

## FUNCTIONS OF EMOJIS ON FACEBOOK POSTS

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### **Abstract**

Communication in this information age has evolved with the assistance of computer-generated iconic features called emojis. Numerous researches corroborated that emojis serve as *quasi-nonverbal cues* in computer-mediated communication (CMC). People develop tactics to compensate for the shortcomings of CMC (Gulsen, 2016) using emoticons. The purpose of this study is to find out the functions of emojis in Facebook posts. Using content analysis to analyze 100 Facebook posts as its corpora, results revealed that emojis are used for various functions such as additional information, either emotional or situational, representation, tone modification, action, message support, emphasis, directing or addressing, and for decoration. In terms of linguistic functions, it is redundant for both meaning and lexical representation, it is a lexical replacement, it serves to provide nonverbal forms of communication such as complementary usage, entire turn, and antiphrasis.

**Keywords:** emojis, content analysis, computer-mediated communication

Computer mediated communication (CMC) innovated various means for people to interact and express themselves. Digital communication has primarily brought instant communication that covers a vast number of people and area (Gulsen, 2015). Nowadays, most human interactions take place online specifically in social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.). Gulsen argued that with the rise of smart phones, millions of people prefer online form of communication because of the convenience of the medium.

Out of 3.17 billion internet users, 176 million are social networkers (Statistic Brain, 2016). Social networking sites allow

people to share what they do, how they feel, what they think, how they treat someone, etc. (Gulsen, 2015). There is an enormous network among people sharing every experience in real life with people who belong to the same digital community (Gulsen, 2015). This feature of SNSs is very enticing for the young adults of this generation or the so-called “millennial.”

Meanwhile, the absence of nonverbal cues in CMC had been a concern for many. In fact, the issue even reached numerous debates and research domain. CMC was deemed as detrimental to interpersonal relationships since the pertinent cues for maintaining them are missing. Hence, relationships are difficult to build as well. The fret over the issue had diminished with the advent of emoticons. Numerous researches corroborated that the latter serve as *quasi-nonverbal cues* in CMC. People develop tactics to compensate for the shortcomings of CMC (Gulsen, 2016). One of these tactics is through incorporating emoticons in toneless and plain text messages.

These elements were later transformed into emojis, which transcend the capabilities of the former by providing iconic features of objects that we see every day (e.g. buildings, animals, etc.). These Unicode graphics undeniably gained general patronage among internet users especially among social networkers.

Emojis are initially used in dyadic messaging, a mediated communication consisting of a sender and an interlocutor. It was first used in SMS and later hit various online group chats. Today, these elements are ubiquitous on social networking sites specifically on Facebook. According to the latest survey, there are over 1.86 billion active users on the aforesaid website (Zephoria, 2017). This makes it the fastest growing network in the cyberspace (Chaffey, 2017). According to a survey made by Facebook, the biggest chunk of its users is comprised of young adults (Facebook Q4-15 Earnings Conference Call, 2016).

Emojis have been through various evolutions in Facebook, which are now slowly being replaced by emoticons. Currently, the site enabled its users to embed built-in emojis on their postings, which contain an emoji along its description. A

new set of emoji icons is also being added from time to time.

In line with this, majority of Facebook postings primarily consist of emojis. It seems like people cannot post anything without embedding emojis on its content. These elements have become essential part of the message. More importantly, these updates can be seen not only by the user’s close friends but as well as other people in his or her friends list.

Currently, emojis do not merely compensate for the absence of nonverbal cues but also replaces the verbal expressions with small icons to convey messages and facts easily (Gulsen, 2015). This phenomenon is highly observed in Twitter, where enormous number of Tweets contains minimal words and became symbol-oriented message. In Facebook, the same thing could also be observed, but with less severity. This phenomenon is something that should not be overlooked for it is now an integral aspect of every communication endeavor in social networking sites.

Derks, Bos, and van Gumbkow (2007) discovered that emoticons enrich the meaning of the text message: A positive text message is rated more positively by incorporating it with a smiling emoticon while a negative text message is rated more negatively by incorporating it with a frown. Derks et al. (2007) also denoted the potential of emoticons to express ambiguity and sarcasm. The latter is constructed if the valence of emoticons varies with the valence of the text message. Thompson and Filik (2016) provided that sarcasm is produced with the use of “wink” and “tongue” emoticons. In addition, they asserted the emoticons’ aid in clarifying the intended meaning of the text message.

In line with this, To (2008) unveiled the assistance of emoticons in a precise message interpretation: The sender is able to convey the intended meaning if appropriate and simple emoticons are integrated with the text message. Effective emoticon use has the potential to enhance a person’s ability to accurately and appropriately use EMC (Dunlap, 2015).

On the other hand, Canstock (2015) propounded that

emoticons and emojis' intended impact is relatively weak; hence, people apparently utilize these pictographs in a habitually or unconscious way. Derks, Bos, & von Grumbkow (2008: 379) believes that emoticons may be used to emphasize or clarify one's feelings, but also soften a negative tone and to regulate interaction, just as smiles and frowns do in daily life. As stated by Bordignon (2015), emoticons and emojis provide the quickest way to express mood through exerting least effort.

Emoticons could also facilitate one's emotion. In studying the effects of emoticons on memory, Alfred et al. (2009) confirmed the efficiency of emoticons in conveying the sender's genuine emotions; however, they added that it does not have lasting effects. Meanwhile, in a qualitative analysis of asynchronous communication, Suhas (2015) indicated that emoticons are "emotion markers" of the sender. These communicative elements also help in making rapport and social intimacy (Suhas, 2015). Dunlap et al. (2015) argued that emoticon use is one strategy to improve communication, establish social presence, and build learning communities.

Abdullah and Jibril (2013) unveiled another essential function of emoticons. Aside from being substitute for para-verbal cues (e.g. tone, pitch, etc.), they claimed that the latter do not merely function as such, but emoticons also function as morphemes in an online message. *Morphemes* are considered as the smallest units of grammar and syntax by linguists. These elements cannot be divided into smaller units. For instance, in the word "dogs," there are two morphemes: the noun "dog" and the "-s" (Nordquist, 2017). With the rise emoticons and later on emojis, these pictographs have become an integral part of a text message.

There are minimal present studies, which tackled emojis' linguistic features. Since emoticons' linguistic functions or features could be applied to emojis, categories from Amaghlobeli's study were added as a way to address this. Each function is discussed below with corresponding examples.

**Criticisms of emoticons and emojis' usage.** Emojis and emoticons were subjected to various types of study, which

imparted their importance in text-based interfaces whether in synchronous or asynchronous settings. In spite of these corroborations, some scholarly works raised their queries regarding emoticons and emojis' plausible repercussions upon its usage as well as queries regarding its efficiency. While emoticons may simplify the task to convey different moods without much effort, they have limitations of their own (Bordignon, 2015).

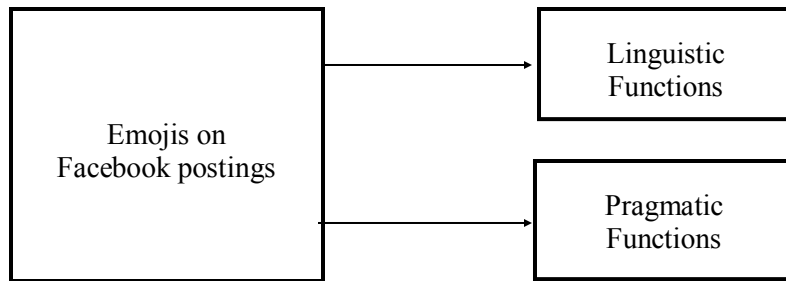
### **Statement of the Problem**

The use of emojis on Facebook is ubiquitous nowadays. Almost every update in Facebook contains at least one of these pictographs. This phenomenon is primarily attributed to the young adults since they mostly constitute the number of population in social networking sites. As referred to the literature review, there is scarce in studies, which defined Facebook users' motivations. Hence, there is a need for a study to further analyze the latter, which usher individuals to use these elements on their updates.

In order to address the aforementioned problem, the main research question must be answered. Accordingly, this research sought answers to the succeeding questions in response to the main research question:

1. What are the pragmatic functions of emojis in CAS students' Facebook postings?
2. What are the linguistic functions of emojis in CAS students' Facebook postings?

### Conceptual Paradigm



**Figure 1.** The variables being investigated in the study.

### Method

Both summative and directed approach to content analysis were used in this study. Rather than analyzing the content as a whole, summative approach involves analyzing a single word or element in relation to the content (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999; Holsti, 1969). Using existing theory or prior research, the researcher began by identifying key concepts or variables as initial coding categories (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). The present study utilized pre-conceived categories from relevant theories or related studies to construct a coding scheme.

### Participants and Sampling Procedure

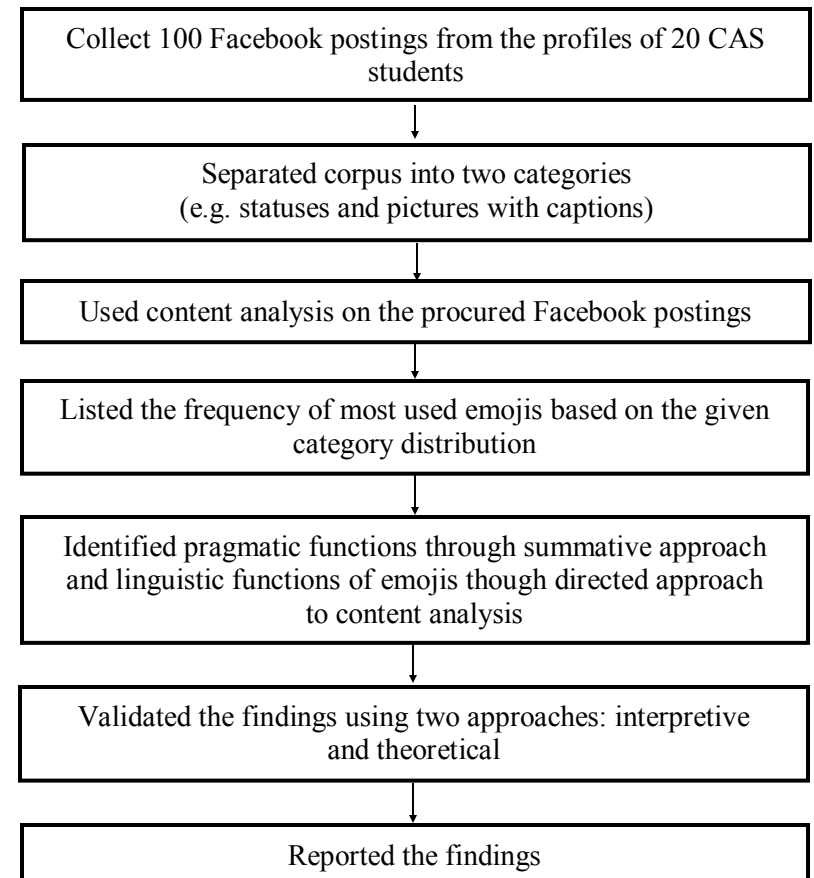
Facebook posts and messages of 20 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) enrolled in the first semester of S.Y. 2017 to 2018 were analyzed. The participants were chosen based on their active use of Facebook who are fond of using emojis. Their first three status messages and images with captions that would appear in their timeline should contain emojis.

At least five Facebook posts were taken each from 20 users, for a total of 100 posts. The corpora are aggregate pictures with captions and status messages. Only postings with emojis were procured from users' profiles. The posts were validated using theoretical and interpretative validity. Interpretative validity

is the degree to which the researcher accurately portrays the meaning given in the corpus (Embraced Wisdom Resource Group, 2015). This was done through participant feedback or "member checking."

For theoretical validity, the researcher used theories to help analyze and explain the findings (Embraced Wisdom Resource Group, 2015). With this approach, the researcher looked at multiple perspectives from various theoretical proponents.

### Data-Gathering Procedure



**Figure 2.** Data-gathering procedure.

The researcher privately messaged selected users on their Facebook accounts. An aggregate of 100 Facebook posts were procured from 20 Facebook profiles. Status messages and pictures with captions were separated and analyzed individually. These postings were separated because these contain different features. Status messages stand on their own while captions are highly dependent on the images, where these were embedded.

### Data Processing

After organizing the corpus, the researcher listed the occurrence of emoticons and emojis in the research corpus. These occurrences of emoticons and emojis were shown through frequency distribution. There are three main categories in which frequency distribution was based: (a) top 10 most used emojis, (b) top 10 Unicode Common Locale Data Repository (CLDR) classes (e.g. face, trees, etc.), and (c) number of messages per number of emoticons/emojis. The first category is divided into three subcategories: (a) number of postings the emoji appeared, (b) the number of sequences, and (c) the number of unique sequences it is a part of. Sequence is any string of emojis of one or more emojis (unique or not) with no spaces in between (e.g. 😊😊😊) (Cramer et al., 2016). This category distribution is adapted from the study of Cramer et al.

Afterwards, the researcher constructed an improvised coding scheme to guide the coding process, which was prepared beforehand. There are separate coding sheets since there were two sets of functions with different structure. The derived categories were divided into two broad categories: (a) verbal and (b) nonverbal. The categories were both adapted from Amaghlobeli and Cramer et al.'s study, which tackled linguistic features of these pictographs.

Next, the researcher proceeded to identifying pragmatic functions from the corpus through a summative approach, which includes two phases of analysis. During the first phase, the researcher started analyzing the corpus without any predetermined categories. Based on this analysis, possible categories were derived from the literature review and related studies.

## Results and Discussion

### Pragmatic Functions of Emojis

After the initial analysis conducted by the researcher, there are seven (7) functions conceived. The initial list of pragmatic functions includes the following: (1) adding information: (a) emotional and (b) situational, (2) tone modification, (3) decoration, (4) action, (5) greetings, and (6) emphasis.

**Final set of pragmatic functions.** After analyzing the postings with corresponding responses from the participants, the researcher laid out eight pragmatic functions of emojis, which are shown in Table 1. The responses were used as confirmation for the predetermined categories.

**Table 1.** Pragmatic functions of emojis.

Functions	No. of Postings
1. Additional information	
a. Emotional information	45
b. Situational information	30
2. Representation	19
3. Tone Modification	13
4. Action	8
5. Message Support	5
6. Emphasis	3
7. Directing or Addressing	2
8. Decoration	2

The results suggest that emojis are widely used for adding information in the message. There are 45 postings containing emojis to provide emotional information while thirty (30) postings were recorded to have emojis that provide situational information.

There are a total of 75 postings, where this pragmatic function was detected. The results imply that most Facebook

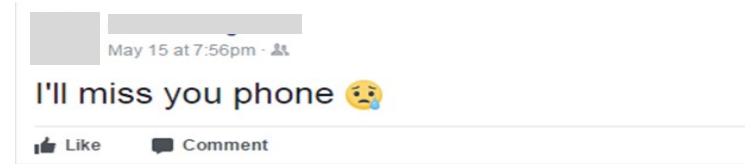
users utilize emojis to supplement information in text messages (or posts for this matter). Users have the tendency to embed emojis in their posts as these are deprived of pertinent cues. It can be implied they embed emojis to make their text messages enriching. In this case, the message occupies shorter space, and it becomes less tedious to read. The result supports Cramer et al.'s (2016) study in which the said function is the most used one.

As can be discerned, there are minimal changes in the list of functions after reviewing the corpus again, taking into account the senders' recorded responses. The "greeting" function was removed in the final list because this was not mentioned by any respondents as their motivation for putting emojis. Meanwhile, there are three functions added in the listing: (a) representation, (b) directing or addressing, and (c) message support. These new functions were named based on the keywords from the participants' responses.

The change means that there are inaccuracies with the first analysis of the researcher. An interpretation of the findings also suggests that there are pragmatic functions of emojis, which are subtle to the receiver(s). This agrees with Cramer et al. (2016) implications that the receiver should know the sender's intention for having emojis within the message.

While it is highly possible that an emoji could have more than one pragmatic function in a post, the researcher took into account the intentions given by the user himself/herself regardless how it functions according to the researcher's (or receiver's) perspective.

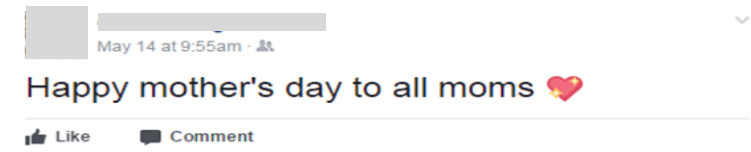
**Emotional information.** Respondents have indicated that they used emojis in their postings to express emotion. Results show that most postings contain emojis, which add emotional information from the receiver. This result is pretty much expected because the function of emojis to express emotion has been echoing in literature review and prior studies. The expressed emotions spotted in the corpus are the following but not limited to happiness, anger, sadness, excitement, and disappointment.



**Figure 2.** Emojis that add emotional information.

Figure 2 shows a typical example how emoji expresses an emotion. The sender used "crying" emoji (e.g. 😭) at the end of the message to express her sadness over her broken phone.

The findings imply that users utilize emojis for adding emotional information to show sincerity of their message. Similar in a face-to-face setting, people show emotion typically through facial expressions, which express sincerity.



**Figure 3.** Emojis that add emotional information.

In the example in Figure 3, the sender incorporated a "shining heart" (e.g. ❤️) emoji with her Mothers' Day greeting to show her gratefulness and love towards all mother figures. The findings imply that emojis with symbolic features could also be used to express emotion. As shown in Figure 3, the ❤️ emoji represents the emotion the user wants to convey.

**Representation.** This function has not been stressed in the literature review; and thus, it is one uncommon function of an emoji could take in a message. The term "representation" was derived from the respondents as they said that some of their emojis were intended to "represent" favoritism, an adjective, etc. through iconic or symbolic representation.



**Figure 4.** Emoji as representation.

In Figure 4, the emoji itself was used to state the sender's fondness and love of strawberries. "Last summer, when we went to Baguio, we personally picked strawberries in a farm, and strawberry is really my favorite." The "strawberry" emoji was used as an iconic representation since the subject is strawberry.



**Figure 5.** Emoji as representation.

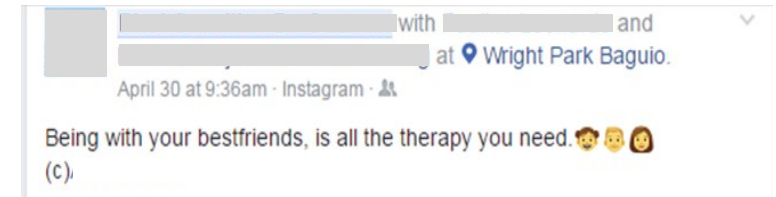
Figure 5 shows a similar example with the previous one. This time, the "dessert/ice cream" (e.g. 🍦) emoji was used to represent the sender's craving towards scramble. Like in the previous example, the emoji was used to represent through iconic means the subject, which is the scramble.



**Figure 6.** Emoji as representation.

Figure 6 shows an example of Facebook posting in which an emoji was used to represent sophistication and

glamour. "I used that emoji to express sophistication and how glamorous I felt that night. I used that emoji to represent it." Parallel with the previous pragmatic function, the findings imply that emojis provide the easiest way to communicate.

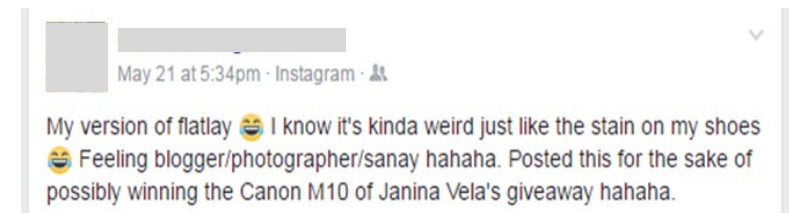


**Figure 7.** Emoji as representation.

The three "girl" emojis shown in Figure 7 were used to represent the three girl best friends in the image. It can be implied that the user wanted to portray their relationship and to stress the moment that they are together.

The samples shown in figures above also give situational context; however, the primary motivation implied by the respondents was to "represent." This is to draw distinction from the function of emojis to add situational context that is absent in the message.

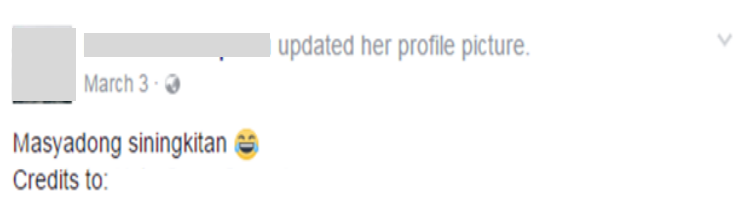
**Tone modification.** From the findings, emoji was also used to modify the message tone. The "modification" observed from the data is mostly about changing meaning and implication. This is in line with the prior studies, which purported the same findings (Cramer et al, 2016; To, 2008).



**Figure 8.** Emoji as tone modifier.

Figure 8 shows an example of an image caption in which emoji was used to modify tone of the message. The first “laughing” emoji was used to hide one’s awkwardness and embarrassment. *“Laughing emoji... to hide the awkwardness of my flatlay, not that confident on my flatlay but need to post it for a giveaway contest so even it's embarrassing I still posted it.”* On the other hand, the second “laughing” emoji was used to imply that message was meant as joke. *“It is funny how the stain on my shoes was included in the picture. So I used the stain on my shoes with the laughing emoji to show it as a joke.”*

**Action.** Findings also showed that emojis were indicated to convey action. With the deprivation of nonverbal cues in text-based interfaces, most are the instances where emojis are used to compensate for these missing cues and actions.



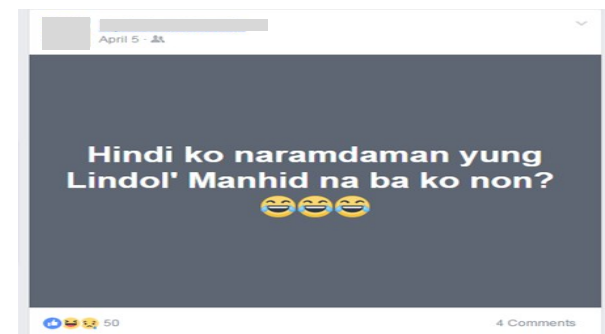
**Figure 9.** Emoji as action.

In Figure 9, the “laughing” emoji (e.g. 😂) at the end of the image caption shows that the sender was laughing while she was writing the caption.



**Figure 10.** Emoji as action.

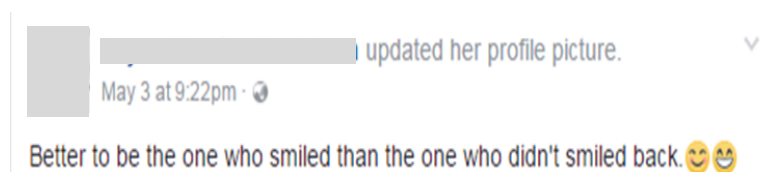
In the example shown in Figure 10, the two emojis were used because the sender wanted to show that he was “imitating” the character in the movie, who was listening to a sound tape. *“Because in the movie, 13 Reasons Why, Clay was listening to a tape. I used those emojis to show that I was listening as well, something like that.”*



**Figure 11.** Emoji as action.

The “laughing” emojis in the Figure 9C was used to show simultaneous actions. *“Actually I always use that emoji, whenever I felt like I wanted to laugh and cry at the same time.”*

**Message support.** Findings also show unexpected functions from the corpus. Some respondents have indicated that they use emojis to “support” their message. This function of emoji was not mentioned in literature review and prior studies.



**Figure 12.** Emoji as message support

In Figure 12, it was indicated that the two “smiling” emojis at the end of the caption were intended to support the caption itself. The findings imply that “support” is equivalent to

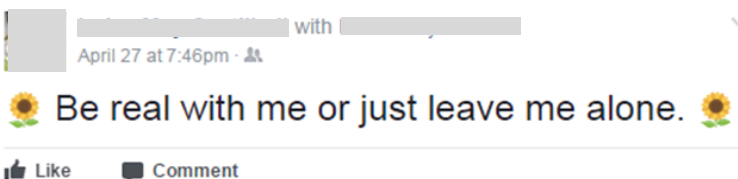
“suit,” which means that the sender intended to use emojis because of the thought that it supports what the message literally meant.



**Figure 13.** Emoji as message support.

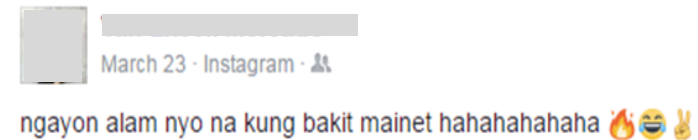
Similarly, the “crying” (e.g. 😞) emoji in the Figure 13 was used because it is deem appropriate with literal meaning of the message itself. *“It was a joke, but because I was apologizing, I used crying/sad emoji.”* A review of the findings shows that users take into account the literal meaning of the message while embedding emojis.

**Emphasis.** As addressed in literature review, emojis are used as emphasis if these are placed as a sequence or as a group (Al Rashdi, 2015; Cramer et al., 2016). The findings show that individual emojis were also noted to provide emphasis to the message.



**Figure 14.** Emoji as emphasis.

In Figure 14, the two sunflower emojis placed one at the beginning and end of the posting were intended to give emphasize the message. *“I used those emojis to emphasize my message.”*

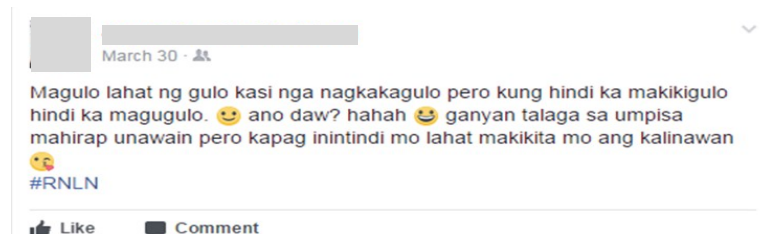


**Figure 15.** Emoji as emphasis.

In Figure 15, the “fire” (e.g. 🔥) emoji was used as an intensifier of the message. *“I used that emoji to make my message more intensified.”*

As can be observed, the sender did not merely used any emoji to emphasize the message, but only those relevant ones or those with meaning. In Figure 15, the sender indicated that the sunflower emojis have corresponding meaning. *“I used sunflower to show that I am a woman who's not afraid to show up and shine even without a man.”* While in Figure 15, the sender used “fire” emoji to emphasize the word “hot” in the message, which is a typical representation of the word. The findings show that a single emoji is used for providing emphasis despite of the prevalence of emoji “sequence.”

**Directing or Addressing.** Another new and unexpected function was unveiled from the findings – the directing or addressing function of emoji. It is interpreted that Facebook users innovate ways to address a public message for specific person. In an online public platform like Facebook, the number of audience is broad; and there are instances where the sender wants to address or direct the message through public means. Respondents have indicated that they used emoji as way to direct the message.



**Figure 16.** Emojis with addressing or directing function.

In Figure 16, the “kissing” emoji was used to indicate that the message was intended for a specific person. *“That emoji pertains to someone I love.”*

### Linguistic Functions of Emojis

This section shows the statistics of linguistic functions detected from the corpus. The statistics were compared with existing studies available. These were interpreted and were compared with Amaglobeli and Cramer, de Juan, & Tetreaut’s study and with related literature.

**Table 2.** Linguistic functions of emojis according to categories

Function	No. of posts per function
<i>Verbal</i>	
Redundancy	
Meaning	34
Lexical	12
Lexical Replacement	
All	6
Partial	3
<i>Nonverbal</i>	
Complementary Usage	59
Entire Turn	16
Antiphrasis	10

The results suggest that emojis repeating the message meaning (redundancy of meaning) is the most observed case in verbal category, which specifically occurred in thirty-four (34) postings verbal. This agrees with prior implications that most emojis enclosed the meaning of the message (Amaglobeli, 2012; Cramer et al., 2016). A text message alone appears insincere while incorporating emojis makes it seems true. Like in face-to-face settings, saying happy statements must be relayed with happy tone usually through facial expressions showing joy. This function is followed by cases of lexical replacement in which six (6) postings solely have emojis while three (3) postings have emojis, which selectively replaced some terms.

Within nonverbal, the widely used one is complementary function of emoji followed by occurrence of entire turn and antiphrasis function, consecutively. In the studies of Amaglobeli (2012) and Cramer, et al. (2016), the complementary usage of emojis was also the highly spotted one.

The results also show that emojis mostly function nonverbally more than verbally in linguistic terms (see table 9). In total, there are eighty-five (85) reported cases in which emojis contain nonverbal function while there are fifty-five (55) cases in which emojis contain verbal function. Even in an online platform, the results live up with those of other studies, where emojis were concluded as quasi-nonverbal cues. The results parallels with Amaglobeli’s (2012) study in which cases of emojis with nonverbal functions are much highly observed than verbal.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The study aimed to discover “how” and “why” emojis are used in Facebook updates, specifically in status messages and images’ captions. The researcher found out that the primary intention or motivation of Facebook users for utilizing emojis is to add information on the message whether emotional or situational. The findings imply that both pragmatic and linguistic functions are connected to address various communicative needs, which are absent in a mediated interface. Therefore, in a broad network such as Facebook, users (the nodes) are tied with the same characteristics – utilize emojis for communication purposes.

Both the results and findings coincide with the implications made by Cramer, de Juan, and Tetreault (2016) and other prior studies that the use of emojis is just beyond “fun.” This extends to the propositions of social processing theory, which proposes that in a deprived-cues interface like electronic message applications and other online platforms, people seek ways to compensate for this shortcoming. Users, who are “interpersonally oriented” and “adapt the communication cues that are available to them in order to exchange social information,” have the potential to substitute verbal and textual

content and style variations to express information about themselves, their emotions and attitudes (Gulsen, 2015).

From this study, emojis can be concluded as integral part of communication endeavor through mediated means. Whether it could affect people's linguistic ability, it is unknown for right now; however, it is plausible to state that emojis will continue to be an essential part of mediated interfaces as can be implied from the findings.

The sample covered in this study is small to the point that it is difficult to give general conclusions. Additionally, the social processing theory is not covered fully because the study specifically covers the sender perspective while the theory could be maximized by also learning the receiver's perspective. The implications made are from given motivations on selected corpus; therefore, there are unavailable insights not covered by the researcher, which could be addressed through further study.

### **Recommendations**

Now that the findings were finally reported, the researcher laid the following recommendations both for the future direction of this study and for the entities involved.

1. It was determined that one should not interpret emojis literally as these elements' functions depend on the sender's preference.
2. Always remember that while many users apparently pay no heed with the latter, others are careful and mindful of using emojis.
3. Users should be mindful of utilizing emojis especially in crucial situations where ambiguity is a big deal.

**Recommendation for future research.** The research method was exhaustive enough to cover the pragmatic and linguistic functions of emojis on the corpus. Nonetheless, there are ways to further improve this study.

1. It would be much better to conduct an in-depth interview to identify pragmatic functions because the researcher was only able to get the reported motivations.
2. The study made use of selected 100 Facebook postings from the participants. This number is limited; therefore, it narrows the perspective of the researcher.
3. As an addition, it is recommendable to increase the number of respondents. More respondents, more distinctions and diversity.
4. The study focused on sender perspective – their motivation for using emojis. The existing body of knowledge about emoji will broaden if the receiver's perspective would be focused in the future studies.
5. The categories for determining the linguistic functions were derived from the literature review, which means that this study was not able to add functions in this category. It is advisable to seek a linguistics expert or veteran to look over this kind of study in the future.
6. It is also recommended that future studies focus on one aspect only (either with pragmatic or linguistic functions).

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