

Emojis In Digital Communication: A Semiological Study Following Roland Barthes' Framework

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Abstract:

This study investigates the semiotic dimensions of emojis in digital communication, questioning whether they function as a universal visual language. Using Roland Barthes' three levels of signification—denotation, connotation, and myth—the research analyzes a purposive sample of ten frequently used emojis, categorized into emotional expressions, gestural signs, and cultural objects. Findings show that while emojis present relatively stable denotative meanings, their connotative and mythic interpretations vary widely depending on cultural and social contexts. At the mythic level, emojis reproduce ideologies of emotional transparency, positivity, consumerism, and gender norms, challenging the assumption of universality. By applying Barthes' framework holistically, the study contributes to emoji scholarship and emphasizes the importance of semiotic inquiry in understanding digital discourse. Future research is encouraged to adopt cross-cultural and comparative approaches in order to capture the complex and evolving nature of emoji usage.

Keywords: Emojis, Semiotics, Roland Barthes, Digital Communication, Visual Language.

1. Introduction

Digital communication has undergone a radical transformation in recent decades, particularly with the advent of social media and instant messaging platforms. Among the most distinctive elements of this transformation is the emergence and widespread use of emojis—small pictographic symbols that supplement, and in some cases

substitute, written language. Emojis have become embedded in daily digital discourse, shaping interpersonal interactions and transcending the constraints of purely verbal communication. Their ability to convey affect, nuance, and cultural symbolism in a compressed visual form has prompted both popular fascination and scholarly inquiry.

The proliferation of emojis across platforms such as WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook highlights their growing importance as a communicative tool in the digital age. Some scholars argue that emojis constitute a new universal language, one that bridges cultural and linguistic barriers by relying on visual symbolism rather than alphabetic systems (Danesi, 2017; Novak et al., 2015). Others contend that while emojis may be widely recognized, their meanings remain context-dependent, culturally specific, and ideologically charged (Dresner & Herring, 2010; Stark & Crawford, 2019). This scholarly debate raises a crucial semiotic question: **to what extent can emojis be considered a universal visual language?**

The relevance of this question extends beyond casual digital interaction. It touches upon fundamental issues in semiotics, intercultural communication, and media studies. Emojis operate at multiple levels of meaning: they depict literal objects (denotation), evoke cultural and emotional associations (connotation), and reflect broader ideological narratives (myth), in line with Roland Barthes' (1967) seminal framework. As such, emojis provide fertile ground for examining how symbolic systems evolve in the digital era and how meaning is negotiated within globalized communication networks.

Despite a growing body of research, gaps remain in the systematic application of semiological theory to emoji analysis. Many existing studies treat emojis as supplementary linguistic markers rather than as complex semiotic entities capable of carrying layered cultural and ideological meanings. Furthermore, the universality of emojis is often assumed rather than critically interrogated. This study addresses these gaps by applying Barthes' model of semiology—denotation, connotation, and myth—to a purposive sample of widely used emojis, with the aim of uncovering the semiotic processes that underlie their interpretation.

2. Literature Review

In order to address the research problem and situate emojis within a broader semiotic perspective, it is essential to ground the study in a robust theoretical framework. Roland Barthes' semiology provides a comprehensive model for analyzing signs at three interrelated levels: denotation, connotation, and myth. Applying this framework to digital symbols such as emojis enables a deeper understanding of how seemingly simple pictographs convey complex cultural and ideological meanings. At the same time, reviewing existing scholarship on emojis as visual language helps to contextualize the present study within ongoing debates in linguistics, communication, and cultural studies. Therefore, this section outlines the theoretical foundation drawn from Barthesian semiotics and surveys key literature that has examined emojis as communicative tools, digital gestures, and ideological artifacts.

2.1. Semiotics and Roland Barthes' Model

Semiotics, the study of signs and meaning-making, provides a powerful framework for understanding how cultural texts—whether verbal, visual, or digital—communicate layered meanings. Roland Barthes (1967, 1972) expanded upon Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic model of the sign, which posited the relationship between the *signifier* (form) and the *signified* (concept). For Barthes, signs are not neutral but culturally embedded, operating simultaneously at multiple levels of meaning.

Barthes distinguished three levels in the process of signification: **denotation**, **connotation**, and **myth**. Denotation refers to the literal, descriptive level of meaning. Connotation refers to the associative meanings that signs acquire within cultural and social contexts. Myth represents the ideological dimension, whereby signs naturalize and reinforce dominant cultural narratives. Through this triadic framework, Barthes demonstrated how everyday cultural artifacts—from advertisements to photographs—are invested with meaning that extends far beyond their surface representation.

In the context of emojis, Barthes' framework allows for a systematic exploration of how these pictographs function not only as literal

representations (e.g., a face with tears of joy) but also as carriers of cultural associations (e.g., humor, irony, or sarcasm) and ideological myths (e.g., global connectivity, digital intimacy, or emotional transparency). This layered model is particularly useful for analyzing whether emojis can sustain universal interpretations or whether their meanings are inherently shaped by cultural and social contexts.

2.2. Emojis as a Visual Language

Since their introduction in Japan in the late 1990s, emojis have evolved into a ubiquitous feature of digital communication. They are now integrated into nearly all major messaging platforms, reflecting their role in supplementing or substituting textual expression. Emojis are often described as a “visual language” because they rely on pictorial signs that can, in theory, transcend linguistic boundaries (Danesi, 2017).

Proponents of the universality hypothesis argue that emojis, much like traffic signs or pictograms, communicate meanings that are intuitively understood regardless of linguistic or cultural background (Novak et al., 2015). Their standardized Unicode encoding further supports this claim, ensuring that emojis retain consistent forms across devices and platforms. This perspective positions emojis as a potential lingua franca of digital communication, capable of bridging global audiences.

However, other scholars caution against overstating the universality of emojis. Dresner and Herring (2010) argue that emojis function more as markers of illocutionary force—indicating tone, affect, or speaker intent—rather than as fully autonomous linguistic signs. Similarly, Stark and Crawford (2019) highlight the cultural specificity of emoji use, noting how the same symbol may carry different connotations across communities. For example, the “folded hands” emoji 🙏 may be interpreted as prayer in some cultures and as a gesture of gratitude or respect in others.

Thus, while emojis may provide a shared repertoire of symbols, their interpretations are far from uniform. The gap between their denotative and connotative levels underscores the importance of applying a semiotic perspective to evaluate claims of universality.

2.3 . Semiotic Studies on Emojis

A growing body of research applies semiotic theories to the study of emojis, though often in fragmented ways. Some scholars adopt a structuralist approach, analyzing emojis as components of a digital grammar (Gawne & McCulloch, 2019). Others focus on the pragmatic functions of emojis, such as softening statements, managing politeness, or conveying irony (Alshenqeeti, 2016). Recent studies emphasize their multimodal role, showing how emojis combine with text, images, and hashtags to create layered digital discourse (Evans, 2017).

Despite this progress, relatively few studies explicitly employ Barthes' tripartite model of signification to emojis. Those that do often limit their focus to either denotative or connotative levels, leaving the ideological dimension underexplored. For instance, Danesi (2017) discusses emojis as a form of "semiotic shorthand" but stops short of interrogating their mythic dimensions. Conversely, Miller et al. (2016) highlight interpretive variations across cultures but do not systematically link these findings to semiological theory.

This research builds upon such studies by offering a comprehensive Barthesian analysis of emojis across all three levels of meaning. In doing so, it seeks to illuminate not only how emojis are recognized and used but also how they embed and reproduce broader cultural ideologies in digital communication.

2. 4. Research Gap and Contribution

While the literature demonstrates the communicative significance of emojis, it reveals key gaps that this study seeks to address. First, the assumption of universality has not been critically examined through a robust semiological framework. Second, existing scholarship often overlooks the ideological implications of emojis as cultural artifacts. Third, there remains a need for integrated analyses that bridge semiotic theory with empirical observations of emoji use.

By addressing these gaps, the present study contributes to the field of semiotics and digital communication in two ways: (1) by applying Barthes' framework holistically to the study of emojis, and (2) by

offering a nuanced evaluation of their potential and limitations as a universal visual language.

3. Methodology

Building on the theoretical framework and previous research, the present study adopts a methodological design that allows for a systematic exploration of emojis as semiotic signs. Since the research questions focus on how emojis operate at the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth, a qualitative semiotic analysis is the most appropriate approach. This section therefore outlines the methodological choices of the study, including the research design, corpus selection, analytical procedures, and limitations. By clarifying these aspects, the methodology ensures transparency and rigor, while also providing a structured pathway for applying Barthes' model to the selected set of emojis.

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative semiotic research design, as its primary objective is not to measure the frequency of emoji usage but to interpret their symbolic meanings through Roland Barthes' semiological framework. A qualitative approach is particularly suited for semiotic inquiry because it allows for in-depth analysis of cultural texts, highlighting the layered processes of signification—denotation, connotation, and myth (Barthes, 1967).

The analysis is interpretive in nature, relying on close reading and theoretical application rather than statistical generalization. This design reflects the epistemological stance that meaning is socially constructed, context-dependent, and best examined through critical and cultural methodologies.

3.2. Sampling Strategy

A purposive sample of ten emojis was selected for analysis. The selection was based on three criteria:

1. **Frequency of use:** The emojis chosen are among the most frequently used across major social media platforms, as reported in Unicode Consortium rankings (Unicode, 2022).
2. **Representational diversity:** The sample includes emojis that depict emotions (e.g., 🤔, 😍), gestures (e.g., 👍, 🙏), and objects (e.g., 🎉, 🍕), to capture the breadth of emoji functions.
3. **Cross-cultural relevance:** Emojis that have been documented in prior studies as subject to cultural variation in interpretation were prioritized (e.g., 🙏, 🇸🇦).

This purposive strategy ensures that the sample is both manageable and analytically rich, allowing for a nuanced exploration of semiotic processes.

3.3. Analytical Framework

The analysis follows Barthes' three levels of signification:

- **Denotation:** Identifying the literal representation of each emoji (e.g., 😭 as a face with tears).
- **Connotation:** Interpreting the associative meanings based on cultural, social, and contextual usage (e.g., 😂 connoting humor, irony, or emotional excess).
- **Myth:** Uncovering the ideological meanings that naturalize particular worldviews (e.g., 😂 reinforcing the cultural emphasis on humor as a coping mechanism in digital discourse).

Each emoji in the sample is analyzed systematically across these levels. This method enables comparison between literal recognition, contextual variability, and broader ideological significance.

3.4. Data Sources and Procedure

The analysis is grounded in two types of data:

- Unicode emoji definitions** (official descriptions of each emoji's pictorial representation).

-Contextual examples drawn from social media discourse, based on published corpora in existing studies (e.g., Miller et al., 2016; Gawne & McCulloch, 2019).

The procedure involved the following steps:

1. Documenting the Unicode definition of each selected emoji.
2. Reviewing prior empirical studies for documented variations in interpretation.
3. Applying Barthes' semiological framework to derive interpretive insights at denotative, connotative, and mythic levels.
4. Synthesizing findings across emojis to assess the extent of universality in their meaning.

3.5. Limitations of the Study

Like all qualitative semiotic research, this study has certain limitations. First, the sample size is limited to ten emojis, which may not fully capture the vast repertoire of emoji communication. Second, interpretations are subject to researcher positionality and may vary across cultural or linguistic contexts. Third, reliance on secondary corpora rather than primary ethnographic data constrains the scope of contextual analysis.

Nonetheless, these limitations are offset by the depth of semiotic interpretation, which provides insights into the symbolic status of emojis that broader quantitative approaches may overlook.




4. Findings and Discussion


After establishing the theoretical foundations and outlining the methodological procedures, this section presents the empirical findings of the study and discusses them in light of Roland Barthes' semiotic framework. The analysis is organized around three main categories of emojis—emotional expressions, gestural signs, and cultural objects—each examined through the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth. The findings are displayed in tabular form to illustrate the semiotic layers clearly, followed by analytical commentary that situates the results within broader cultural and communicative contexts. By combining descriptive categorization

with interpretive discussion, this section aims to demonstrate how emojis function not merely as tools of expression but also as cultural texts that embody and reproduce ideological meanings.

4.1. Emojis as Emotional Expressions




Table 1. Semiotic Analysis of Facial/Emotional Emojis


Emoji	Denotation (Literal)	Connotation (Associative)	Myth (Ideological)
 (Face with Tears of Joy)	A smiling face with tears falling from the eyes	Laughter, irony, exaggeration, emotional release	Digital culture values humor and resilience; emotions are best communicated visually in global online interactions.
 (Smiling Face with Heart Eyes)	A face with heart-shaped eyes	Love, admiration, aesthetic pleasure	Romantic and consumerist ideologies: emotions are commodified and visualized through standardized symbols.
 (Crying Face)	A face with a tear	Sadness, empathy, vulnerability	Normalization of emotional exposure online; digital spaces encourage affective intimacy.

Source: Developed by the author using Barthesian semiotic framework. These emojis illustrate the strong affective role of visual signs in digital discourse. While their denotative meanings are relatively clear across cultures, their connotative associations are shaped by context. For example,  may be interpreted as genuine laughter in Western cultures but as irony or ridicule in others. At the mythic level, these emojis reinforce the ideology of emotional transparency in digital communication, suggesting that feelings should be made visible, shareable, and standardized across platforms.

4.2. Emojis as Gestural Signs




Table 2. Semiotic Analysis of Gestural Emojis

Emoji	Denotation (Literal)	Connotation (Associative)	Myth (Ideological)
 (Thumbs Up)	A raised thumb	Approval, agreement, encouragement	Ideology of positivity and efficiency in digital culture; simplified affirmation replaces nuanced discourse.
 (Folded Hands)	Two palms pressed together	Prayer (Asia), gratitude (West), respect (general)	Digital globalization naturalizes diverse religious/cultural practices into a single ambiguous symbol.
 (Clapping Hands)	Two hands clapping	Applause, encouragement, sarcasm	Ideology of performativity: online interactions framed as performances requiring validation.

Source: Developed by the author using Barthesian semiotic framework. Gestural emojis reveal the instability of connotation across cultures. For example,  carries different cultural associations, challenging the idea of universality. At the mythic level, these emojis embody the digitization of human gestures, reducing embodied communication to simplified pictograms that reinforce quick, performative exchanges.

3. Emojis as Cultural and Symbolic Objects

Table 3. Semiotic Analysis of Object/Cultural Emojis

Emoji	Denotation (Literal)	Connotation (Associative)	Myth (Ideological)
 (Party Popper)	A cone releasing confetti	Celebration, joy, success	The ideology of constant celebration and positivity in online life, masking complexity of reality.
 (Pizza Slice)	A slice of pizza	Casual dining, youth culture, “Western” lifestyle	Globalization of consumer culture; Western foods symbolized as universally desirable.
 (Dancer in Red Dress)	A woman dancing	Femininity, festivity, passion	Gendered stereotypes: women associated with seduction, performance, and spectacle.

Source: Developed by the author using Barthesian semiotic framework. Object-based emojis show how cultural products are universalized through digital platforms. While 🍕 may appear “neutral,” its mythic reading reflects the **hegemony of Western consumer culture**. Similarly, 🍷 naturalizes **gendered representations** of women, aligning with broader media stereotypes. At this level, emojis not only communicate but also reproduce cultural ideologies in subtle ways.

5. Discussion and analysis of results

The analysis across categories demonstrates that emojis operate as **multilayered semiotic signs**. While **denotative meanings** are relatively stable, **connotative and mythic levels** reveal significant cultural variability and ideological implications. This finding challenges the hypothesis of emojis as a **universal language**, suggesting instead that they are a **globalized but culturally embedded semiotic system**.

At the ideological level, emojis promote certain cultural values—positivity, emotional transparency, consumerism, gendered representation—thus naturalizing dominant global discourses. Emojis therefore serve not only as tools of communication but also as vehicles of cultural ideology, reinforcing and reproducing symbolic hierarchies in digital interaction.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to examine whether emojis can be considered a universal visual language through the lens of Roland Barthes’ semiotic framework. By analyzing a purposive sample of emojis across three categories—emotional expressions, gestural signs, and cultural objects—the research demonstrated that while emojis possess relatively stable denotative meanings, their connotative and mythic interpretations are deeply embedded in cultural, social, and ideological contexts.

The findings reveal that emojis are not universally interpreted symbols but culturally situated signs that both reflect and reproduce dominant ideologies of digital communication. At the mythic level, emojis naturalize values such as emotional transparency, positivity,

consumerism, and gender stereotypes, thereby functioning as cultural artifacts rather than neutral communication tools.

This study contributes to the growing body of emoji scholarship by applying Barthes' tripartite model holistically, extending analysis beyond literal and contextual interpretations to the ideological dimension. It also underscores the importance of critical semiotic inquiry in understanding the subtle ways in which digital technologies shape global communication practices.

Future research should expand the sample size, employ cross-cultural ethnographic methods, and investigate the ideological implications of emojis in specific socio-political contexts. Such directions would further illuminate the complexities of emoji use and their evolving role in digital semiotics.

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