



SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE GROWTH OF READING AND LEARNING ABILITIES

Ifeyinwa Obiegbu, PhD

Department of English Language and Literature,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

Abstract

The growth of reading and learning abilities is partly a function of the total development of human organisms as they interact with various institutions, persons and forces in society. Anderson and Hughes (1995) found from a study of matched group of boys and girls in the first school grade, that success in reading at that early age is a function of total development; children who are normal or advanced in general maturity tend to succeed, whereas those who are retarded in their social development tend to fail in reading. This finding has been confirmed by several other research reports (Olson, 1988; Richardson, 1987; Keshian, 1973). The purpose of this article is to discuss the relationship of social development and the growth of reading abilities, and examine their educational implications, with reference to a developing country like Nigeria

Keywords: Reading, Learning, Ability, Education, Schools

Introduction

The exact connotations of the terms growth and development are not always clear, even in psychological literature. Sometimes the two terms are used synonymously. At other times the term growth is applied to maturation which, according to Mc-Graw (1980), means "the unfolding and ripening of the abilities, characteristics, traits and potentialities present at birth but only later coming to maturity in a developing organism;" while the term development is applied to changes brought about by environmental influences, or by learning. Because of the problems inherent in such an attempt to distinguish between the development of innate potentialities and the changes that are attributable to environmental factors, many psychologists find this definition unsatisfactory. Kelly (1985) has also attempted to define growth and development. In his view, the term growth means the progressive increase and continuous advancement of the child from birth to maturity. Growth is evidenced in an increase in quantity or in size, in enlarged capacity, and in changing proportions, either of the organism as a whole or of its parts. It therefore involves structural and functional changes, and implies an increase in dimensions.

The term development means, in his view, the gradual and orderly unfolding of the characteristics of the successful stages of growth. It involves changes from simplicity to complexity, or a continuous increase in the child's powers of functioning, and in the coordination between mind and body, leading towards full maturity. In other words, development implies qualitative changes.

In the present writer's view, the term development connotes both quantitative and qualitative changes in the total organism, whereas the term growth connotes changes in a particular phase or in specific attributes even though such changes can be related to the general development that goes



on concurrently within the same organism. Growth curves may show some similarity, but they also indicate differences in the rate, extent and variability of development.

Social Development in Relation to Various Developmental Stages in Reading and Learning

It is customary, and indeed convenient, to consider human development in terms of different patterns of growth and behaviour at certain age limits. Although there is no general agreement as to the number of such stages, we shall, for purposes of this discussion, adopt the five stages postulated by Strang (2001). These are (a) Infancy, (b) Early childhood, (c) Middle childhood, (d) Pre-Adolescence, and (e) Adolescence.

Infancy

The period extends throughout approximately the first two years of life, or from birth to the time when the child has developed speech sufficiently to express himself purposefully, by using very simple words to connote thought or feeling. Infancy is believed to be a most significant stage in the entire processes of growth and development. Indeed, no other period possesses more significance for the future than the first years of life, because, as Gessell (2001) has shown, it is during this period that the foundations are laid for all future growth and development.

The period is characterized not only by rapid physical growth, but also by a rapid mental development. The primary characteristic of mental development during infancy is the acquisition of language and its use as a means of expression and communication. Though the child possesses at birth the necessary physical apparatus for vocalization, and the mental potentialities for the acquisition of speech, yet the language which the child speaks must be learned very largely through imitation of sounds in social environment, through the processes of association and abstraction, and through the formation of ideas. During these years the child progresses from crying to babbling, to imitation of sounds, to articulation of one or two syllables, to the combination of these into word, and then to the comprehension and use of words. In this way, names of familiar persons and objects are learned, and speech is used on purpose.

On the whole, social development, as distinct from other phases of development, is slight during infancy, because as yet the infant's interaction with his environment, or his capacity for learning, is very limited. But he does develop an increasing awareness of other people as separate people from himself, and a widening of interests beyond himself. Gradually, too, he learns to imitate simple acts such as laughing, waving to people, throwing and picking objects. Furthermore, he acquires the interest and attitudes fostered by his parents and all other persons concerned with his care and upbringing.

Early Childhood (or the Pre-school Age)

This period includes the interval between the time when the child has developed language sufficiently to express himself purposefully and his entrance to school. The interval includes the years three, four and five, since the child usually enters school at the age of six.



During this period, considerable progress is usually made in the acquisition of motor skills. This is evident in the child's increasing involvement in self-care activities such as dressing, feeding and washing himself, picking up toys, and the like. The predominant characteristic of the period is curiosity, and for this reason it is usually called the questioning age. The child seeks to know the what, why, when, and how of everything. These questions are indications of his eagerness to learn or to acquire new experiences. Usually, this eagerness leads to an extension of understanding of some aspects of his environment, given proper guidance and culturally rich and stimulating home backgrounds.

Social development in the pre-school period is also manifested by extending the range of contacts with other children in play groups. This new interest marks the beginning of group activity and of co-operative behaviour. Although the pre-school child cannot read, he has a keen interest in hearing stories which feature sense impressions, and in watching actions which are characterized by rhythm and repetition. This period provides a good opportunity for the development of reading readiness in the child.

Middle Childhood (The Primary School Period)

This period extends from the age of six to the age of nine or ten. Because it corresponds with the progress of the child through the early grades in school, it is sometimes designated as the primary school period. The importance of this stage lies in the fact that it marks the transition from home to school, as well as the growth of contact with, and membership and active participation in social groups. During this period the child broadens his environment, increases his activities, develops new interests, faces new kinds of problems, learns to make new adjustments and to accept the authority of his teachers.

The social development of the child at this stage is probably best indicated by the attainment of "readiness to learn," or sufficient maturity to profit from formal instruction in the school situation. It is true that not all children who enter school at the age of six are ready for formal instruction, but effective learning can only take place when readiness has been attained. This involves proper physical, mental, and emotional development, an adequate experiential background, and a willingness to learn. The mental development involved in readiness includes a capacity for accurate visual and auditory discrimination, adequate memory span, ability to concentrate sufficiently, capacity to think in abstract terms and to express thoughts in a meaningful fashion. There is also a marked improvement in language ability which, in both first and second language situations, is manifested by an increase in the size of vocabulary, the length and structure of sentences used, effectiveness in expression of ideas, and correct usage of words. The extent to which readiness is attained, largely depends on the kind, or quality of the social environment, and the effectiveness of the child's interaction with it. Children who fail to achieve this readiness to read or learn tend to learn at frustration level and develop negative attitudes to reading and learning.

Pre-adolescence



The age limits of this period are flexible, due to variation at the onset of puberty. Moreover, there seems to be increasing evidence that the onset of puberty occurs earlier in the present generation than in previous ones (Good-enough, 1980). However, the span of the period is roughly four years, extending from the age of nine or ten to the attainment of puberty (age 13 or 14).

The manifestations of mental growth and development through social interactions are many. They include the following: keen observation through the use of perceptual abilities and experiences; improvement in attention span with the result that class periods are lengthened accordingly, strong language interests which leads to further vocabulary expansion; constructive imagination; understanding of causal relationships, greater ability to reason logically and to generalize; and a deeper insight into social situations, with a consequent expansion of interest in history, geography, and in simple phases of science, such as, nature study and health science.

Apart from all this, the social development of the pre-adolescent child is characterized by a greater degree of social consciousness, an increase and expansion in group activity and loyalty, as well as striving for group unity, which is frequently referred to as the "gang spirit." This is the age when the child participates actively in scouting, extra-curricular activities and team games, which constitute valuable sources for the acquisition of such characteristics as co-operation, perseverance, a sense of fair play, group loyalty, and leadership.

With regard to reading interests, pre-adolescence is the time when voluntary reading of easy materials for enjoyment and information approaches its peak. Through his reading the child is introduced to world events, both past and present. He becomes familiar with human behaviour outside the family, the immediate neighborhood and his circle of friends. In this way, he learns something about objects and places, and also about the forces and ideals which motivate human conduct. During this period there are, on the whole, noticeable trends towards selectivity in reading material. Boys' interests tend to centre around adventure, action, mystery, science, invention, and biography, while girls show a great liking for romance, for stories of sacrifice and home life (Kelly, 1989). Under proper guidance by language arts teachers, pupils could develop permanent interest in extensive reading, for recreation, enrichment of their experiential backgrounds, and development of their personalities.

The Period of Adolescence

The term adolescence is derived from the Latin word *adolescere*, which means "to grow to maturity." This period represents the last stage of immaturity during which a gradual physiological and psychological transition is made from childhood to maturity. During this period the boy and the girl are in the process of completing their physical, mental, social, emotional, and moral preparation for adulthood; in short; the characteristics of the child are exchanged for those of the adult.

The adolescent period normally extends from the age of thirteen or fourteen when puberty is attained, to the age of about twenty, when cessation of growth usually occurs, or when maturity is attained. Because adolescence corresponds roughly to the "teen years," adolescents are referred to as "teenagers".



Generally, the outstanding characteristics of adolescence is considered to be emotional development. This is so because of the idealism and enthusiasm, the self-assertiveness and initiative, the moods and conflicts, which are manifested by those passing through this phase of development, and which are so characteristic of the endeavours of youth to make adequate adjustment to life. It is for these reasons that adolescence has frequently been described as a time of "storm and stress."

During the period of adolescence, a child develops not only greater consciousness of self as a person but also a strong social awareness. He manifests this social awareness through the expression of new interest, new attitudes, and new social relationships. The result is an expansion of activities which are reflected in an improvement of social relations, and also in adjustment to a complex social environment. The adolescent child's eagerness to participate actively in the experiences of others, particularly of the same group, is indicated by his membership of clubs, cliques, societies, and the like. Group action is essential for complete social development. Little wonder, then, that the adolescent, who normally desires social approval, not only participates but also displays enthusiasm and pride, in group activities with others of his own age group. He attaches great importance to the opinions of his age groups, and manifests loyalty to group standards or ideals in such matters as dress, mannerisms, appearance, and speech. Under adequate direction and good guidance, this social activity does promote qualities of leadership and cooperation, and fosters the development of a sense of responsibility.

Among the significant aspects of development during adolescence is a maturing of interests of an intellectual, recreational, and social nature, as well as the emergence of definite interests of a vocational nature. As Kelly (1989 p.204) says, the maturing intellectual interests of the adolescent are indicated by his increased perceptual ability and vivid imagination, by his improved capacity for abstract reasoning, judgement, and the analysis, organization, and classification of knowledge, as well as by his more mature interest in reading and school subjects.

In general, reading interests become broader, more individualized and specialized. They also give evidence of critical taste. There is usually an increase in the reading of non-fiction, of newspapers, and of magazines. Interest in school subjects is broadened or changed, due, undoubtedly, to mental and social development, and also to the characteristic idealism of the period. This usually gives rise to a marked preference for subjects embodying or emphasizing an understanding of social relations, and for those related to a possible future career. Change in interests of a recreational nature is evident in the more mature choices of such leisure-time activities as motion pictures, radio and television programmes, while changes in social interests are manifested by participation in such activities as dancing, parties, and "dating".

Factors that Influence Social Development

It is apparent from this discussion so far, that environmental factors play a crucial role in the social development of the child, from birth to maturity. In this section, an attempt will be made to explain the way in which certain environmental factors affect social development. The environmental factors will be discussed under the following headings: (a) The influence of the home; (b) The



influence of the school; (c) The influence of the Mass Communications media; and (d) other environmental influences.

The Influence of the Home

A child's earliest experiences of social development usually take place in his home or family. His early upbringing, or experiences during his interaction with the home environment play a great part on his later development. The combined data from various studies of child development, patterns of child rearing, delinquency and maladjustment, mental deficiency, and the like, all point to this fact.

For purposes of illustration, we might just refer to a few experimental findings. Hewitt and Jenkins (1990), in a very valuable experiment, applied factorial analysis to the traits of five hundred problem children, of average age between 11 and 12 years, with a mean IQ of 94. These researchers made the following interesting findings:

- (a) Unsocialized aggressive behaviour in children (viz: assaulting tendencies, cruelty, defiance of authority, malicious mischief, inadequate guilt feelings) was significantly related to parental rejection (arising from such circumstances as illegitimate or unwanted pregnancy, parents' hostility to the child, breakdown of marriage, among others).
- (b) Socialized delinquent behaviour in children (characterized by bad companies, gang activities, stealing, truancy, staying out late) was significantly associated with parental negligence (characterized by untidy or dirty home, lack of supervision, moral laxity, the mental dullness of the mother, living in slums, among others).
- (c) Over-inhibited behaviour in children (seclusiveness, shyness, worrying, sensitivity, submissiveness) was significantly associated with repressive tendencies in the family on the part of the parents, (manifested by hypercritical moods, unsociability, and sibling rivalry). This experiment had demonstrated convincingly, that there is a connection between certain kinds of behaviour in children and certain kinds of upbringing or environment.

In a study of patterns of child-rearing, Sears and his associates (2005) used an interview form to obtain information regarding the way in which parents dealt with some aspects of childcare; cleanliness, aggressiveness, sex behaviour, care of property, noisiness, and toilet training. They found that mothers who were anxious about the job they had to do in child-rearing tended to have more aggressive children than mothers whose anxiety was low.

Similarly, there was a tendency for children to be more aggressive if their mothers were dissatisfied with the way in which child rearing interfered with their free time, if they had little or no interest in their husband, or if they disagreed with their husbands to a considerable extent about child rearing principles.

In another study, by Watson (1957), children reared permissively did not differ significantly in most of the personality traits that were explored; but there were substantial differences between



the two groups in some of the traits. Children from permissive homes, who enjoyed greater freedom than those from strict or authoritarian ones, showed: (a) more initiative and independence; (b) better socialization and cooperation; (c) less inner hostility and more friendly feelings towards others; and (d) a higher level of spontaneity, originality, and creativity. Watson further found that there was "a marked tendency for greater freedom in the home to show itself in great independence in the child's behaviour outside the home." Furthermore, children from permissive homes were found to be, on the whole, more effective in their social relations than those from strict home. It is important to note that effectiveness in social relations tends to minimize the chances of maladjustment in classroom learning situations, and to increase the pupils' self-confidence as a reader or a learner.

In yet another study of parental attitude and children's behaviour, Lafore (1991)) recorded the practices of twenty-one mothers and the behaviour of their children. Even though no parent consistently used a single approach, yet Lafore was able to classify the parents into four groups as follows:

1. "Dictators" Parents who emphasized authority and obedience and who were usually dictatorial.
2. "Co-operators". Parents who were usually friendly, who seemed to deal with the child on the basis of mutual respect, who emphasized cooperation and persuasion rather than unquestioning obedience.
3. "Temporizers". Parents whose approach was mainly "situational" or circumstantial, who did not follow any consistent pattern of behaviour, or who could be pleasant or harsh as circumstances seemed to dictate.
4. "Appeasers". Parents whose approach was predominantly conciliatory, who tended to be afraid of annoying the child, who tended to avoid issues and circumvent any problems that arose, and who were guided mainly by the principle of avoiding, rather than facing an issue.

Lafore found that the parents who most frequently dictated to, and interfered with their children received the largest number of expressions of hostility from their children. Parents who confessed to numerous instances of blaming, hurrying, punishing, threatening, and interfering had children who presented many instances of crying. Children who were frequently threatened tended to be fearful, and children who were most often cautioned tended to be low in initiative or resourcefulness.

Negative attributes such as those once mentioned in these studies are certainly not conducive to effective reading and learning; they rather create emotional blocks to learning (Harris 2011). It is the duty of both parents and teachers to help pupils in whatever ways they can, either to guide against or to alleviate their effects.

The Influence of the School



The school also plays a role of crucial importance in the social development of the human organism. From the pre-school or the primary school age until maturity is reached, the school enters into a kind of partnership with individual families, for the upbringing of their children. It is common knowledge that the personalities of the teachers, and the social climate of the schools do have great deal of influence on the social development of children.

In a study of what he called "Dominative" and "Integrative" behaviour of the classroom and in group play, Anderson (1995) found that integrative behaviour on the part of one child (ie behaviour by which a child discovers ways of reaching goals which are satisfying to himself and to other children) elicits integrative behaviour in others. This kind of behaviour is the basis of cooperative enterprise and needs to be encouraged, since, unlike dominative goals, regardless of other people's needs) it satisfies the needs of the members of the group, minimizes the amount of conflict between them, and ensures effectiveness in learning and problem-solving situations. Connor (1990) has shown in his studies with children from New Zealand that pupils in classes which have "good" social climates interact more with one another and with the teacher; have better emotional rapport with the teacher, are more socially cohesive as a group, and have a better attitude to learning or schooling; compared with pupils in classes with "poor" social climates

Popular Reading Materials

Popular or sensational magazines, periodicals, novels, and poor quality (or politically partisan) newspapers, do tend to have an adverse effect, in much the same way as good literature or good publications, also tend to have a good effect, on the character development of youngsters. It has been suggested that the increasing wave of violence among youngsters in Nigeria is attributable to cheap publications which give undue publicity to crime and violence. Furthermore, sensational novels and magazines, with sex and romance as their main themes, have tended to encourage moral laxity among youngsters who are exposed to such influence (Healy and Bronner, 1988). A judicious choice of reading materials can help pupils to develop good taste and permanent interest in reading for pleasure and the expansion of knowledge.

Other Environmental Factors

One should point out that there are other environmental factors of an "occasional" or "situational" nature, which also affect social development. These arise from the ever-widening circle of inter-personal relationships, or from a multiplicity of interactions with various persons and institutions, not only within our immediate social and cultural environments, but also in other parts of the world. In short, whatever may be the effects that have been left on us by our homes, our school, and the mass media, the subtle effects of our interactions with various persons and institutions in this world of diverse peoples and cultures make it possible for our personalities to be continually modified or changed, for better or for worse. Thus, the richer and better the pupils' linguistic-cultural experiences and social contacts, the greater their chances of having satisfactory social development and of achieving intellectual growth progressively.

Conclusions and Recommendations



This discussion of social development in relation to the growth of reading and learning abilities has important implications for education, particularly in the developing countries of Africa. Since the school community plays a key role in the social development of pupils, care must be taken not only to adapt the school's curriculum to the maturational needs of pupils at various stages of development, but also create such a social climate within the school as will be conducive to pupils' achievement of reading or learning readiness.

The social activities which can help to bring about this desirable stage of physical, mental, emotional, attitudinal, linguistic and experiential preparedness for learning to read and reading to learn which is known as "reading readiness," are too numerous to discuss fully in a brief article such as this. It will suffice to mention a few of such activities:

- (a) Providing opportunities for extensive formal and informal use of language, for building word power or increasing vocabulary, and for acquiring new concepts and mastering various sentence pat-terns.
- (b) Oral language work, designed to improve ability to tell stories, participate in discussions, speak with a measure of clarity and in-eligibility, and listen attentively or purposefully.
- (c) Exercises designed to develop pupils' curiosity, to make them ask and answer questions intelligently, and to help them to follow directions or instructions,
- (d) Play activities and projects designed to make them develop a sense of purpose, and acquire the capacity for concentration, persistence, initiative, creativity, deductive and inductive reasoning and problem-solving, all of which are very crucial in reading and learning.
- (e) Exercises in drawing, tracing and painting, which could help them to acquire a sense of aesthetic judgement, and improve their abilities to perceive, construct and differentiate patterns and stimuli.
- (f) Participation in various recreational and play activities, such as, educational excursions, play acting and watching, which help to stimulate pupils' use of the sense of sight, hearing, touch, smell and feeling, to enrich their experiential background, to stimulate the imagination, and to provide relief from emotional tensions.
- (g) Other social-cultural and educational activities, such as sports, physical education, music, which could contribute to the physical, mental, emotional and moral well-being of the pupils, and also improve their value judgements and their capacity for rational learning.

These activities are interrelated, and so they overlap considerably. The developmental needs and problems of particular pupils at certain times will determine the areas of emphasis in these social activities. Yet, it is important to remember that the general well-being, and the physical, mental, emotional, linguistic and spiritual maturity of pupils are related to the growth of their reading or learning abilities.



Apart from providing effective reading readiness or learning readiness programmes, the school community should be in a position to make prompt and effective identification of cases of maladjustment (such as rejectees, isolates, delinquents, among others); to gain an insight into the environmental, psychological or other reasons for deviant classroom behaviour, conflicts and frustrations, and all forms of emotional problems that may affect general learning readiness or the growth of reading and learning abilities at various stages of schooling; and to take appropriate steps to remedy the situation. This may be best accomplished through the establishment of School Psychological Services, Educational Guidance Centres, Reading Centres or Clinics, Learning Disability Centres and/or similar units.

Teachers and parents also have an important part to play in all this. As pupils learn a great deal by imitation and identification, parents' attitudes to and interests in reading and learning, and the kinds of reading and learning facilities they provide at various developmental stages, will affect the growth of pupils' reading and learning abilities. The teacher, in particular, must ensure that instructional facilities and reading materials are specifically related to the developmental characteristics, needs, or problems of pupils, at the various stages, and that pupils are getting as much guidance and help as they may need for the progressive and sequential development of essential reading or learning skills. As much as possible, parents or guardians should supplement teachers' efforts in this regard by providing their children with educationally-stimulating, healthy, happy, and contented home-backgrounds, or ensuring that pupils do not have to live and work under intolerably frustrating home conditions, as is often the case with children from low socio-economic backgrounds and culturally "disadvantaged" homes.

Finally, developing African countries must show a much greater interest in the study of social development in relation to various aspects of personality and intellectual growth, that appears to be the case at the present time. The current trends in the studies of language development, as revealed by Bloom (2000) and by Ferguson and Slobin (2003), among others, offer African educators perspectives of value for empirical researches on language development and social development of African pre-school and school children. Indeed, research activities in this area could shed light on the problems of educational under-achievement, school drop-outs, wastage or inequality of educational opportunities, and the reading and learning difficulties, which seem so prevalent under current educational system in Nigeria, and which are not unconnected with differences in the quality or circumstances of social development of school children in African countries.

References

- Anderson, H.H.(1995) "An Experimental Study of Dominative and Integrative Behaviour in Children of Preschool Age" *J. Soc. Psych*, 8, 335-345.
- Anderson H. & Anderson G.L., Carmichael, L. (1990) *Manual of Child Psychology*. John Willey & Sons, New York.
- Anderson I.H. and Hughes, B.O.(1990) "The Relationship Between Learning to Read and Growth as a Whole" *School of Education Bulletin*. University of Michigan.



- Bandura, A. and Walters, R.H.(1989) "Aggression" in Child Psychology: 62nd Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education. Univ. of Chicago Press, .
- Bloom, L.(1985) Language Development: Form and Function in Emerging Grammars. M.I.T. Press, Cambridge Mass.
- Ferguson, C.A. &Slobin, D.I. (eds.)(2003) Studies of Child Language Development. Holt, Rinehart & Winston, N.Y.
- Gesell, A.(2001) The first Five Years of Life. New York, Harper.
- Harris, L.D(2004). Emotional Blocks to Learning. New York, The Free Press.
- Goodenough (1980)F.L. et al: Developmental Psychology. Appleton-Century-Crofts, New York, 1959.
- Hewitt, LE. and Jenkins R.L. (1987) Fundamental Patterns of Maladjustment, The Dynamics of Their Origin. Illinois: Green.
- Keshian, J.(2003) "The Characteristics and Experiences of Children who Learn to Read Successfully." Elementary English 40 pg 615-616.
- Kelly, W.A.(1989) Educational Psychology, Bruce Publishing Co., Milwaukee (Chap. xiv).
- McGraw, M.B. (2000) The Neuromuscular Maturation of the Human Infant. New York: Columbia Univ. Press.
- Mussen, P.A.(1989) The Psychological Development of the Child. (Chaps. 2, 4, 5 & 6). Prentice Hall Inc. New Jersey.
- Olson, W.C. (2007) Reading and Pupil Development. Supplementary Education Monographs.
- Richardson, J.A(2003). Causes of Reading Retardation in Primary School." Unpublished
- Strang, R. (2001) An Introduction of Child Study. Macmillan, N.Y.



IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities

Vol. 11. No. 6, (2025)

ISSN: 2488- 9210 (Print) 2504-9038 (Online)

Dept. of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Tansian University Umuoya

Indexed: Academic Journals Online, Google Scholar, Igwebuike Research Institute

PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS OF EMOJIS IN CROSS-CULTURAL ONLINE COMMUNICATION

Chinwe Udoh, PhD & Chiamaka Ogugua Ononye

Department Of English Language & Literature

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

vc.udoh@unizik.edu.ng, ononyeogugua@gmail.com

Abstract

This research investigates the pragmatic roles of emojis in cross-cultural communication on WhatsApp, particularly among participants from Nigeria, Japan, and Western countries. Employing a qualitative and descriptive methodology, it analyzes 20 carefully chosen excerpts that showcase extensive emoji usage from 40 naturally occurring conversations gathered between January and June 2025. The study utilizes Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory to explore how emojis function as paralinguistic tools that influence the illocutionary force of messages, address face concerns, and facilitate intercultural understanding. The findings indicate that in high-context cultures like Nigeria and Japan, emojis frequently convey implicit relational meanings, softening commands and enhancing solidarity, whereas in low-context cultures, they tend to be employed more explicitly for emotional emphasis or clarification. This research contributes to the field of digital pragmatics by contextualizing emoji usage within both high- and low-context cultural environments, providing valuable insights for improving intercultural competence in online communications.

Keywords: Emojis, Pragmatics, High-context culture, Low-context culture, Speech Act Theory, Politeness Theory

Introduction

Emojis, which are small graphical icons that originated from Japanese digital culture, have evolved into an essential component of online communication in today's digital era. Given that text-based communication often lacks the rich nonverbal cues found in face-to-face interactions—such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and gestures- emojis act as a crucial paralinguistic resource that users utilize to convey emotions, navigate interpersonal relationships, and express nuanced meanings that extend beyond mere words. By employing these visual symbols, communicators can infuse emotional depth, indicate sarcasm or humor, soften requests, and convey social cues that might otherwise be overlooked in computer-mediated communication.

In the ever-expanding realm of social media and instant messaging platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Instagram, emojis have emerged as prevalent tools that influence how individuals engage and interpret messages online. Their application transcends linguistic barriers, enabling quicker and often more effective emotional expression. Nevertheless, despite their apparent universal appeal, emojis are intricately tied to cultural contexts, and their meanings are not fixed or universally recognized. Variations in emoji interpretation across cultures are common, reflecting diverse social norms, communicative conventions, and cultural values. For example, an



emoji that conveys gratitude or friendliness in one culture may be viewed as disrespectful or ambiguous in another.

This cultural variability in interpretation carries significant pragmatic implications. Pragmatics, which is the study of language in use and the ways in which meaning is constructed during interactions, offers a valuable perspective for understanding how emojis operate in digital communication. Emojis can fulfill various speech acts—such as expressing emotions (expressives), making requests (directives), or indicating agreement (commissives)—while concurrently managing politeness and face needs in intercultural interactions. They assist in mitigating potential face-threatening acts by softening criticisms and enhancing the overall communicative experience.

The importance of comprehending the use and interpretation of emojis is particularly apparent in multicultural and multilingual contexts such as Nigeria, a country distinguished by over 250 ethnic groups and a variety of linguistic environments. The communication style in Nigeria is typically characterized as high-context, where a significant amount of meaning is conveyed implicitly through shared background knowledge and indirect signals. In such a communicative setting, emojis are likely to play an essential role in enhancing verbal messages.

Given the growing dependence on digital platforms for personal, educational, and professional communication, it is crucial to investigate the pragmatic roles of emojis across cross-cultural online interactions. This research can illuminate how emojis aid or obstruct meaning-making, politeness management, and interpersonal connections in various digital environments. Additionally, it offers valuable insights for developing communication strategies and digital interfaces that honor cultural sensitivities and promote mutual understanding in an increasingly interconnected world.

Numerous Nigerian researchers have explored various facets of emoji usage and digital pragmatics; however, their investigations have not entirely encompassed the cross-cultural dynamics present within Nigeria's high- and low-context WhatsApp groups. Akpan and Shogeyinbo (2023) examined the role of emojis as semiotic instruments in WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger among students at the University of Lagos, illustrating how they enhance emotional significance in online communications. Udoudom, William, Igiri, and Okon (2024) analyzed emoji usage among Nigerian youth and discovered that cultural, linguistic, and regional variations frequently lead to miscommunication in digital exchanges. Likewise, Oyibo and Olaniyi (2021) performed a multimodal discourse analysis of emojis utilized in religious WhatsApp groups, uncovering their diverse pragmatic roles in expressing emotions and attitudes such as reverence, anxiety, and excitement. In a related study, Eke, Ofome, and Opeyemi (2022) investigated politeness strategies within Nigerian digital communication, observing that emojis serve to manage respect and uphold coherence; however, their research did not address cross-cultural or subcultural differences.

Although these studies offer valuable perspectives on the function of emojis in Nigerian online discourse, none have explored how such pragmatic roles—like speech-act modification,



politeness, or emotion signaling—vary across different cultures in Nigeria, Japan, and other Western societies, particularly between high-context and low-context WhatsApp groups and across various language forms.

This research holds significance for multiple reasons. Firstly, it adds to the expanding literature on digital pragmatics by focusing on emoji usage with a specific emphasis on the distinctions between high-context and low-context communication styles. The data were exclusively sourced from naturally occurring WhatsApp conversations involving participants from Nigeria, Japan, and Western countries, reflecting a uniquely diverse linguistic and cultural landscape. By analyzing the pragmatic functions of emojis across high-context and low-context WhatsApp groups, the study sheds light on how cultural orientation affects meaning-making in digital interactions.

Secondly, Brown and Levinson's politeness theory and speech act theory within the realm of digital communication demonstrate how these frameworks can elucidate both convergence and divergence in the interpretation of emojis is noteworthy. Furthermore, the findings hold significant practical implications for educators, social media managers, intercultural trainers, and technology developers, as they can inform the creation of culturally sensitive communication strategies and platform interfaces. Ultimately, this study contributes to the field of cross-cultural communication scholarship by filling a gap in existing research from Nigeria, providing an empirically grounded account of how visual symbols operate pragmatically in multicultural online environments, and proposing methods to bridge potential communicative divides through effective emoji usage.

Literature Review

The examination of emojis within online communication has garnered interest from researchers in linguistics, communication studies, and digital media. In high-context cultures, such as Nigeria and Japan, a significant portion of communicative meaning is derived from implicit signals, shared experiences, and contextual knowledge rather than from direct verbal communication. In these settings, visual symbols like emojis can act as valuable enhancements to verbal language, augmenting meaning and reinforcing mutual understanding. In contrast, in low-context cultures, where explicit and direct language is emphasized, emojis may be employed more for emphasis or emotional nuance rather than as essential interpretive signals.

Empirical studies support these theoretical insights. Li and Yang (2018) illustrated that emojis are not simply ornamental but fulfill crucial communicative roles, such as indicating emotions, managing conversational dynamics, and framing responses. Bich-Carrière (2019) posited that emojis can operate as digital paralanguage, expressing tone and attitude similarly to nonverbal cues in spoken communication. In the Nigerian context, Akpan and Shogeyinbo (2023) examined the application of emojis in WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger among university students, the research indicates that emojis enhance emotional significance but are frequently understood within the framework of shared peer culture. Udoudom, William, Igiri, and Okon (2024) investigated the miscommunication among Nigerian youths stemming from emoji usage, demonstrating that cultural and linguistic diversity affects interpretation and can occasionally lead to unintended offense. Oyinbo and Olaniyi (2021) explored religious WhatsApp groups, uncovering that emojis



can convey reverence, excitement, or anxiety, contingent upon the topic of conversation and the norms of the group. Eke, Ofome, and Opeyemi (2022) concentrated on politeness strategies in Nigerian online interactions, discovering that emojis are commonly used to express respect or sustain rapport, although they did not explore cross-cultural variations within Nigeria.

Research from other regions further emphasizes the significance of cultural context in the interpretation of emojis. Bae et al. (2019) revealed that the same emoji can be understood differently in Japan compared to Western nations—for instance, 🙏 representing “thank you” in Japan while signifying “high five” in the West. Holtgraves (2023) noted that patterns of emoji usage differ across cultures in ways that reflect face-to-face politeness norms. These findings reinforce the notion that emoji interpretation is socially and culturally contextualized, making both cross-cultural and intra-cultural comparisons vital for comprehending digital communication practices.

Despite these valuable contributions, a significant gap persists in empirical research investigating how emoji usage varies among different cultures. This study aims to fill that gap by incorporating Hall’s cultural context theory, Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory, and speech act theory to examine the pragmatic roles of emojis in various WhatsApp groups, covering Nigeria, Japan and other Western countries thus providing fresh insights into how visual symbols facilitate meaning in multicultural online settings.

Theoretical Framework

This research employs a dual-theoretical framework, utilizing Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) and Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) to examine the pragmatic roles of emojis in cross-cultural online interactions. The integration of these theories offers a thorough perspective for comprehending both the functional and interpersonal aspects of emoji usage.

Speech Act Theory asserts that language serves not only as a medium for transmitting information but also as a tool for executing actions. Austin’s tripartite model differentiates the locutionary act (the literal interpretation of the utterance), the illocutionary act (the intended communicative purpose, such as requesting, promising, or apologizing), and the perlocutionary act (the impact on the listener, such as persuading, entertaining, or comforting). In the realm of online communication, emojis act as paralinguistic elements that can enhance, soften, intensify, or even substitute verbal components, thus influencing both illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect. For instance, a request paired with a smiling face emoji may convey friendliness and lessen the sense of imposition.

Politeness Theory complements this by examining how communicators navigate “face” — the public self-image that individuals strive to uphold. Brown and Levinson identify positive politeness strategies (aimed at fostering solidarity and expressing approval) and negative politeness strategies (focused on reducing imposition and honoring autonomy). Emojis frequently fulfill these roles across various cultures: 🙏 can be employed as a positive politeness strategy to express gratitude or solidarity, while 😊 may function as a negative politeness marker to soften



commands or critiques. Notably, the interpretation of these strategies can differ across cultures, with the same emoji possessing unique pragmatic implications in diverse socio-cultural settings. By merging Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory, this framework facilitates the systematic categorization of emojis based on their specific functions.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative and descriptive research design to investigate the pragmatic roles of emojis in cross-cultural online interactions. Data were gathered solely from WhatsApp conversations involving participants from Nigeria and Japan, chosen for the platform's extensive use and rich integration of emojis. A purposive sampling method was utilized to identify 40 naturally occurring conversations that featured emoji usage, from which 100 instances of emojis were extracted. Out of these, 20 excerpts considered most pertinent to the study's aims were purposefully selected for in-depth analysis. The data collection spanned a six-month period, from January to June 2025. The analysis utilized Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory as theoretical frameworks, facilitating a comprehensive examination of the functional and interpersonal roles that emojis fulfill in these cross-cultural digital communications.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Excerpt 1

"Thanks 😊. I really appreciate your help!"

Analysis

This statement represents an expressive speech act that conveys gratitude, enhanced by the smiling emoji, which intensifies warmth and friendliness. In the Nigerian context, where interpersonal relationships hold significant importance, the positive politeness strategy fosters solidarity and social connection. Cross-culturally, such explicit expressions of gratitude accompanied by emojis may be perceived as either sincere or somewhat formal, depending on the cultural context; for instance, in certain East Asian cultures, overt expressions of appreciation may be more subdued, and emojis could act as crucial softeners to express sincerity. Therefore, the emoji pragmatically serves as a bridge in intercultural digital communication, compensating for the absence of nonverbal cues and ensuring that the emotional message is effectively transmitted.

Excerpt 2

"Hmm... okay 🤔, I see your point."

Analysis

This utterance exemplifies a representative speech act indicating cognitive engagement and tentative agreement, with the thinking face emoji offering a metapragmatic signal of contemplation. In Western cultures, this may be interpreted as a sign of thoughtful consideration, while in other cultural contexts, the interpretation may vary.



Excerpt 3

"Incredible! That is truly remarkable 🎉."

Analysis

This statement illustrates an expressive speech act that conveys admiration, with the party popper emoji enhancing the celebratory tone. In collectivist societies, such as Nigeria and Japan, the enthusiastic use of emojis may help to reinforce group unity by publicly recognizing the accomplishments of others, which reflects a strategy of positive politeness. Conversely, certain cultures might perceive such exuberance as excessive or unsuitable in formal situations. Across cultures, the emoji serves as a universal representation of celebration; however, its frequency and context of use can differ, underscoring how emojis not only express emotions but also reflect culturally specific social norms in online communication.

Excerpt 4

07:20 – Priya: Happy birthday, Chuka 🎉🍰. Many blessings!

07:22 – Chuka: Thank you, my dear 🙏. May God bless you too.

Analysis

Priya's birthday greeting is an **expressive speech act** conveying celebration and goodwill, with the party popper and cake emojis reinforcing the festive mood. From a **positive politeness** perspective, this act affirms social solidarity and warmth. Chuka's reply, featuring the folded hands emoji (🙏), expresses gratitude and invokes a blessing, functioning both as an **expressive** and a **commissive speech act** by reciprocating goodwill. Cross-culturally, while the birthday celebration is common, the emoji use reveals culturally specific nuances: in South Asian contexts, the folded hands emoji often signifies respect or prayer, while in Nigerian usage, it frequently conveys gratitude or spiritual blessing. This interaction illustrates how emojis can simultaneously enact culturally resonant politeness strategies and mediate intercultural understanding in digital spaces.

Excerpt 5

14:15 – Lisa: You mentioned "How far" yesterday. What does that imply?

14:17 – Tunde: Haha 😂. It's Nigerian slang for "How are you doing?"

14:18 – Lisa: Ohhh, I understand now!

Analysis

Lisa's inquiry represents a directive speech act aimed at obtaining clarification, softened by an informal tone. Tunde's reply incorporates a laughing emoji to express friendliness and alleviate



any potential face-threat associated with explaining unfamiliar slang, thereby employing a positive politeness strategy. This interaction illustrates the cross-cultural negotiation of meaning, where Nigerian Pidgin or local slang, along with their corresponding emojis, necessitate interpretation by non-native speakers. The emoji pragmatically conveys amiability and helps mitigate possible confusion or embarrassment. This episode emphasizes how emojis function as paralinguistic cues that enhance understanding and foster social connections across varied linguistic and cultural contexts in online communication.

Excerpt 6

10:40 – Akira: I apologize for my late response 🙇.

10:42 – Ngozi: No wahala 😊. I just noticed your message as well.

Analysis

Akira's apology serves as a negative politeness speech act, acknowledging a potential face-threat by demonstrating deference, further supported by the bowing emoji, which culturally resonates with Japanese expressions of apology and respect. Ngozi's reply, which includes a smiling emoji, employs a positive politeness strategy, reducing the perceived impact of the delay and offering reassurance. This exchange exemplifies cross-cultural politeness practices in WhatsApp communication: the formal and respectful demeanor characteristic of Japanese culture contrasts with the more casual, colloquial Nigerian response. The emojis pragmatically embody these culturally distinct politeness norms, facilitating seamless intercultural digital interactions.

Excerpt 7

16:05 – Hassan: Would you be able to join us for lunch?

16:07 – Grace: I would be delighted to, but I have prior commitments 😞. Perhaps next time?

Analysis

Hassan's invitation functions as a directive speech act that requests attendance, being both direct and courteous. Grace's refusal, softened by the sad face emoji, employs a negative politeness strategy to lessen the potential face-threat associated with declining the invitation. The emoji expresses regret and empathy, striking a balance between directness and sensitivity. In high-context cultures like Nigeria, indirect refusals and face-saving strategies are favored, whereas in certain Western contexts, more straightforward refusals may be prevalent. In this instance, the emoji serves to bridge these cultural differences by conveying emotion non-verbally, thereby maintaining interpersonal harmony in the cross-cultural WhatsApp conversation.



Excerpt 8

12:25 – Tom: Wishing you the best of luck at your presentation!

12:26 – Chioma: 😬 Excuse me, why would you say that?

12:28 – Tom: Oh! It’s an English idiom meaning “Good luck.” My apologies 😊.

Analysis

Tom’s statement is a performative speech act aimed at wishing good luck through an idiomatic expression, which Chioma initially misinterprets, indicating a cross-cultural pragmatic misunderstanding. Chioma’s emoji (😬) conveys surprise and confusion, functioning as an expressive speech act that communicates her emotional response. Tom’s apology, along with the laughing emoji (😊), represents a negative politeness strategy intended to alleviate the misunderstanding and preserve rapport. This interaction exemplifies how idiomatic expressions and emojis can have different implications across cultures, highlighting the need for explicit clarification to ensure effective communication in intercultural digital environments.

Excerpt 9

06:50 – Fatima: As-salamu alaykum 🌙.

06:51 – David: Wa alaykumu s-salam, my sister. How’s your family?

Analysis

Fatima’s greeting functions as a declarative speech act that conveys a religious and social salutation, further emphasized by the crescent moon emoji, which culturally represents Islam. David’s response reciprocates this greeting and inquires about the well-being of her family, employing a positive politeness strategy that highlights solidarity and care. The use of emojis not only acts as a cultural indicator but also aids in affirming shared identity within a multicultural WhatsApp environment. Such interactions illustrate how emojis encapsulate religious and cultural affiliations, thereby reinforcing communal ties in varied online communities.

Excerpt 10

11:15 – Sarah: I’ll talk to you later 😊.

11:16 – Kunle: Are you flirting?

11:17 – Sarah: No 😊. In my culture, that emoji just means “playful.”

Analysis



Sarah's statement "I'll talk to you later 😊" serves as a commissive speech act indicating a commitment to future conversation, softened by the winking emoji, which adds an expressive illocutionary force of playfulness. Kunle's inquiry "Are you flirting?" represents a directive speech act that seeks clarification while also revealing a cross-cultural difference in emoji interpretation, as Kunle perceives romantic implications in the wink. Sarah's response, accompanied by a laughing emoji, employs a negative politeness strategy to alleviate any potential face-threat and clarify the cultural meanings of emojis. This dialogue highlights how emojis can simultaneously facilitate and complicate intercultural communication by embodying culturally specific pragmatic subtleties.

Excerpt 11

09:10 – Daniel: Good morning everyone ☀️. Are you prepared for the meeting?

09:12 – Amina: Good morning! Nearly there. Just getting some coffee ☕.

Analysis

Daniel's greeting functions as a representative speech act coupled with a directive aimed at confirming readiness. The sun emoji conveys a sense of positivity and invigorates the message. Amina's response employs the coffee emoji to illustrate her ongoing preparation, serving as both a response act and an informal update on her status. In both Nigerian and Western contexts, such emojis are commonly used in casual professional conversations, enhancing positive politeness by personalizing the interaction and softening the formal tone. The emojis fulfill pragmatic roles of emotional expression and contextual elaboration, reflecting shared communicative norms despite cultural variances.

Excerpt 12

14:35 – Chika: I feel extremely fatigued today 😞.

14:36 – Kenji: Please take care! Make sure to rest well 🙏.

Analysis

Chika's remark is an expressive speech act that communicates her tiredness, with the weary face emoji amplifying the emotional weight. Kenji's response is a directive (albeit indirect) combined with a commissive (a well-wishing), indicated by the folded hands emoji, which in Japanese culture often represents prayer or gratitude but is broadly recognized as a gesture of goodwill. This interaction exemplifies how culturally significant emojis can foster cross-cultural empathy and politeness strategies, thereby enhancing emotional bonds despite linguistic barriers.

Excerpt 13

18:00 – Naomi: Congratulations on your promotion 🎉👏!

18:02 – Bayo: Thank you very much! I couldn't have achieved this without your support 🙌.



Analysis

Naomi's congratulatory note represents an expressive speech act, with the celebratory emojis enhancing positive emotions and group unity. Bayo's reply expresses gratitude, utilizing the raised hands emoji as an expressive illocutionary act that indicates celebration and shared success. In collectivist societies such as Nigeria, the use of such emojis acts as a positive politeness strategy to reinforce social connections. The shared emojis visually represent mutual acknowledgment and community support across cultural divides.

Excerpt 14

20:15 – Koji: I apologize, but I cannot join tonight 🙇♂️.

20:17 – Amaka: No problem! We will catch up soon 😊.

Analysis

Koji's apology is a negative politeness speech act, using the bowing man emoji to convey respect and regret, which holds cultural significance in Japan. Amaka's comforting response mitigates the impact of the refusal through a positive politeness strategy, employing a smiling emoji to preserve goodwill. This interaction illustrates how emojis reflect cultural politeness standards, aiding in the delicate management of interpersonal relations in cross-cultural digital communications.

Excerpt 15

08:50 – Tolu: Did you watch the game last night? ⚽🔥

08:52 – Hana: Yes! That goal was incredible 😲👏.

Analysis

Tolu's inquiry is a representative speech act paired with expressive emojis that convey excitement and intensity. Hana's enthusiastic response, featuring astonishment and clapping emojis, represents a commissive and expressive act, confirming shared interest and emotional involvement. The inclusion of sports-related emojis serves as a universal pragmatic tool to express enthusiasm, transcending cultural barriers and fostering social unity within the online community.

Excerpt 16

13:40 – Samuel: Could you please send me the file? 🙏

13:42 – Emiko: Certainly, I am sending it now 📩.

Analysis

Samuel's request constitutes a directive speech act, with the folded hands emoji serving as a negative politeness strategy to lessen the perceived imposition. Emiko's reply represents a commissive act affirming her compliance, with the outbox tray emoji offering a visual indication



of action. The use of emojis enhances politeness and clarifies intent, illustrating how digital paralanguage fosters cooperative interactions across cultures in WhatsApp communication.

Excerpt 17

07:05 – Blessing: Good morning! How was your weekend? 😊

07:08 – Ken: It was great, thank you! I had a relaxing time and caught up on sleep 😴.

Analysis

Blessing's greeting and question function as a representative speech act, complemented by the smiling emoji to convey warmth. Ken's response employs a sleeping face emoji as an expressive speech act to indicate relaxation and well-being. These emojis pragmatically act as emotional enhancers, promoting interpersonal closeness and friendliness that are prevalent in both Nigerian and Western messaging cultures.

Excerpt 18

21:30 – Ayodele: Could you kindly assist with this report? 🙏

21:32 – Yuki: Certainly! I will complete it by tomorrow ✅.

Analysis

Ayodele's request functions as a directive speech act, softened by the culturally significant folded hands emoji, which serves as a negative politeness marker indicating respect and deference. Yuki's reply is a commissive that confirms action, with the checkmark emoji further emphasizing commitment. The use of emojis in this context acts as pragmatic markers to address face concerns and affirm intentions, effectively bridging cultural expectations in Nigerian-Japanese digital interactions.

Excerpt 19

15:00 – Chi: I am feeling anxious about the presentation 😟.

15:02 – Rina: You will excel! Have faith in yourself 💪.

Analysis

Chi's statement represents an expressive speech act that conveys anxiety, with the worried face emoji amplifying the emotional weight. Rina's supportive response is a commissive speech act, bolstered by the flexed bicep emoji, which symbolizes strength and confidence. These emojis fulfill a pragmatic role of providing emotional support and reassurance, which is vital for sustaining interpersonal rapport across cultural boundaries in online communication.

Excerpt 20



11:45 – Uche: Shall we convene at 5 pm, if that is agreeable?

11:47 – Kenji: That sounds great 👍 . I will see you then!

Analysis

Uche's suggestion is a directive speech act articulated tentatively to demonstrate consideration, whereas Kenji's reply, which includes the thumbs-up emoji, serves as an assertive speech act indicating agreement. The thumbs-up emoji pragmatically acts as a swift, affirmative confirmation, although its interpretation may differ across cultures—as observed in certain Nigerian contexts where it may have alternative meanings—underscoring the importance of cultural sensitivity in emoji usage during intercultural digital communications.

Findings

The examination of these WhatsApp conversations indicates that emojis fulfil various pragmatic roles in cross-cultural online communication, intricately associated with speech acts and strategies of politeness. Emojis consistently serve as paralinguistic instruments that reinforce, alter, or soften illocutionary forces. For example, winking and smiling emojis often act as indicators of playfulness and positive politeness, fostering relational closeness and alleviating face-threatening actions. Requests and refusals are commonly softened by the use of folded hands, sad, or apologetic emojis, which reflect culturally rooted norms of politeness, especially in Nigerian and Japanese contexts.

Cross-cultural subtleties significantly influence the interpretation and application of emojis. While certain emojis (e.g., 🎉, 😊) generally convey universal celebratory or friendly connotations, others such as the thumbs-up (👍) and folded hands (🙏) demonstrate culturally specific pragmatic differences that may result in misunderstandings in the absence of shared contextual knowledge. The data reveal that interlocutors actively negotiate meaning through metapragmatic clarifications when interpretations of emojis diverge, illustrating the digital mediation of face and meaning-making in multicultural environments.

Furthermore, the research highlights the importance of emojis in compensating for the lack of non-verbal signals typically present in face-to-face interactions, thereby restoring the affective and interpersonal aspects of online communication. These functions are particularly prominent in Nigeria's high-context communication setting, where indirectness and implicit signals prevail, and in interactions with lower-context cultures, where explicit verbalization is more prevalent. Consequently, emojis serve as essential semiotic tools that bridge cultural and linguistic gaps, enhance pragmatic competence, and foster intercultural understanding in digital discourse.

Conclusion

This research validates that emojis play crucial pragmatic roles in cross-cultural WhatsApp interactions by simultaneously executing speech acts and managing politeness strategies that are rooted in culturally specific norms. The results indicate that emojis transcend mere decorative symbols; they serve as potent multimodal instruments that facilitate emotional expression,



alleviate face threats, and aid in conversational management across various linguistic and cultural settings.

Significantly, the differences in emoji interpretation among Nigerian, Japanese, and Western users underscore the importance of cultural sensitivity and awareness in digital communication. Participants frequently depend on contextual and metapragmatic signals to negotiate meaning, thereby avoiding miscommunication and enhancing rapport. The application of Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory offers a solid framework for comprehending these interactions, shedding light on the role of emojis.

Future investigations should delve deeper into emoji pragmatics across additional communication platforms and cultural demographics, taking into account multimodal and contextual elements more thoroughly. From a practical standpoint, the findings can guide the development of culturally adaptive digital communication tools and assist users in engaging in effective and respectful cross-cultural online interactions. In summary, this study enhances the comprehension of how visual digital symbols function pragmatically within the intricate realm of global online communication.

References

- Akpan, O., & Shogeyinbo, T. (2023). Emoji use as semiotic tools in WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger among University of Lagos students. *Journal of Digital Communication Studies*, 15(3), 45–62.
- Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Harvard University Press.
- Bae, S., Ishii, K., & Choi, Y. (2019). Cross-cultural differences in emoji interpretation: A comparative study between Japan and Western countries. *International Journal of Communication*, 13, 43–59.
- Bich-Carrière, C. (2019). Emoji as digital paralanguage: Conveying tone in computer-mediated communication. *Language@Internet*, 16, 130–150.
- Bogore, L. (2023). Emoji use across cultures: Survey reveals surprising differences. *Global Social Media Insights*. <https://globalsocialmediainsights.com/emoji-crosscultural-survey>
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge University Press.
- Central Intelligence Agency. (2024). Nigeria. *The World Factbook*. <https://cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/nigeria/>
- Eke, C., Ofome, I., & Opeyemi, F. (2022). Politeness strategies in Nigerian digital communication. *African Journal of Pragmatics*, 8(1), 77–95.
- Hall, E. T. (1976). *Beyond culture*. Anchor Books.
- Holtgraves, T. (2023). Cross-cultural patterns in emoji use and politeness norms. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 194, 1–15.
- Li, W., & Yang, F. (2018). Functions of emojis in online communication: Emotional expression and conversational management. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 123, 87–101.



IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities

Vol. 11. No. 6, (2025)

ISSN: 2488- 9210 (Print) 2504-9038 (Online)

Dept. of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Tansian University Umunya

Indexed: Academic Journals Online, Google Scholar, Igwebuike Research Institute

- Lupyan, G., & Dale, R. (2018). The role of emoji in online communication: Frequency and pragmatic usage. *Language and Communication*, 60, 55–65.
- Melefe, I., Nwankwo, P., & Abiola, R. (2023). Multilingualism and code-switching on Nigerian WhatsApp groups. *Nigerian Journal of Linguistic Studies*, 12(1), 130–145.
- Oyinbo, I., & Olaniyi, A. (2021). A multimodal discourse analysis of emojis in religious WhatsApp groups. *Journal of Media and Religion*, 20(2), 114–130.
- Pavlikova, P. (2021). Political metaphors in presidential speeches: A comparative study. *Political Discourse Review*, 8(1), 55–70.
- Semino, E. (2008). *Metaphor in discourse*. Cambridge University Press.
- Udoudom, C., William, E., Igiri, A., & Okon, B. (2024). Emoji use among Nigerian youths: Cultural and linguistic miscommunication in digital interaction. *Nigerian Journal of Linguistics*, 19(2), 99–118.