

Taming the Sting: The Use of Evaluative Emojis by College Students in Kuwait¹

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Abstract

Messaging through smart phones has become a vital method of communication. In the light of the use of emojis in messages, the following paper investigates the reasons and methods of the use of different emojis by college students in academic related settings. The study was implemented in the college of Basic Education in Kuwait. The participants, 163 male and female students, answered a questionnaire on the importance of emojis, the context of use, and the way they are used. In addition, some of the students were interviewed to elicit more information on the use of emojis. After the analysis of the qualitative and quantitative data, the researchers found that the use of emojis by students is highly important in the discussion of college-related topics. They are used as a safe vehicle to reflect criticism and negative comments in an authority-free setting. Whether they are used individually or in clusters, they carry a bundle of meaning.

Keywords: Sociolinguistics, self-expression, emojis, gender, college, undergraduate education

1. Introduction

In an ever-changing world that is heavily impacted by new communication technologies and emerging media cultures, popular texting discourse is increasingly favoring more distinctive visual resources during communication. The use of emojis (also known as emoticons, although slightly different) is on the rise and does not seem to be exclusive of a certain socio-cultural context, age group or gender type. While emoticons are typographic representations of facial expression which usually mirror emotions, emojis are actual pictures of a large variety of facial expression and ideas, such as weather conditions, seasonal celebratory events, food, etc. (Pavalanathan and Eisenstien, 2015). We will use the term emojis henceforth since these pictographic icons are a prevalent feature in the interaction of the sample being examined in the present study.

As defined by the Oxford Dictionary, emojis are ‘a small digital image or icon used to express an idea or emotion’ (<http://www.Oxforddictionaries.com>). Researchers in language and communication view these ‘graphical forms’ as replacements of ‘paralinguistic’ features and they are considered the ‘socio-emotional’ suppliers in a message (Thurlow and Brown, 2003: 10; Crystal, 2006; Jibril and Abdulla, 2013). These pictograph characters were first launched in Japan in the 90s and are now used globally as part of mobile phones’ texting repertoire on social media platforms. Emojis are on the increase with new characters being introduced all the time (see Unicode Consortium). The idea of having such a large variety of emojis to choose from gives them a rather playful character and makes them quite accessible and mutually intelligible among users. In fact, their universal meanings are generally shared because users are constantly habitually use them as part of their daily routine interaction on social media (Dresner and Herring, 2010).

Our aim in the present study is to show that students in the College of Basic Education in Kuwait use emojis as a non-verbal tool to convey evaluative attitudes, intentions and decisions with regard to their own academic performances and their professors’ teaching practices. In order to argue for this claim, we apply a combined qualitative and quantitative framework of analysis.

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Our expectation is that this combination of approaches will help identify the distinctive functions and features of emojis as a communicative strategy among members of an online community. Our examination looks at the impact of emoji use from 3 vantage points: gender, topic (of discussion) and the audience (present in the online forum).

2. Literature Review

2.1 The extended meaning of emojis

Theoretical indicators and empirical research involving emojis suggest that these expressive pictograph-images gain their importance as speaker intent clarification tools akin to paralinguistic features such as intonation used in verbal communication and punctuation marks in formal written exchanges such as emails (Dresner and Herring, 2010; Wang et al., 2005). Also, several sources of research have examined the importance of the interpretative aspect of emojis touching on the double meaning or non-literal, extended meaning of these graphical icons (Marvin, 1995; Kelly, 2015).

Interestingly, apart from the fact that they add an expressive, playful and fun characteristic to texting, they are often utilized to disambiguate messages. According to Crystal (2006), emojis are used to distinguish the sender's intent and avoid misunderstanding by the recipient of a text message (2006: 39) while also having a 'pragmatic force' as in warning a recipient or 'diffusing the situation' in a chat group (2006: 42). Additionally, these pictographic icons are commonly used to establish rapport and solidarity (2006: 43) while transmitting messages in a playfully manner (also see, Dresner and Herring, 2010). While they are used as shortcuts especially in situations where the user feels too lazy to type a whole sentence, emojis are also used when a facial character can capture an idea more appropriately than words. In the sense that rejecting a dinner invitation with a smile and an excuse of being busy with work somehow lessens the force of a rejection (Thurlow and Brown, 2003; Lebduska, 2014). According to the cultural critic Umberto Eco (2002), 'we live in an age where the diminutive, the brief and the simple, are highly prized in communication'. He explains why short forms in modern communication can be simply irresistible (Eco, 2002). If anything, this applies quite aptly to computer-mediated communication (CMC henceforth) according to Lynn Cherny (1999). She argues that 'The availability of multiple, flexible ways of communicating invites users to innovate, and the community may adopt their innovations into its linguistic repertoire (Cherny, 1999: 177). Considerable evidence has shown that the use of emojis is a global feature of social media communication (Danet and Herring, 2007: 27) albeit a new way of communicating that has an 'informal character' and lies somewhere in between traditional writing and oral communication (Turkle, 1995: 183).

In fact, one of the most interesting characteristic of using emojis as part of routine interaction lies in the extent to which a user can get away with using them in patterns of 'non-serious' or informal chat particularly when discussing sensitive or very serious issues. This is especially prevalent within certain specialized online settings, such as the one being explored in the present study: the use of emojis as a tool of communication in college student forums. In this online setting using context-dependent emojis during a discussion about group reactions towards announcements made by college professors is common and acceptable behavior, even when the emoji being used has negative or offensive implications.

2.2 Using emojis as a communicative strategy by online student communities

Ever since the launch of the world's most popular mobile phone apps (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, etc.) a decade ago, social media is proving to be an increasingly central part of how people communicate with each other. Besides allowing communication between distant others (such as family, friends and loved ones), social media sites have become ever more important online spaces, which facilitate the exchange of information exchanged between users in work-related contexts. These spaces also provide a safe setting where venting one's views is a common strategy among social groups with shared interests, such as college student groups, for example (Manago et al., 2012). According to sociocultural theorists, social media blogs and group forums provide students in academic settings with a unique space to impart knowledge, voice frustration or even create a sense of solidarity among students who share a common goal, namely, getting through college (Ryshina-Pankova and Kugele, 2013; Dunlap et al., 2015). In addition, given that these student networks are brought together in virtual platforms, it is understood that self-disclosure is at a minimum.

This in turn permits affordances during interactive engagements online that are not always possible or acceptable in face-to-face interaction. Among these affordances are utilizing emojis that entail expressing love, such as the kiss-blowing face or red rose emoji or expressing anger and/or aggression, such as the fist punch emoji, or red angry face, and so on (Moss, 2013).

Other research in this area focuses on looking at emoticons as a learning tool in the classroom (Dunlap et al., 2015). Dunlap et al. (2015) explore how emoticons are used as a tool to improve online teaching and learning among members in a community of practice. While numerous other studies emphasize gender difference associated with emoji use (Brunet and Schmidt, 2010; Dresner and Herring, 2010), a study carried out by Kelly (2015) looks at the universal meaning of emojis and how highly context-dependent and user mood-dependent they can be when trying to understand differences in interpretation. And while we also argue in the present study that emojis are context-dependent, users go through a process of mastering the meaning of emojis before using them at a more individual level. That is to say, when users are introduced to new emojis, they go through a process of negotiating their meanings and with the repeated use of these emojis their meanings are renegotiated introducing shades of different meanings (Walther and D'Addario, 2001). This gives emojis the added feature of having multiple and dynamic meanings.

A few other studies demonstrate the beneficial role that emojis can play in people's lives. One such study was conducted by David Donovan (2016) in which he looks at the impact of emoji use by young people with mental issues and how using them facilitates communication with these people's guardians or parents and hence improves their mental well-being. However, to our knowledge, little empirical work has explicitly examined emojis as an expressive or evaluative strategy utilized by student-led networks on social media. And while the sociolinguistic examination of CMC generally and emojis specifically in gender-specific settings such as the Arabian Gulf region, are gradually gaining momentum. For example, Al-Rashdi (2015) looks at the function of emojis in casual communication between friends and family in the Omani culture and explores emojis as a venting tool in professional circles. These research enquires are fairly novel to our region. The present study could therefore bring forth a unique viewpoint on the distinctive features and functions of emojis as a communicative tool used in a specialized online setting. This would undoubtedly lend support to the continuously growing body of research on emojis and emoticons in areas of new media communication and interactional sociolinguistics.

In previous research within the field of exploring socio-cultural aspects of student interaction (Algharabali et al., 2014), we were able to establish that students tend to use 'gossip-like' interactional practices in various (online and offline) public platforms in order to evaluate whether their professors were 'good or bad teachers'. While such practices meant that these evaluative statements spread all around the college community, they were never considered as a direct attack on the teaching staff at our institution. As a continuation to our exploratory vein of examining college students' communicative practices, in the present study we investigate the students' use of emojis in online forums. Here, we intend to address 4 objectives: (a) why are emojis considered to be an important feature of communication in our students' online communities? (b) do different topics trigger certain types of emoji use during interaction? (c) whether or not there could be differences between male and female students' use of emojis? (d) whether or not the type of audience (for example, the presence of a professor or of students from the opposite sex) influences the use of emojis?

3. Methods

The sample being examined in the present study includes two departments within the College of Basic Education in Kuwait: The English Department (consisting of all-girls students) and The Music Department (consisting of all-boys students). It is customary within the two departments that at the beginning of the each semester the professor of a given subject asks the class to pick a student who is willing to be the administrator of a student group forum on the popular social media platform, WhatsApp. It is uncommon for professors to join these student groups but certainly not impossible, either. However, in the rare occasion where a professor does join their social networks, the students discretely setup a new group that does not include their professor (this is according to feedback given by students during the interviews that were conducted for the present study, see below). The reason students setup these groups on social media is to exchange information, display announcements given by the professor, vote about decisions pertaining exams. But most importantly, students use this online space to vent their frustrations and air their criticisms about the professor and his/her teaching practices.

Our study is built around a combined quantitative and qualitative approach that was designed to assemble results on the prevalence of emoji use in online student forums, categorize the functional aspect of emojis, yield findings on their situated use as determined by three sociolinguistic variables, namely: gender, topic and audience.

This framework would then be coupled with feedback from interviews, which provide a descriptive identification of how emojis are utilized as an expressive tool in a 'safe' non-self-disclosing setting. The idea of exploring the use of emojis as part of the students' repertoire in online forums first originated from a general database collected during a sociolinguistic course assignment intended to help students practice how to apply analytical sociolinguistic variables such as, hearer/speaker, setting, topic, purpose of interaction, etc. on extracts from CMC in student forums. After obtaining permission from students to use this data for further research purposes and upon closer examination, the data suggested that emojis seem to be a significant feature in students' online chats with each other. Based on the patterns that were revealed on emoji use, a questionnaire was designed in order to assemble findings related to the research line of inquiry presented above (see Section 2.2). The questionnaire was composed of ten multiple-choice-based questions with most questions encouraging further comments to elicit the reason for a particular choice. The questionnaire, which was written in English and translated into Arabic for the convenience of the students, was administered to 100 female students at The English Department and 100 male students from The Music Department both in the College of Basic Education (although not all questionnaires were utilized, see Section 4, below).

To compliment the quantitative findings collected from the questionnaire, interviews were set up with 10 female students (who had also participated in answering the questionnaire). Unfortunately, however, due to sociocultural constraints associated with the gender-segregated nature of the College of Basic Education, interviews with male students were not possible because the researchers performing the study are female professors. The interviews were semi-structured and focused on a number of issues: capturing a more detailed picture of what actually goes on during text-based chat between students in online forums and gathering in-depth information about the functions of emojis and their non-literal, extended meaning. We opted for face-to-face interviews because they have the added dimension of being a multi-faceted, qualitative source of information unraveling some of the vagueness encountered when dealing with questionnaires (Schiffrin, 1994). Also, the rich feedback that was provided by students was supplemented by examples or extracts of (student identity-protected) chats that demonstrate the use of emojis in online forums.

4. Results

The data obtained depended mostly on open-ended and close-ended questions distributed to the students in the form of a questionnaire. The actual participants were 82 male students and 81 female students (a total of 163 students), who are all students in the College of Basic Education in Kuwait. The first part contained ten questions, some of which required students to add a note for clarification. The second part consisted of a chart listing common emojis and reasons of use; where the students were requested to list the emojis used in certain contexts and the frequency of the emoji use (see Appendix 1 for the list of emojis used in the present study).

The first statement in the questionnaire asks students about the reason they use emojis. The most common reason given was "to clarify the text" (41.1%). However, a one-way ANOVA by gender by the first statement reflects significance of $f=0.002$ (where significance is calculated at $f \leq 0.05$). It appears from analyzing the mean of the first statement that 48.1% of the female participants use emojis because they clarify texts as opposed to 34.1% of the male participants. Male students, however, use emojis for fun. Table 1 reflects the most common reasons for the use of emojis in texting by both genders.

Table 1 Answers to the statement “why do you use emojis?”

		Gender		Total
		male	female	
Why do you use emojis?	because everyone does	4	4	8
	to clarify text	28	39	67
	because it's faster than text	6	9	15
	because it's fun	29	12	41
	to make the message seem more powerful	15	17	32
Total		82	81	163

As shown in Table 1, the majority of students use emojis to clarify the text.

It appears from the data that emojis are somewhat important, according to 47.9% of the participants. However, emojis seem to be more important to female students as stated by 59.2% as opposed to 35.4% male participants. Moreover, 49.7% of the students stated that they would not care if they found that they could not use emojis. A one-way ANOVA by age by feeling if emojis could not be used reveals high significance ($f \leq 0.01$), as the eldest age group (30-35) cared less about using emojis. Although the majority of students stated that they would not care if emojis were not available to use especially male students (59.8%), surprisingly, 54% of the students noted that they use emojis in 75% of their messages! A one-way ANOVA shows high significance as the participants who are aged 23-26 use emojis significantly less than the other age groups ($F=0.036$).

Serious messages usually do not contain emojis, as reflected by 76.5% of the participants, 11.1% of the participants avoid using emojis in sad messages or ‘depressing messages’ (according to interviewees). Additionally, when it comes to using clusters, gender has not been found to be significant. 55.8% of the students stated that they use emojis in clusters. They defended their choice of using clusters by providing many reasons. The reasons are listed below from the most common to the least common:

1. The message becomes clearer
2. A cluster of different emojis gives several meanings
3. To avoid dull conversations
4. To have a relaxed conversation
5. To type less
6. To emphasize meaning
7. To reflect exact feelings

Two students added that using clusters depends on the conversation, albeit the fact that they usually feel the need to use emojis in clusters. The remainder 44.2% that do not use clusters also provided their reasons:

1. To be very specific and clear
2. It is faster
3. It is brief
4. To enable the reader to concentrate on the message
5. To leave space for words

On another note, according to responses, when messages are exchanged among students they are not the same as when the messages involve both teachers and students. 61.7% of the students said that they do not use emojis when the conversation is teacher-student based. Moreover, although more male students than female ones use emojis with teachers (47.6% and 28.4% consecutively), the majority of both genders believed it is a formal message and should not contain emojis as a sign of respect for the teacher. However, some male students felt that using emojis would break the ice between the student and teacher and makes conversations easier. And yet in a one-way ANOVA by age, high significance of $f \leq 0.01$ appeared as the oldest group (aged 30-35) does not use emojis with teachers at all ($m=2.00$).

The majority of the participants believe that emojis could sometimes be misunderstood (63.8%). The reason behind this misunderstanding, in the participants' point of view, is that emojis are given certain meaning by individuals; hence, their interpretation is based on the individual's sociocultural background. Another reason provided was that some emojis are believed to be sarcastic while they are not; a good example of that would be the use of the tongue and one eye wink face (see Appendix 1) which might reflect a joke and would be understood as sarcasm. One last reason given for the misunderstanding of emojis is choosing the wrong emoji by mistake. The students clarified this point by adding that once you insert an emoji by mistake, it is very difficult to take it back. When the students were asked if they would use the same emoji if a member of the opposite gender were in the group? 39.3% of the students answered with yes. 45.1% of the male students stated that they would, as opposed to 33.3% of female students. When asked to explain, most students said gender does not make a difference.

Many male students believed that it is more important to use emojis when the opposite gender is in the group because "girls appreciate emojis more than boys". However, a few students of those who chose "yes" added "we must be selective and choose appropriate emojis only". 26.4% of the students stated they would not use emojis if there were individuals from the opposite gender (more specifically, 30.9% female students and 22% male students). They believed that emojis might be misunderstood because girls interpret emojis differently due to gender differences in interpretation.

The final question to the students was "would you use emojis in your class group if your teacher was with you in the texting group?" 39.3% responded with "no", 39.9% replied with "sometimes", and 20.9% said "yes". 49.4% of the females noted they would not use emojis if the teacher was with them in the class group, in comparison to 29.3% of the male students. They believed the use of emojis was disrespectful, and were afraid the teacher would misinterpret the students' intention when using an emoji. On the other hand, the students who sometimes use emojis (the majority of which are male students) stated that it depends on the teacher's mood, gender and personality, as well as the choice of emoji being used. The students, who use emojis when a teacher is in the class group, use it to break the barrier between the students and the teacher; moreover, many students believed that using emojis is convenient because it saves time and sends the messages more clearly; hence they prefer not to stop using them when teachers are around.

When given a list of emojis, the students were asked to state which emoji they prefer to use, and when do they tend to use it. They were provided with five contexts: homework, tests, grades, class cancellation, and teacher evaluation. The data shows that female students use emojis more than twice as much as male students (scoring 5776 and 2112 successively). The data also reflected the fact that students use emojis most when it comes to class cancellation (1928), followed by tests (1619). The most emoji type used is the crying face which scored a high 452 (see appendix A for the emoji list). The second most common emoji scoring 384 is the face with the heart eyes, followed by the scream in fear face (342) and the pensive face (303). Chart 1 (Appendix 2) illustrates the amount of emojis use by all participants and the contexts in which they are used.

When analyzing the data in terms of gender, the image slightly changes. Female students appear to use emojis most when the topic is about class cancellation (frequency of 1465). The next popular topic with emojis is grades, followed by tests (1170 and 1130 consecutively). The most common emoji used by female students is the crying face which scored a high 329. In second place comes the heart eyes which scored 262. In third place is the cry with one tear face, and the scream in fear follows it with a score of 232. The unamused face comes fifth (224) and the pensive face comes in sixth place scoring 218. It appears that the poop emoji is the least common emoji between female students. Chart 2 (Appendix 2) displays the amount of emoji use between female students within the five suggested contexts.

Not only do male students use emojis less than female students, but they also use them differently. The context where male students use emojis most is tests (489), the second most common context would be class cancellation followed by grades (463 and 441 successively). Male students favor the crying face emoji. This is represented by a frequency of use as high as (123), whereas their female peers use the heart eyes face at a frequency as high as (122). The third most common emoji amongst male students is the scream in fear face scoring 110, while the confounded face comes forth with a score of 93.

The pensive face comes fifth, scoring only two points more than the face with the grin, which scored 83. The least popular emoji with male students is the sleeping face emoji, which scored 40. Chart 3 (Appendix 2) shows the amount of emoji use among male students within the five suggested contexts.

5. Discussion

Our findings demonstrate commonalities with previous research on emojis and emoticons, especially with relation to gender and age. For instance, although emojis seem to be a very important tool of communication commonly used by most students in the present study, female students are almost twice as likely to use them than male students (cf. Wolf, 2000; Crystal, 2006; Dresner and Herring, 2010; Nishimura, 2015). Additionally, younger students are a lot keener on using emojis than older students (cf. Nishimura, 2015). Also, as supported by numerous empirical work, we have found emojis to be used essentially to clarify or disambiguate messages which could be misunderstood on their own (Dresner and Herring, 2010; Dunlap et al., 2015).

That said, we have however, uncovered new grounds in the present study that do not appear to have been touched upon in past studies in new media communication. For example, the students who participated in the questionnaire of the present study believe that serious and/or sad messages should not usually include emojis. And yet, according to responses from the questionnaire that specify a link between the use of a particular emoji and the academic topic being discussed, the opposite seems to be true. We were able to establish from both questionnaire and interview feedback that negative emojis such as crying face, or scream in fear face, for example were frequently used to express group commiserations and lamentations over unfortunate topics such as poor performance on tests or difficult exams. When students use these particular emojis during such critical times, they (the emojis) are intended as a communicative strategy that helps create a sense of solidarity. The nature of the sociocultural fabric of these online groups encourages students to build online 'communities of practice' (built on from Lave and Wenger 1991). In these groups, students are brought together through shared goals as well as shared problems and common communicative practices using language features (such as, emojis) that allow them to demonstrate group membership (Lave and Wenger 1991).

One of the more important functions of emojis that also appears to lack in-depth examination in work on CMC is how these pictograph icons are used as a 'safe' expressive strategy in online student forums. We mention the word safe because similar interactional practices may be considered culpable in face-to-face communication due to the prevalent power asymmetry between teacher and student in the College of Basic Education, Kuwait (cf. Algharabali et al., 2014). Consider for example, the situation in which positive emojis such as the dancing emoji, the heart eyes face, a red heart emoji and the clapping hands emoji are used by most students upon seeing a class cancellation announcement. This expression of happiness could greatly offend the professor cancelling his/her class if it were to be articulated in his/her face. However, when it is used in student forums, there are 3 protective factors at play: a) the fact that emojis are expressed online where only the students involved are present, b) the students are protected by pseudo-nicknames rather than their real names, and c) the idea that using these pictographic icons creates a playful or less disrespectful expression toward class cancellation (Dresner and Herring, 2010).

In his seminal work on conversational organization, sociologist Erving Goffman proposed that 'playfulness' during interaction can be keyed as a 'make-believe' activity which allows participants in an engagement to understand situated meaning without any cause for misunderstandings while decoding meaning of a message (Goffman, 1974: 48). The pictograph nature of emojis and the 'frame' (the virtual context) in which they are being used makes them highly context-dependent as well as both understood and appropriately interpreted by the participants in this online social network (Goffman, 1981). Students in the College being examined are not known to be whistleblowers. Therefore, no student would take the negative implications represented by positive emojis out of this online context and convey them to the professor in question, as the ramifications of such a deed would simply go against the sense of community that students have created.

While we have established that they do have multiple meanings and that they are context-dependent, emojis may also have individually determined interpretation. Consider the following extract provided from one of the students who participated in face-to-face interviews. The students in Extract 1 are reacting towards their poor performance in a midterm exam:

Extract 1

- (1) **User A** Soooo girls, how did u guys find the exam? 😄
- (2) **User B** I think I'm going to fail the course, for sure 😂😂
- (3) **User C** Me too 😭😂😭😂😭
- (4) **User D** 'F' for me 🍑🍑🍑🍑
- (5) **User E** I don't want to fail 😭
- (6) **User B** Common, be real..we're doomed 😂😭
- (7) **User E** 😞😞😞

Extract 1, demonstrates the dynamic feature of emojis. Here, the emojis used appear to have a situated meaning since there is a clear contradiction between the typed text message and the particular emoji(s) accompanying the message. Two users express their unfortunate expected failure in the subject by ironically using positive emojis (dancing and tears of laughter face, see lines 2 and 4), while one user mixed a positive emoji (tears of laughter face) with a negative emoji (crying face, see line 3). According to the student who provided Extract 1, and who was present online during this interaction, students often commiserate their academic misfortunes by conveying opposing emojis or mixed emojis that signify mixed feelings in order to show the group their utter hopelessness especially if they believe they are bound to fail the subject. Another interviewee mentioned that using positive emojis while discussing unfortunate events diffuses the somber mood among students in the forum. In the present study, we label emojis with double meanings: topic-dependent emojis (see Figure 1). And while one of the students engaging in this extract did express sad feelings towards the prospect of not wanting to fail (see sad face, line 5), she was jokingly mocked for being unrealistic by another user who expresses this using the tears of laughter face (line 6), to which she (user E) then disapprovingly responds using the un-amused face (line 7).

It is worthy of note that the gravity of the topic or announcement introduced by the administrator usually not only instigates the type of emojis being used but also their intensity. In Extract 1 above, several users have opted to using a cluster of either the same emoji or mixed emojis. According to interviewees, using multiple emojis in a single message often represents the intensity of the feelings – be it positive or negative. They also believe that using a cluster of mixed emojis identifies one's feelings much more accurately than a text-based message, especially in situations where mixed feelings occur. Additionally, as our findings demonstrate, using clusters of emojis in a message does not seem to be linked to the gender of the user, but more to the topic being discussed.

One of the major gender differences in our findings was that female students use emojis for the interactional clarification of a message, while male students use them for their playful characteristic, thus resonating to existing research (cf. Wolf, 2000). Another gender-related finding, that seems rather unusual, draws a relationship between the user of emojis and the audience that s/he is using these emojis in the presence of. Male students have no quibbles over using emojis in the presence of professors in forums. They emphasize a link between the character of the professor and the judicious use of emojis. Although male students approve of using emojis in the presence of female students, they favor using emojis that appeal to female preferences and shy away from emojis that may offend them to avoid any potential misunderstandings. Female students, on the other hand, prefer to limit emoji use to an all-girl audience and believe that using emojis in the presence of professors is disrespectful. Students do not usually have difficulties interpreting the meaning of emojis in a given communicative situation. According to feedback from interviewees, there are times where the use of emoji clusters by many students with no accompanying text, not only creates misunderstandings and confusion, but also causes chaos and a total breakdown in the flow of a group discussion.

This happens especially when the administrator is asked by the professor to announce an important piece of information (whether positive or negative) and the students reaction goes viral mostly using clusters of the same emoji or mixed emojis making it difficult for other students who were not present at the time of the announcement to understand the theme of the discussion. This is why most administrators introduce to the group a new title when there are new announcements. This way they create a theme that relates to the ongoing discussion, and thus, prevent potential misunderstandings among the students in the group. Interestingly, emojis have a practical function too. There are incidents when emojis replace typed words or short sentences, especially if succinct or quick responses are necessary.

The idea of creating an online group is for students to have their say in major decisions (if and when they are granted this option). Agreeing on a specific test date, for example, is a situation where the administrator suggests several options and the students vote in favor of whatever options are provided, by using the raised hand or thumbs up emojis. In this case, emojis are easier to count in a group of 30 or 40 students than various typed text responses. These emojis tend to be non-polar (neither negative nor positive) and are not likely to be used in contexts where they could be seen as ambiguous or having a double meaning. Figure 1 below, reveals an overview of the different functions of emojis as used by college students in online forums.

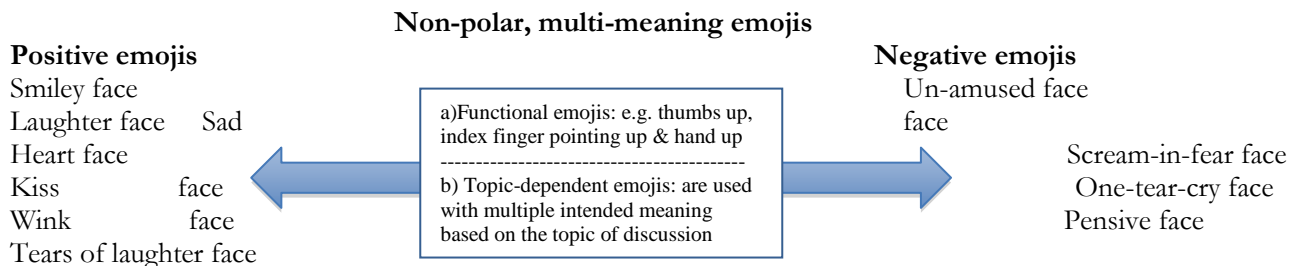


Figure 1. Emoji-nal Polarity: Categorizing emoji functions.

6. Conclusions and Implications

In the present study, we have applied a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches to investigate the prevalent use of emojis among students in the College of Basic Education in Kuwait. We have argued that students take advantage of the whimsical pictographic feature of emojis, and the authority-free online space to express serious messages such as criticizing a professor's difficult exam or lamenting poor student performances in a test. We have also demonstrated that the multi-meaning feature of emojis is subject to appropriate interpretation based on the topic being discussed in the student forum. The present study could potentially fill a gap in the literature with regard to the use of emoji clusters. Our findings have shown that using repetitions of the same emoji or a mixture of emojis can emphasize the intensity of a message or be used in a situation where mixed feelings can be difficult to express in a text-based message. Additionally, we have found that not only is the use of a particular emoji determined by the topic, but also influenced by the audience present in the forum – whether it is students from the opposite sex or the professor of the subject. And whereas both male and female students believe emojis are important in online communication, we have established that the two genders use emojis for different purposes and use different emojis on similar topics.

This study, then, primarily identifies a less familiar function to the use of emojis, one that is strictly limited to online use within a community where users share common goals and shared communication practices. Although the double intended meaning of emojis has been investigated by numerous studies, we shed light on new aspects of emojis use as a context-dependent, safe tool which mitigates the negativity of a message in a specialized setting. Yet, with 70 new emojis being added every year to the already huge number of existing emojis, according to the Unicode Consortium (unicode.org/emoji/), it is difficult not to imagine the various new multi-functional and multi-meaning features that these pictographic icons will add to our everyday communication. This suggests a need to revisit the investigation of emoji use in professional settings in future works.

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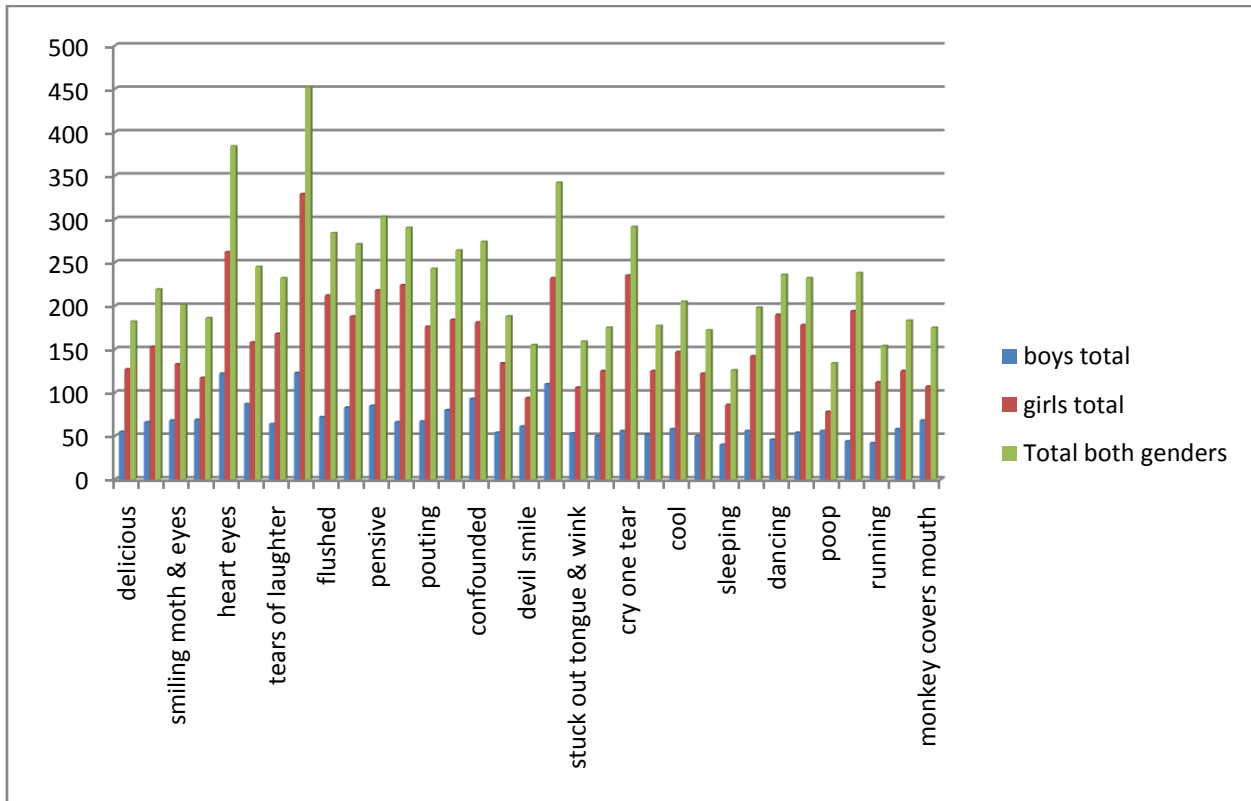
Appendix 1

		emoji name
		delicious
		smiling face & open mouth
		smiling moth & eyes
		wink
		heart eyes
		kiss
		tears of laughter
		crying face
		flushed
		grin & eyes smile
		pensive
		unamused
		pouting
		frustration
		confounded
		smirk
		devil smile
		scream in fear
		stuck out tongue & wink
		tongue & closed eyes
		cry one tear
		medical mask
		cool
		halo

		sleeping
		rolling eyes
		dancing
		clapping
		poop
		heart
		running
		monkey covers eyes
		monkey covers mouth

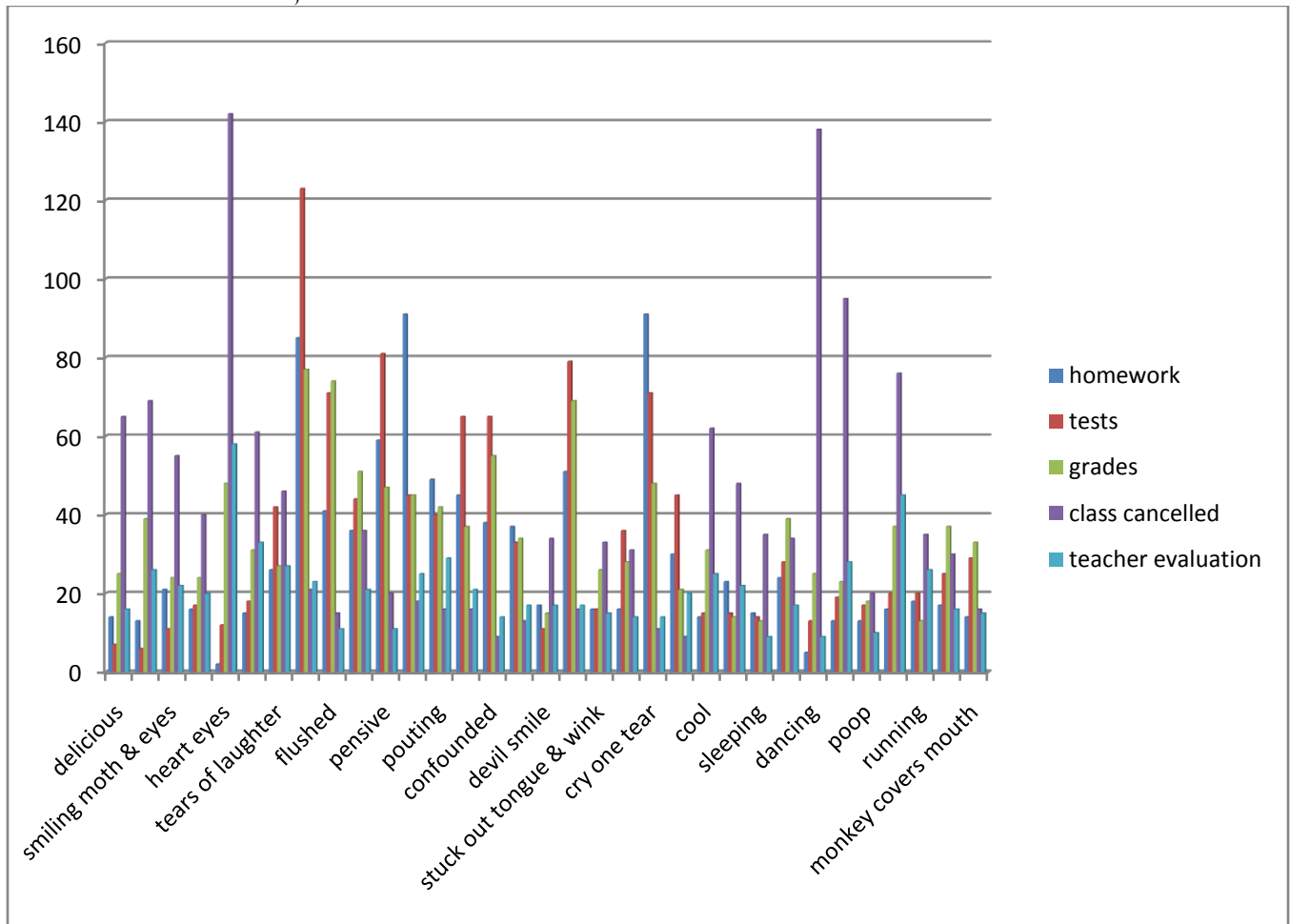
Appendix 2

Chart 1 types of emojis used in five different contexts by both genders



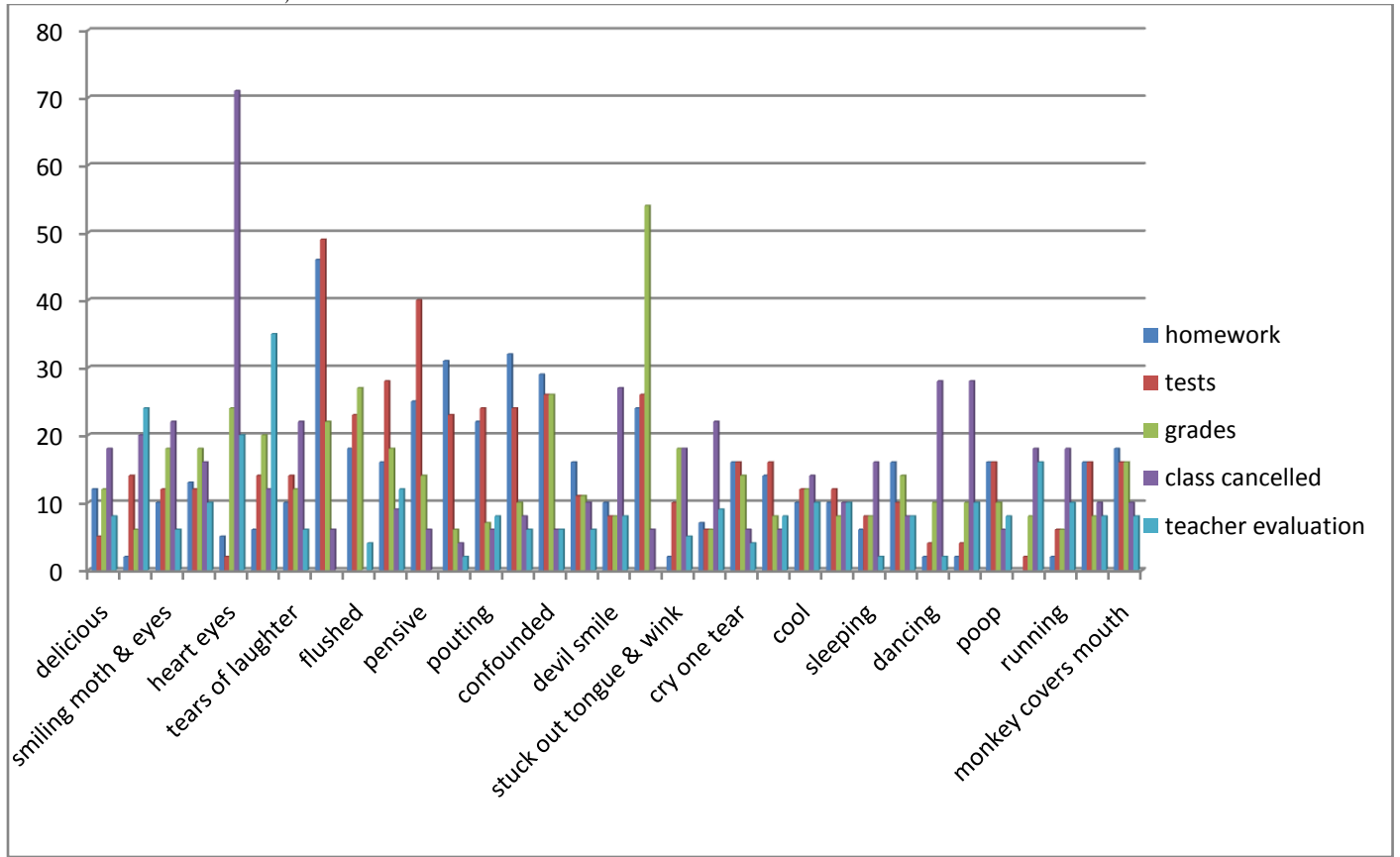
The Chart above shows that “crying face” is the most used emoji.

Chart 2 female use of emojis in five different class-related contexts



As reflected in Chart 2, female students use all kinds of emojis

Chart 3 male use of emojis in five different class-related contexts



The data in Chart 3 reflects the male students use emojis most for class cancellation.