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CULTURAL INTERPRETATION OF EMOJI IN MALAYSIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

Emoji depicts real-world properties and infer their meaning through universal depictions. However, the interpretation of emoji are not necessarily understood collectively. One of the many factors influencing the interpretation of emoji is culture. The current study investigates the interpretation of emoji among three main cultures in Malaysia, namely the Malays, Chinese, and Indians. The respondents are digital natives from various parts across the country. The focus is on their interpretation of selected facial emoji namely the; sleeping face, tears of joy, loudly crying, blowing a kiss, and screaming in fear emoji. The analysis first identifies the interpretation of the emoji according to each culture, which is then followed by the analysis of differences in semantic misconstrual between the cultures. The results shows; (i) there are common interpretation shared among the three cultures for each emoji, highlighting the universal inherent meaning possessed by emoji, (ii) there are additional interpretations from each culture for each emoji, highlight the culturally specific interpretation for each emoji, and (iii) each culture have different degrees of variation in terms of interpretation for each emoji, highlighting the degree of potential misinterpretation among different cultures in intercultural communication. Overall, the study provides additional evidence of emoji interpretation being influenced by cultural idiosyncrasies, and understanding the differences can assist in smoother intercultural communication within a multicultural society such as in Malaysia.

Keywords: Emoji, digital communication, digital natives, interpretation, cultural, Malaysia.

1. Introduction

The fast-evolving technology of the world today has shifted the way we communicate with each other. Digital messenger applications such as Whatsapp messenger, Telegram application, Wechat application, and other various messenger applications are rapidly becoming the norm if not the preference of everyday communication. However, one major disadvantage of online text messaging is the degree of difficulty in expressing emotions and feelings due to the absence of non-verbal cues (such as facial expressions and verbal intonation) which are readily available in face to face communication (Kelly & Watts, 2015). This is where the use of emoji as supplements in online text messaging allows for a degree of compensation where there is a lack of non-verbal cues (Miller et al., 2016).

Emoji are pictures or symbols which are commonly used in textual digital communication. Novak et al. (2015) describe emoji as visual characters that depict its real-world counterpart, e.g. facial expressions, feelings, weather, automobiles, buildings, food, beverages, animals, natures, activities, and many more. In this sense, emoji deliver their meanings through their similarity and representation of such expressions, feelings, and objects. However, the role of emoji goes beyond representing the literal meaning of pictures/symbols as studies have shown that people also use emoji to manipulate the communication environment in which they are in (Kelly & Watts, 2015).

There are millions of emoji being used daily in various digital platforms worldwide (Miller, 2018). In a global analysis of emoji usage, Ljubesic and Fiser (2016) found that Southeast Asia countries are among the top frequent users of emoji in the world. Moreover, a study conducted by Swiftkey keyboard application developers in 2015 reported that Malaysians as a whole, uses emoji more than (at least) 16 other different regions and languages around the globe. As a multicultural society, the language/linguistic situation of Malaysia has always been influenced by the diversity of cultures and the needs of the people (Asmah, 1992). It is clear that in today's context, emoji are significantly a part of this ever-evolving language/linguistic scenario of Malaysia.

The issue of interpretation (and misinterpretation) has been one of the main concerns in the studies of emoji. Although emoji are intended to represent the state of their real-world counterparts, their meanings, however, are not necessarily understood collectively. Miller et al. (2016) claim that even though people frequently use emoji, they do not necessarily have similar agreements in the understanding and interpretation of a given emoji when being used in communication. Users are influenced by their language, culture, and regional characteristics in preference for specific emoji to express their thoughts and feelings (Guntuku et al., 2019; Lu et al., 2016). In other words, different people associate with different interpretations of a given emoji. This is partly due to the fact that emoji are visual-based items making them open to numerous forms of interpretations. This inherent quality held by emoji could potentially lead to a degree of misinterpretation or misunderstanding between users. This study is interested in understanding how Malaysians interpret (selected) emoji.

2. Problem Statement

Emoji are nuanced, visually-detailed pictures that may be more open to various kinds of interpretation. However, it is not clear how people interpret the meaning of emoji as people do not interpret

a given emoji in the same way (Miller et al., 2016). In general, there is a lack of studies on the interpretation of emoji in terms of the differences between cultures (Miller et al., 2016). Most studies on emoji interpretation in terms of culture, commonly focuses on the different interpretations of emoji in different cultures between different countries (e.g. Barbieri et al., 2016; Guntuku et al., 2019; Li et al., 2019). In other words, studies on emoji interpretation between different cultures within the same country are still lacking (Barbieri et al., 2016; Guntuku et al., 2019). In culturally diverse countries, there is always a potential for misinterpretation of emoji during communication between the different cultures. This is because different cultures are influenced by their cultural background which is reflected in their communication, influencing their intercultural communication as well. Taking the above points into account, there is thus a need for understanding how different cultures affect emoji interpretation in Malaysia's multicultural context.

3. Research Questions

The objective of the study is to identify the cultural differences in the interpretation of (selected) emoji in Malaysian context. The study aims to answer the research question of, what are the cultural differences in the interpretation of (selected) emoji in Malaysian context.

4. Purpose of the Study

As stated above, there seems to be a gap in the literature in terms of intercultural emoji interpretation. This current study intends to shed some light on how the three main cultures in Malaysia interpret emoji, and to understand whether their cultures influence the interpretation of the selected emoji. The outcome of this study will benefit the field of emoji studies in general, especially on emoji interpretation with different cultures within the same country. Furthermore, this study may also help to improve intercultural communication when using emoji in Malaysian context.

5. Research Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach to analyse the differences in the interpretation of the selected emoji. The sampling technique used to acquire respondents is purposive homogenous sampling as this study focuses on the characteristics of culture. The population of Malaysia is approximately 32.6 million with Bumiputera being the largest ethnic group (69.3%), followed by the Chinese (22.8%) and Indians (6.9%) (Department of Statistics Malaysia Official Portal, 2019). Bumiputera includes the Malays and the natives of Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah, and Sarawak (Ramlee et al., 2008). The current study only focuses on the three main cultures namely the Malays, Chinese, and Indians. Data were collected form a total of 180 respondents (60 from each culture). The respondents are from various parts across Malaysia, grouped as originating from the northern region (Perlis, Kedah, Pulau Pinang, and Perak), the central region (Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, and Negeri Sembilan), the southern region (Melaka and Johor), the east coast region (Pahang, Kelantan and Terengganu) and, Sarawak and Sabah. The respondents are all digital natives, i.e. those who were born after 1983 (Helsper & Eynon, 2010), ranging between 19 to 34 years of age. The

digital natives are the perfect respondents as they grew up with computers, live with the Internet, and made online language as their native language (cf. Molnár et al., 2017).

In 2015, Swiftkey keyboard application developers conducted an analysis on the usage of emoji and reported the 15 frequently used emoji by Malaysian includes; sleeping face, baby face, clapping hands, victory hand, thumbs up, thumbs down, pig, ram, frog, turtle, poo/feces, rainbow, man running, dashing away, and woman raising hand. Conversely, in a study by Guntuku et al. (2019) on emoji usage between Western and Eastern cultures, the top 5 most used emoji in the Eastern culture were; tears of joy, loudly crying, folded hands, blowing a kiss, and screaming in fear. Taking the information above into consideration, only the facial expression emoji of sleeping face [😴], tears of joy [😂], loudly crying [😭], blowing a kiss [😘], and screaming in fear [😱], were the focus of this current study.

An online-based open-ended questionnaire was administered. The respondents were presented with the selected emoji and instructed to give their interpretation/meaning for each of them. This study adheres to Clark's (1996) theory where communication is seen as a form of joint action between different parties. Any kind of verbal or non-verbal actions can be considered as a form of communication. Both the sender and receiver construe (i.e. interpret) the verbal and non-verbal actions in a particular way during communication (Clark, 1996). In other words, when a sender performs an action during communication, the receiver construes what he or she thinks the sender intended by the action. If however, the receiver's interpretation varies from the sender's original intention, a misconstrual occurs.

Extending this idea to the current study, the use of emoji in digital messaging is considered as a joint action between different parties, and in order for an emoji to be correctly construed, the receiver needs to interpret the emoji with the same intended meaning by the sender. The analysis of the data adopts the emoji semantic misconstrual score by Miller at al. (2016). The measure calculates the average score by taking into account the different interpretations of emoji within the same culture, and dividing them by the respondents for each culture. The range of the score is between zero and one. Higher average score for an emoji signifies more variation in interpretation.

6. Findings

The results were divided according to the selected emoji under study by analyzing the general and the additional interpretation of each culture, followed by the differences for the semantic misconstrual score between the three cultures.

6.1. Sleeping face emoji

This emoji can be described as a face with its eyes closed and rounded mouth, along with three 'zzz' symbol on top of its head. The general interpretation for this emoji in all three cultures are 'sleepy' or 'sleeping'. Another slightly interesting general interpretation among all cultures for this emoji is the act or the feeling of 'boredom'. With regards to intracultural interpretation, the Malays additionally interpreted this emoji as 'do not disturb', while the Chinese interpreted this emoji as 'to ignore'.

6.2. Loudly crying face emoji

The loudly crying face emoji can be portrayed as a face with a stream of tears from closed eyes and a wailing mouth that is opened. The general interpretation of this emoji between the cultures are 'cry' and 'sad'. Concerning intracultural interpretations, the Malays additionally interpreted this emoji as 'denial', 'touched' and 'anxious', the Chinese interpreted as 'disbelief', 'disappointed' and 'overwhelmingly happy', while the Indians interpreted this emoji as 'help' and 'regret'.

6.3. Face with tears of joy emoji

This emoji can be described as the act of laughing to the point of tears. The general interpretation for this emoji are 'laughing' and 'very funny'. Interestingly, the Malays additionally interpreted this emoji as 'cry' and 'why' as well. In contrast, the Chinese additionally interpreted it as 'awkward', while the Indians interpreted this emoji as 'lame'.

6.4. Face blowing a kiss emoji

This emoji portrays a winking face with a puckered lips blowing a tiny red heart kiss. The most common interpretations for this emoji across three cultures are 'kiss' and 'love you'. Intraculturally, the Malays also interpreted this emoji as 'happy mood', 'appreciate' and 'to flirt'. The Chinese, however, interpreted this emoji as 'in love', 'tease' and 'miss you'. Interestingly, the Indians additionally interpreted this emoji as being 'thankful'.

6.5. Face screaming in fear emoji

This emoji portrays a screaming opened mouth face with hands on the cheeks and pale blue color on the forehead (as if the face is losing color). The common interpretation for this emoji across the three cultures are 'shocked' and 'scared'. With regards to intracultural interpretation, the Malays additionally interpreted this emoji as 'excited' and 'impressed', the Chinese interpreted it as 'disbelief', while the Indians interpreted it as 'denial'.

The results illustrate that there are indeed some common interpretations between the three cultures for each emoji. This proves the inherent universality of emoji, i.e. offering the literal meaning of what it intended to represent. However, there are also some additional interpretations from each culture as exemplified above. For instance, the Malays have a unique interpretation for the sleeping face emoji as a sign for 'do not disturb', the Chinese have a rather different interpretation for the face with tears of joy emoji as the state of 'awkwardness', while the Indians have an interesting interpretation for the blowing a kiss emoji as being 'thankful'. To a certain degree, the additional interpretation can be considered as culturally specific interpretations. This is to say that an emoji can carry a different meaning and interpretation when it is used within a particular culture. For example, other cultures may fail to see the face with tears of joy emoji having an additional meaning of 'awkwardness' (as this is not an obvious attribute of the emoji). Similarly, although it may be acceptable to use the blowing a kiss emoji to give thanks in other cultures, it is perhaps inappropriate to do so in the Malay culture due to its Islamic influence. Such intracultural usage can create misinterpretations, especially in intercultural communications.

Through the semantic misconstrual score, we can see the degree of variety each culture has for the interpretation of the selected emoji. The average scores were obtained by counting the different interpretations of emoji within the same culture, and dividing them by the respondents for each culture (refer to table 01).

Table 01. Summary of semantic misconstrual score for each emoji from each culture

Emoji	Semantic misconstrual score for each culture			
	Malay	**Chinese**	**Indian**	**Overall**
Sleeping face	0.08	0.08	0.05	0.07
Loudly Crying Face	0.12	0.13	0.08	0.11
Face with Tears of Joy	0.10	0.08	0.08	0.09
Face Blowing a Kiss	0.15	0.15	0.12	0.14
Face Screaming in Fear	0.07	0.05	0.07	0.06

From the results, both Malays and Chinese share the same score (0.08) for the interpretation of the sleeping face emoji, while the Indians scored lower (0.05) for this emoji. The Chinese scored the highest (0.13) for the loudly crying face emoji, followed by the Malays (0.12) and Indians (0.08). The Malays scored the highest (0.10) for the tears of joy emoji, while the Chinese and the Indians share the same score (0.08) for this emoji. The Malays and Chinese both share the same score (0.15) for the blowing a kiss emoji, while the Indians scored the lowest (0.12). Finally, for the face screaming in fear emoji, the Malays and Indians share the same score (0.07), while the Chinese scored lower (0.05) for this emoji. In general, a higher average score for an emoji signifies more variation in the interpretation of the emoji within the particular culture. In other words, the Malays and Chinese have more variation of interpretation for the sleeping face emoji. The Chinese have the most variation of interpretation for the loudly crying face emoji. The Malays have the most variation of interpretation for the tears of joy emoji. Both Malays and Chinese have more interpretation for the blowing a kiss emoji in comparison to the Indians. Finally, Malays and Indians have more verities of interpretations than the Chinese for the face screaming in fear emoji. Concerning emoji in particular, the face screaming in fear has the overall least variation of interpretation (0.06), while the face blowing a kiss emoji has the overall most variation of interpretation (0.14), among all the three cultures. In short, the more variation of interpretation an emoji has, the higher the possibility or potential for the emoji to be misinterpreted when in use interculturally**.**

7. Conclusion

Language operates in a manner that is relatively open to different interpretation, be it in verbal or written form. Emoji add the means in which users can further express themselves in today's world of digital

communication. Although not completely identical, emoji does to a larger degree function similarly to how language operates. From this study, it is clear that despite the universality in meaning imposed by emoji, their interpretation changes and varies across different cultures. This study provides further evidence on how users are influenced by their cultural idiosyncrasies when using emoji in communication. It is thus important not only to acknowledge but also to try to understand the varieties of intracultural interpretation of emoji, in order to insure smoother (less misinterpretation of) intercultural communication. Moreover, this study also illustrates how different cultures contribute to the unique diversity of Malaysia's linguistic environment.

Acknowledgments

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