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The Use of Emojis in Written ELF Communication through Social Network Sites by Thai and Non-Thai Communicators

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Abstract

This research aims to address the gap regarding the use of emojis in written EMC. Specifically, the study seeks to 1) Identify the most and least commonly used emojis in online ELF communication by Thai and non-Thai users, 2) Explore how people utilize these emojis in digital conversations, and 3) Examine whether there are significant differences in emoji usage between the two groups. The study employed a survey methodology to explore their usage patterns and emotional responses toward emojis. The results revealed that the emoji 'Face with tears of joy' was the most frequently selected, while the 'Eggplant' emerged as the least utilized. Additionally, the findings suggest that facial expression emojis demonstrate significant versatility in conveying a wide array of meanings; the analysis revealed a notable level of consensus in the emotional interpretation of emojis among the participants. The nature of the relationship between the communicators influences the emoji usage patterns. In summary, most participants, irrespective of nationality, preferred incorporating emojis in communication with friends, underscoring the social function of these digital symbols in informal, interpersonal exchanges. Also, the additional findings from the interviews have implications for enhancing intercultural communication strategies and promoting successful interactions among diverse communicators in the evolving realm of EMC.

Keywords: Electronically mediated communication (EMC), Emojis, English as a lingua franca (ELF)

Introduction

In the contemporary digital landscape, electronically mediated communication (EMC) has emerged as an increasingly pervasive interaction modality across personal and professional spheres. As elucidated by Lin and Atkin (2007), EMC encompasses a multifaceted array of digital platforms and technological tools that facilitate real-time interpersonal communication and connectivity, transcending geographical boundaries. That is to say, social network sites (SNSs) influence communication in this digital age; formal and informal communication through various platforms is accessible, efficient, and cost-effective. This encompasses various communication platforms and applications, including email, instant messaging, social media, and video conferencing, which empower users to exchange information, collaborate, and engage effortlessly. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have revolutionized interpersonal interaction and information sharing. Furthermore, Lin and Lu (2011) posited that EMC has fostered the development of online communities, providing individuals with opportunities to engage with others who share aligned interests and pursuits. Additionally, EMC is a pivotal tool in mitigating the barriers of time and geographical distance, enabling seamless communication and effective collaboration among globally dispersed teams (Hertel et al., 2005).

Besides, it is more common to see paralinguistic features, including conveying text messages via the SNSs (Vinagre, 2008). People widely use emojis in digital communication to express meanings and/ or feelings both implicitly and explicitly. The pervasive

integration of emojis into digital communication has profoundly reshaped the dynamics of interpersonal interaction. However, their usage introduces a notable challenge, as the interpretation of emojis is highly subject to cultural variation (Chui, 2020b). Differences in cultural contexts can lead to divergent understandings of an emoji's meaning and significance, often resulting in misinterpretations and communication breakdowns in digital exchanges (Guntuku et al., 2019).

Digital communication often blurs boundaries, as it does not limit interlocutors to native English speakers, non-native English speakers, or interactions between the two. With the goal of communicative intelligibility among any people who possess different first languages, English as a lingua franca (ELF) would potentially best describe the definition of such interactions (Seidlhofer, 2011) where the interlocutors can use English in their own right in order to communicate successfully (Jenkins, 2006).

Focusing on English, Thai undergraduate students are those who are taught to use English based on native norms under an English as a foreign language (EFL) approach, where the best practice is on an imitation of English as a native language (ENL) aspect (Trakulkasemsuk, 2015). Additionally, they are growing up surrounded by digital environments including, online communication through SNSs. They communicate online as if it were one of the common and necessary ways of interacting with people virtually. While they use English as a medium of communication, appropriate accommodation and/ or pragmatic strategies are employed unconsciously to overcome communicative failures or difficulties and enhance successful intercultural communication in naturally occurring conversations (Cogo, 2009). Unconsciously, they use English in their communication particularly, with peers, not only those Thais but also non-Thai who might have different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, by employing merely the ELF approach - where the goal of interaction is to create mutual understanding between interlocutors - enhancing successful online communication.

In addition, the development of computer-mediated communication (CMC) to EMC has led to numerous research studies on using emojis in written or text messages in digital communication through SNSs. More than that, there has been minimal research on emojis, especially by Thais; Thai and non- Thai communicators use and interpretation of emojis remain unexplored mainly (see Rugchatjaroen, 2021). This issue becomes highly intriguing and offers an opportunity to address the research gap in emoji use within written communication— particularly in electronically mediated communication (EMC), which is widely used worldwide but remains insufficiently examined. Therefore, this is a topic of great interest to investigate how ELF communicators interpret and understand the most commonly found emojis in EMC by providing answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the most and the least commonly found emojis used in online written ELF communication via SNSs by Thai and non-Thai communicators?
2. How are the emojis used by Thai and non-Thai communicators in online written ELF communication via SNSs? And
3. Are there any significant differences in using such features between Thai and non- Thai communicators?

Review of related literature

Definitions of emojis

Based on Prisco (2018), the terms "emoji" comes from the Japanese words "e" (meaning "picture") and "moji" (meaning "character"). They were first created in Japan in the late 1990s but have since become a popular tool for expressing emotions and conveying meaning in electronic communication worldwide. In addition, according to Novak et al. (2015), emojis are graphic symbols that can be used in various electronic communications to represent feelings, objects, or ideas. They can take the forms of various facial expressions, objects, animals, and other symbols. Overall, the definition of emojis as a form of visual communication has significantly impacted how individuals communicate electronically, and the increasing use of emojis in electronic communication highlights the need for further study on their impact on enhancing understanding of non- verbal messages conveyed in EMC these days.

Previous studies on emojis

Emojis have become an increasingly popular research topic, with studies focusing on their use and

impact (George et al., 2023). One area of research has been the role of emojis in enhancing emotional expression and social connection in digital communication. The studies have found that emojis help to supplement written language, enabling individuals to convey their emotions and attitudes more effectively and to establish a sense of social connection with their peers; besides, such features are employed in EMC, making meaning and replacing nonverbal messages (Luor et al., 2010). Moreover, Balahur and Turchi (2015) have also examined the potential of emojis as a tool for sentiment analysis and natural language processing. The study demonstrated the usefulness of emojis in identifying and categorizing emotions and attitudes in large-scale text-based data. In the same way, Kotarputh (2020) suggested that using these multimodal features in written ELF in the working environment builds a better relationship between all parties involved in a friendly way, and certainly decreases formality in such communication.

The growing body of research on emojis highlights their significant role in enhancing digital communication, particularly regarding emotional expression, social connection, and intercultural understanding. As emojis serve as a valuable tool in bridging gaps in written communication, offering a more nuanced and expressive form of interaction, this evolving area of research not only contributes to a complete understanding of digital communication but also underscores the potential of emojis in fostering effective communication across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts.

Electronically Mediated Communication (EMC)

According to Walther and Parks (2002), EMC refers to using technology to enable communication between two or more individuals. This can include a range of technologies, such as email, instant messaging, video conferencing, and social media. Similarly, Turkle (2011) mentioned that EMC refers to transferring information utilizing electronic devices or systems, including social media platforms, email, and instant messaging. However, EMC can also create communication barriers and misunderstandings, particularly when communicators cannot rely on nonverbal cues such as body language and tone of voice to interpret messages (Kiesler et al., 1984). EMC is the exchange of messages between individuals via electronic devices and it is prevalent in today's society. It has become a popular way for digital written interlocutors to connect.

Emoji use and interpretation in EMC

Lu et al. (2016) conducted an empirical analysis of smartphone users' usage of emojis to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the meaning and functions of emojis in contemporary communication. The study revealed that users commonly use emojis to convey emotions, sarcasm, humor, and social context in text messages. Users assign multiple meanings to certain emojis and use them in various ways depending on the context and their social and cultural backgrounds. Effective cross- cultural communication facilitates interpersonal communication among individuals from different cultural backgrounds. As noted by Guntuku et al. (2019), cultural variations may contribute to nuances in the usage of emojis across cultures; it revealed the differences in emoji usage between Eastern and Western cultures. Their analysis of tweets from the United States and China revealed significant variations in the frequency and types of emojis used by users in the two countries. Chinese users tended to use more emojis overall, particularly emotional and positive ones, whereas American users tended to use more object-related and negative emojis. This highlights the importance of considering cultural differences in emoji usage in cross- cultural communication. Different cultures may have different associations with certain emojis, leading to misinterpretation (Chui, 2020a), and relationship types between the senders and the recipients can also influence emoji interpretation (Kotarputh, 2020). It is possible that differences in cross-cultural interpretations of emojis can result in miscommunication and misunderstandings.

Research methods and data collection procedures

Sampling frame

The research was conducted at a university in northeastern Thailand. In this area, the use of English is less widespread compared to the capital city of Bangkok. This discrepancy arises from the limited number of foreigners and tourists visiting the region, resulting in fewer opportunities for everyday English

communication. Within the university, students and faculty primarily use English for intercultural communication, especially in classroom settings and on digital platforms that support online interactions. Despite its regional location, the university has ambitious goals to attain international recognition. Its mission includes enhancing the intellectual growth and global competence of its local community, comprising students, faculty, and staff, while promoting a holistic approach to internationalization.

Instead of aiming to select participants representative of a broader population, this study employed a mixed-methods approach, consistent with the qualitative research paradigm. The researcher selected a purposive sampling approach to obtain rich, detailed, and meaningful insights into the phenomenon under investigation. The key rationale behind purposive sampling its emphasis on selecting individuals with specific characteristics or expertise that align closely with the research (Dornyei, 2007; Etikan et al., 2016). Targeting participants who can provide depth and relevance, this method ensures that the data collected is both focused and contextually significant, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the research topic. This study is grounded in the theoretical frameworks of multimodality, EMC, and pragmatic strategies in written ELF, with a particular focus on the use and interpretation of emojis in digital communication. The research involves 76 participants who engage in online communication utilizing emojis. Among these participants, 51 are Thai undergraduate students majoring in English aged 18-30 selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the study's objectives. The snowball sampling method identified 25 non-Thai communicators comprising 21 undergraduate students aged 18-30 and 4 workers aged 31-50. For non-Thai students, there are 1 American, 1 British, 5 Cambodians, 9 Japanese, 4 Burmese, and 1 Malaysian, where the 4 workers are 1 Australian, 1 British, 1 Irish, and 1 Filipino. The selected individuals met the established criteria, including regular use of emojis in EMC, and demonstrable proficiency in English and digital technologies. Participants were not restricted by geographical location, as long as they regularly used emojis in their everyday electronically mediated communication (EMC) in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). This included interactions such as creating statuses or posts and engaging in messaging on social networking platforms

Research instruments

The main research instrument in this study is the questionnaire, which was distributed to all participants and received online. In contrast, the online interview is an additional instrument some of the participants voluntarily given by. The questionnaire consists of two sections: personal information and emoji usage on social networking sites (SNSs). The second part is the most important data because the participants would reveal their use of emojis based on the questions asked. Seven question items in this part show how the participants apply emojis in their text-based messages through SNSs. In this part, the respondents would see the list of 25 emojis selected from the Unicode Characters. The researchers intentionally selected the top five most frequently used emojis from five sub-categories, resulting in a total of 25 emojis. The selection was based on the 2021 emoji frequency rankings published by the Unicode Consortium. Two main categories are 'Emotion' and 'Content' according to Bai et al.'s (2019). 'Emotion' is categorized into three distinct sub-divisions or sub-categories: 'Face-positive', 'Face-neutral' and 'Face-negative' (Hand et al., 2022; Matsumoto et al., 2018), and one last main category 'Content' is divided into two sub-categories: 'Food & Drink' and 'Activity' (Bai et al., 2019; Donato & Paggio, 2017). The researchers presented all 25 emojis without labels, assigning each a number from 1 to 25 and consistently referring to them by their assigned numbers throughout the study.

Data analysis approaches

Using the primary research instrument, the questionnaire, descriptive statistics were employed to evaluate the occurrence of emojis in the participants' text-based communication through SNSs in ELF communication. The researchers primarily used percentages to present the results of the study, in line with the quantitative approach. This approach elucidates the frequency distribution of responses, aiming to deliver a comprehensive and unambiguous depiction of a phenomenon or circumstance. In addition, some answers to the question items in the questionnaires, as well as of the semi-structured interview, were

transcribed and interpreted due to the feelings classified by Ekman (2022) and the motives behind their use of emojis classified by Prada et al. (2018). More than that, more data on perceptions of ELF and awareness of intercultural communication were identified and coded into themes emergent due to the content analysis underneath the qualitative data approach.

Table 1 The findings of emojis use from the questionnaire

Category		No. of emoji determined	Emoji	Participants' use (N=76)		Participants' use classified by nationality			
						Thai (N=51)		Non-Thai (N=25)	
Emotion	Face-Positive	1	😂	73	96.05%	50	98.04%	23	92.00%
		6	🤣	72	94.74%	49	96.08%	23	92.00%
		11	😘	66	86.84%	42	82.35%	24	96.00%
		16	😍	67	88.16%	43	84.31%	24	96.00%
		21	😊	69	90.79%	45	88.24%	24	96.00%
	Face-Neutral	2	😳	60	78.95%	42	82.35%	18	72.00%
		7	😴	57	75.00%	39	76.47%	18	72.00%
		12	😐	51	67.11%	39	76.47%	12	48.00%
		17	😑	52	68.42%	37	72.55%	15	60.00%
		22	🙄	60	78.95%	42	82.35%	18	72.00%
	Face-Negative	3	😢	70	92.11%	48	94.12%	22	88.00%
		8	😟	46	60.53%	29	56.86%	17	68.00%
		13	😡	55	72.37%	40	78.43%	15	60.00%
		18	😭	73	96.05%	49	96.08%	24	96.00%
		23	😔	68	89.47%	47	92.16%	21	84.00%
Content	Food & Drink	4	🥂	27	35.53%	16	31.37%	11	44.00%
		9	🍆	15	19.74%	12	23.53%	3	12.00%
		14	🎂	60	78.95%	40	78.43%	20	80.00%
		19	☕	30	39.47%	21	41.18%	9	36.00%
		24	🍻	33	43.42%	20	39.22%	13	52.00%
	Activity	5	🎊	62	81.58%	41	80.39%	21	84.00%
		10	🎉	66	86.84%	43	84.31%	23	92.00%
		15	❤️	67	88.16%	46	90.20%	21	84.00%
		20	✨	50	65.79%	34	66.67%	16	64.00%
		25	🎈	39	51.32%	28	54.90%	11	44.00%

Findings

This part provides a comprehensive analysis of the survey findings derived from all participants. The researchers systematically examined the survey data to identify thematic insights related to emoji interpretation and usage, variations across linguistic communities, and an integrative summary of participant responses. This analysis offers nuanced perspectives on emoji use's socio-linguistic and cultural dimensions.

Findings from the questionnaire

As in Table 1 with the question asking if the participants use each of the emojis given, 73

In order to answer Research Question 1, as demonstrated in Figure 1 above, the data derived from the questionnaire show that 30 participants considered as 39.47% agreed that they use emoji one the most often, followed by emoji 21 with 13.16% and emoji 15 with 9.21% respectively. Although the percentages of the agreement saying that they used these emojis the most often seem to be relatively low, it is because the respondents were allowed to choose just one emoji revealing that they use it the most often, so several participants chose different emojis based on their actual utility making the results varied.

To answer what the least commonly found emojis used in online written ELF communication via SNSs by Thai and non-Thai communicators are, Figure 4 above illustrates that 47 participants considered as 61.84% agreed that they rarely or never use emoji 9, followed by emoji 19 with 11.84% and emoji 25 - with 9.21% respectively.

To break it down further, Figure 5 illustrates that there are 27 participants considered as 52.94% agreed that they rarely or never use emoji 9 ranked in the first place, followed by emojis 19, emoji 24 and emoji 25 with equal percentage of 11.76, and the third most infrequently or never used emojis are emoji 1, emoji 4, emoji 7, emoji 12, emoji 16 and emoji 20 with 1.96% respectively. Among non-Thai emoji users, Emoji 9 was the least frequently used or never used by the highest percentage of participants (80.00%). Emoji 19 ranked second with 12.00%, while Emoji 25 ranked third with 4.00%.

respondents of both Thai and non-Thai (96.05%) agreed that they used emoji 1-face with tears of joy- and emoji 18- worried face in their EMC in either form of messaging interactions or posts or even both. Followed by the use of emoji 6, 72 respondents (94.74%) agreed that they used it. The third most selected is emoji 3, with the number of 70 participants (92.11%) choosing it. Conversely, the study also reports the three emojis selected by the fewest participants. Only 15 out of 76 participants, 19.74%, said they use emoji 9, followed by emoji 4 with 27 respondents (35.53%) and emoji 19 with 30 users (39.47), respectively.

To provide additional specifics, Figure 2 illustrates the 3 most often used emojis revealed by only 51 Thai participants. There are 21 participants considered as 41.18% agreed that they use emoji one the most often, followed by emoji 15 and emoji 6 with 7.84%, and the third most frequently used emoji is emoji 21 with 5.88% respectively. Figure 3 shows that among non-Thai users, Emoji 1 was the most frequently used (36.00%), followed by Emoji 21 (28.00%) and Emoji 15 (12.00%).

To address Research Question 2, the researchers clearly present and explain the data derived from the questionnaire, as shown in Tables 2-5.

Referring to Table 2 above, the information evaluates potential differences or similarities in participants' emotional responses to the 25 emojis. The analysis revealed that the emotional responses of both Thai and non-Thai participants were largely congruent, demonstrating a significant degree of consistency in their interpretations. While the results indicated a range of emotional responses for each emoji, the overall trends suggested a high level of agreement across the two groups in perceiving the emotions conveyed by the emojis.

To start with the first sub-category, which is 'Face-positive' under the category 'Emotion" all 5 emojis were interpreted similarly, 'Enjoyment' by most respondents. More specifically, 81.58% of participants agreed on Emoji 1, 94.74% on Emoji 6, 86.84% on Emoji 11, 88.16% on Emoji 16, and 90.79% on Emoji 21.

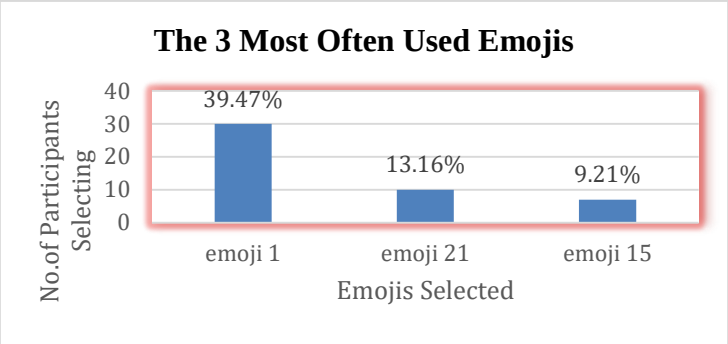

Figure 1 The 3 most often used emojis revealed by all participants

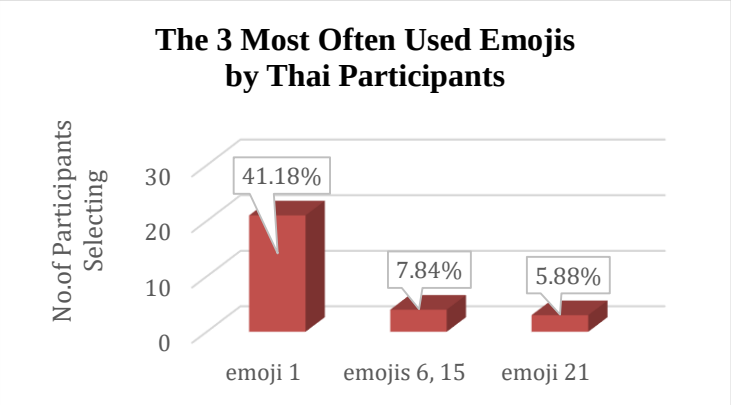

Figure 2 The 3 most often used emojis revealed by Thai participants

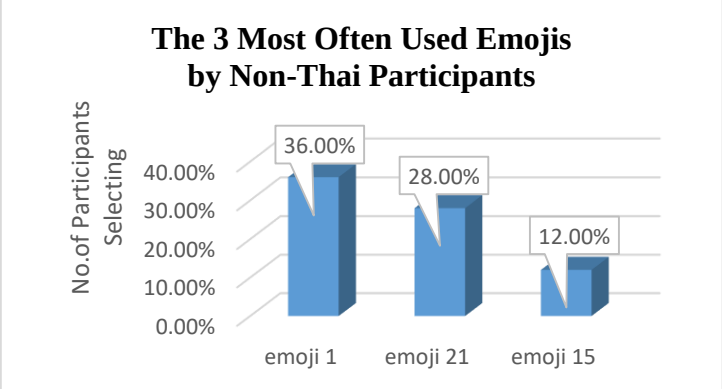

Figure 3 The 3 most often used emojis revealed by non-Thai participants

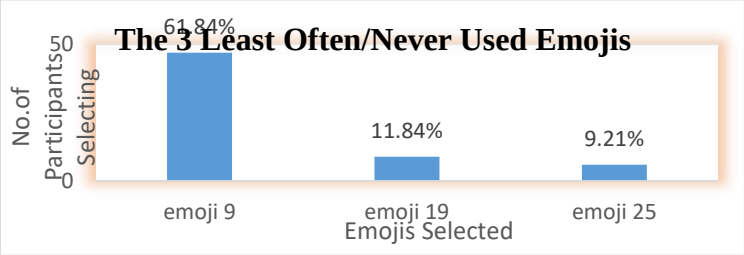

Figure 4 The 3 least often/never used emojis by all participants

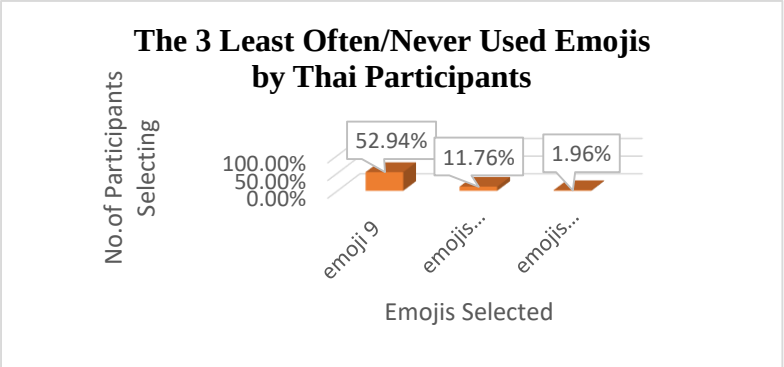

Figure 5 The 3 least often/never used emojis by Thai participants

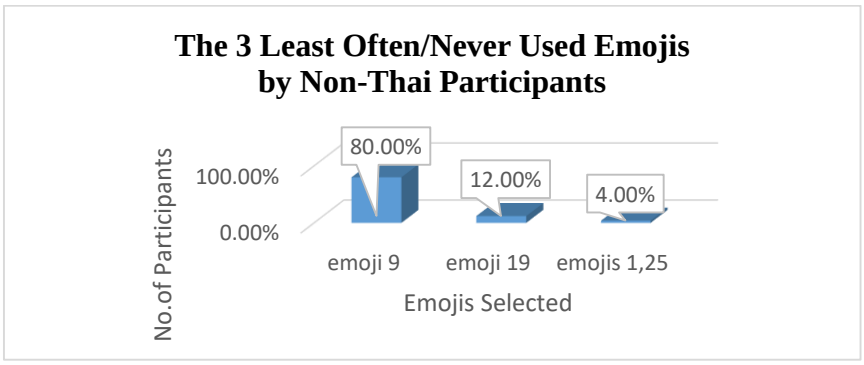

Figure 6 The 3 least often/never used emojis by non-Thai participants

In the second sub-category 'Face-neutral' under the 'Emotion' category, participants reported slightly different interpretations of the emojis' meanings. Emojis 7, 12, and 17 were classified as ' None,' indicating that participants interpreted these emojis in ways not represented by the provided options. Emoji 7 agreed with 81.58% of the participants associated with drowsiness, Emoji 12 by 42. 11% expressed being speechless or awkward, and Emoji 17 by 39.47% with meanings of being bored. While Emoji 2 attributes a sense of 'Surprise' to 50.00% of the participants, Emoji 22 means 'Contempt' by 35.53%.

In the last sub-category, which is 'Face-negative' under the category 'Emotion' the emojis 3, 8, 18, and 23 seem to be interpreted as the feeling of 'Sadness' except only emoji 13, which was considered as 'Anger' with the percentage of 89.47. Emoji 3 was agreed by 93.42%, Emoji 8 by 44.74%, Emoji 18 by 81.58% and Emoji 23 by 89.47%.

Moving to the category 'Content' where there are two sub-categories: 'Food & Drink' and 'Activity'. The emojis under the sub-category 'Food & Drink' describe their use in two feelings: 'Enjoyment' and 'None'. Emoji 4, Emoji 14, and Emoji 24 convey a sense of 'Enjoyment' with percentages of 72.37%, 55.26%, and 69.74%, respectively, whereas Emoji 9 was conveyed a meaning of sexual sense or organ, and Emoji 19 identified as a sense of relaxation or being chill. However, the emojis under the sub-category 'Activity' are all aligned in the same direction of feeling 'Enjoyment'. Emoji 5 was agreed by 64.47% of the participants, Emoji 10 by 61.84%, Emoji 15 by 56.58%, Emoji 20 by 50.00% and Emoji 25 by 56.58%. In the following paragraphs, with whom the participants employed the emojis in their ELF communication via SNSs.

Almost all participants indicated they mostly used emojis in text messages with friends at 92.11%. The second most used is with family members at 34.21 %, partners at 28. 95% , strangers at 21. 05% , and co-workers/colleagues at the least ~~of~~ 18.42%. Nevertheless, notable variations were observed in the ranking of individuals with whom emojis were deliberately employed, once participants had been categorized into

two distinct groups. Thai participants asserted that they felt comfortable using emojis with friends the most at 90.20%, followed by co-workers/colleagues at 29.41%, family members as well as partners at 27.45%, and lastly with strangers at 23.53%. Slightly different compared to those peers of non-Thai participants, they employed emojis in the texting interactions with friends the most at 96.00%, followed by family members at 48.00%, co-workers/colleagues at 36.00%, partners at 32.00%, and the last group of people they used emojis to convey meanings with is strangers at 16.00%. Interestingly, one non-Thai and four Thai participants, meaning five in total which is 6.58%, indicated that they felt free to add emojis into their messages with all five groups of recipients.

Table 2 The most agreement on the interpretation of 25 emojis

Category		No. of emoji	Interpretation	Participants selecting					
				No. of total	%	No. of non-Thai	%	No. of Thai	%
Emotion	Face-positive	1	Enjoyment	62	81.58%	18	72.00%	44	86.27%
		6	Enjoyment	69	90.79%	22	88.00%	47	92.16%
		11	Enjoyment	51	67.11%	18	72.00%	33	64.71%
		16	Enjoyment	52	68.42%	19	76.00%	33	64.71%
		21	Enjoyment	70	92.11%	25	100.00%	45	88.24%
	Face-neutral	2	Surprise	38	50.00%	15	60.00%	23	45.10%
		7	None	62	81.58%	20	80.00%	42	82.35%
		12	None	32	42.11%	8	32.00%	24	47.06%
		17	None	30	39.47%	7	28.00%	23	45.10%
		22	Contempt	27	35.53%	5	20.00%	22	43.14%
	Face-negative	3	Sadness	71	93.42%	23	92.00%	48	94.12%
		8	Sadness	34	44.74%	8	32.00%	26	50.98%
		13	Anger	68	89.47%	22	88.00%	46	90.20%
		18	Sadness	62	81.58%	19	76.00%	43	84.31%
		23	Sadness	68	89.47%	22	88.00%	46	90.20%
Content	Food & Drink	4	Enjoyment	55	72.37%	18	72.00%	37	72.55%
		9	None	47	61.84%	16	64.00%	31	60.78%
		14	Enjoyment	42	55.26%	15	60.00%	27	52.94%
		19	None	39	51.32%	12	48.00%	27	52.94%
		24	Enjoyment	53	69.74%	19	76.00%	34	66.67%
	Activity	5	Enjoyment	49	64.47%	16	64.00%	33	64.71%
		10	Enjoyment	47	61.84%	19	76.00%	28	54.90%
		15	Enjoyment	43	56.58%	15	60.00%	28	54.90%
		20	Enjoyment	38	50.00%	17	68.00%	21	41.18%
		25	Enjoyment	43	56.58%	16	64.00%	27	52.94%

Table 3 Recipients of emoji used in SNSs by participants

Group of people	Participants indicating					
	No. of total	%	No. of non-Thai	%	No. of Thai	%
Friend	70	92.11%	24	96.00%	46	90.20%
Family	26	34.21%	12	48.00%	14	27.45%
Co-worker/ Colleague	14	18.42%	9	36.00%	15	29.41%
Partner	22	28.95%	8	32.00%	14	27.45%
Stranger	16	21.05%	4	16.00%	12	23.53%

Table 4 The reasons why using the most often used emojis

Reason	Participant indicating					
	No.of total	%	No.of non-Thai	%	No.of Thai	%
Express feelings	58	76.32%	22	88.00%	36	70.59%
Strengthen the content	27	35.53%	11	44.00%	16	31.37%
Soften the content	33	43.42%	12	48.00%	21	41.18%
Make the content more ironic/sarcastic	19	25.00%	4	16.00%	15	29.41%
Make the content more fun	37	48.68%	13	52.00%	24	47.06%
Make the content more serious	4	5.26%	2	8.00%	2	3.92%
Make the content more positive	42	55.26%	15	60.00%	27	52.94%
Make the content more negative	8	10.53%	3	12.00%	5	9.80%
Replace what can't be said by words	30	39.47%	12	48.00%	18	35.29%

Table 5 The reasons why infrequently/never using the emojis

Reason	Participant indicating					
	No. of total	%	No. of non-Thai	%	No. of Thai	%
Do not know its meaning	16	21.05%	8	32.00%	8	15.69%
Be irrelevant to topics discussed	21	27.63%	7	28.00%	14	27.45%
Do not like the vegetable/drink	12	15.79%	2	8.00%	10	19.61%
Use only facial-expression emojis	4	5.26%	2	8.00%	2	3.92%
Relate to sexuality in a negative perspective	11	14.47%	4	16.00%	7	13.73%
Has no meaning	12	15.79%	2	8.00%	10	19.61%

The data presented in Table 4 provides an analysis of the reasons participants utilized specific emojis, and additional reasons associated with those selected by fewer participants, thereby preventing these emojis from being ranked among the top three. It was found that among all 76 participants, the highest percentage of 76. 32 for the agreed- upon reason was attributed to 'Express feelings'. This means the emojis can reveal texting expressions completely; rather than type words, the EMC communicators replaced them with particular emojis and still kept the same meanings or intentions of the message conveyed. The second most agreed reason for using the emojis is 'Make the content more positive' at 55.26%, followed by 'Make the content more fun' at 48.68%, 'Soften the content' at 43.42%, 'Replace what cannot be said by words' at 39.47%, 'Strengthen the content' at 35. 53% , ' Make the content more ironic/ sarcastic' at 25. 00% , 'Make the content more negative' at 10. 53% and ' Make the content more serious' at 5.26% respectively.

Table 5 presents the reasons provided by participants for infrequently or never using the emojis under investigation. The most frequently reported reason among all participants was that the emojis were 'Be irrelevant to the topics discussed' (27. 63%). This was consistent across both Thai (27.45%) and non-Thai (28.00%) participants, indicating a shared perception of contextual inappropriateness. However, a notable distinction emerged in the reasons cited by non- Thai participants. The most prominent reason in this group was a lack of understanding of the emoji meanings (32. 00%), suggesting that semantic ambiguity may present a greater barrier to emoji use for non-Thai users. In contrast, Thai participants more commonly selected 'do not like the vegetable/ drink' and 'has no meaning' (both at 19. 61%) as significant factors. These findings suggest that cultural familiarity and personal relevance play key roles in emoji adoption, with comprehension challenges being more prevalent among non-Thai users, while Thai participants may focus more on personal or cultural associations with the emoji content.

Findings from the interview

The interview process serves as a supplementary research instrument designed to enrich and triangulate the data obtained from the primary tool. The data collected during this phase were obtained from five Thai participants and three non-Thai participants, all voluntarily participated in individual semi-structured interviews. Notably, all interviewees had completed and submitted the questionnaire, ensuring that their characteristics align with the study's objectives. The three non-Thai participants comprise one Australian worker with more than 10 years of experience in Thai, one British worker with 7-9 years of experience in Thai, and one Japanese student with less than one year of experience in. For the group of Thai participants, there are five students.

Relating the questions asked, certain questions posed during the interview might not be directly pertinent to the 25 selected emojis shown in Table 2, presented to the participants, as the primary objective of this method was to elicit broader insights into the participants' perspectives on emoji usage within social network interactions. This includes an exploration of their perceptions of ELF, as well as the communicative strategies they employ in EMC. The data derived from this approach were intended to offer a deeper understanding of the participants' cognitive and pragmatic engagement with emojis beyond the specific set under consideration.

In the first instance, the interviewees revealed with whom they usually communicate through, and this aligned with the answer derived from the questionnaire that seven participants (87.50%) agreed to use them with 'Friends' except only one Thai participant insisted on using with only 'Partner'. The second group of people they use emojis with is 'Co-workers/ Colleagues' released by three Thai participants. The third group is 'Family members' reported by one Thai and one non-Thai, and 'Partner' agreed upon by two Thai participants, which counted as 25% of all respondents. Interestingly, only one non-Thai account 12.50%, said that s/he also used emojis in EMC with ones s/he did not know or had a relationship with. Additionally, those who used emojis with friends described that they felt more comfortable using emojis anytime they communicated with their friends. They were sure that their interactants would understand what they intentionally meant in a certain as they usually contacted each other with the emojis attached almost all of the time texting. This is similar to the pragmatic strategy in ELF communication, where the use of emojis – one of the multimodal features – were intended to minimize the social distance between interlocutors, fostering a more congenial and inviting atmosphere in written communication (Kotarputh, 2020). Emojis seem to be one of the elements in their written communication through SNSs conveying, certain meanings or obvious feelings in the messages.

However, for all recipient groups other than 'Friends', participants indicated that, although they could not be certain their interlocutors would fully comprehend their intended meaning, they nonetheless anticipated that, at the very least, their interlocutors would make an informed inference based on the contextual cues they had provided. If they did not know the meanings of emojis, they avoided using them. The most interesting point is the explanation from the one who used emojis with 'Strangers'; s/he stated that the reaso

n why s/he intentionally selected included emojis in the texting messages to strangers is that s/he preferred to confuse the interlocutor and somehow to end the written conversations without saying words or sentences explicitly. That is, s/he knew the meanings of the emojis chosen, but s/he still said it or them in out-of-contextual compatibility in the written conversation.

When it turned to the participants' interpretations of emojis used in EMC in general, whether there was more than one meaning for one emoji, most of them asserted that there were possible depending on what such particular emojis were. Some emojis have a variety of possible meanings based on the emoji users' cultural background as well as their interactants' as well. One of them mentioned an example of the emoji 'folded hand' 🙏. S/He said that some people could comprehend this emoji as 'sorry' while some might think about saying 'thank you.' All of the interviewees believed that previous messages should be delivered so that readers could understand the context and the emoji correctly, but if there was no context clue – only the emoji itself – misinterpretation could probably occur. Back to the example mentioned earlier, the backup reason for using the emoji 'folded hand' in particular is that the

conversational breakdown happened to the participant who mentioned this emoji. S/He included the emoji 'folded hand' in the message delivered to a co-worker who was in another country and absolutely with a different culture. S/He intended to say 'thank' to that recipient, but that person replied to the interviewee asking, "What do you mean by this emoji? Why did you say sorry to me?". Clarification was consequently needed by the participant through an explanation of what was truly meant and how the emoji was generally used in his culture, until mutual understanding was achieved (see Mauranen, 2006). In conclusion, it must be emphasized that contextual and cultural background schemas play a critical role in written communication. Particularly regarding cultural background schemas, all participants in the communication process must possess a keen awareness of their own schemas and those of their interlocutors. This mutual understanding is crucial for effectively constructing and transmitting messages to the intended audience.

Moving on to how the participants managed successful written communication through SNSs, the questions related to 'English', and 'communicative strategies' to cope with mis/non-understanding from their perspectives (Cogo, 2009). The ideas relating to the use of English are multifarious; the Australian and British interviewees, referred to as 'native speakers,' appeared to place minimal emphasis on grammatical accuracy. Instead, they conveyed that as long as they could comprehend or at least infer the intended meaning behind the messages conveyed to them, they were completely comfortable with such forms of communication. This viewpoint is further corroborated by the responses of three Thai participants who stated that, in general high levels of formality were not maintained in their text messages, either in terms of content and context. Consequently, they did not emphasize grammatical accuracy significantly (see Firth, 1996). They indicated that minor errors, whether made by themselves or their interlocutors, were typically overlooked, provided the messages remained intelligible. Clarifications were sought only in instances where the messages failed to, convey meaning— a scenario that, according to the participants, rarely occurred in everyday communication. On the other hand, the three other participants, one Japanese student, and two Thai students, disagreed with this opinion. They emphasized that whenever they communicated using a foreign language, they made a concerted effort to adhere to the linguistic norms and conventions of native speakers (Jenkins, 2006). They expressed that it was uncommon for them to allow their text messages to be grammatically incorrect. In their view, maintaining grammatical precision was a matter of linguistic accuracy and demonstrating their proficiency and intellectual competence in particular foreign language. The data shows two perspectives on how to use English in EMC communication: Egalitarian and Nativized inclination (Kotarputh, 2020).

In addition to the pragmatic strategies employed to address instances of miscomprehension or non-understanding of received expressions and/or emojis, the participants demonstrated a variety of coping mechanisms for managing the broader range of conversational breakdowns that occurred. As mentioned above, the Thai and Japanese participants would consider whether the comprehension of such miscomprehension or non-understanding is necessary. If it is, they resorted to various strategies to ascertain meaning, including consulting reliable sources such as reputable websites or seeking clarification from acquaintances (see Cogo, 2009). In cases where these efforts proved insufficient, they would revert to the message's sender and directly inquire about the intended meaning, which is the only way the two non-Thai participants would do. They further explained that it was very common in such circumstances, so the best way to solve this problem was to directly the primary source who the senders of the problematic messages were (see Mauranen, 2006). Therefore, it can be concluded that the differences in the perception of English usage and in the strategies employed to manage conversational breakdowns may not necessarily be determined by whether an individual is Thai or non-Thai, or a native speaker of the language in question. Instead, these differences are rooted in the individual's linguistic and cultural background, and their level of awareness in these areas (see Baker, 2015). These factors, however, are not fixed and can be learned. When effectively applied in intercultural communication contexts, they can significantly enhance the success of communication processes.

Discussion and conclusion

Frequency of emoji used in EMC

To begin with, according to these research results, the three most often used emojis are the face with tears of joy (emoji 1), followed by the smiling face with smiling face with smiling eyes (emoji 21), and the heart suit (emoji 15). These findings are consistent with Macourková's (2022) research, which also indicated that the same selected emojis were the most commonly used in online communication via WhatsApp. Additionally, these results align with the findings of other studies, such as Chui's (2020a) study, which found that the emoji 'face with tears of joy' was the most frequently used on Twitter between 2014 and 2019. Furthermore, Arafah and Hasyim's (2019) study found that the predominant type of emoji used in Indonesia on WhatsApp is facial expressions, with a usage rate of 80.6%.

For the objective of identifying the least often used emojis in EMC by both Thai and non- Thai communicators, the findings show that it is worth noting that the sexual connotations of the 'eggplant' (emoji 9) and the users emphasized that this emoji is rarely or even never used; moreover, it potentially is misinterpreted easily. It has been reported that some individuals intentionally avoid using it in their written English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) through social networking sites (SNSs). The eggplant emoji is widely recognized as having hidden sexual connotations which may lead to discomfort being experienced by either the sender or the receiver when using it.

To be more detailed, by giving some examples from the interview, the participants shared their perspectives on the eggplant emoji in the same direction. The respondents' comments included, "It denotes sexual content"., "I fear it could be interpreted negatively as sexual in nature.", "It makes me feel uneasy". and "I perceive it as implying sexuality". These findings align with Ravi's (2023) study that the sexual associations linked with non-facial emojis, particularly the eggplant. The study also revealed that 60.9% of the participants identified the eggplant emoji as representing the male sexual organ. Another study from Weissman in 2019 highlighted that eggplant and peach emojis carry strong sexual implications when used without adequate discourse context.

Even though some individuals viewed the emoji as too suggestive, others felt uncertain how to use the eggplant emoji correctly through its meaning or they avoided using it. Some examples from their views are "I don't know what it means.", "Has no relevance; don't know what context I'd use it in"., and "I've never used this emoji because I don't know what feelings it conveys. It's just an eggplant". Both literal and euphemistic interpretations were expressed, with most participants agreeing that it is simply a type of vegetable.

Again, in the least used ones, particularly the second least often used emojis in EMC, all participants shared the same use of the emojis; which is the 'hot beverage' (Emoji 19). The supporting reasons for not or rarely using it from the participants were divided into 4 areas: 1) No opportunity to use it (they rarely or never drink coffee), 2) No awareness of its existence, 3) Preference of facial expression emojis and 4) No interest in using it. However, in case of using it in EMC, the hot beverage emoji can be utilized in sentences for a variety of purposes including indicating a specific type of drink attached with the textual message. For instance, the coffee emoji is used together with a "good morning" greeting (Zappavigna & Logi, 2021). Meanwhile, the 1st and 2nd least used emojis are in the food and beverage category with certain reasons asserted, the third least commonly used object emojis in the result is the 'balloon' (emoji 25). In Maier's (2021) study reported that object emojis are not as widely used as face emojis in practice, as indicated by the fact that among the top 20 emojis tracked by emoji tracker, there are 14 face and 2 hand emojis, but no object or event emojis. Object emojis are not as commonly employed among users on EMC.

Utilization of emoji used in EMC

For the motive behind emoji use, the most significant finding in this study reveals that the reason why the participants utilized the emojis in EMC is to express how they feel to others (see Prada et al., 2018). It is understandable because emojis are predominantly used to convey feelings and emotions in internet communication (Arafah & Hasyim, 2019). In accordance with this result, previous studies have demonstrated that most of the respondents use emojis to express their feelings, as they find it easier to convey

emotions through written instant messages, and emojis are now capable of replacing written words in internet communication (see Macourková, 2022). It can be concluded that facial expression emojis exhibit versatility in conveying a range of meanings, contingent upon the context in which they are employed, and still, it is the first priority expressing emotions once emojis appear in EMC.

Drawing on the work of Chui (2020a) and Gullberg (2016), it can be inferred that facial emojis possess the capacity to convey a multiplicity of meanings, with their interpretation being contingent upon the communicative context and the socio-cultural background of the recipient. For example, Chui (2020a) stated that the emoji "Face with tears of joy" conveys a complex interplay of emotions, as it simultaneously features tears, often associated with negative emotions, and an open smile, emblematic of positive sentiments. This may lead users to interpret it as either excessive happiness or intense crying. However, in this study, most of the participants including Thais and non-Thais agreed that they used and/or interpreted emojis in the same direction expressing the emoji "Face with tears of joy" as representing a positive emotion of "enjoyment and love". These are in line with accommodation/pragmatic strategies fundamentally found in ELF communication studies (e.g. Cogo, 2009; Cogo & House, 2017; Seidlhofer & Berns, 2009) where communicators utilize emojis to adapt to different interlocutors in ELF interactions, thereby facilitating successful communication.

Differences of emoji used in EMC

In terms of the frequency of use, all the selected emojis are used in a quite similar manner by all participants, with the exception of two emojis that are used slightly differently by Thai and non-Thai participants: the neutral face (emoji 12) and the balloon (emoji 25). For emoji 12, it is ranked in the top three of both the most and the least often used by Thai emoji users in their EMC whereas it is out of the list of top three of both the most and the least often used for the non-Thai participants. Furthermore, the two groups of participants intentionally selected the target audience, which the recipients or receivers of the messages are divided into five groups: Friends, Family members, Colleges, Partners and Strangers, with emoji attached in the EMC differently. Only 27.45% of the Thai participants tended to use emojis with their family members, but it is higher for those non-Thais at 48.00%. Conversely, the Thai respondents show that they use emojis with strangers at 23.53% whereas only 12.00% of the non-Thai attached emojis in the EMC with strangers. This relates to Derks et al.'s (2008) study revealed that emoji usage patterns can vary depending on the relationship between the sender and receiver; for instance, individuals tend to use more emojis when communicating with friends compared to strangers.

Overall, based on the feedback from the majority of all participants, it was found that most participants prefer to use emojis when communicating with their friends. This finding is consistent with the results of Gullberg's (2016) study detailing that the informants used emojis among friends; however, they acknowledged that when communicating with close friends, the use of emojis was less necessary. numerous research This can be attributed to their familiarity with one another, which enables them to interpret textual messages and infer underlying meanings and emotions accurately. As a result, emojis are not required to enhance or emphasize meanings, nor to reinforce their relationship dynamics. (ibid.).

Conclusion

Emojis hold multifaceted meanings, capable of conveying both literal and suggestive interpretations. Similar meanings are often expressed through the use of multiple emojis, with a common consensus about their interpretation being reached by many participants. Certain emojis can evoke multiple emotional responses, such as "anger" and "annoyance," which encompass a spectrum of related feelings rather than a single discrete emotion. Notably, 45% of participants reported predominantly using emojis in communication with friends, reflecting a shared understanding of these symbols' emotional nuances (ibid.). Emojis also function as globally recognized symbols, facilitating uniform interpretation across diverse national and cultural contexts. While consistent emotional interpretations are common, individual experiences and cultural factors can influence their perception. Culture profoundly shapes how emotions are interpreted and expressed through emoji use. Despite these variations, emojis serve as valuable tools for enhancing emotional

expression and fostering effective communication in cross- cultural contexts. Moreover, communication strategies are not solely determined by national cultures; instead, individual experiences and cognitive schemas play a significant role in shaping how people employ these strategies, including emojis in written communication with interlocutors holding a variety of cultural awareness (see Baker, 2015). The results have been linked to previous studies on emoji use and individual interpretations. Furthermore, ELF is regarded in this study as an approach that reflects how English is used by interlocutors, rather than as a distinct framework. It is assumed communication within the ELF paradigm occurs among individuals of all nationalities. Therefore, this study examines whether emoji usage differs in cross- cultural communication. The findings indicate that effective communication requires interlocutors to consider multiple factors when engaging with diverse individuals. In particular, intercultural awareness is essential for successful written ELF interactions within electronically mediated communication (EMC).

Contributions

From an intercultural communication perspective, valuable insights are provided by this research into how emojis are interpreted across different cultural contexts. Moreover, it enhances sentiment polarity analysis, improving mass sensing in market intelligence products and linking emojis to short text inputs, which aids in developing more accurate sentiment models. Since emojis can carry varied meanings depending on cultural backgrounds and individual experiences, this study can help daily communication or even businesses tailor their digital communication/ pragmatic strategies to diverse audiences. It can also aid in developing AI- driven sentiment analysis tools that account for cultural nuances in emoji interpretation. Future research could explore cultural variations in emoji use, enabling more effective global communication in digital marketing, customer service, and international business negotiations for more precise emotional recognition.

Limitation and recommendations

Since the participants in this study come from diverse national and sociocultural backgrounds, with some being non-students, these variations may influence emoji usage, potentially impacting the validity and reliability of the findings. Moreover, using the snowball sampling technique to recruit non-Thai participants may have resulted in a sample with substantial variability in linguistic and cultural backgrounds, potentially influencing their emoji usage in EMC. This diversity could limit the generalizability of the findings. The Thai participants, primarily university students, will likely exhibit similar digital communication patterns shaped by academic culture, institutional expectations, and peer interactions. In contrast, the non- Thai group includes students and non-students, whose emoji usage may vary depending on professional, social, or personal contexts. To address this limitation, future research should consider employing a more controlled sampling method, such as stratified or quota sampling, to ensure a more balanced representation of participants with similar linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Additionally, incorporating pre- screening criteria or conducting follow- up interviews could help account for individual differences in emoji usage and provide a more nuanced understanding of the factors influencing EMC communication. Additionally, generational differences and cultural attitudes toward emojis may further contribute to variations in usage. The absence of controls for these variables may result in skewed findings, limiting the generalizability of the study.

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