

**COMMUNICATING IN THE MULTIMEDIA AGE:
EXPLORING THE USE OF EMOJIOLOGY IN SELECTED X COMMENTS ON MIRABEL'S
ALLEGED RAPE SAGA**

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Abstract

Communication does more than enable human survival; it helps humans to thrive across all spheres of interactions, from leisure activities to business engagements. Emojis as iconic communication symbols of expression help to construct, label and deepen meaning in contemporary digital communication. However, due to the increasing need for universally understanding symbols that convey meaning and express emotion, the use of emojis as an interactive feature in digital communication has become increasingly important. This study examines Emojiology as a tool for sharing and deepening meaning in machine assisted (computer-aided) communication exchange. The study is underpinned by the multimodal discourse analysis framework within a qualitative semiotic approach. Primary data were obtained from posts and comments on the social media platform X (formerly Twitter), in response to discussion surrounding an alleged rape incident involving a social media user, Abigail Inkak, popularly known as Mirabel, reported in Lagos, Nigeria, in February 2026. The study examines the role of emojis as paralinguistic features in digital communication, focusing on their use in selected online responses to the case. Findings reveal semiotic resources such as emojis enhance communication by deepening emotional expression and clarifying intended meaning. Emojis and emoticons help to reduce cultural and linguistic barriers, thereby supporting more universal forms of meaning-making in digital discourse. In light of these findings, the study concludes that the convergence of meaning and emotional expression through emojis should be further explored and developed as an efficient and increasingly relevant mode of communication in contemporary society.

Keywords: Emojis, Machine Assisted Communication, Multimedia, Semiotics

Introduction

Humans would always need to communicate using language and other forms of communication. According to Etuk and Urujzian (2018), "Humans use language, in a distinct way, to communicate their feelings, desires and beliefs" (p.87). This is to say that through language, "humans carry out activities, exchange shared beliefs and thoughts and as well ponder on their individual and collective experiences" (Etuk & Urujzian, 2024, p.187). The world is constantly evolving and so is the standard of shared information, knowledge and meaning. This change is mainly as a result of technological advancements in the world as technology influences systems of communication and shared meaning. Effective communication therefore, goes beyond speaking mere words, to enacting a conscious and consistent construct through the use of machine-assisted system, codes and models to foster understanding shared in a communication interface.

In the digital age where there is convergent use of multiple media channels of communication, multimedia serves as an effective communication system which allows for the digital integration of texts, graphics, pictorials, audio, still images, animation and motion videos in a way that provides a user with a high level of control and interaction. This communication system has become crucial in expanding aesthetic possibilities and creating an understanding and satisfying template for contemporary communicators, whose world are filled with technological devices and who can readily connect with symbols or icons presented as Emojis. Emojiology is the use of multimedia to create, document and communicate such feelings, gestures, facial expressions and paralanguage, all of which are captured through digital pictorial formats. This multi-dimensional experience now presents a fresh facet of innovative symbolic picturisation of words, thoughts and feelings called Emojis, which have become a universally acceptable non-verbal mode of communication. According to Jacques Derrida "the contemporary use of technology to improve art making is a process which incorporates movies, slides, animations, Emojis, music and lighting in a combination normally for the purposes of education or entertainment (21)".

However, the use of Emojiology to deepen meaning within a communication construct requires its own set of skills, but it undoubtedly brings with it new possibilities in areas of communication as well as becoming an agent of the narrative. The use of semiotic elements helps in effective communication and deepens the emotional value of the communicated message (s). According to Bucholz, “the icons have grown from seventy-six (76) in 1995 to three thousand nine hundred and seventy-two (3972) in 2026” (Katharina Bucholz 1).

This essay evaluates the use of emojis in selected posts and comments on Abigail Intak (popularly known as) Mirabel’s rape saga; it also validates the use of multimedia as a tool to enhance nonverbal communication messages expressed by nonlinguistic means. Previous works, like Lotfinejad and Aelami (2020), have paid attention to how emojis can help facilitate information on safe hygiene, infection prevention and control in public health. There is also need to examine how emojis are utilised, in the Generation Z era, on social media, to reinforce meaning. To this end, this paper investigates the place of semiotics and the use of emotic icons to enhance effective nonverbal communication and deepen the emotional value of communicated messages. Through the use of Emoticons or Emojis, the iconic representation of ideas beyond the use of words are attained. This could be further enhanced by the conscious, constant and consistent use of codes and symbols as enhancers in the nonverbal communication process. As a concept,

Nonverbal communication is the main channel through which we experience inner life of others, including their emotions, feelings, moods, social attitudes, etc. This attracts the interest of the computing community because nonverbal communication is based on cues like facial expressions, vocalizations, gestures, postures, etc. that we can perceive with our senses and can be (and often are) detected, analyzed and synthesized with automated approaches (Adler and Proctor II 227).

Nonverbal communication drives effective communication and creates a significant impact on the overall communication process (Etuk, 2021). In the contemporary society, digital integration of texts, graphics, audio, still images, animation and motion videos have turned the world into information super highway. This affirms McLuhan’s position that, “The Globe has been contracted into a village by technology and the instantaneous movement of information from every quarter to every point at the same time (28)”. According to Grannan, “the internet has greatly changed the way we communicate. Since body-language and verbal tone do not translate in our text messages or e-mails, we have developed alternate ways to convey nuanced meaning. The most prominent change to our online style has been the addition of two new-age hieroglyphic languages: Emoticons and Emojis (2).” Emoticons and Emojis are pictorial icons that display an emotion or sentiment. It is a fusion of the words ‘Emotional’ and ‘Icon’. The emoticon came into being after a joke went wrong at Carnegie Mellon University in 1982. A gag about a fake mercury spill posted to an online message board sent the university into a tizzy, and because of this confusion, Dr. Scott E. Fahlman suggested that jokes and non-jokes be marked by two sets of characters we now recognize as standard emoticons: the smiley face :-) and the frowning face :- (. After this, emoticons were a big hit among Internet users. Emojis on the other hand, are a more recent invention which started at about 1995 and is culled from the Japanese *e*, “picture,” and *moji*, “character”. Emojis are pictographs of faces, objects and symbols mostly cast in yellow cartoony characters with a barrage of expressions – families, symbols, food, objects, flags and buildings (www.weforum.org).

Furthermore, the study deploys a qualitative research design. The primary data were obtained from X posts and comments from Abigail Inkak popularly known as Mirabel in an alleged rape incident in an apartment in Lagos, while textbooks, journal articles and relevant internet materials constitute the secondary source of data. Five texts from X posts and comments were purposively selected for analysis based on their relevant themes and importance to this study. The texts are labelled “samples” in this work. Additionally, X was chosen as the social media platform for collecting data for the study because topical issues have been known to receive a lot of comments, opinions and views from many X subscribers, making the platform significant in the assessment of public opinion on a particular public discourse. According to Aniebiet Mbede, “New media possesses the capacity to converge diverse voices and opinions, transmitting a wide range of ideas across borders, while retaining the ability to transform traditional mindsets and deconstruct systems that hinder progress, thereby creating new pathways for social advancement” (Mbede 5).

Also, sufficient data on Mirabel’s alleged rape could be generated from X, where the discourse gained relevance and increasingly trended for a significant period of time. Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen’s (2001) Multimodal Communication Approach is the theoretical framework for data analysis. The theory assumes that communication modes play an important role in deciphering messages. Thus, the framework is adopted to enhance the analysis of how emojis in the rape discourse intensifies or clarifies the various stance of social media actors on the subject of Mirabel’s claimed rape. In the use of multimedia (graphics and text in this instance), Aniebiet Mbede submits that, “another important aspect of social media engagement theory is the role of social influence. This is reflected in the phenomenon where individuals are more likely to engage with content that is popular, or has been shared by others they trust” (Mbede et al. 97). The exploitation of social media communication system can therefore be influenced by factors like, the use of platforms (e.g., Facebook vs X), the kind of content being

shared (e.g., text, images, video), and the user's personal characteristics and motivation (e.g., age, gender, interests) (Mbede *et al.* 97). The virality of Mirabel's outcry via the use of body language, proxemics, gestures and emojis to deepen the meaning and message of her protest.

Understanding Body Language Emojis

Body language is a form of human non-verbal communication, which consists of body posture, gestures, facial expressions, and eye movements. Humans send and interpret such signals almost entirely subconsciously. James Borg states that human communication consists of 93 percent body language and paralinguistic cues, while only 7% of communication consists of words themselves. A reflection of body language emojis provides clues as to the attitude or state of mind of a person. For example, it may indicate aggression, attentiveness, boredom, relaxed state, pleasure, amusement, and intoxication, among many other cues. The technique of 'reading' people's mood through the use of emojis has heightened over the years. It is important to note that some indicators of emotion (for instance, smiling/laughing when happy, frowning/crying when sad) are largely universal, hence its use within the emoji construct is widely accepted. Paul Ekman presents an expanded list of basic emotions to include a range of positive and negative emotions, not all of which are encoded in facial muscles. This is the kind of extended communication that emojis offer. The newly included emotions are: amusement, contempt, contentment, embarrassment, excitement, guilt, relief, satisfaction, sensory pleasure and shame, all of which can be symbolically represented by emojis to intentionally communicate using learned and socially shared signal systems of propositional information transmitted via symbols.



Plate 3: Emojis: Facial Expressions and their Meanings

Source: www.pinterest.com

Proxemics: The Use of Space in Emojis

According to Edward T. Hall, "Proxemics is the study of measurable distances between people as they interact with one another (8)". The distance between people in a social situation often discloses information about the type of relationship between the people involved. Proximity may also reveal the type of social setting taking place. There is an intimate zone reserved for lovers, children and close family members. This zone is between six and eighteen inches. 1.5 to 4 feet is the distance that friends or associates will generally be within. That is, people that are close but not necessarily on a regular touching basis. Between 4 and 12 feet is the zone for more social environments. These are familiar people such as co-workers or someone else that is seen occasionally throughout the week. The outer end of this zone is reserved for newly formed groups, and new acquaintances. The last zone accruing between 10 and 25 feet and is known to be public distance. This area of space is used for speeches, lectures and theater; essentially, public distance is the range reserved for larger audiences or for people that are not familiar. There are specific sets of Emojis that accentuate proxy relationships by showing family connections, friends, husband and wife, holding hands, and the like.

Use of Gestures

Gestures are physical expressions like waving; pointing, touching and slouching are all forms of nonverbal communication. The study of body movement and expression is known as kinesics. Such movements help ease the mental effort when communication is difficult. Physical expressions reveal many things about the person using them. For example, gestures can emphasize a point or relay a message, posture can reveal boredom or great interest, and touch can convey encouragement or caution. A barrage of hand gestures communicates instantly and all of these symbols can be found and used in the digital space.

	Waving Hand		Love-You Gesture		Raising Hands
	Raised Back of Hand		Sign of the Horns		Thumbs Up
	Hand with Fingers Splayed		Call Me Hand		Thumbs Down
	Raised Hand		Backhand Index Pointing Left		Raised Fist
	Vulcan Salute		Backhand Index Pointing Right		Oncoming Fist
	OK Hand		Backhand Index Pointing Up		Left-Facing Fist
	Victory Hand		Backhand Index Pointing Down		Right-Facing Fist
	Crossed Fingers		Index Pointing Up		Clapping Hands
	Writing Hand		Middle Finger		Palms Up Together
	Folded Hands		Open Hands		Handshake

Source: <https://emojipedia.org/>.

Plate 2: Emoji, Hand Gestures

Source: www.emojipedia.com

smile	grimace	drool	scowl
frown	cool	blush	scream
strive	scold	doubt	ssshh
bah! l	bah! r	yawn	look down
coffee	rice	pig	rose
moon	sun	gift	hug
in love	blowkiss	waddle	tremble
sob	sly	silent	sleep
chuckle	joyful	slight	smug
crazy	toasted	skull	hammer
tearing up	shy	kiss	uh oh
lips	heart	heartbroke	cake
weak	shake	victory	admire
twirl	kowtow	look back	jump
awkward	pout	cool	cry
drowsy	panic	puke	hungry
speechless	nose pick	dizzy	wave
cleaver	melon	wronged	whimper
bomb	dagger	wilt	lightning
fist	pinky	strong	beckon

Plate 3: Variety of Emojis and their Meanings

Source: Unicode Consortium

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the Multimodal Communication Approach, which assumes that communication modes play an important role in deciphering messages, as its theoretical framework. The theory which rests on the scholarly positions of Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2001) stipulates that meaning is reinforced through the use of multiple semiotic modes in communication. To them, “Modes are semiotic resources for making meaning” (21). The theory accommodates the employment of many modes, not just language alone, especially in communicating societal affairs. To this end, these modes are conventional and constructed by the society which ascribes meaning to them. The theory outlines important issues for further consideration on the importance of nonverbal communication templates; highlighting ‘Emojiology’ as a key driver of twenty-first century communication systems. According to Mbede, “this theory supports the use of social influence as a platform design beyond popularity but as a strategic leverage for effective flexible network, sharing, community building which is demographic specific and context driven with the possibility to achieve extraordinary possibilities in creating an appealing environment capable of attracting contemporary audiences” (Mbede 179). The use of emojis as a multimodal socially curated communications system

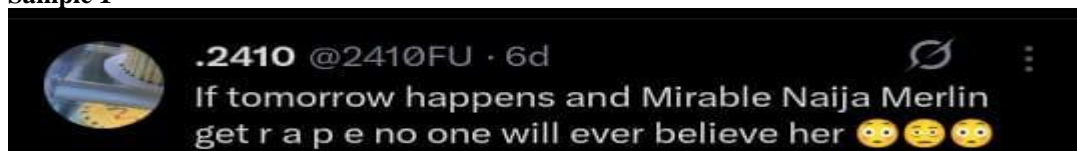
Exploring the use of Emojis in Selected Posts and Comments on Mirabel's Rape Saga

In mid-February 2026, Mirabel, a young Nigerian TikTok user posted emotional videos online saying she had been assaulted and raped in her apartment on the morning of February 15th, 2026. She alleged that the incident occurred after she drank herself to sleep owing to her struggle with insomnia. According to her, although her eyes were tired, she struggled to fall asleep and eventually slept until about 6 a.m. of the February 15th when she heard a knock on her door. She assumed it might have been one of her neighbours, considering it was a Sunday morning and most people would have gone to church. Immediately she opened the door, she was forcefully pushed back that she hit her head against the fridge that was positioned closed to her door. As a result, she lost consciousness. When she regained consciousness, she found a man on top of her, clothes stuffed into her mouth and tied. After twenty minutes of mumbling and struggling and no help from the neighbours, she laid there until it was over.

The post sparked debates online about how rape claims should be treated. Some users offered empathetic support to Mirabel, others pointed to concerns about false allegations and how they might affect responses to real victims. However, an audio recording shared online by VeryDarkMan (VDM) claimed that Mirabel admitted to fabricating parts of her story. In that recording, she supposedly said she had created some evidence herself and that her earlier videos were not entirely truthful. Again, after the Ogun State Police Command and the Ogun State Ministry of Women Affairs launched investigations into the matter, authorities noted various inconsistencies, including no signs of a break-in, and contradictory statements provided by Mirabel.

Throughout the episode, non-verbal communication in the form of emotional expressions, tone, and visual presentation in the videos complemented the written captions accompanying the posts. Together, these elements conveyed a strong sense of distress, shaping public interpretation by evoking emotions, suggesting actions, and establishing a particular mood that influenced online reactions. With emojis, users do not worry about the limitations of textual space; emojis convey multiple emotions simultaneously without occupying much room. Emojis therefore allow individuals to express feelings quickly and efficiently in ways that written language alone sometimes struggles to achieve. In many cases, there are emotional nuances that are easier to communicate symbolically than through lengthy verbal explanations. For instance, one might write statements such as "I am crying," "I am so shocked," or "I am laughing." While these expressions describe the emotion, they often lack the immediacy and visual intensity that emojis provide. When the crying, shock, or laughing emojis appear within a conversation, they instantly capture the emotional tone of the message and make the reaction more vivid for the reader. In this sense, emojis function as powerful communicative tools in digital discourse. They condense emotional meaning into small visual symbols that are easily recognised and interpreted. Consequently, they save time and textual space while simultaneously producing a stronger emotional impact than lengthy explanations. These emojis therefore become strategic communicative tools through which commenters in Mirabel's case construct credibility, scepticism, and ideological stance on X and TikTok.

Sample 1



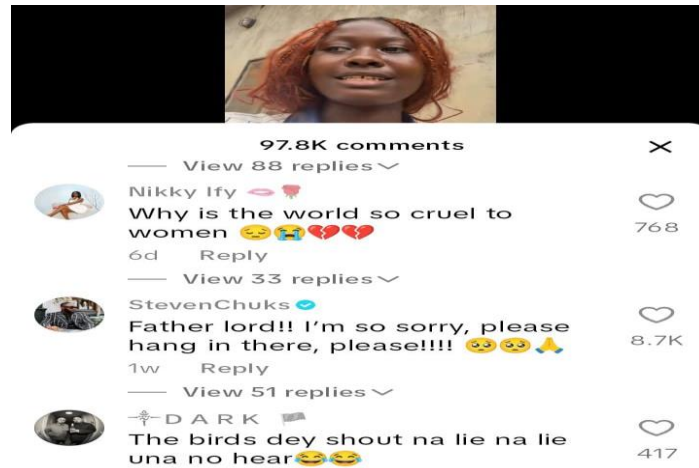
Emojis in general operate as a semiotic enhancer that deepens the meaning of a statement and shapes how readers interpret the moral and social weight of statements. 😜 conveys shock. This is attained with facial widening of the eyes, and raised eyebrows, with a slight opening of the mouth. This enhances expressivity because a statement would have simply passed as a mere commentary, but the emojis make the tweet alarming and emotionally weighted. The middle emoji, on the other hand, though appears to express shock, more accurately conveys disbelief. Here the brows are drawn downward and the lips remain flat while only letting the eyes widen. These emojis reinforce a warning about credibility, highlight anxieties surrounding false allegations, and underscore the impact of social media on justice narratives.

Sample 2



The emoji used here is a face screaming. The mouth and eyes are wide open, with hands pressed against the face. This performs *heightened alarm* while communicating public disbelief, social betrayal, and shock at perceived manipulation. It also amplifies and dramatises the emotional intensity of the message that follows and the impact of falsity on public consciousness which later surfaced after police revelation that Mirabel was in fact lying about being raped.

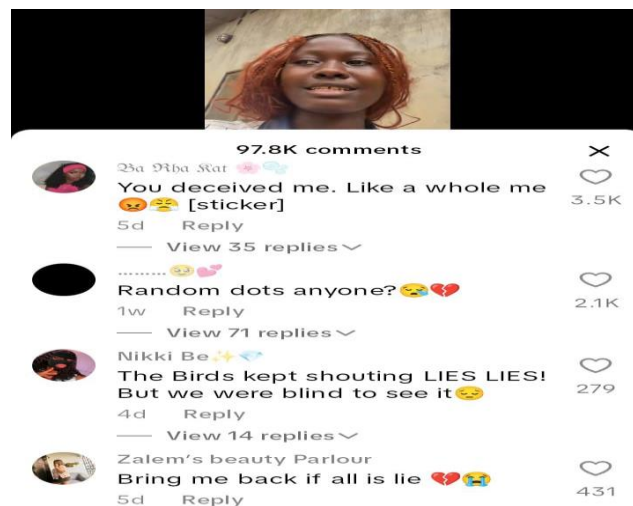
Sample 3



The first and second comments above portray compassion toward Mirabel for the trauma she was believed to have experienced. The accompanying emojis reinforce these expressions by intensifying the emotional tone of the messages. They visually communicate sorrow, grief, heartbreak, empathy, and prayers respectfully. In addition, the use of such emojis symbolically extends support and solidarity, functioning almost as digital gestures of comfort and prayer for the alleged victim. 😞 expresses sadness, 😭, cries or sobs, ❤️, heartbreak, 🙏, empathy, and 🤲, a silent prayer.

The third comment takes a rather mocking turn with distinctly derisive tone, reinforced by the use of laughing emojis. It makes reference to the sound of a bird heard in the background of the video Mirabel posted, suggesting mockingly that the bird was attempting to expose her alleged falsehood. The emojis amplify the element of ridicule, transforming the comment from mere skepticism into overt mockery, signalling dismissal rather than sympathy.

Sample 4



In the first comment, “You deceived me. Like a whole me”, the angry and frustrated emojis communicate outrage and indignation. These emojis signal a sense of personal betrayal, and reflects how social media audiences often feel emotionally invested in viral testimonies. This aligns with the thought of Adler and Proctor (2011) who asserted that nonverbal communication serves as a primary medium through which individuals perceive and interpret the inner states of others, including their emotions, feelings, moods, and social attitudes. The truth about the case turned sympathy into anger, sad emojis into angry ones, and attracted vehement public condemnation. The tired face with a drop of sweat and a broken heart in the second comment softens the tone. 😞 typically expresses exhaustion and frustration, while the broken heart, ❤️ signals emotional attachment expressing sadness, disappointment, and shattered trust. In a broader public discourse, it represents the collapse of belief, not just in an individual story, but in the credibility of online narratives. This connects to larger socio-political debates about

truth, misinformation, and the fragility of public trust in the digital age. Here, the emojis suggest that the commenter once felt emotionally connected or sympathetic but now feels hurt. It reflects how digital empathy can quickly transform into emotional disillusionment when narratives shift. The theatre and multimedia director, Aniebiet Mbede submits that, “these productions provide practical ways which theatre can adapt emerging technologies through the use of compelling scripts, creative directors, ‘tech-savvy’ actors and multimedia adept directors to create a more stimulating theatre environment and bring to the fore the inventiveness of digital theatre conventions” (Mbede *et al* 141).

In the comment about the birds “shouting lies,” the sad face emoji conveys disappointment and reflective regret, suggesting that the commenter feels saddened by the realisation that the situation was misunderstood. It signals a moment of emotional reflection rather than anger. Similarly, the statement “Bring me back if all is lie” followed by the crying face emoji expresses a sense of emotional pain and distress. The emoji intensifies the sadness, indicating a feeling of heartbreak and deep disappointment over the unfolding revelation. Within digital communication, a sad face or crying emoji quickly communicates regret and sorrow without lengthy explanations. In a broader socio-communicative context, these emojis demonstrate how social media platforms transform serious allegations into shared emotional experiences. Public reactions become highly expressive and performative, moving rapidly from empathy to doubt and eventually to regret, as individuals publicly signal their feelings through emotionally loaded symbols.

Sample 5



The 🙄 emoji usually conveys a tone of casual remark, mild sarcasm, and stating an opinion without insisting on it. It presents a person shrugging and suggests “just saying”, “that is my opinion, take it or leave it”. In this context, the commenter deploys the emoji to imply that the alleged manipulation ought to have been obvious, indicating that the individual should have recognised the situation earlier. In the second comment, the emoji represents a face holding back tears. It is often used to convey emotion that is overwhelming or choked up; thus, it tries to keep emotions in check. The emoji 🙌 at the end of the second comment, functions as a closing gesture that signals calmness or self-assuredness. It helps reduce the harshness of the earlier criticism and leaves the message on a calmer, conciliatory note. It is a peace sign, often used to convey friendliness, harmony, victory, and positivity. According to Aniebiet Mbede, “Social listening, connectivity and interconnectedness should be promoted to extend the influence of new media, particularly in political and social campaigns (Mbede 6)”. In Nigerian online spaces, it is sometimes used for campaigns and call outs, and also for counter campaigns and counter callouts (saga) to address issues in the social media space. In all, the analyses reveal how emojis reinforce meaning and buttress deeper connection within the communicated messages.

Conclusion

The world has not remained the same since the discovery of computers and the information superhighway. Digital technologies have become instruments of significant transformation across all of human endeavour, with human communication being the most prominent. In both verbal and nonverbal communication systems, the use of technology as a medium for message transformation is now an established reality and continues to evolve in its multimodal capacity to adopt new forms in line with technological advancement. As a form of multimedia expression, Mbede argues that, “drawing from this aesthetic toolbox, the theatre director therefore needs to creatively explore digital tools to conveniently foist creative images, videos, animation and sound-scapes to improve on the aesthetics” (Mbede 14). This highlights the increasing role of digital tools in enhancing meaning-making processes in communication and artistic production.

The use of symbols to represent ideas in nonverbal communication helps to clarify and contextualise messages exchanged between individuals. Such messages can be conveyed through facial expressions, gestures, engagement, posture and even clothing. Emojis as a contemporary form of electronic visual language provide additional depth to digital communication. The study of Emojiology has therefore become imperative, as

the use of emoticons and emojis to convey meaning and emotion in machine-mediated communication remains widespread in contemporary society.

Recommendations

This study recommends the intentional and informed use of Emojis to communicate without using language. This would deepen meaning in the communication process as humans engage the pictorial representation via: facial expressions, body language, posture, and other ways people can best share meaning without the use of words. Considering the important role of 'Emojiology' as a driver of the 21st century communication system, this study recommends that apart from social and informal usages and expressions of joy, pain, and the like; official emojis like, 'Thank you sir/ma', 'I am in the Office' and the like, should be developed to compliment official conversations across the global communication space.

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