – Excel table of facial emojis used to express anger

Emoji	Total Frequency	Female	Chinese	Malay	Indian	Male	Chinese	Malay	Indian
Face with Raised Eyebrow	12	5	3		2	7	5	1	1
Unamused Face	30	21	15	2	4	9	8		1
Face with Rolling Eyes	36	29	26		3	7	5	1	1
Enraged Face	***69***	***44***	***37***	***3***	***4***	***25***	***20***	***1***	***4***
Angry Face	***38***	***26***	***20***	***3***	***3***	***12***	***9***	***1***	***2***
Face with Symbols on Mouth	***48***	***31***	***25***	***4***	***2***	***17***	***14***		***3***
Yawning Face	1	0				1			1
Face with Steam From Nose	25	15	11	2	2	10	8	1	1
Slightly Smiling Face	34	31	27	3	1	3	2		1
Neutral Face	9	6	5		1	3	2		1
Frowning Face	4	2	2			2	1		1
Upside-Down Face	21	17	15	1	1	4	3	1	
Shushing Face	3	2	2			1		1	
Zipper-Mouth Face,	1	0				1		1	
Expressionless Face	27	20	16	1	3	7	6	1	
Angry Face with Horns	15	7	4	2	1	8	8		
Smiling Face with Horns	1	1	1			0			
Grinning Face	15	12	10	2		3	3		
Grinning Face with Big Eyes	11	9	6	3		2	2		
Grinning Face with Smiling Eyes	6	4	1	3		2	2		
Beaming Face with Smiling Eyes	5	3		3		2	2		
Melting Face	14	8	7		1	6	6		
Grimacing Face	2	1	1			1	1		
Face with Diagonal Mouth	9	5	5			4	4		
Fearful Face	2	1	1			1	1		
Dotted Line Face	9	5	3		2	4	4		
Smiling Face	2	1	1			1	1		
Weary Face	6	4	4			2	2		
Pouting Cat	10	3	2	1		7	5	1	1
Smiling Face with Tear	2	0				2	2		
Face Without Mouth	4	3	3			1	1		
Face with Hand Over Mouth	2	1	1			1	1		
Counfounded Face	3	1			1	2	2		
Perservering Face	1	0				1	1		
Exploding Head	8	7	6	1		1	1		
Face in Clouds	1	0				1	1		
Clown Face	11	10	9		1	1	1		
Ogre	4	1		1		3	2		1
Goblin	5	3	3			2	1		1
Skull and Crossbones	2	0				2	2		
Skull	8	7	6	1		1	1		
Pile of Poo	3	2	2			1	1		
Face with Monocle	2	1	1			1	1		
Loudly Crying Face	2	1	1			1	1		
Grinning Squinting Face	2	1		1		1	1		
Worried Face	3	2	2			1	1		
Smirking Face	1	1			1	0			
Disappointed Face	2	2			2	0			
Rolling on the Floor Laughing	1	1		1		0			
Grinning Face with Sweat	5	5	4	1		0			
Smiling Face with Open Hands	2	2	1	1		0			
Relieved Face	4	4	2	2		0			
Face Exhaling	1	1		1		0			
Sneezing Face	1	1		1		0			
Confused Face	4	4	3	1		0			
Smiling Face with Halo	3	3	3			0			
Smiling Face with Hearts	1	1	1			0			
Ghost	1	1	1			0			
Nerd Face	1	1	1			0			
Face with Tears of Joy	2	2	2			0			
Face with Bags Under Eyes	1	1	1			0			
Hear-No-Evil Monkey	1	1	1			0			
Smiling Face with Smiling Eyes	3	3	3						
Frowning Face with Open Mouth	1	1	1						
Downcast Face with Sweat	3	3	3						
Slightly Frowning Face	1	1	1						
Cowboy Hat Face	2	2	2						
Alien Monster	1	1	1						
Robot	1	1	1						
Shaking Face	1	1	1						
Anxious Face with Sweat	2	2	2						
Sad but Relieved Face	1	1	1						
Crying Face	1	1	1						
Nauseated Face	1	1	1						
Face with Spiral Eyes	1	1	1						
Saluting Face	1	1	1						
Woozy Face	1	1	1						
Total	**580**	**405**	**325**	**45**	**35**	**175**	**145**	**10**	**20**
					405				**175**

Appendix O – Excel table of non-facial emojis used to express joy

Emoji	Total Frequency	Female	Chinese	Malay	Indian	Male	Chinese	Malay	Indian
Waving Hand	***41***	***24***	***21***	***3***		***17***	***13***	***1***	***3***
Raised Hand / Raised Back of Hand	13	8	5	3		5	5		
Vulcan Salute	12	8	6	2		4	3	1	
Rightwards / Leftwards Hand	5	2	1	1		3	3		
Palm Down / Palm Up Hand	3	2	1	1		1	1		
Leftwards / Rightwards Pushing Hand	2	1		1		1	1		
OK Hand	***34***	***19***	***17***		***2***	***15***	***11***	***2***	***2***
Pinched Fingers	12	6	4	1	1	6	4	1	1
Pinching Hand	2	1		1		1	1		
Victory Hand	***72***	***55***	***47***	***5***	***3***	***17***	***16***		***1***
Crossed Fingers	19	16	12	3	1	3	3		
Hand with Index Finger and Thumb Crossed	***61***	***47***	***37***	***6***	***4***	***14***	***11***	***1***	***2***
Love-You Gesture	25	17	14	2	1	8	5		3
Sign of the Horns	9	4	2	1	1	5	4		1
Call Me Hand	12	8	4	2	2	4	3		1
Backhand Index Pointing Right / Left	5	4	3		1	1	1		
Middle Finger	1	1	1			0			
Backhand Index Pointing Up / Down	0	0				0			
Index Pointing Up	0	0				0			
Index Pointing at the Viewer	0	0				0			
Thumbs Up	***70***	***49***	***42***	***1***	***6***	***21***	***19***	***1***	***1***
Thumbs Down	0	0				0			
Raised Fist	2	1		1		1	1		
Oncoming Fist	5	2	1	1		3	2	1	
Left-Facing / Right-Facing Fist	1	1		1		0			
Clapping Hands	38	29	23	2	4	9	6	1	2
Raising Hands	18	12	9	2	1	6	5		1
Heart Hands	***56***	***50***	***43***	***2***	***5***	***6***	***5***		***1***
Open Hands	2	2	2			0			
Palms Up Together	0	0				0			
Handshake	10	6	5	1		4	4		
Folded Hands	16	6	3	1	2	10	10		
Writing Hand	0	0				0			
Nail Polish	9	6	5	1		3	2		1
Flexed Biceps	25	18	17		1	7	6	1	
Total	**580**	**405**	**325**	**45**	**35**	**175**	**145**	**10**	**20**

Appendix P – Excel table of non-facial emojis used to express sadness

Emoji	Total Frequency	Female	Chinese	Malay	Indian	Male	Chinese	Malay	Indian
Waving Hand	23	15	12	3		8	5	1	2
Raised Hand / Raised Back of Hand	19	13	12	1		6	6		
Vulcan Salute	4	2		2		2	2		
Rightwards / Leftwards Hand	10	4	3	1		6	6		
Palm Down / Palm Up Hand	16	9	8	1		7	7		
Leftwards / Rightwards Pushing Hand	29	22	19	2	1	7	6		1
OK Hand	19	15	11	3	1	4	4		
Pinched Fingers	39	27	22	2	3	12	11		1
Pinching Hand	21	15	11	3	1	6	4		2
Victory Hand	5	4	2	1	1	1	1		
Crossed Fingers	11	7	4		3	4	3		1
Hand with Index Finger and Thumb Crossed	0	0				0			
Love-You Gesture	2	1	1			1	1		
Sign of the Horns	0	0				0			
Call Me Hand	7	5	5			2	1		1
Backhand Index Pointing Right / Left	***44***	***37***	***32***	***1***	***4***	***7***	***7***		
Middle Finger	***42***	***23***	***19***	***3***	***1***	***19***	***16***		***3***
Backhand Index Pointing Up / Down	4	2	2			2	2		
Index Pointing Up	4	2	2			2	1	1	
Index Pointing at the Viewer	19	14	11		3	5	3	2	
Thumbs Up	11	7	4	2	1	4	3		1
Thumbs Down	***89***	***63***	***54***	***4***	***5***	***26***	***22***	***2***	***2***
Raised Fist	11	8	6		2	3	2	1	
Oncoming Fist	32	23	17	3	3	9	6	2	1
Left-Facing / Right-Facing Fist	10	7	6	1		3	3		
Clapping Hands	5	3	3			2	1	1	
Raising Hands	3	3	1	1	1	0			
Heart Hands	3	2	2			1	1		
Open Hands	7	5	1	4		2	2		
Palms Up Together	10	8	7	1		2	2		
Handshake	9	6	5	1		3	1		2
Folded Hands	***64***	***47***	***39***	***5***	***3***	***17***	***14***		***3***
Writing Hand	3	2	2			1	1		
Nail Polish	2	1			1	1	1		
Flexed Biceps	3	3	2		1	0			
Total	**580**	**405**	**325**	**45**	**35**	**175**	**145**	**10**	**20**

Appendix Q – Excel table of non-facial emojis used to express anger

Emoji	Total Frequency	Female	Chinese	Malay	Indian	Male	Chinese	Malay	Indian
Waving Hand	12	8	6	2		4	3	1	
Raised Hand / Raised Back of Hand	8	6	5	1		2	2		
Vulcan Salute	3	2		2		1	1		
Rightwards / Leftwards Hand	3	2		2		1	1		
Palm Down / Palm Up Hand	7	4	3	1		3	3		
Leftwards / Rightwards Pushing Hand	26	15	11	3	1	11	11		
OK Hand	11	9	6	2	1	2	2		
Pinched Fingers	51	40	40			11	11		
Pinching Hand	36	30	23	6	1	6	4	1	1
Victory Hand	0	0				0			
Crossed Fingers	1	0				1	1		
Hand with Index Finger and Thumb Crossed	0	0				0			
Love-You Gesture	0	0				0			
Sign of the Horns	0	0				0			
Call Me Hand	12	12	11	1		0			
Backhand Index Pointing Right / Left	4	4	4			0			
Middle Finger	***94***	***64***	***53***	***7***	***4***	***30***	***25***	***1***	***4***
Backhand Index Pointing Up / Down	11	5	5			6	6		
Index Pointing Up	7	4	3	1		3	3		
Index Pointing at the Viewer	***64***	***41***	***33***	***3***	***5***	***23***	***20***	***1***	***2***
Thumbs Up	7	5	3	1	1	2	1	1	
Thumbs Down	***74***	***49***	***39***	***5***	***5***	***25***	***22***	***1***	***2***
Raised Fist	15	9	9			6	4	1	1
Oncoming Fist	***65***	***48***	***37***	***4***	***7***	***17***	***13***	***1***	***3***
Left-Facing / Right-Facing Fist	12	10	7	1	2	2	2		
Clapping Hands	14	10	8	1	1	4	3	1	
Raising Hands	3	2	1	1		1			1
Heart Hands	1	1	1			0			
Open Hands	3	1	1			2			2
Palms Up Together	1	1			1	0			
Handshake	0	0				0			
Folded Hands	18	12	8	1	3	6	4		2
Writing Hand	1	1			1	0			
Nail Polish	2	2	2			0			
Flexed Biceps	14	8	6		2	6	3	1	2
Total	**580**	**405**	**325**	**45**	**35**	**175**	**145**	**10**	**20**

Appendix R – Excel table of outlier emojis that have double meanings

			Q1	Q2	Q1	Q2	Q1	Q2		Q1	Q2	Q1	Q2	Q1	Q2
Emoji	**Total Frequency**	**Female**	**Chinese**		**Malay**		**Indian**		**Male**	**Chinese**		**Malay**		**Indian**	
New Moon Face	***138***	***101***	***53***	***32***	***7***	***3***	***4***	***2***	***37***	***22***	***10***	***1***		***3***	***1***
Full Moon Face	***81***	***62***	***37***	***20***	***3***	***1***	***1***		***19***	***14***	***3***	***1***		***1***	
Eyes	***113***	***73***	***41***	***22***	***4***	***1***	***5***		***40***	***24***	***10***	***2***	***2***	***2***	
Biting Lip	53	27	10	13	2	1	1		26	8	12	1	1	2	2
Tongue	44	19	6	10	2	1			25	10	11			2	2
Brain	19	8	7	1					11	7	3	1			
Chair	5	2	1				1		3	1	1			1	
Moai	62	41	28	5	4	1	3		21	13	6			1	1
Triangular Flag	35	24	14	3	4		2	1	11	8	2			1	
Rainbow Flag	36	20	8	8	1		2	1	16	6	6			2	2
Kiss Mark	15	7	4	3					8	2	4			2	
Sweat Droplets	***106***	***68***	***34***	***19***	***4***	***4***	***5***	***2***	***38***	***16***	***17***		***1***	***3***	***1***
Pill	14	7	2	4	1				7	2	4			1	
Scissors	21	9	1	2	4	2			12	6	3			2	1
Billed Cap	22	13	6	2	2		3		9	7	2				
Ear of Corn	20	9		3	2	1	1	2	11	6	1	1		2	1
Grape	13	9	2	2	1	1	1	2	4	2	2				
Watermelon	18	12	6	2	1	1	1	1	6	4	2				
Banana	49	24	7	11	2	2	1	1	25	10	10			3	2
Peach	***74***	***43***	***15***	***17***	***4***	***4***	***1***	***2***	***31***	***13***	***11***	***1***		***3***	***3***
Cherries	23	9	2	4	1	1		1	14	5	5			2	2
Eggplant	***66***	***38***	***12***	***17***	***3***	***3***	***1***	***2***	***28***	***13***	***10***		***1***	***2***	***2***
Broccoli	3	2			1	1			1					1	
Peanuts	12	8	1	2	2	2		1	4	2	1			1	
Glass of Milk	15	8	2	3	1			2	7	3	3			1	
Popcorn	14	10	3	1	3		2	1	4	2	1	1			
Salt	6	3	1					2	3	1	1			1	
Teacup Without Handle	***52***	***46***	***30***	***11***			***3***	***2***	***6***	***5***	***1***				
Hot Beverage	25	20	10	2	2	1	3	2	5	3	1			1	
Ninja	47	31	14	5	4	4	1	3	16	8	5	1		1	1
	0	0							0						
	0	0							0						
	0	0							0						
	0	0							0						
	0	0							0						
Total	**1201**	**753**	**357**	**224**	**65**	**35**	**42**	**30**	**448**	**223**	**148**	**10**	**5**	**41**	**21**

Appendix S – Excel table of outlier emoji explanations in the open-ended section

From the emoji list below, which do you feel can carry double meanings or are sometimes used to express more than one idea or emotion. You may select more than 5.	Which emoji from your selection do you think is the most commonly misunderstood or interpreted in different ways? You may select more than 1.	Briefly explain why you think the emoji(s) chosen above is open to multiple interpretations. You may describe how you or others have used or received it in different contexts.
New Moon Face, Full Moon Face, Eyes, Moai, Billed Cap, Ear of Corn, Grapes, Watermelon, Peach, Cherries, Eggplant, Teacup Without Handle, Hot Beverage, Ninja	Sweat Droplets, Scissors, Ear of Corn, Grapes, Banana, Peach, Cherries, Eggplant, Peanuts, Glass of Milk	The name of the emojis rhyme with actual words in the context, for example 'corn' rhymes with 'porn' and I've seen it used frequently to refer to pornography in a more censored context on social media
New Moon Face, Full Moon Face, Rainbow Flag, Sweat Droplets, Ear of Corn	Rainbow Flag	Based on today generation context, the rainbow flag is more known as LGBT
New Moon Face, Full Moon Face, Eyes, Sweat Droplets, Ninja	Eyes, Biting Lip, Tongue, Brain, Ninja	Because it's a common emoji people use without thinking about what feeling that they convey tl others when texting
Sweat Droplets, Ear of Corn, Watermelon, Banana, Peach, Cherries, Eggplant, Ninja	Sweat Droplets, Ear of Corn, Ninja	Cultural influence from social media; using emojis as sexual connotations or as substitute to censored words
Full Moon Face, Eyes, Sweat Droplets, Peach, Ninja	Teacup Without Handle	The “teacup without handle” emoji has two meanings for me. One is the calm or “zen” vibe, and the other refers to the idea of a “绿茶女” (green tea girl). Because in Chinese internet slang 🍵 is sometimes used to refer to a girl who appears sweet and innocent, but is actually manipulative in a subtle way. Sometimes, when I’m chatting with a friend and they use this emoji to describe a girl I don’t know, I get confused because I’m not sure whether they mean she’s a chill person or a 'Green Tea' girl.
New Moon Face, Eyes, Biting Lip, Moai, Triangular Flag, Sweat Droplets, Banana, Peach, Cherries, Eggplant, Teacup Without Handle	New Moon Face, Biting Lip, Rainbow Flag, Sweat Droplets, Banana, Peach, Cherries, Eggplant, Teacup Without Handle, Hot Beverage	People of diffrent generations use it for the implied meaning rather than what it shows visually. Its usage acts as a slang for different groups of people.
New Moon Face, Full Moon Face, Billed Cap,	Sweat Droplets, Ear of Corn, Grapes,	Older people lack context. Generational gaps. They simply use the emoji naively

Teacup Without Handle, Hot Beverage	Watermelon, Banana, Peach, Cherries, Eggplant, Peanuts, Ninja	
Sweat Droplets, Scissors, Peach, Eggplant, Peanuts	Sweat Droplets, Scissors, Peach, Eggplant, Peanuts	This is because they have sexual undertones
Biting Lip, Tongue, Sweat Droplets, Scissors, Ear of Corn	Watermelon, Ninja	Because i think theyre secret codes that the government use.
New Moon Face, Moai, Triangular Flag, Sweat Droplets, Billed Cap, Hot Beverage	New Moon Face, Sweat Droplets, Banana, Peach, Eggplant	The emojis are used in different contexts including serious situations, literal meanings, or sarcastic expressions. It can also be based on pop culture and online references.
Eyes, Sweat Droplets, Scissors, Banana, Peach, Eggplant, Teacup Without Handle	Tongue, Sweat Droplets, Peach, Eggplant	Because of different generations like generation X or Y may explains it by the meaning itself but start from gen Z some already started to use it for a dofferent meaning
New Moon Face, Moai, Sweat Droplets, Eggplant, Teacup Without Handle	Biting Lip, Sweat Droplets, Banana, Peach	they might just food but some how it also bring different meaning in slang or replacements for sexual words or body intimate part. e.g. tea could be a cup of tea but it also bring meaning spill the tea in slang meaning tell me more about the story(gossip related or bad news); sweat droplets bring definition of very hot or sexually attractive.
New Moon Face, Full Moon Face, Eyes, Rainbow Flag, Banana, Peach, Eggplant	Biting Lip, Tongue, Sweat Droplets, Banana, Eggplant	Because sometimes I found that one emoji can help me to express many feelings. For example, the peach emoji. Sometimes I used it to describe peachy ass, rather than just a simple meaning of he food "peach".
New Moon Face, Biting Lip, Tongue, Peach, Eggplant	New Moon Face, Biting Lip, Tongue, Sweat Droplets, Banana, Peach, Eggplant	Perspectives
New Moon Face, Full Moon Face, Eyes, Biting Lip, Sweat Droplets	New Moon Face, Full Moon Face, Eyes, Moai, Sweat Droplets	The eye can be in a sarcastic way or waiting for response
New Moon Face, Full Moon Face, Eyes, Moai, Sweat Droplets	Eyes	The eye emoji can be understand as "let me have a look" or 'look at my eye"
New Moon Face, Eyes, Brain, Moai, Sweat Droplets, Banana, Peach, Glass of Milk	Biting Lip, Rainbow Flag, Kiss Mark, Sweat Droplets, Pill, Banana, Peach, Cherries, Eggplant	Uhm somehow some of the people in the internet use these emojis as a sexual harassment.
Biting Lip, Tongue, Rainbow Flag, Banana, Peach, Eggplant	Tongue, Sweat Droplets, Banana, Eggplant, Ninja	Some people see them as just food, but others use them to represent something else, especially in a funny or suggestive way. It depends on who’s using them and in what situation.

New Moon Face, Full Moon Face, Eyes, Moai, Sweat Droplets	New Moon Face, Full Moon Face, Eyes	Moon face usually used to express awkwardness or something funny, and eye emoji used to ask questions, could be misunderstood as being impolite and ignorant
New Moon Face, Eyes, Tongue, Moai, Triangular Flag, Rainbow Flag, Sweat Droplets, Banana, Peach, Cherries, Eggplant, Teacup Without Handle	New Moon Face, Eyes	Both 'New Moon Face' & 'Eyes' signify doubts & perspectives of the user to send certain signals for others, but it can be ambiguous as it receiver might or might not catch the implied emotion through the use of this emoji, which could cause misunderstanding.
New Moon Face, Full Moon Face, Eyes, Biting Lip, Triangular Flag	Ear of Corn, Grapes, Peach, Cherries, Eggplant, Peanuts, Glass of Milk	Lack of clear context. Emojis are often used without accompanying text, which can make the meaning ambiguous.
New Moon Face, Eyes, Moai, Triangular Flag, Teacup Without Handle	New Moon Face	It's often used to show sarcasm
Eyes, Moai, Peach, Teacup Without Handle, Hot Beverage	Banana, Peach, Eggplant, Hot Beverage, Ninja	Cultural difference affect interpretation; for example, 🙏 may be seen as “praying” in one culture and “thank you” in another.
Sweat Droplets, Pill, Peach, Eggplant, Teacup Without Handle	New Moon Face, Sweat Droplets, Peach, Eggplant	The word form of the above emojis have since undergone semantic shift as a result of the rise of urban lingo. The elements of the emoji (e.g.: shape) often represent explicit components due to resemblance to actual body parts, real life expressions, as well as biological processes; hence, they no longer carry just the literal meaning and are open to multiple interpretations, depending on context. For instance, the new moon face is often used to describe something spooky or creepy. However, others may use it suggestively when asking for explicit requests.
Eyes, Moai, Sweat Droplets, Billed Cap, Watermelon, Banana, Peach, Eggplant, Popcorn	Watermelon, Banana	Gender might result in multiple interpretations since I've seen some males using fruit emojis to indicate inappropriate meanings (e.g genital organs). Another reason could be cultural differences as I've seen 🍆 being used to show pro-Palestinian agenda and racism towards African-Americans (sometimes joking).
New Moon Face, Eyes, Sweat Droplets, Teacup Without Handle, Hot Beverage	New Moon Face	Might use to express happiness or anger
New Moon Face, Full Moon Face, Eyes, Moai, Teacup Without Handle	New Moon Face, Full Moon Face, Eyes, Moai	The moon faces are sometimes used in sarcastic manners or genuinely positive manners. Tea can mean the literal tea or

		gossips or green tea b*tch. Often people will ask for clarification (from the user) why the eyes are used if not given any context and just thrown out in the group chat randomly. The moai can be for humour or generally irritated, stoned or stunned instances.
New Moon Face, Full Moon Face, Eyes, Triangular Flag, Rainbow Flag, Billed Cap, Peach	New Moon Face, Full Moon Face, Eyes, Billed Cap, Peach, Eggplant	Emoji are like slangs for people nowadays in text,and they will change time to time by following the trend and how other people uses them. For example i use this 👀 emoji base on the situation like sometimes it means “i see” sometimes it means “spill the tea sis” or sometimes maybe “seems suspicious”, or 💀 this emoji as “im ded” or “laugh die me” , the most commonly use between me and my friends is 😭 where it helps me express my tone in different situations like might be because of frustration or dissatisfaction or relieved.
Tongue, Brain, Moai, Triangular Flag, Sweat Droplets, Scissors, Ear of Corn, Peach, Cherries, Eggplant, Peanuts, Ninja	Eyes, Biting Lip, Tongue, Sweat Droplets, Peach, Cherries, Eggplant	Used either appropriately or in a flirty context
New Moon Face, Full Moon Face, Eyes, Moai, Ninja	New Moon Face	The emoji is unique
New Moon Face, Eyes, Moai, Triangular Flag, Billed Cap, Popcorn	Biting Lip, Tongue, Sweat Droplets	Most of the emojis above are commonly interpreted as ways to describe something sexual. Other than that, some emojis are just used to describe the internet slang like saying, "No cap. There's tea to spill."
New Moon Face, Full Moon Face, Eyes, Triangular Flag, Kiss Mark	Biting Lip, Tongue, Moai, Sweat Droplets, Scissors	When i want to go out or ask my friend to come house
New Moon Face, Full Moon Face, Eyes, Teacup Without Handle, Hot Beverage	New Moon Face, Eyes	especially for the new moon face emoji will usually cause misunderstanding to me when I receive this emoji as I will think is the person who send me this emoji is delivering positive expression or negative expression
New Moon Face, Full Moon Face, Eyes, Moai, Teacup Without Handle	Teacup Without Handle	Taking 🥵 as example, my friends and I will use it in different contexts such as when we both saw something embarrassing or we knew each other mind without saying anything. It can imply awkwardness, secrecy, or a shared inside joke depending on the situation.

Eyes, Sweat Droplets, Watermelon, Popcorn, Teacup Without Handle	Eyes, Sweat Droplets, Watermelon, Popcorn, Teacup Without Handle	This is because everyone is now immersed in the online world, and emojis have a second meaning every second. I always use emoji 'watermelon' to know the gossip with my friend.
New Moon Face, Full Moon Face, Eyes, Brain, Watermelon	New Moon Face, Full Moon Face, Eyes	Opsss 😳 ,hehe 😳 , ouhh 😳, his eyes be like👀,may i have a look👀
New Moon Face, Eyes, Tongue, Kiss Mark, Sweat Droplets	New Moon Face, Eyes, Biting Lip, Tongue, Sweat Droplets	You free right now? *Eyes emoji* My POV: Asking with playful (non sexual) intension like: You free? Can talk? Family POV: He is asking whether we are free with our time, maybe something is up. MEANWHILE, my close friends (specifically boy group): Yo this guy trippin or what? (Take it sexually or is like joke. But not really take the question seriously)— often didn't answer my question.
New Moon Face, Full Moon Face, Eyes, Sweat Droplets, Ninja	New Moon Face, Full Moon Face	maybe will be a helpless meaning
Eyes, Biting Lip, Ear of Corn, Peach, Popcorn	Eyes, Biting Lip, Tongue, Sweat Droplets, Eggplant	Mainly because they tend to have sexual connotations
New Moon Face, Biting Lip, Rainbow Flag, Sweat Droplets, Scissors, Ear of Corn, Banana, Peach, Cherries, Eggplant, Broccoli, Peanuts, Glass of Milk, Salt, Hot Beverage, Ninja	New Moon Face, Rainbow Flag, Banana, Peach, Cherries, Eggplant, Ninja	New Moon Face: It is a moon, but also a landmark in online culture. Rainbow Flag: It's not really the emoji, the people are often misunderstood. Banana, Peach, Eggplant, and Cherry: The amount of times I've used this and gotten obscene pictures in return when I just wanted some goddamn fruit...anyways. Ninja: I just cant say that.
Eyes, Biting Lip, Moai, Sweat Droplets, Teacup Without Handle, Hot Beverage	New Moon Face, Full Moon Face	The trend of developing new online terms, which using random name or word to describe another object of action. Like to describe a girl that purposely get closer to other's boyfriend, the internet called them green tea, which a common drink that just made by tea leaf.
New Moon Face, Full Moon Face, Eyes, Moai, Sweat Droplets	Moai, Triangular Flag, Rainbow Flag, Sweat Droplets, Peach	Usually in context with double meanings and subtle jokes between friends

Appendix T – P1 transcription

Transcription (P1).pdf

Appendix U – P2 transcription

Transcription (P2).pdf

Appendix V – P3 transcription

Transcription (P3).pdf

Appendix W – P4 transcription

Transcription (P4).pdf

Appendix X – P5 transcription

Transcription (P5).pdf

Appendix Y – P6 transcription

Transcription (P6).pdf

Appendix Z – P7 transcription

Transcription (P7).pdf

Appendix AA – P8 transcription

Transcription (P8).pdf