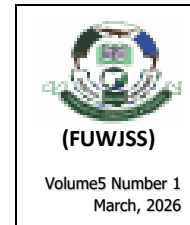


PATTERN AND USAGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA EMOJIS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study explores the patterns and usage of emojis among Nigerian university students, highlighting their role in digital communication and academic contexts. Emojis have a lot of potential since they are full of meaning. People tend to employ it based on the settings or circumstances. They are also excellent for expressing the good emotions when users are unable to do so in person and for enhancing their contact with others, such as friends, teachers. Emojis are undoubtedly a significant component of regular written communication. Using a survey of 372 respondents at the University of Ibadan and guided by Social Presence, Media Richness, and Diffusion of Innovations theories, the study found that emojis are widely used, especially on WhatsApp. Students frequently employ emojis with friends and peers, but sparingly with lecturers, reflecting differences between informal and formal communication. Most participants agreed that emojis enhance clarity and emotion, though opinions diverged on their appropriateness in academic discourse. The study concludes that emoji choice is influenced by mood, peers, and social trends, while cultural and gender factors shaped interpretation. The study recommends cautious academic use of emojis in academic communication and encourages improved digital literacy among students.

Keywords: Emoji, digital communication, social media, digital literacy, students

Introduction

The fast expansion of social media has changed the patterns of communication, most especially among students who deal extensively with digital conversations (Dresner and Herring, 2010). Emojis have turned into an essential phenomenon of online communication, representing visual signs that affect textual conversation by conveying

tones, occulesic, fascics, intent and emotions (Danesi, 2017). It is worth noting that in Nigerian university communities, students largely depend on emojis for several forms of communication such as self-expression, peer group communication and academic discourse on social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok and WhatsApp. Nevertheless, the patterns and usage of emojis among university students are yet to be ascertained, which is not being explored in most cases, most especially how they impact the dynamics of communication, understanding and social engagement among students. Hence, this study seeks to assess the context, frequency and communicative or chatty implication of emoji usage among students in University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

Post-traditional mass media create a multimedia platform for information distribution. This is represented by the social media and various apps, programmes and channels that have redefined the notion of mass communication (McGregor, 2019).

At present, social media users referred to as 'netizens' have become not only consumers of media materials but have themselves become content producers, including news reports, documentaries, skits, and emojis among others (Ojomo and Sodeinde, 2021). They have also become content distributors across geographical, political ideological, and other spaces beyond the frontiers of regular radio, television, newspapers, and magazines (Diamond & Plattner, 2012). However, with the advent of the internet and its social platforms, multimedia materials, including audio, video, graphics, text, pictures, among others, can be shared across diverse platforms. For instance, emojis, which are non-verbal, sometimes graphics or pictorial, have become a tool for communication or sending messages on the internet. However, there are concerns about the ethical use of emojis in terms of the cultural, historical, political, and social meanings that they convey in everyday social interaction and communication.

Thus, this study is designed to evaluate the pattern and usage of social media emojis among University students in Nigeria. Hence, this study seeks to investigate the predominant patterns of emoji usage among the students in Nigeria. The study further examined the perception of the students on using emoji for social and academic communication. The study critically evaluated the factors that influence the choices of emojis and the meanings among students in Nigeria.

Evolution of Digital Communication

Emojis are social media content designed in the form of icons or images used by social media users to convey messages within and across

chat (Chen, 2023). Emojis are image-like content used to express a verbal or written communication in the course of chat or online communication. Was and Hamrick (2021) describe emojis as ideograms composed of icons intended to represent facial expressions, emotions, objects, or other symbols, commonly used in digital communication technologies such as smartphones and computers. Similarly, Godard et al. (2022) define emoji as pictographs representing a wide range of facial expressions, symbols, and objects, highlighting their administration and standardization by the Unicode Consortium.

From a communicative perspective, Caspi et al. (2025) emphasize that emojis, much like their predecessors the emoticons, were primarily designed to convey nonverbal information in text-based interactions. This aligns with Unicode's technical position that emoji are not merely images but standardized characters within a universal digital system, ensuring cross-platform compatibility (Godard et al., 2022).

Beyond technical views, lexicographic sources adopt a more general definition, such as the Cambridge English Dictionary, which frames emoji as digital images inserted into electronic messages to express ideas or feelings (Cambridge English Dictionary, n.d.). However, some scholars caution against overly rigid definitions. For instance, Tenzer (2022) argues that emojis function as semiotic signs with meanings that are highly fluid, context-dependent, and open to interpretation, particularly in legal and intercultural communication contexts. Udoudom et al. (2024) define emoji as a Language that is increasingly utilised to transmit intricate messages, narratives, and even whole conversations. As a result, emoji-based languages have emerged. Some emojis become well-known and linked to particular movements, occasions, or trends. For instance, the use of specific emojis during social movements or international events (Udoudom et al., 2024).

The history of digital communication reflects the progressive integration of technology into human interaction. Early stages began with telegraphy and telephone systems in the 19th and early 20th centuries, which laid the foundation for long-distance communication by converting information into electronic signals (Flichy, 1995). The development of computers and the internet in the mid-20th century revolutionized communication, allowing for the digitization of text, images, and eventually multimedia content (Castells, 2001).

The email era of the 1970s and 1980s marked the first widely adopted form of digital interpersonal communication, enabling asynchronous exchange of information (Segerstad, 2002). This was followed by the emergence of instant messaging, online forums, and chatrooms in the

1990s, which emphasized real-time interaction and community building (Herring, 2004).

The early 2000s social media revolution further transformed digital communication by introducing platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (now X), and YouTube, which encouraged user-generated content and participatory culture (boyd & Ellison, 2007). In parallel, the rise of mobile technology and smartphones facilitated ubiquitous connectivity and introduced new multimodal communication practices such as texting, multimedia sharing, and voice notes (Ling, 2012).

More recently, the integration of emojis, GIFs, and memes has reshaped online discourse by incorporating nonverbal and visual elements into text-based exchanges, enriching emotional expression and cultural representation (Danesi, 2016). Furthermore, the current phase of digital communication is increasingly characterized by artificial intelligence, video conferencing, and algorithm-driven personalization, highlighting the convergence of technological innovation and social interaction (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). Thus, the evolution of digital communication can be seen as a continuum from early signal-based systems to today's complex, multimodal, and networked platforms that define everyday life in the digital age.

Social Relevance of Emojis in Online Conversation

In online communication, where physical presence and non-verbal cues are absent, emojis have become a crucial tool for enhancing interaction. Text-based messages can often be ambiguous, lacking tone, facial expression, and gesture. Emojis help to bridge this gap by serving as substitutes for paralinguistic cues, adding emotional nuance and context to digital conversations (Dresner & Herring, 2010). For instance, the inclusion of 😊 (smile) or 😭 (crying face) changes the interpretation of a message, reducing misunderstandings that may arise in plain text (Kaye, Malone, & Wall, 2017).

Emojis also play a significant role in expressing emotions and building social presence. Riordan (2017) notes that emojis function as “emotion work” tools, allowing users to communicate affective states and maintain relational closeness in digital exchanges. In this sense, they humanize computer-mediated communication by making it more personal and expressive.

Beyond emotional expression, emojis contribute to clarity and efficiency in communication. A single emoji can sometimes replace several words, making interactions faster and more engaging (Danesi, 2016). They also serve as relational markers, signaling politeness, humor,

irony, or intimacy, depending on the conversational context (Derks, Fischer, & Bos, 2008).

Additionally, emojis foster cross-cultural communication, as their pictorial nature often transcends language barriers (Stark & Crawford, 2015). For example, ❤️ (heart) or 👍 (thumbs up) can be understood globally, supporting meaning-making in intercultural digital settings.

In summary, emojis are not just decorative symbols but essential communicative resources that enrich online conversations. They enhance emotional expressiveness, reduce ambiguity, foster relational bonds, and create a more engaging and human-like digital communication environment.

The introduction and widespread adoption of emojis represent a significant milestone in the evolution of digital communication. Traditionally, non-verbal communication relies on facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice to convey meaning beyond words (Knapp, Hall, & Horgan, 2014). In computer-mediated communication (CMC), however, such cues are often absent, leading to potential ambiguity and misinterpretation (Walther, 2011). To address this gap, users initially developed *emoticons* (e.g., :-)) or in the 1980s as a way to signal emotions in text (Dresner & Herring, 2010). Emojis, which emerged in Japan in the late 1990s, expanded on this concept by providing standardized pictographs that represent facial expressions, objects, activities, and symbols (Danesi, 2016).

Emojis quickly rose to prominence because they enable users to infuse messages with affective and relational meaning (Kilby et al., 2025). They serve as a digital substitute for body language and tone, enhancing clarity and emotional nuance in online interactions (Riordan, 2017). For example, a simple text such as “*I’m fine*” can be interpreted differently depending on whether it is accompanied by genuine positivity or irony/sarcasm. In this sense, emojis function as paralinguistic cues, bridging the gap between spoken and written discourse (Kaye, Malone, & Wall, 2017).

Moreover, emojis are not merely ornamental but have become a cultural and linguistic phenomenon. Their incorporation into social media, instant messaging, and even professional communication demonstrates their role in shaping digital literacy and expressive practices (Gesselman, Garcia, & Garcia, 2019). Scholars argue that emojis are part of a broader “visual language” of the internet, allowing people to negotiate meaning across linguistic and cultural boundaries (Danesi, 2016; Stark & Crawford, 2015).

Thus, the rise of emojis reflects the human tendency to reintroduce non-verbal richness into text-based media. As a hybrid between writing

and gesture, emojis embody a new semiotic resource that extends the expressive possibilities of digital communication in the 21st century.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by Social Presence, Media Richness, and Diffusion of Innovations theories. The Social Presence Theory discusses how emojis have impacted the perception of imminence and emotional involvement in online conversations. Social Presence Theory (SPT) was first introduced by Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) to explain how communication media differ in their ability to convey a sense of presence between participants. They defined *social presence* as the degree to which a medium allows users to perceive others as being psychologically present in an interaction.

In online communication, where non-verbal signals are often missing, social presence is crucial for effective interaction. Low-presence media like emails or text chats can sometimes lead to misunderstandings or emotional distance (Walther, 2011). To compensate, users adopt strategies such as the use of emoticons, emojis, Graphic Interchange Formats (GIFs), and other visual cues to enhance social presence (Yus, 2019). These tools help recreate elements of face-to-face communication by adding warmth, personality, and emotional nuance, thereby increasing a sense of interpersonal closeness.

The relevance of SPT lies in its application to digital environments such as online learning, social media, and instant messaging. For example, in virtual classrooms, building social presence through multimedia, emojis, and interactive cues has been shown to increase learner engagement and satisfaction (Richardson, Maeda, & Swan, 2017). Similarly, in interpersonal online conversations, emojis function as paralinguistic cues that enhance immediacy and emotional expression, strengthening relational bonds (Riordan, 2017). Social Presence Theory explains why digital communication often feels less personal than face-to-face interaction, and why the incorporation of non-verbal surrogates such as emojis is essential for fostering connection, empathy, and relational closeness in online contexts.

The Media Richness Theory (Daft and Lengel, 1986) was also employed in this study. According to the postulation of the theory, communication media are different in their ability to convey rich information. Social media platforms are wired with various emojis to impact digital communication by reducing vagueness and encouraging emotional expressions. The above-stated theoretical underpinnings will help to provide the parameters for understanding the importance of communicating with emojis among students during online interaction.

As technology evolved, scholars noted that digital users adapt by integrating new tools to enrich communication. Features such as emojis, GIFs, stickers, and video calling enhance richness by reintroducing non-verbal and emotional cues (Kaye, Malone, & Wall, 2017). The relevance of MRT today lies in its ability to explain why people choose certain communication channels for specific purposes. For instance, organisations often use rich media (e.g., video conferencing) for complex negotiations, while lean media (e.g., email, text messages, memo) may suffice for simple information sharing (Dennis & Kinney, 1998). In personal communication, the use of emojis increases the richness of text-based platforms like WhatsApp or Twitter by conveying tone and emotion, thereby reducing ambiguity and strengthening relational meaning (Riordan, 2017). Thus, MRT highlights the importance of choosing communication channels, or enhancing them with visual and emotional cues, to match the complexity and relational needs of the message.

The diffusion of innovations theory aims to clarify how and why novel concepts and methods are embraced, as well as why they may proliferate over extended periods of time. The rate of dispersion, or spreading, depends in large part on how innovations are disseminated to various segments of society and the subjective perceptions surrounding them (Halton, 2025). The major figures in the theory of dissemination of innovations are: People who are willing to take chances and are the first to try new things are known as innovators. Those who are eager to test new technologies and determine their value to society are known as early adopters. The early majority are the people from the general population who open the door for an innovation to be used in mainstream society (Halton, 2025). The late majority are members of the general public who, like the early majority, incorporate the invention into their daily lives. Laggards are those who adopt new ideas and products more slowly than the broader public.

Research Methodology

This research employed a survey research design. According to Mills (2024), researchers can gather structured data from people or groups using this kind of research methodology to learn more about their attitudes, actions, or experiences around a certain subject.

Respondents who are currently enrolled in the institution's learning programmes were chosen, using the purposive sample technique, guaranteeing that participants have experience of using social media in an academic setting (Creswell, 2014). A total of 396 samples were selected from the 39,799 University of Ibadan students using Taro Yamane's formula of 0.05 margin of error. where n represents the sample size, N

represents the total population, and e represents the level of precision or margin of error. In this study, the total population was 39,799, while the margin of error was set at 0.05 (5%), which is a commonly accepted level in social science research. First, the margin of error was squared: $0.05^2=0.0025$. This value was then multiplied by the population size, giving $39,799 \times 0.0025=99.497$. Next, 1 was added to the result to obtain 100.4975. Finally, the population size was divided by this value, resulting in $39,799/100.4975 \approx 395.99$. The value was then approximated to the nearest whole number, giving a final sample size of 396 respondents. This sample size was considered adequate to represent the entire population for the purpose of the study. However, only 372 respondents adequately participated in the period of data collection.

A structured questionnaire served as the primary data collection instrument. The questionnaire was divided into sections that cover demographic information and other objectives of the study. The method of data collection was the internet, through a Qualtrics survey. Having identified the study population, the contact details of participants, such as emails, were collected during the distribution of the consent form, with the intention to share the link to the questionnaire with them. The link to the questionnaire was shared through the email of the interested participants. To analyze the data, descriptive and inferential statistical tools such as Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) were employed for the quantitative data analysis. The results were presented in tables based on the frequencies and percentages.

Results and Discussions

Table 1: Age Distribution of Respondents

Age Group	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
16–20	110	29.6
21–25	170	45.7
26–30	65	17.5
31 and above	27	7.2
Total	372	100

The dominance of the 16–25 age group suggests that emoji usage on social media is most common among younger students. This aligns with global trends where digital natives and Gen Z rely more on emojis for expression. The low representation of students aged 31 and above (7.2%) implies that older students may either use emojis less frequently or are fewer in the university population. This generational difference could affect how emojis are interpreted in communication across age groups. Since the majority are within the youth bracket (16–25), the results primarily reflect the patterns and perceptions of younger students rather than older ones.

This should be noted as a limitation if the results of this study are to be generalize to all Nigerian students. Younger students may use emojis more in casual/social conversations than in academic contexts.

Hence, the table shows that the study sample is youth-dominated, which reinforces the relevance of researching emoji usage, since younger people are the main drivers of digital communication trends. However, it also suggests that the results may not fully represent older student populations.

Table 2 Gender Distribution

Gender	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Male	190	51.1
Female	172	46.2
Prefer not to say	10	2.7
Total	372	100

Since the male and female proportions are fairly close, the findings on emoji usage reflected perspectives across both genders, reducing gender bias. The near-equal distribution makes it possible to compare male and female emoji usage patterns to see if significant differences exist. For example, prior studies suggest that females often use emojis for emotional expression, while males may use them more functionally. Your data can test if this holds true in the Nigerian student context.

The 2.7% who preferred not to say is small but notable, highlighting a need for inclusivity in digital communication research. Even though the number is small, it reflects that not all respondents identify with binary categories. Because of the gender balance, the study's conclusions about emoji usage will have stronger validity across male and female groups.

Therefore, the gender distribution shows a fairly even split between male and female respondents, which strengthens the study's ability to explore possible gender-based differences in emoji use. The inclusion of a small group who preferred not to disclose their gender also adds nuance, suggesting that future studies might explore emoji use beyond binary gender categories.

Table 3 Level of study

Level of Study	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
100	50	13.4
200	70	18.8
300	95	25.5
400	80	21.5
500	50	13.4
Postgraduate	27	7.4
Total	372	100

The table above shows that the largest group of respondents are in 300 level (95 students, 25.5%). This is followed by 400 level students (80; 21.5%) and 200 level students (70; 18.8%). Both 100 level and 500 level have an equal number of respondents (50 each; 13.4%). Postgraduate students are the least represented (27; 7.4%).

The majority of respondents are intermediate-level undergraduates (200–400 levels), who together make up 65.8% of the sample. This suggests that the findings will largely reflect the experiences of students already familiar with university life and digital communication practices. The relatively smaller proportion of 100-level students indicates that fresh entrants into the university system (who may still be adjusting to academic and social communication norms) are less represented. Similarly, 500-level students (often final-year or professional course students) are moderately represented, which can give insight into whether emoji use changes with academic maturity. With only 7.4% of respondents, postgraduate students' voices are less prominent. Their lower representation means the study will focus more on undergraduate patterns of emoji use rather than postgraduate experiences. The spread across all levels makes it possible to compare emoji usage across different stages of study, to see if maturity, academic exposure, or communication needs influence emoji patterns.

The data showed that mid-level undergraduates dominate the sample, meaning the study primarily reflected how emojis are used by students in the middle stages of their academic journey. While all levels were represented, the smaller share of postgraduates may limit the study's ability to generalize emoji usage among more advanced learners.

The predominant patterns of emoji usage among university students in Nigerian.

Table 4 Frequency of Emoji Use in Daily Conversation

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Very frequently	150	40.3
Frequently	120	32.3
Occasionally	70	18.8
Rarely	25	6.7
Never	7	1.9
Total	372	100

Based on the table above, a large proportion of respondents reported using emojis very frequently (150; 40.3%) and frequently (120; 32.3%) in their daily conversations. Together, this means 72.6% of students use emojis either very frequently or frequently. Another 18.8% (70 respondents) use them only occasionally. Only a small minority reported

using emojis rarely (6.7%) or never (1.9%). The overwhelming majority (over 70%) indicates that emojis are now a mainstream communication tool among Nigerian students. This widespread frequency shows that emojis have become integrated into everyday digital language, shaping how students express emotions, tone, and meaning. Since most students use emojis often, it suggests they are likely applied in both social and academic conversations, a useful link to your RQ2 (perceptions in different contexts). The very low percentage of students who rarely or never use emojis highlights that emoji use is nearly universal, though this minority group may reflect personal preferences, cultural factors, or digital literacy differences. The strong dominance of frequent users validates your study focus, emoji use is not a marginal practice but a central part of student communication.

It is saying that the table demonstrates that emoji use is highly prevalent among Nigerian students, with nearly three-quarters using them frequently in daily conversations. This underscores emojis' significance in shaping digital communication patterns and supports the rationale for investigating not only how they are used but also the meanings and perceptions attached to them.

Table 5 Platforms Where Emojis are Used most

Platform	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
WhatsApp	210	56.5
Twitter/X	50	13.4
Instagram	55	14.8
Facebook	30	8.1
TikTok	20	5.4
Others	7	1.8
Total	372	100

According to the data gathered, WhatsApp is by far the most dominant platform for emoji use, with 210 respondents (56.5%). Instagram (55; 14.8%) and Twitter/X (50; 13.4%) follow at a distant second and third. Facebook (30; 8.1%) and TikTok (20; 5.4%) have lower representation.

Only a small number (7; 1.8%) indicated "other" platforms. The overwhelming dominance of WhatsApp suggests it is the central medium of student communication in Nigeria, making it the main context where emojis are embedded in daily interactions. The notable presence of Instagram (14.8%) and TikTok (5.4%) reflects how visually driven platforms encourage emoji use, though still less than WhatsApp. With only 8.1%, Facebook seems to be less popular among younger demographics, aligning with global trends where youth shift toward newer platforms.

Different platforms may shape how emojis are used: On WhatsApp, emojis may serve interpersonal and relational communication. On Twitter/X, emojis might be tied to public expression, trends, or online activism. On Instagram/TikTok, they may enhance visual captions and entertainment content. Since most students use emojis on WhatsApp, your study's findings will largely reflect WhatsApp communication patterns, but differences across platforms could provide insights into context-specific emoji usage.

The data reveals WhatsApp as the most dominant platform for emoji use among Nigerian students, with over half of respondents identifying it as their primary medium. Other platforms such as Instagram and Twitter, are used to a lesser degree, while Facebook and TikTok trail behind. This highlights the centrality of WhatsApp in student digital communication and suggests that platform choice may influence both the frequency and function of emoji use.

The results reveal that emojis are widely adopted, with the majority of students reporting frequent or very frequent use in everyday communication. WhatsApp emerged as the dominant platform for emoji use, followed by Instagram and Twitter/X, reflecting global trends in youth digital communication (Dresner & Herring, 2010; Bai et al., 2019).

Table 6 Frequency of Emoji Use across Social Context

Context	Always	Often	Sometime s	Rarely	Never
Close friends	180 (48.4%)	120 (32.3%)	50 (13.4%)	15 (4.0%)	7 (1.9%)
Lecturers	20 (5.4%)	40 (10.8%)	80 (21.5%)	120 (32.3%)	112 (30.0%)
Classmates /Groups	100 (26.9%)	150 (40.3%)	90 (24.2%)	20 (5.4%)	12 3.2 %

Emoji use is most common with close friends: nearly half of respondents (180; 48.4%) use them *always*, and another 32.3% (120) use them *often*. Together, over 80% of students use emojis regularly when interacting with close friends. Only a very small minority use them *rarely* (4.0%) or *never* (1.9%). Emoji use with lecturers is very limited. Only 5.4% (20) said *always* and 10.8% (40) said *often*. The majority either use emojis *rarely* (32.3%) or *never* (30.0%). This shows that students exercise caution and formality in academic/authority communication. Emoji use with classmates and group chats is also fairly high: 26.9% always and 40.3% often, meaning two-thirds of students regularly use emojis in peer academic/social interactions. Moderate proportions use them *sometimes* (24.2%), while only small fractions *rarely* (5.4%) or *never* (3.2%) use them. The data highlights that emoji use is context-dependent. Students

are freer to use emojis in informal and peer-based communication (friends, classmates), while communication with lecturers remains more formal and restrained. The contrast between high use with friends/classmates and low use with lecturers suggests that students recognize social boundaries in digital communication. Emojis are seen as less appropriate in formal academic contexts. High usage among friends and classmates indicates emojis serve as tools for building rapport, expressing emotions, and reinforcing peer relationships. The minimal use of emojis with lecturers suggests that emojis may not yet be widely accepted in formal academic exchanges in Nigeria. This aligns with traditional expectations of professionalism and respect in teacher-student communication.

It is evident that students use emojis most frequently with close friends and classmates, highlighting their role in informal and peer-based communication. In contrast, emoji use with lecturers is rare, reflecting the perception that emojis are inappropriate or less acceptable in formal academic settings. This underscores the contextual and relational nature of emoji use among Nigerian students.

Students reported using emojis more frequently with close friends and classmates than with lecturers, highlighting the influence of communication context. This finding supports Media Richness Theory, which posits that communicators seek richer cues to reduce ambiguity in informal settings, and Social Presence Theory, which emphasizes the role of social cues like emojis in creating a sense of warmth and immediacy in online exchanges.

1. The perception of the students on using emoji for social and academic communication.

Table 7 Do Emojis Enhance Communication?

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Yes	310	83.3
No	32	8.6
Not sure	30	8.1
Total	372	100

An overwhelming majority of respondents (310; 83.3%) believe that emojis enhance communication. Only a small fraction disagreed (32; 8.6%), while another small group (30; 8.1%) were uncertain. This means more than four out of five students recognize emojis as a positive communication aid in their digital interactions. The findings suggest that emojis are not just decorative; students see them as functional tools that improve clarity, emotional expression, and meaning in digital communication. The high “Yes” response indicates that emojis are widely seen as helping to strengthen relationships, reduce misinterpretation, and

make conversations livelier. The small percentages of “No” and “Not sure” responses may reflect students who view emojis as unnecessary, distracting, or potentially ambiguous, showing that not all users share the same enthusiasm. This result aligns closely with your RQ2 (students’ perceptions of emoji use in social and academic communication), offering evidence that students generally hold positive perceptions of emojis in their digital interactions.

The data reveals that emojis are overwhelmingly perceived as enhancing communication among Nigerian students. This underscores their importance in digital interactions, particularly for expressing emotions, clarifying intent, and maintaining social bonds. However, the small group of skeptics highlights that emojis are not universally accepted, and their effectiveness may vary by individual preference or context.

A large proportion of students believed emojis enhance communication, with many agreeing that they often convey emotions more effectively than words. This underscores their role as emotional amplifiers in text-based interaction, consistent with findings by Derks, Bos, and von Grumbkow (2008).

Table 8 Emoji Helps Expressing Emotion Better than Words

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Strongly agree	140	37.6
Agree	160	43.0
Neutral	40	10.8
Disagree	22	5.9
Strongly disagree	10	2.7
Total	372	100

A combined majority of respondents (140; 37.6% strongly agree and 160; 43.0% agree) believe that emojis help express emotions better than words. Together, that’s 80.6% of the sample. A smaller proportion (40; 10.8%) were neutral, indicating mixed or situational views. Only 22 (5.9%) disagreed and 10 (2.7%) strongly disagreed, making up 8.6% of respondents who do not see emojis as superior to words for expressing emotion. The overwhelming agreement highlights that students consider emojis as powerful emotional tools, often more effective than text in conveying feelings such as joy, sadness, sarcasm, or humor. Emojis are seen as helping to bridge the gap left by the absence of facial expressions, tone, and body language in text-based conversations.

The neutral (10.8%) and disagreeing (8.6%) groups suggest that while most students find emojis helpful, some either rely more on words or perceive emojis as ambiguous, context-dependent, or less formal. This finding aligns with cultural communication patterns among youths, where visual and symbolic cues play a central role in social interaction. The

results provide strong evidence for your research objective of examining perceptions of emoji use, showing that students not only use emojis frequently but also perceive them as enhancing emotional expression more effectively than words alone.

The data shows that a large majority of Nigerian students believe emojis help express emotions more effectively than words, reinforcing their role as vital emotional cues in digital communication. However, a small minority remains neutral or skeptical, suggesting that while emojis complement text well, their effectiveness may vary depending on context and individual preferences.

Table 9 Appropriateness of Emojis in Academic Discussion

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Yes	110	29.6
No	120	32.3
Depends	142	38.2
Total	372	100

A relatively small proportion of students (110; 29.6%) believe emojis are appropriate in academic discussions. Slightly more (120; 32.3%) feel they are not appropriate. The largest share of respondents (142; 38.2%) said it depends on the context. The responses show that there is no consensus on emoji use in academic settings. While some students accept them, others reject them, and many remain conditional. The fact that the largest group answered “*Depends*” suggests that students see emojis as appropriate only in certain academic contexts, perhaps in peer group chats or informal exchanges with classmates, but not in formal communication with lecturers or academic writing. The near balance between “Yes” and “No” indicates that academic spaces are viewed as more formal communication environments, where emojis may be seen as either unprofessional or undermining seriousness. This result reflects an ongoing tension between traditional academic conventions (favoring formality and text-based clarity) and modern digital practices (where emojis are common in everyday communication). These findings speak directly to your RQ2, which explores students’ perceptions of emojis in social vs. academic communication. Clearly, while emojis are embraced in social settings, their academic appropriateness remains contested.

The data reveals mixed views on the appropriateness of emojis in academic discussions. While nearly one-third of students accept their use, another third reject them, and the largest share condition their use on context. This highlights the tension between formal academic norms and evolving digital communication practices among Nigerian students.

Table 10 Effect of Emojis on Seriousness of Academic Discussion

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Yes, negatively	120	32.3
Yes, positively	90	24.2
No effect	162	43.5
Total	372	100

The table indicates that the largest group of respondents (162; 43.5%) believe emojis have no effect on the seriousness of academic discussion. 120 students (32.3%) feel emojis affect academic discussions negatively, reducing seriousness. A smaller group (90; 24.2%) perceive emojis as having a positive effect, possibly making discussions more engaging or less rigid. The majority view that emojis have *no effect* suggests many students compartmentalize emojis as just communication tools, without attaching them to the academic weight of the conversation. The 32.3% negative responses indicate a significant group who worry that emojis may undermine formality, professionalism, and academic seriousness. This reflects the perception of academia as a more formal and text-driven environment. The 24.2% positive responses suggest some students see emojis as lightening discussions, aiding expression, and fostering engagement, possibly useful in peer learning or group chats. These mixed responses reinforce the idea that the effect of emojis depends heavily on context (formal communication with lecturers vs. peer-to-peer group work).

This result supports your aim of assessing students' perceptions, showing that while many remain neutral, there is a clear divide between those who see emojis as undermining seriousness and those who see them as enhancing interaction. Most students perceive emojis as having no impact on the seriousness of academic discussions, while others are split between viewing them as negative or positive influences. This reflects a tension between maintaining academic formality and embracing emojis as tools for engagement, suggesting that context determines whether emojis are seen as appropriate in academic communication.

It is worth noting that there is a divergence of perceptions here in that in academic settings, while some respondents considered emojis appropriate in academic discussions, others viewed them as undermining seriousness, with the largest proportion stating that appropriateness depends on context. These results reflect a tension between digital youth culture and the formal conventions of academic communication. From the lens of Social Presence Theory, emojis add nonverbal cues that enhance interpersonal connectedness, but within academic contexts, they may clash with expectations of professionalism (Lo, 2008).

2. Factors that influence the choices of emojis and the meanings among students in Nigerian.

Table 11 Influence on Emoji Choice

Factor	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Mood/Emotion	260	69.9
Trend on social media	140	37.6
Cultural background	90	24.2
Social media platform	100	26.9
Friends' influence	150	40.3
Others	12	3.2

The above table indicates that the most influential factor in emoji choice is mood/emotion (260; 69.9%), showing that students primarily select emojis to reflect their emotional state or feeling in communication. Friends' influence (150; 40.3%) and trends on social media (140; 37.6%) are also strong factors, reflecting peer dynamics and online culture. Social media platform (100; 26.9%) and cultural background (90; 24.2%) play moderate roles, suggesting that technical features (platform design) and cultural norms also shape emoji use. Only a small number (12; 3.2%) cited "other" factors. Students' heavy reliance on mood/emotion as a driver shows that emojis function mainly as tools of emotional expression and self-representation in digital communication. The significant role of friends and social media trends indicates that emoji use is shaped by social learning and collective digital practices. Students may adopt emojis to fit in, signal belonging, or follow popular online culture. The influence of platform type suggests that technical affordances (e.g., available emojis, design, or ease of use) affect choice. Cultural background's role (24.2%) highlights that interpretation of emojis may vary culturally, affecting how students select and interpret them.

The findings connect to communication theories: emoji adoption is influenced by social influence, cultural norms, and platform affordances, showing how innovations spread within peer groups. This directly supports the RO3, which examines the factors influencing emoji choice and meaning, confirming that both individual (emotion) and social (friends, trends) factors matter.

The data shows that students' emoji choices are primarily driven by mood and emotions, followed by social influences such as friends and online trends. Platform features and cultural background also play secondary roles, highlighting the interplay of personal, social, and technological factors in shaping emoji use among Nigerian students.

Hence, the study found that mood and emotion were the strongest drivers of emoji choice, followed by friends' influence and social media trends. This aligns with the Diffusion of Innovations Theory (Rogers,

2003), which emphasizes the role of social influence and peer adoption in shaping communication behaviors.

Table 12 Misunderstanding Emojis

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Yes, often	70	18.8
Yes, sometimes	180	48.4
No, never	122	32.8
Total	372	100

A majority of students (70; 18.8% “often” + 180; 48.4% “sometimes” = 67.2%) admit that emoji use can lead to misunderstandings in communication. Only 122 (32.8%) respondents said they never experience misunderstandings, showing that misinterpretation is relatively common. The “sometimes” category (48.4%) is especially dominant, suggesting that misunderstandings are not constant but arise in specific contexts (e.g., cross-gender, cross-cultural, or formal communication). Emojis are not universally interpreted the same way; meanings can shift depending on context, culture, or personal perception. This supports the idea that emojis, while enhancing expression, can also introduce ambiguity.

In academic or professional communication, misinterpretation could weaken clarity and cause communication breakdowns. This is important in your study since you’re also analyzing emojis in academic contexts. The finding reinforces the role of cultural background and social norms (as seen in your earlier table) in shaping emoji meaning. What seems funny or friendly to one person may be offensive or confusing to another.

From a Diffusion of Innovation perspective, it shows that while emojis are widely adopted, their interpretation is still evolving and contested. The results reveal that more than two-thirds of students experience emoji-related misunderstandings, highlighting the **double-edged role of emojis** in communication: they enrich expression but can also create confusion due to differences in interpretation.

Table 13 Do meaning change depending on the person?

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Yes	250	67.2
No	80	21.5
Not sure	42	11.3
Total	372	100

A strong majority of students (250; 67.2%) believe that the meaning of emojis changes depending on the person using or interpreting them. A smaller group (80; 21.5%) believe meanings remain constant, while 42 (11.3%) are uncertain. This confirms that emojis are not fixed symbols but

rather fluid, context-dependent signs. The finding underscores the subjective nature of emoji interpretation. Unlike words that carry relatively stable dictionary meanings, emojis rely heavily on personal, cultural, and relational context. This result aligns with your earlier finding (Table:12 Misunderstanding Emojis) that students often face confusion, since different people attach different meanings to the same emoji. The fact that meaning changes depending on the person suggests that individual identity, peer group norms, and cultural background strongly shape emoji interpretation.

From a Diffusion of Innovations perspective, while emojis have been widely adopted, their meanings remain socially negotiated rather than universally agreed upon. The majority agreement that emoji meanings change depending on the person reflects their **fluid and negotiated nature** in digital communication. This has both positive (flexibility, creativity) and negative (ambiguity, miscommunication) implications, making emojis powerful but also risky as communicative tools.

Table 14 Cultural Differences Affect Emojis Interpretation

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Strongly agree	120	32.3
Agree	150	40.3
Neutral	70	18.8
Disagree	22	5.9
Strongly disagree	10	2.7
Total	372	100

A clear majority of respondents (120; 32.3% strongly agree + 150; 40.3% agree = 72.6%) acknowledge that cultural differences influence how emojis are understood. A moderate group (**70; 18.8%**) are neutral, indicating that while they do not deny the effect, they may not consciously perceive cultural differences in daily usage. Only a small minority (22; 5.9% disagree and 10; 2.7% strongly disagree = 8.6%) reject the idea, suggesting that most students accept cultural relativity in emoji interpretation. The data highlights that emojis are not universally interpreted; their meanings can shift across cultural groups. For example, hand gestures or certain symbols may be read positively in one culture but offensively in another.

This finding reinforces earlier results on misunderstanding emojis and changing meanings across individuals, showing that cultural context is a major factor contributing to ambiguity in emoji use. In academic or professional settings, cultural variability could make emojis risky. Students interacting across diverse cultural or ethnic backgrounds may

unintentionally cause confusion or misinterpretation. From the perspective of Diffusion of Innovations Theory, while emojis have diffused rapidly across cultures, their meanings are not standardized, making them socially negotiated signs.

The findings show that most students recognize cultural differences as a major factor in emoji interpretation. This suggests that emojis, while global in availability, remain culturally situated symbols whose meanings vary across contexts, reinforcing both their expressive power and their communicative risk.

Cultural background and platform design were also reported as factors, demonstrating that emoji use is socially and technologically situated (Miller et al., 2016). Importantly, many respondents acknowledged that emoji meanings change depending on the person and that cultural differences affect interpretation. These findings echo the argument that emojis are “polysemous” symbols, open to multiple interpretations (Danesi, 2016)

Table 15 Gender influence on emoji use

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Yes	200	53.8
No	120	32.3
Not sure	52	14.0
Total	372	100

Over half of the respondents (200; 53.8%) believe that gender influences emoji use, suggesting that male and female students (and possibly other gender identities) differ in their frequency, style, or type of emojis used. About a third (120; 32.3%) disagree, indicating they perceive emoji use as gender-neutral. A smaller group (52; 14.0%) are uncertain, perhaps reflecting that while they notice individual differences, they may not explicitly attribute them to gender. The result suggests that students themselves recognize gender differences in emoji use. For instance, prior research often notes that women tend to use facial expressions, hearts, and emotive emojis, while men may use fewer emojis or different types (objects, symbols, hand gestures). This reflects how gender norms and identity can shape communication styles. Emojis may act as markers of self-presentation, with students consciously or unconsciously using emojis in ways that align with gender expectations. The relatively high proportion of “No” (32.3%) and “Not sure” (14%) suggests that while some differences exist, they are not always clear-cut or universally agreed upon. Emoji use may be more individual than strictly gendered in some contexts.

From a Diffusion of Innovations perspective, gender differences may influence how quickly or in what ways emojis are adopted and normalized

among peer groups. More than half of the students perceive emoji use as gender-influenced, suggesting that male and female students may differ in how they express themselves through emojis. However, the sizeable minority who see no gender influence indicates that emoji use also transcends gender boundaries, pointing to both socially shaped and individualized patterns of digital expression.

Over half of the respondents reported that gender influences emoji use. This perception is consistent with prior studies that suggest women tend to use emojis more frequently and for emotional expression, while men may prefer fewer or more neutral symbols (Park, Barash, Fink, & Cha, 2013). Nevertheless, a sizeable minority reported no gender influence, suggesting that emoji use may also be driven by individual communication styles rather than gender alone. This finding reinforces the idea that digital communication practices are shaped by both social norms and personal identity choices.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the patterns, perceptions, and influencing factors of emoji use among Nigerian university students. The findings highlight how emojis function as a vital part of digital communication, while also reflecting the tensions between informal and formal communication practices. This study concludes that emojis play a significant role in the digital communication practices of Nigerian university students. They function primarily as tools of emotional expression and social bonding, enriching conversations with peers while remaining contested in formal academic settings. Factors such as mood, peer influence, and social media trends strongly determine emoji choice, but cultural differences and individual interpretation mean that emojis are not universally understood. These findings support the relevance of Media Richness Theory and Social Presence Theory in explaining the widespread use of emojis in informal communication, while also validating Diffusion of Innovations Theory in accounting for peer influence, cultural negotiation, and responsible usage. Overall, emojis are cultural artefacts that enrich communication but carry the potential for misinterpretation if used indiscriminately.

Based on the findings, it is worth recommending that exercise caution when using emojis in academic contexts, where formality and clarity are expected, to avoid undermining seriousness or causing misinterpretation. Student should be aware of cultural and individual differences in emoji interpretation to promote responsible and inclusive digital communication. Educators should recognize emojis as part of students' communicative repertoire and consider their potential for enhancing engagement in informal learning or group collaboration. They should incorporate digital

literacy initiatives that guide students on appropriate and responsible emoji use, especially in academic and intercultural communication. Social Media platforms should be design to enhance cultural inclusivity by providing localized emoji descriptions or contextual guides to minimize cross-cultural misinterpretations. Finally, future research should conduct comparative studies across different regions, age groups, and cultural backgrounds to deepen understanding of emoji use and interpretation. It should explore the impact of emoji use on learning outcomes and academic communication, particularly in blended and online learning environments.

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