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SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF EMOJI USE IN DIGITAL WORKPLACE COMMUNICATION AND EMPLOYEE INTERACTION IN TWO MACHAKOS COUNTY UNIVERSITIES

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ST. PAUL'S UNIVERSITY

A DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO THE SCHOOL OF COMMUNICATION AND COMPUTER STUDIES OF ST. PAUL'S UNIVERSITY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN COMMUNICATION STUDIES

OCTOBER, 2026

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DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation is my original work. I affirm that this work is original and has not been presented before for any kind of examination for an award other than St. Paul's University, Kenya.

Signature:  Date: 22nd October, 2026

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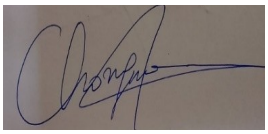
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This dissertation has been submitted for examination with our approval as supervisors.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ASCII	American Standard Code for Information Interchange
CMC	Computer Mediated Communication
COREQ	Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Studies
Gen X	Generation X
Gen Z	Generation Z
GIFs	Graphic Interchange Formats
ISERC	Institutional Ethics and Review Committee
MksU	Machakos University
Ms Teams	Microsoft Teams
NACOSTI	National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation
SCU	Scott Christian University
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Science
TD	Technological Determinism

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the effect of emoji use on workplace communication among university employees in Machakos County, focusing on message tone and clarity, cultural influences, and perceived communication effectiveness. The research adopted a quantitative approach using a descriptive survey design. The target population comprised 198 academic and administrative employees from Machakos University and Scott Christian University, from which a stratified random sample of 132 participants was selected. Data were collected via a structured questionnaire and analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and frequencies), while a regression model assessed the impact of emoji use on communication effectiveness. Findings revealed that employees use emojis moderately, with most reporting that they enhance clarity, convey emotions, and foster engagement, though concerns about professionalism in formal communication were noted. Cultural differences were found to influence emoji interpretation and usage, highlighting their role in inclusivity and context-dependent communication. Results from the regression analysis indicated that emoji use, message tone, clarity, and cultural and contextual factors explained 49.2% of the variation in perceived message quality. Of these factors, message tone had the strongest predictive effect. Generally, the results demonstrate that emojis had an impact on the tone, clarity, and emotion of the message, highlighting the value of the emoji as a nonverbal indicator in a digital medium. The study's findings suggest that while the use of emojis is generally advantageous in an informal context at the workplace, care should be exercised to ensure professionalism, as with most aspects of professional life. It also suggests universities ought to develop guidelines and policies on emoji usage. Further, universities should encourage effective, culturally sensitive emoji use and provide training that discourages over-reliance on emojis.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The development and popularisation of digital communication technologies have had a major impact on workplace communication, changing how employees exchange information, coordinate activities, collaborate, and maintain interpersonal relationships (Liegl & Furtner, 2024; Capriotti et al., 2021). In higher education institutions, including universities, these changes have increasingly extended communication beyond traditional face-to-face and formally documented interactions to digitally mediated forms of communication. Universities are increasingly relying on electronic communication, such as email, social media chat, and instant messaging, as communication channels between employees (Liegl & Furtner, 2024). This shift has made Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) an important component of contemporary workplace interaction (Stein, 2023), particularly where employees communicate across offices, departments, professional roles, and age groups (Krohn, 2004).

Unlike face-to-face communication, CMC largely depends on written or digitally transmitted messages, which may provide fewer of the non-verbal cues available during physical interaction, such as facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, and body language (Manusov, 2016). Consequently, employees may use digitally represented non-verbal cues to supplement textual messages and communicate emotions, attitudes, reactions, emphasis, and intended tone (Cavalheiro et al., 2024). Emojis have increasingly become one of these visual cues in digital workplace communication. Emojis have therefore found their way into computer-mediated communication, and they have been recognised as symbols that play a role in non-verbal communication and that can contribute to communicating feelings, adding clarity to the intended

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message, and building rapport (Knapp et al., 2013; Burgoon et al., 2021). Emojis were traditionally identified with informal and casual communication styles, but their use is slowly penetrating business environments such as universities, which are highly formal spaces (Sai et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of emojis varies with varying perceptions of professionalism, culture, and communication environment (Rathgeber, 2024; Chen et al., 2024; Gabbiadini et al., 2020; Udoudom et al., 2024). There is scarce empirical research on the effect of using emojis in workplace communication in Machakos County universities, particularly in their contribution to improving workplace communication, bridging communication gaps in tone, interpersonal relationships, and clear intent, and bridging generational communication gaps. This study therefore sought to examine the effect of emoji use on employee interaction among university employees in Machakos County by investigating how emojis influence message tone and clarity, how cultural backgrounds influence the perception, interpretation, and use of emojis, and how they affect perceived communication effectiveness.

This chapter presents the background of the study, the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the objectives of the study, the research questions, the justification/rationale, the significance of the study, the assumptions, the scope of the study, the limitations and delimitations of the study, and the definition of terms.

1.2 Background of the Study

Emojis and emoticons are becoming a crucial component of digital communication, enabling people to express tone and feelings in ways that text cannot (Dhaliwal & Hazarika, 2026). Initially created by Scott Fahlman in 1982, emoticons, like :), are made out of keyboard characters. They

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take the role of nonverbal communication, particularly facial expressions; however, because of the limited number of keyboard symbols, they might not be precise enough to convey subtle emotions (Chen et al., 2024). On the contrary, emojis, initially created in the late 1990s by Japanese inventor Shigetaka Kurita, are the latest generation of emoticons. Emojis are colourful images, which is the primary distinction between them and emoticons (Rodrigues et al., 2018). A circle is usually employed as the border in those that depict facial emotions, and the circle may convey several different facial expressions. In other words, emojis are a highly simplified symbolic representation of facial expressions that have deeper meanings and may convey more nuanced and complicated emotions than emoticons. Emojis serve more than a decorative purpose since they also play a functional role, assisting in addressing the following challenges such as: communicating intent and feelings in written messages; creating a shared emotional vocabulary among team members; minimizing miscommunications and ensuring psychological safety; enhancing engagement and teamwork; and clearly conveying appreciation and recognition (Naghiyeva, 2026).

Emoji use is the use of visual symbols that add to or reinforce a textual message. In other words, emojis are signs that function as nonverbal cues that play the same role as body movements or facial expressions in interpersonal conversations in the real world. In CMC, due to the inability to provide a multitude of nonverbal signals in real-world communications, emojis are a tool that can be utilized to enrich clarity in meaning, enhance emotional delivery, and facilitate expression of relational intent (Knapp et al., 2013). The latter is a position in which emojis are recognized within the study of nonverbal communication, in addition to their importance to human interactions in professional environment (Burgoon et al., 2021). Therefore, by conceptualizing emojis as semiotic signs, the research recognized that the usage of emojis in communication among university

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employees, may produce messages that carry cultural or contextualized meanings. Emotion icons often follow utterances in CMC, which may be produced either by existing characters on a keyboard, termed American Standard Code for Information Interchange (ASCII) characters, or by graphic symbols, also known as pictograms or "emoji" (Skovholt et al., 2014).

Due to the rapid advancement and acceptance of digital communication technologies, workplaces have been reshaped, and similarly, organizations such as Universities are increasingly engaging in digital modes of communicating and facilitating communication between staff members and teams through applications like instant messengers, social media, and e- mails (Liegl & Furtner, 2024). Thus, in this age, emoticons and emoji have come to occupy a prominent place as part of CMC (Stein, 2023). These non-verbal cues are used to provide additional, or to help supplement, other verbal and textual cues to communicate emotion and intent and to make computer- mediated communication more expressive of interpersonal interactions (Cavalheiro et al., 2024). While it has been suggested that emoticons have mainly been used for non- formal communication, usage in professional environments, including higher educational institutions, is growing (Sai et al., 2024). Emojis and emoticons have also recently seen their introduction into professional work settings. Both emoticons and emoji are ways of visually encapsulating feelings or emotions in electronic messages, with one small but significant difference. Emoticons are constructed from characters present on a keyboard, as in ASCII (such as :)), while emoji are images that can be inserted or copied and pasted into a message (Brito et al., 2020). Nonverbal communication is the use of kinesics, proxemics, haptics, vocalics, and many more, all of which convey the meaning of a message (Manusov, 2016).

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In online conversations, people can express emotions, convey tone, and enhance the richness of their textual communication by using emoticons (Danesi, 2016), which are digital representations of certain nonverbal cues (Zhang, 2020; Tang & Hew, 2019; Chen et al., 2024). Teh et al. (2020) affirm that emojis enhance digital communication by conveying the sender's emotional state in text messages.

Over the past few decades, emoticons have evolved into many forms, types, and meanings. Emoticons, also called digital pictogram non-verbal communication, have made it possible to express feelings in written or worded messages and through face-to-face communication (Kumari & Ganagwar, 2018). However, this form of emotional communication in digital communication can challenge the receiver in deducing the intended message. For instance, Dwivedi et al. (2018) observe that it can be difficult to appropriately detect and comprehend emotions in digital communication.

Traditionally, the common emoticons were the 'smiley face' and the 'frowny' or 'sad' face. Today, emoticons used in nonverbal and electronic communication have evolved into various shorthand representations of human emotions, such as emojis. These emotions range from happiness, sadness, and anger to nuanced feelings such as sarcasm and affection. Nevertheless, the utilization of these digital communication tools has been perceived to be predominantly associated with teenagers (Skovholt et al., 2014).

The prevalence of emoticons has increased notably in recent years, as noted by Bosch (2018), and is evidenced by approximately 6 billion emoji uses daily. In today's workplace, several distinct

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generations often interact with each other. These generations include baby boomers (1946-1964), Generation X (1965-1976), Millennials (Gen Y) (1977-1995), and Generation Z (1996-2017), with the Millennials making up the majority of the current employees. According to Krohn (2004), different generations exhibit markedly different values, perspectives, and life experiences and, consequently, communicate in different linguistic styles. The use of technology for communication by different generations is also diverse, as reflected in their varied communication styles. The workplace is currently dominated by millennials, as noted by Skovholt et al. (2014). Studies by Bosch (2018) and Aranas et al. (2024) show that the use of emojis is prevalent among millennials. Bosch (2018) noted that millennials purposefully used emojis in dialectical contexts. His study further depicted that emojis are predominant in communicating emotions, and the trend was more common among women.

In today's world, organizations and institutions strategically develop effective communication strategies and tactics to achieve their goals and objectives. As a result, they adopt various indispensable communication tools that have emerged in the digital age, moving from face-to-face to digital (Erle et al., 2022). Web 2.0 digital tools, such as social media, email, and video conferencing, have recently been widely used in work environments (Capriotti et al., 2021). Digital communication, defined as the transmission of information through electronic devices and technologies, has been enabled by; advances in technology, the fourth industrial revolution and globalization 4.0 (Gabbiadini et al., 2020).

The proliferation of digital communication platforms, birthed by the ubiquity of the internet, has on the other hand, offered a variety of media for communication, including social media. Social

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media, in particular, has provided platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and X, as well as forums for directly communicating with others within and outside the workplace. These interactions involve, among others, the sharing of data, documents, images, and videos (Abraham, 2020). Research shows that Facebook and X, for instance, have been key in influencing decision-making in academic environments among learners and educators (Al-Rahmi & Othman, 2013). More than ever, institutions have a wide variety of options to choose from for their preferred workplace communication channels. From the perspective of higher education institutions, workplace communication is the process by which academic and administrative staff exchange information, collaborate, and coordinate activities within an institution to support teaching, research, and institutional operations (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 2016).

The communication process consists of two types: Formal communication involves official and standard means such as faculty meetings, faculty and academic reports, and university policy statements. Informal communication consists of emails, text messaging, and face-to-face interactions. This fosters cooperation and overall organizational effectiveness. CMC technology has been increasingly shifting from asynchronous to greater real-time interactivity (synchronicity) (Banerjee & Bute, 2017). Over the years, perceptions of digital communication have changed due to the increased adoption and use of emoticons and multilingual effects (Verma & Uikey, 2019).

Emojis in the workplace, for many, have been a way to communicate or complement work messages. They have become integrated into the digital communication environment as they are embedded in technology. Emojis in the workplace add a layer of friendliness and help facilitate more effective, engaging, and visually appealing online communication.

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Emoji usage varies based on age, gender, and cultural disposition, as noted by Rathgeber (2024) and Chen et al. (2024). Consequently, these disparities lead to different interpretations and understandings of the information communicated (Gabbiadini et al., 2020; Udoudom et al., 2024). Research shows that studies on emojis have continued to grow in recent years (Cherbonnier & Michinov, 2022; Tang & Hew, 2019; Ge & Herring, 2018; Kazemian, 2021; Banerjee & Bute, 2017; Li et al., 2022). Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, and its subsequent global spread, there was significant disruption across industries. This disruption prompted industries to embrace digital communication, including the use of emoticons (Gabbiadini et al., 2020). Various institutions were seen embracing virtual communication for internal communication. This effect did not leave academic institutions behind, which had been 'traditional,' and highly 'standardized' (confined to formally worded communiqués via specified channels) (Li et al., 2022).

As the modern work environment becomes more digitally oriented, and especially in educational institutions such as universities, effective communication among staff members often transcends conventional formal language. The adoption of visual signals, commonly known as emojis, originating from casual text messaging and extending to formal and professional environments, has affected employees' way of expressing emotions, clarifying their intentions, building relationships, and developing rapport. However, the formal employment setting (universities) may be viewed as formal settings and not ideal for the use of such symbols, hence raising questions about the level of professionalism, understanding, and cultural appropriateness.

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In a diverse communicating society, in the higher learning environment of the universities of Machakos County, it is important to establish the impacts of emoji usage in employee communication. In Machakos County - Kenya, this research focused on two universities which are; Machakos University (MksU), a public university that was chartered in 2016 with a wide diverse number of students and staff members that participate in learning, academic and administrative aspects (Machakos University, 2023), and Scott Christian University (SCU), a private, faith-based university founded in 1962 that provides holistic education for its students and it has a small tight knit group of students, administrative and academic members (Scott Christian University, 2023). With the two universities located within the same geographical area, peri-urban Kenya, the study provided an opportunity to examine how emojis function as digital communication symbols within higher education environments, focusing on their potential to enhance or hinder communication effectiveness in both professional and informal employee communication contexts.

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1.3 Statement of the Problem

The rapid digitalization of workplace communication has reshaped how organizations, including universities, interact internally, with institutions increasingly relying on instant messengers, social media, and email to facilitate communication among staff members and teams (Liegl & Furtner, 2024; Capriotti et al., 2021). Within this shift, emoticons and emojis have moved from their origins in casual, personal messaging to occupy a prominent place in computer-mediated communication (CMC) generally (Stein, 2023), including, increasingly, in professional and higher-education settings (Sai et al., 2024). As visual signals that supplement or reinforce textual messages, emojis

are intended to enrich clarity, convey emotional tone, and facilitate relational intent in contexts where nonverbal cues are otherwise absent (Knapp et al., 2013; Burgoon et al., 2021).

However, this growing reliance on emojis in workplace communication introduces a problem that remains inadequately understood, particularly in formal institutional settings such as universities. Emoji meaning is not fixed or universally shared: interpretation has been shown to vary systematically by age, gender, cultural disposition, and familiarity with digital communication norms (Rathgeber, 2024; Chen et al., 2024; Gabbiadini et al., 2020; Udoudom et al., 2024). Du Plessis (2020), studying organizational emoji use in South Africa, found that interpretation of the same emoji varied by race, age, gender, work culture, and hierarchical level, leading to inconsistent understanding among employees in the same workplace. Similarly, studies in formal and educational settings have found that while emojis can foster rapport and social presence, their use also carries a documented risk of being perceived as unprofessional or ambiguous, particularly where generational, cultural, or hierarchical differences exist among communicators (Hayes & Fatima, 2024; Lawrence, 2022; Shalahuddin & Fajrianti, 2024). In a university workforce such as that found in Machakos County, spanning multiple generations (Krohn, 2004), cultural backgrounds, and levels of comfort with digital communication, this creates a genuine risk that emoji use, rather than uniformly enhancing workplace interaction, may in some cases undermine clarity, professionalism, or working relationships, depending on who is sending and interpreting the message. Despite this, no institutional guidance currently exists on how emojis should be used in employee-to-employee digital communication within these universities.

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Empirically, this problem has not been adequately addressed in the existing literature. Globally, research acknowledges cultural and contextual differences in emoji interpretation and the risk of unprofessionalism in formal communication (Du Plessis, 2020; Shalahuddin & Fajrianti, 2024; Guntuku et al., 2019; Li & Zheng, 2024). However, this body of work is concentrated in Western, Asian, and general social-media contexts. Within Sub-Saharan Africa and Kenya specifically, the use of emoticons in professional and interpersonal communication, and the associated risk of unprofessionalism in formal settings, remains considerably less explored. Existing Kenyan studies on emoji use have focused on social media platforms among students; for instance, Sadia (2018) examined the communicative function of emojis in CMC generally, while Mohamed/Mohammed (2022) studied gender and cross-cultural differences in emoji interpretation on Instagram among USIU students, rather than on employee-to-employee communication within a university workplace. Likewise, studies examining emoji use among university staff specifically, such as Banerjee and Bute (2017), have been conducted in institutional contexts outside Kenya (Amity University, India), leaving open the question of how these dynamics play out among university employees in the Kenyan, and specifically Machakos County, context. This represents both a contextual gap, a lack of Kenya/Machakos County-based evidence on emoji use in formal university workplace communication, and a population gap, prior Kenyan studies have focused on students, not university employees. It is against this backdrop that the present study sought to examine the effect of emoji use in the workplace on employee interaction within universities in Machakos County.

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1.4 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of emoji use in the workplace on employee interaction within universities in Machakos County.

1.5 Objectives of the Study

i. To examine how emojis affect the tone and clarity of workplace messages among university employees in Machakos County.
ii. To investigate how cultural backgrounds influence the perception, interpretation, and use of emojis in digital communication among university employees in Machakos County.
iii. To assess the effect of emoji use on perceived communication effectiveness, including clarity, relational rapport, and professionalism in the workplace.

1.6 Research Questions

i. How do emojis affect the tone and clarity of workplace messages among university employees in Machakos County?
ii. In what ways do cultural backgrounds influence the perception, interpretation, and use of emojis in digital communication among university employees in Machakos County?
iii. How does the use of emojis impact perceived communication effectiveness, particularly clarity, relational rapport, and professionalism in the workplace?

1.7 Justification of the Study

The increasing adoption of digital communication technologies has transformed workplace interaction, including communication within universities. Platforms such as WhatsApp, email, Microsoft Teams and Zoom are increasingly used to facilitate information sharing, coordination and interpersonal interaction among employees, with emojis becoming an increasingly visible

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feature of digitally mediated communication. Kaye et al. (2022) indicates that emojis have become an established component of contemporary digital communication. However, empirical understanding of how emojis shape workplace communication within university settings remains limited, particularly in developing-country contexts such as Kenya.

Existing research on emoji use has predominantly focused on contexts outside the African continent, with relatively limited empirical attention to workplace communication within African higher education institutions (Choi et al., 2023; Dhaliwal & Hazarika, 2026; Jain, 2024; Manganari, 2021). Consequently, the extent to which findings from other geographical and organisational contexts apply to Kenyan universities cannot be assumed. Differences in organisational culture, workplace hierarchies, communication practices and socio-cultural backgrounds may influence how employees interpret and use emojis in professional interaction. The study was therefore justified by the need to generate context-specific empirical evidence on emoji use in workplace digital communication among university employees in Machakos County. By examining how emojis influence message tone, clarity, intended meaning and perceived communication effectiveness, the study extends existing scholarship on computer-mediated communication beyond the contexts in which much of the existing evidence has been generated.

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The study also provides an opportunity to examine how cultural and demographic differences may shape the interpretation and use of emojis within a Kenyan university environment. The study is further justified by its practical relevance to the increasing digitalisation of university workplaces. As employees rely more heavily on digital platforms for routine communication, understanding the circumstances under which emojis facilitate or complicate workplace interaction can provide

useful evidence for institutional communication practices. The findings may therefore inform the development of context-sensitive digital communication guidance and staff awareness initiatives while providing a basis for further research on emojis, computer-mediated communication and workplace interaction in Kenyan universities and comparable organisational settings.

1.8 Significance of the Study

1.8.1 University Management

The findings may provide university management with evidence on how employees use and interpret emojis in workplace communication and the circumstances under which their use may enhance or hinder communication. This evidence may inform the development of institutional digital communication guidelines, workplace etiquette standards and staff development initiatives that promote clear, appropriate and inclusive digital interactions. The findings may also assist managers in recognizing the importance of contextual and professional considerations when communicating with employees through digital platforms.

1.8.2 University Employees

The study may enhance employees' awareness of how emojis can influence the interpretation, emotional tone and perceived professionalism of workplace messages. This may encourage employees to consider factors such as the communication context, intended audience, organizational position and cultural background when using emojis. Such awareness may contribute to more appropriate and effective digital interactions among employees.

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1.8.3 Policymakers and Institutional ICT Managers

The findings may provide useful evidence for policymakers and institutional personnel responsible for communication and ICT governance. The evidence generated may inform the development or refinement of institutional policies and guidelines concerning digitally mediated workplace communication, including appropriate consideration of emojis in professional interactions.

1.8.4 Researchers and Scholars

The study contributes empirical evidence to scholarship on computer-mediated communication, digital workplace communication and organizational interaction by examining emoji use within the relatively under-researched context of Kenyan higher education. It may provide a basis for comparative studies across institutions, sectors and geographical contexts and stimulate further research on cultural, demographic and organizational factors influencing emoji interpretation and use. Overall, the study contributes to understanding how an increasingly common feature of digital communication operates within a professional university environment. Rather than treating emojis as inherently appropriate or inappropriate, the study provides context-specific evidence that may support a more informed understanding of their role in workplace interaction.

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1.9 Assumptions

This study assumed that university employees use digital communication platforms in the course of their work and are familiar with the use of emojis in workplace communication. It was further assumed that respondents would provide honest and accurate information regarding their experiences and perceptions of emoji use. While the study acknowledged that emoji interpretation and usage may vary across demographic and cultural groups, it assumed that such variations could

be reliably captured and measured through the survey instrument. The study also assumed that emojis enhance communication effectiveness in the workplace.

1.10 Scope of Study

This study was geographically confined to Machakos County, Kenya. The county was selected because it hosts universities that have increasingly adopted digital communication technologies for academic and administrative operations, making it an appropriate setting for examining emoji use in workplace communication. Limiting the study to one county also ensured that the research could be conducted within the available time and financial resources while allowing for an in-depth investigation of the phenomenon.

Institutionally, the study was restricted to Machakos University and Scott Christian University. These universities were purposively selected because they represent public and private university settings, respectively, and both rely on digital communication platforms for internal communication. Including both institutions provided a broader understanding of workplace communication practices in higher education without comparing the institutions.

The participants involved in the study were faculty (professors, researchers, and lecturers), academic and administrative staff (human resources staff, IT staff, and similar), and professional/support staff (clerks, secretaries, communication officers, and the like). This participant recruitment process was conducted in that manner since they are frequently involved in formal and informal digital communication for carrying out their work responsibilities and have access to information on this behaviour in the workplace. The focus of the study, in the theoretical context, was on the effect of using emojis on employees' communication and interaction with one another.

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Conceptually, the research focused on the effect of emojis on the perceived clarity and tone of a message; the effect of an employee's cultural background on emoji interpretation and usage; and the impact of emojis on communication efficiency perception among employees. The research scope of the study was restricted to communication in an organization and only using institutional e-mails, communication channels (internal message board), and workplace WhatsApp groups, as communication was carried out as this kind of media was common to communication at the chosen universities.

1.11 Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

1.11.1 Limitations of the Study

The study had several limitations that were beyond its control. First, the study relied on self-reported questionnaire data, and survey research of this kind is generally susceptible to non-response, inaccurate responses, and intentional misreporting by participants (Christopher & Udoh, 2020). Respondents may therefore have underreported or overreported their use of emojis, particularly where they perceived emoji use as inappropriate or unprofessional in workplace communication. Consequently, the reported patterns may not fully correspond to participants' actual communication practices.

Second, the interpretation of emojis is inherently context-dependent, with prior research showing that meaning varies with age, gender, cultural background, and prior digital communication experience (Rathgeber, 2024; Chen et al., 2024; Gabbiadini et al., 2020; Du Plessis, 2020). Participants in this study may therefore have attached different meanings to the same emoji based

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on these factors, introducing variation in how respondents understood and answered questions concerning emoji use and interpretation.

Third, the availability of senior administrative staff and academic employees within the selected universities may have affected respondents' participation and, consequently, the response rate, a limitation consistent with the general vulnerability of survey research to non-response bias (Christopher & Udoh, 2020). The study therefore recognized the possibility that employees with limited availability may have been less likely to participate, which could have affected the representativeness of the responses.

Finally, emojis may be used differently across digital communication platforms such as email, WhatsApp, and Microsoft Teams, as differences in platform features and communication conventions have been shown to shape how emojis are used and interpreted (Suresh, 2018; Hasan, 2018). Differences in platform features, communication conventions, and the nature of interactions conducted through each platform may therefore have influenced participants' reported experiences. Since the study examined digital workplace communication generally rather than isolating the technical characteristics of each platform, such platform-specific differences could not be examined in detail.

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1.11.2 Delimitations of the Study

To manage the limitation associated with self-reported data (Christopher & Udoh, 2020), the study employed a standardized questionnaire to ensure that participants responded to comparable questions and that data were collected consistently. Respondents were also informed about the

confidentiality and anonymity of their responses to encourage honest reporting of their experiences and practices. To address the limitation arising from the context-dependent nature of emoji interpretation (Rathgeber, 2024; Chen et al., 2024; Gabbiadini et al., 2020; Du Plessis, 2020), the study deliberately incorporated demographic and contextual characteristics, including gender, age, professional position, and cultural background, into its analytical scope rather than treating emoji use as uniform across all employees.

To manage the limitation associated with response rate and participant availability (Christopher & Udoh, 2020), the study was delimited to employees of Machakos University and Scott Christian University in Machakos County, using a stratified sampling technique proportionate to each institution's staff size. The selected institutions provided the organizational setting within which the study examined emoji use in workplace digital communication; the study was not designed to establish comparisons between the two institutions or to generalize the findings to all universities in Kenya. Finally, to address the limitation associated with platform-specific variation in emoji use (Suresh, 2018; Hasan, 2018), the study was delimited to employees' use and interpretation of emojis in workplace digital communication generally, rather than to the technical characteristics, functionality, or design of individual communication platforms. Although platforms such as email, WhatsApp, and Microsoft Teams were considered within the study context, the technical differences between these platforms were outside the scope of the investigation.

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1.12 Definition of Terms

Emoticons – Emoticons are combinations of keyboard characters used in digital communication to represent non-verbal cues, particularly facial expressions and emotions. In this study, emoticons

refer to character-based expressions used by university employees to communicate feelings and tone in digital workplace messages (Chen et al., 2024).

Emoji – Emojis are colourful pictographic symbols used in digital communication to represent facial expressions, feelings, and other meanings. In this study, emojis refer to graphical symbols used by university employees to communicate tone, feelings, intent, appreciation, and recognition in digital workplace communication (Rodrigues et al., 2018; Dhaliwal & Hazarika, 2026).

Digital Communication – The exchange of information through electronic platforms such as emails, messaging apps (WhatsApp, Microsoft Teams), and social media, where emojis help enhance meaning and engagement (Erle et al., 2022).

Communication Effectiveness – The ability of a message to achieve its intended purpose by ensuring clear understanding, appropriate emotional expression, and a meaningful response from the recipient (Chaturvedi, 2026).

Cultural Differences – Variations in beliefs, norms, and communication styles across different social or ethnic groups that influence how emojis are understood and used in workplace interactions (Sun et al., 2023).

Workplace Communication - Refers to the process through which academic and administrative staff exchange information, collaborate, and coordinate activities within an institution to support teaching, research, and institutional operations (Adu-Oppong & Agyin-Birikorang, 2014).

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1.13 Summary

This chapter provides an introduction to the study, which includes the background of the study, statement of the problem, research questions, purpose of the study, objectives of the study, rationale/justification, significance of the study, scope of study, limitations, and delimitation. Chapter two reviewed relevant literature to the study, and chapter three discusses the research methodology.

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CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a literature review, including a theoretical framework, general literature, an empirical framework, a summary of the research gap, and a conceptual framework.

2.2 General Literature Review

The purpose of a general literature review is to summarize, synthesize, and critically discuss what is already known, identify patterns and trends, and highlight gaps or inconsistencies in the current body of knowledge.

2.2.1 Overview of Emoticons

The subject of emoticons has been on the rise in recent times. The development of technology has largely contributed to the growth in emoji use. Today, the use of emojis has 'exploded' and is mainly used to communicate within social spaces to express feelings and interpret messages (Veytia-Bucheli et al., 2020). Today in history, various generations exist simultaneously, with each having grown up in different eras characterized by different forms and methods of communication (McCrindle, 2011). Baby boomers grew up in the era of traditional communication methods such as letters, telephone, and face-to-face conversations. Gen X and Millennials tend to communicate flexibly, blending both formal and informal communication strategies. The younger generations, that is, Gen Z and Alphas, tend to be highly informal, using emojis, GIFs, memes, and abbreviations for self-expression and to emphasize a message in electronic communication, reflecting their adaptation to the visually driven world (Azad et al., 2023). Communication of this nature is widely referred to as computer-mediated communication (CMC), which is characterized by the absence of nonverbal visual cues present in traditional physical interactions.

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Teenagers use emojis for various reasons, including facial expressions, food, weather, and animals (Dharma et al., 2022). Banerjee and Bute (2017), in their study at the Noida Campus of Amity University, examined the nature and frequency of emoticon use in email communication. Their findings showed that emoticons are a powerful tool for non-verbal communication in both informal settings, such as online platforms, and formal settings, such as email. The preference for email messages with social and emotional cues, such as greetings and acknowledgment, was high compared to task-focused emails containing activity instructions or reminders. Dharma et al. (2022) further argue that the nature and frequency of emoji use in formal communication can be limited by awareness of organizational email setup, work culture, and email message characteristics.

Emojis can also vary based on culture. Yamamoto et al. (2020), in examining differences between Japanese and Dutch speakers, found that Japanese participants inclined towards the eyes when interpreting the emotion communicated by an emoticon. In contrast, people of Dutch origin focus on the mouth of an emoji to interpret the emotion conveyed (Yamamoto et al., 2020). Research also shows that the Japanese commonly use emojis to illustrate their facial expressions, food, or weather (Banerjee & Bute, 2017; Arnesen et al., 2017).

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2.2.2 Definition and Types

In the past decade, scholars have conceptualized emoticons based on their purpose and usage, with many studies viewing them as tools for expressing emotions and feelings. Various studies have conceptualized emojis as having functions similar to non-verbal cues that represent facial

expressions in real-life interactions. Dresner and Herring (2013) described emojis, or emotional icons, as symbolic representations of one's expressions that convey one's feelings and tone in communication. Walther and D'Addario (2001) and Hasan (2018) show that emojis can mimic non-verbal indicators of emotions and visual cues and provide additional information to communication by enhancing the intensity of textual CMC.

Cherbonnier and Michinov (2022) identify two types of emoticons: typographic and graphic emoticons. Typographic emoticons combine keyboard symbols that can express happiness or sadness. In contrast, graphic emoticons are visual representations of a face, mainly consisting of eyes and a mouth. Examples include memes, emojis, and GIFs that can convey different emotional states. Other messaging platforms can create unique graphical emojis for users (Toet et al., 2018). According to Kelly (2015), emoticons are illustrated with ASCII characters such as smiley and frowny faces, as well as emojis used in emails and instant messaging. These characters can express various emotions, including happiness, disappointment, opinions, thoughts, encouragement, and status. Thus, emoticons and emojis can extend the meaning of written text by providing emotional and contextual information that may otherwise be difficult to communicate through words alone.

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2.2.3 Purpose and Use

Facial expressions, body language, and other traditional visual indicators present in one-on-one interactions are absent in textual CMC. The use of emoticons emerged in the early 1980s, when computer scientists at Carnegie Mellon University proposed them (Fahlman, 2021). Emojis have since become a means of supplementing these non-verbal strategies as indicators of an individual's emotive state (Cherbonnier & Michinov, 2021). The addition of emojis to instant messages and emails aims to convey non-linguistic information to the reader that could be communicated in

physical interactions through facial expressions, body language, or other non-verbal cues (Bavelas & Chovil, 2006).

Today, emojis are used in synchronous communication, such as instant messages, and asynchronous communication, such as email. They are also prevalent in online communication, with age and gender as contributing factors (Oleszkiewicz et al., 2017). Emojis convey meaningful messages without lengthy elaboration, thereby meeting the needs of young online users for speedy, concise communication. In another study, Iqbal et al. (2020) conducted a survey involving students from Eastern Mediterranean University in North Cyprus to examine the use of emojis on social media. The study found that social media platforms offer a variety of emojis designed to facilitate communication and help users understand and interpret messages. However, Guntuku et al. (2019) expressed concerns about the potential misinterpretation of emoticons, particularly due to cultural differences, which could lead to misunderstandings of individual thoughts, emotions, or feelings.

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2.2.4 Historical Development

Earlier versions of emojis were simple, character-based symbols (emoticons) used in online communication, attributed to Scott Fahlman, a computer scientist at Carnegie Mellon University in the USA. In 1982, Fahlman posted a message on the CMU online platform suggesting the use of characters, such as punctuation marks, to create smiley (interpreted as a smiley emoji) and frowny (☹ interpreted as a frowny emoji) expressions in their online communications (Fahlman, 2021). Emojis align with the Japanese logographic writing system, Kanji, and derive from a combination of the letter '*e,*' meaning picture, and '*moji,*' meaning word (Li & Zheng, 2024). Therefore, emoji refers to text that conveys a picture (Dharma et al., 2022).

In 1986, online users in Japan developed the kaomoji, a combination of emojis that used Japanese characters to create emoticons (Fahlman, 2021). Emojis did not evolve much beyond Japan until the advancement of technology and the internet in the late 20th and early 21st century, when they became increasingly widespread and gradually developed, beyond earlier, simpler logographic systems such as emoticons. The emergence of smartphones in the 2000s led to the development of more complex emoji graphics, which further expanded their ability to add personality and nuance to online communication (Fahlman, 2021).

2.2.5 Technological Advancement

The rise of both technology and the internet facilitated the development of more complex emoticons to express a wider range of emotions. Dr. Anne Fitzpatrick explained that the late 20th Century was a critical moment in the evolution of emoticons (Briggs, 2016). According to Dr Fitzpatrick, online users view the internet as an essential collaborative tool for work and communication. Therefore, as the internet evolved, emoticons were widely adopted to supplement and add tone to email, website, and forum communications. Research shows that early criticisms argued that replacing character-based symbols with complex emoticons to convey non-verbal information would impoverish electronic communication and impede users' writing skills (Briggs, 2016).

Since the inception of Generation Y- the Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996)- communication has become more visual as they grew up in the era of the rise of the internet and mobile technology. Gen Y differs from Gen X in that Gen X (born between 1965 and 1980) grew up before the internet and mobile technology, only to adopt them later in life. Gen Z (born between

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1997 and 2012), and now the latest generation, Gen Alpha (born between 2013 and present), are highly informal and flexible in communication, blending elements of text, linear images, and animated emojis. Research shows that Gen Z has existed during a time of fast technological growth, making them, so far, the most skilled generation when it comes to using the internet (Dangmei & Singh, 2016). This generation is always online, mostly using mobile phones and social media applications. Research shows that they use emojis, GIFs, memes, and abbreviations for self-expression and to emphasize a message, which reflects their adaptation to the visually-driven world (Azad et al., 2023). As a result, technological development has facilitated the incorporation of increasingly complex visual elements, including animations that move or make sounds, allowing users to personalize textual computer-initiated communication.

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2.3 Empirical Literature Review

An empirical literature review examines and discusses findings from previous studies that are based on direct observation, experimentation, or data analysis. It focuses on summarizing and comparing evidence from research that has collected and analysed primary data, whether through qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods. By reviewing these studies, researchers can identify tested relationships, patterns, and outcomes relevant to their own work, evaluate the validity of existing findings, and pinpoint gaps that warrant further investigation.

2.3.1 Role of Emotion Icons in Modifying Message Tone and Clarity

Numerous researches have conducted and studied emojis' ability to alter message tone and comprehensibility. Using an online survey design and a mixed factorial design, Neel et al. (2023) examined how emojis alter emotional perception in affective natural text messages. Using

convenience sampling, 217 people, including Americans, British, Danes, and citizens from 17 other nations, completed the online survey. Participants were already acquainted with the use of emojis; they were proficient readers/speakers of English, and participants with communication disorders were not allowed in the study. Four emojis were selected from the Emoji Sentiment Scale v1.0 and cross-referenced with other platforms to ensure user familiarity. The emojis conveyed negativity, neutrality, and positivity. The findings showed that adding emojis to textual CMC affected the participants' perception of sentiments and shaped the tone of the message. The study predicted that positive emojis added to text messages were rated more emotionally positive, while negative emojis added to text messages were rated negative. The effect was consistent across different nationalities.

Iqbal et al. (2020) carried out a study exploring the use of emoticons in social media, dubbed *"The Use of Symbols (Emoticons) in Social Media: A Shift of Language from Words to Symbols"*. This study explored the growing and developing role of emoticons in digital communication. It further studied the different communication patterns of social media users from diverse demographics. The findings showed that emoticons are essential in enhancing message clarity, tone, and emotional expression in digital communication, predominantly in informal communication circumstances (Iqbal et al., 2020).

Mkhwanazi (2021) completed a case study with semi-structured interviews aimed at investigating the use of memes and emojis in the digital communication environment at Discovery. This study used purposeful sampling to select six digital experts from the city of Johannesburg, South Africa, and one from Germany. The interviews were conducted online on the Microsoft Teams application

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during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic in the year 2020. This study found that graphic expressions like memes and emoticons allow brands to connect to consumers. According to the study, consumers were using emotion icons to express feelings and connect with friends online. Hence, it stated that when brands use emoticons in their communication, the communication can seem more approachable for consumers (Doiron, 2018). The conclusion of this study was that by utilising emoticons or other visual expressions, online relationships were strengthened, online connection and engagement were fostered, and, in turn, text-based CMC became more humanised and relevant to the reader.

A study was also carried out as an electronic survey with the help of the Qualtrics platform on various organizations of people and also an examination of emojis as well as how to understand these icons in organizational textual CMC (Du Plessis, 2020). This was an exploratory study, and it used convenience, snowball, and stratified sampling to capture and obtain 400 employees who are socially active and acquaintances of employees of various organisations in South Africa. The questionnaire explored the use of 16 emoji Unicode characters on Apple and Android WhatsApp, Twitter, and Microsoft Office, and the interpretations given for them. From this, we get an idea that emojis do have the potential to alter communication by conveying non-verbal expressions in both formal and informal situations; however, emojis are open to misunderstanding, and they do lead to miscommunication. Interpretation varied in the case of race, age, gender, work culture, level of hierarchy, and importantly, most of the participants were White; thus, the interpretation could be influenced by Western culture. This made it difficult for the researchers to get uniform results since they gave different interpretations to the 16 emoji Unicode characters; hence, we lost diversity in the emoji as a whole.

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In Nigeria, Nwegbo (2026) examined the use of emojis and emoticons in WhatsApp communication to mitigate face-threatening acts among undergraduate students. The study adopted a qualitative research design and utilized purposive sampling to select 50 participants. The results showed that emojis were employed intentionally to soften requests, lessen the impact of corrections and disagreements, and mend potentially offensive remarks. Preemptive, inline, and post-hoc positioning had unique influences on shaping understanding. Although certain emojis encouraged warmth and unity, others created uncertainty or, in certain instances, heightened conflict. The analysis indicated that the context of the group and local interactional norms affected the interpretation and use of these markers. In conclusion, the research showed that emojis serve as significant pragmatic instruments in WhatsApp communication, allowing students to maintain clarity while being polite in an academic setting.

In South Africa, Lawrence (2022) examined the use of emojis among Afrikaans undergraduate students using a mixed-method approach. The findings indicated that the context affected how students used emojis. Emojis were used more in WhatsApp messages to family and friends, less in messages to peers and tutors, and the least in messages to lecturers. There was a distinction in the kinds of emojis employed in these exchanges: face emojis were more prevalent in casual situations, whereas hand emojis were more common in formal educational settings. Discoveries also suggested that emojis not only saved time but were enjoyable, influencing students' online communication in various manners. Further, the incorporation of emojis not only boosted the accurate understanding of messages but also fostered social presence. Nevertheless, when emojis were understood in various ways, it could cause misinterpretations, thereby obstructing effective

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communication. The use of emojis in communication among students, their peers, and tutors fostered a relaxed environment and social presence that enhanced learning. Emojis were rarely, if ever, used in communications between students and lecturers. When utilised, they were generally limited to the use of the less expressive thumbs-up and praying hands emojis. While students felt uneasy about using emojis in WhatsApp messages to their lecturers (considering online learning a formal environment where emojis were viewed as unsuitable), a significant number of respondents (41%) were unsure if emojis could enhance communication between students and lecturers in online learning. Students supporting emoji use in this context, though not in large numbers, suggested that emojis could similarly aid in fostering a relaxed environment and social presence that enhanced learning, just as they did in their interactions with peers and tutors.

In Kenya, Mohamed (2022) sought to investigate the gender and cross-cultural differences and how emoji users interpreted it on the Instagram platform among USIU students. Employing a descriptive research approach, the study found out that Emoji usage was exacerbated by cultural and geographical factors, making it susceptible to misunderstanding. Additionally, instead of relying just on words, emojis allowed one to express their intentions, liven up posts, and convey feelings. While certain emoticons, like the laugh emoji, were simple to use, others might have led to misunderstandings. The majority of respondents said using emojis on Instagram was simple. Instagram's visible characteristics and the simplicity with which text may be edited with emojis when needed made it a popular platform.

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2.3.2 Perception and Use of Emojis in Digital Communication

Several studies have done empirical research on people's perceptions of emoticons and emoticon usage. Banerjee and Bute (2017) conducted a mixed-method research study on users' perceptions towards emoticon usage on mail.amity.edu as an email system at Amity University Noida Campus in India. Convenience and random sampling of the 75 main users of mail.amity.edu, namely advisors, department heads, faculty members, teaching assistants, and administration members of the university and departments, using a questionnaire as a tool for data collection. From the findings, the results suggested that users preferred social-emotional cues (emoticons) over others (such as welcome, greetings, acknowledging, etc.). Additionally, participants demonstrated preferences for emoticon placement in email signatures, which enhances the use of visual expressions in email communication to convey the message's tone to the recipient. However, this study noted that the nature and frequency of emoticon usage by Amity University staff were influenced by awareness of the university email setup, work culture, and familiarity with and understanding of receiver- or task-oriented communication within the institution.

A study was conducted by Hayes and Fatima (2024) involving 10 semi-structured interviews with university students in South England to examine their perceptions of emojis, memes, and GIFs in teaching. The students studied different courses at the university and had diverse racial, age, gender, nationality, and cultural backgrounds. The Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Studies (COREQ) guidelines were used to develop the study. The interviews took place in April 2022 and were conducted in person and through the MS Teams online platform. The findings showed that students had positive perceptions about using emojis, memes, and GIFs for higher education teaching and offered opportunities for university staff to develop stronger connections

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with students. However, using emoticons in learning contexts presented the risk of unprofessionalism, which was likely to affect staff-student interactions. This is because the teaching context is formal.

Chiedu (2024) used observation to investigate the use of emojis in social media interactions and how they convey messages. A purposive sampling method was used to select 25 WhatsApp interactions from students at Delta State University, Abraka; Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku; and the University of Benin. Screenshots of the messages were obtained and analyzed using the representational meaning view developed by Kress and Van Leeuwen. The findings showed that participants believed emojis deliver messages similar to non-verbal cues in one-on-one interactions. Different emojis and emoticons were used to deliver messages in different contexts. The findings also showed that the different perceptions, usage, and interpretations of emojis presented the risks of misinterpreting them, reflected by discrepancies between physical form and encoded meaning.

In Ghana, a study involving 300 students at a Ghanaian University assessed how often emojis were used, their interpretations, and the perceived impact on interactions (Amadu, 2024). Results indicated a common use of emojis for conveying feelings and fostering social connections. However, students did not uniformly interpret emojis in the same way. Nonetheless, the majority of students thought emojis improved interactions. The differences in emoji understanding suggested possible communication dangers. The results of this study emphasized the importance of enhanced emoji literacy to aid university students in their critical understanding and responsible use.

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In Kenya, Sadia (2018) conducted a descriptive macro-linguistic study to establish the communicative function of emojis in textual CMC and how emoticons fulfill users' needs. Krejcie and Morgan's formula at a 94% confidence level was used to calculate a sample of 385 respondents who used emojis online worldwide. A questionnaire was developed to engage the sample and help in data collection. The study found that emojis convey gestures through their graphical representations. There was a strong perception and balance in how individuals use emojis to express emotions and enhance message understanding. Online users combine multiple emojis to enhance understanding of the message or as a substitute for words. The findings also indicated that the interpretation of emojis was context-specific, making them inadequate as a form of written grammar. The study concluded that emojis aided the delivery and setting of tone in online written communication.

2.3.3 Impact of Emotion Icons on the Effectiveness of Communication

Various studies have explored the impact of emotion icons on the effectiveness of formal and informal communication. Hasan (2018) conducted qualitative research to investigate the impact of emojis and emoticons on enhancing interpersonal communication on Messenger and WhatsApp platforms. Screenshots of emoji and emoticon displays from Messenger and WhatsApp applications were obtained for analysis. A screenshot from the researcher's iPhone Messenger app in September 2017 showed emojis of facial and animal facial expressions, body parts, animals, and plants. Another screenshot from the iPhone WhatsApp in September 2017 showed emojis of facial emotions, plants, animals, food, drinks, vehicles, and flags. A screenshot of emotion icons

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was also taken from 'PiliApp' (an online application and a text generator) on the application's website www.piliapp.com, which shows various emojis and emoticons.

Additionally, screenshots of personal conversations on the researcher's WhatsApp platform displayed communications that included messages and emojis. The findings revealed that emojis in various smartphone communication applications can express, enhance, and modify sentiments and emotions. Attaching emojis and emoticons to interpersonal messages deepens and enriches their meaning, leading the receiver to feel the impact of the message and strengthening the connection between the sender and receiver.

Shalahuddin and Fajrianti (2024) used qualitative methods to explore the impact of emoticons in social media communication, focusing on how their use, meaning, and interpretation affect the effectiveness of communication. The study findings revealed that the use of emojis may enhance the quality of communication as well as lead to a better interpersonal connection with the audience. Emojis reduce ambiguity and increase understanding of messages, enhance the tone of communication, convey senders' emotions and intentions, and influence the receiver's perception and response to the message. The study also found that emojis make messages interesting and memorable. The study highlighted the challenges of varied emoji interpretations due to cultural and contextual differences, as well as the risks of unprofessionalism in formal communication.

Suresh (2018) conducted a quantitative survey involving 200 college students from Mysuru to examine the impact of emojis on communication through email, Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Instagram. The study measured student perceptions, awareness, and usage patterns of emojis

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on these platforms. The findings revealed that emojis reduced the written form of communication and conveyed certain subtle tones in messages. The study concluded that the appropriate use of emojis increases communication effectiveness.

A study by Erle et al. (2022) conducted eleven high-powered experiments to test the functional use and effectiveness of digital emojis in conveying emotions and feelings in online communication. The first four experiments tested the common intended communicative functions of smiley emojis, setting the message tone and reducing ambiguity. Emotional intensity, represented by positive or negative emojis, was used to measure emotional tone and perceived message ambiguity. Two other experiments tested the effectiveness of emojis in conveying emotional states in textual CMCs. In comparison, the last two experiments predicted the degree to which participants perceived the emotional state of the person sending the message. In addition, the experiments tested how emoticons can enhance message appeal or repulsion, where the study predicted that the use of stronger emoticons could prompt perception of the visual expression. The perception of the emoticon can be either a positive or negative emotional expression. In the experiments, messages with emojis that were perceived as emotionally intense were compared with messages without emojis. The findings suggested that emojis effectively express non-verbal cues in digital communications. The emojis produced patterns similar to non-verbal expressions present in face-to-face interactions. The emoticons prompted affective, inferential expressions in digital communication, shaping individual behavioural intentions. Lecturers tend to send email messages to students in a variety of forms and styles.

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In Tanzania, Rwezahula (2026) examined the analysis and interpretation of emojis used in WhatsApp text messages among students at St. Augustine University. The study employed a mixed research approach using a sequential explanatory design among 153 respondents who were purposively selected. The results showed that each emoji has a wide range of possible meanings. Only seven of the smileys that were examined and used as the variable in this study were interpreted similarly by every respondent (love, kiss, lying, drooling, sleepy, crying, and delicious), while the remaining smileys were interpreted differently based on the respondents' interpretations of the smileys' meanings. However, certain smileys' intended meanings were still unclear to users, leading individuals to interpret the smileys according to their perception and comprehension. Through a comprehensive review of existing literature, online discourse analysis, and case studies, Udoudom et al. (2024) explored the dynamic role of emojis in text-based communication and the potential implications for miscommunication among youths in Nigeria. The study discovered that young Nigerians used emojis often, highlighting the importance of these visual signals in their online chats. Participants used a variety of emojis, demonstrating a rich and varied emotional expression through this type of nonverbal communication. Further, emojis were seen to function as cultural markers, expressing the distinct social milieu of young Nigerians. The interaction of technology and cultural identity in digital communication was highlighted by the frequent usage of certain emojis to communicate feelings, expressions, and subtleties that are firmly ingrained in the local culture. Lastly, even though emojis were widely used, the study revealed situations where misinterpretation may occur (Udoudom et al., 2024). There was ambiguity in how some emojis were interpreted, particularly where context was important. The study emphasized how crucial it was to take context and cultural quirks into account when interpreting the intended meaning of emojis in text-based conversations.

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Anchored in Symbolic Interactionism Theory, Ndimofor (2026) explored the extent to which university students in Cameroon shared similar interpretations of commonly utilized emojis across different communicative contexts. The results showed that emojis related to celebration, appreciation, affection, and happiness were triggered by favourable circumstances, including winning a scholarship, getting a great grade, seeing an old friend again, and getting academic support. On the other hand, unfavourable circumstances, including loss, unfounded allegations, postponed exams, and unintentional message sharing, caused empathy, humiliation, annoyance, and rage. While many emojis seemed to have rather constant meanings within the University of Buea community, the study also showed that communication context had a major impact on emoji selection and interpretation. The results demonstrated that emoji meanings were socially formed and widely disseminated among members of a certain linguistic group, which supported the assumptions of symbolic interactionism. The study concluded that emojis served as powerful tools for conveying feelings, enhancing connections between individuals, and promoting sense-making in online interaction.

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2.3.4 Cultural and Contextual Consideration

Empirical evidence from global studies has shown that differences in the meaning and interpretation of emotion icons are because of variations in cultures and languages that influence the normative and culture-specific expression of emotions and feelings. Guntuku et al. (2019) downloaded random samples from random users of Twitter and Weibo to explore the East and West cultural differences in the usage of emojis for communication. User profile location on Weibo and tweet location for Twitter were used to geolocate messages posted in 2014 by users.

Users from the US, UK, and Canada represent Western cultures, and users from China and Japan represent Eastern cultures. The findings suggested strong correspondence in the types of emojis frequently preferred by users from the East and West cultures. The lowest correlations in emoji usage were in food, drink, and activities emojis, suggesting differences in the interpretation and meaning of emojis that represent certain foods, drinks, or activities. Emoji expressions were categorized similarly in both cultures. This study explored cultural differences from the perspective of emoji use. However, the differences that emerged in the study could be attributed to the messages in the social media post. The study proposed that future studies investigate cross-cultural variations in text and emoji use.

A recent study in China by Li and Zheng (2024) dubbed '*Cross-Cultural Communication in Digital Age: An Analysis of Cultural Representation and Inclusivity in Emojis'* used a mixed-methods approach to explore cultural representation in emojis and usage in cross-cultural communication. A sample of 106 college Chinese students with experience using emojis in formal and informal communication was surveyed using a questionnaire to identify their usage patterns, preferences, and interpretations. Participants' understanding of the cultural characteristics of emojis was also examined in the study. The findings showed that emojis reflect diversity and inclusivity in digital communication. Individuals use emojis to clarify communication and enhance inclusivity among users from different cultural and demographic backgrounds. The findings reveal that emojis have substantive emotional and cultural meanings. The study raised concerns over the risk of misinterpretations and misunderstandings of emojis due to cultural and contextual differences. The introduction of multi-color, gender- and culture-specific emojis improves user understanding of emojis in online communication (Li & Zheng, 2024).

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Cultural and contextual factors are important in understanding the use and interpretation of emojis in African digital communication. Although emojis are often presented as universal visual symbols, evidence from African contexts demonstrates that their meanings are shaped by language, culture, social relationships, and communicative situations. In Southern Africa, Shibeshi et al. (2025) evaluated Vibes on two YouTube datasets: comments in English/isiXhosa from *the@cmtvsa* channel and remarks on video content dis-criticizing a hair care commercial dispute. In the project, they faced several practical difficulties, such as failures in language identification and code-switching occurring within a single conversation, unconventional spellings, and multimodal interaction utilizing emojis. The obstacles prompted the authors to suggest a design for joint coding that considered translanguaging approaches. The hackathon development process emphasized the necessity for context-delicate instruments to examine language variety in the Global South. Further, Docrat and Kaschula (2024) posited that emojis may be regarded as proof presented in legal proceedings in South Africa. This was recommended in the context of established case law that was already present in different regions of the globe like the United States of America. Nevertheless, it was also contended that in a multilingual and diverse society like South Africa, a 'conscious' method should be adopted in understanding emojis. This method should consider that emojis could be understood in various ways depending on cultural context. Consequently, it was crucial to determine the genuine intention of the sender in regard to how the emoji was perceived. This equilibrium would consequently develop a detailed and equitable understanding of emojis used as proof in a legal setting. Similarly, Mgogo and Nokutywa (2023) found that isiXhosa-speaking social media users reinterpreted emojis and combined them to construct meanings associated with indigenous proverbs and expressions, demonstrating the

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adaptation of globally circulated symbols to local cultural contexts. Regionally, in Kenya, studies have shown differences in cross-cultural usage, meaning, and interpretation of emotional icons.

Mohammed (2022) used a mixed-method approach to understand the efficiency of emoji usage, cross-cultural variations in misinterpretation of emojis, and the moderating effect of demographic factors on emoji usage for online engagement. Simple random sampling techniques were used to select 357 students from the United States International University (USIU) Kenya for engagement using survey questionnaires and interviews. The findings showed that emojis enable the students to convey emotions and intentions. The usage of some emojis, like smiley or frowny emojis were easier to use, while some other emojis were difficult to understand. Cultural and demographic backgrounds also influenced emoji usage differently (Mohammed, 2022).

2.4 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation shapes the study as a reference to explore the meaning of emoji in workplace communication. In this regard, this study drew upon existing knowledge of communication studies, organizational studies, and sociology to construct a framework that conceptualizes how emoji plays its part in an organization-wide context, with universities taken as a case. Semiotics Theory, Politeness Theory (PT), Technological Determinism Theory (TDT), Structuration Theory (ST), and Sensemaking Theory were selected and adopted to develop the theoretical understanding. These selected theoretical perspectives enable this research to provide a synthesized framework that holistically comprehends the roles that emoji serve in organizations including universities.

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2.4.1 Semiotics Theory

Semiotics is the study of signs, sign systems, and the processes through which meaning is produced, communicated, and interpreted (Flavian-Obasi, 2026). The modern development of semiotics is principally associated with Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) and Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), who developed influential but distinct approaches to the study of signs. Saussure, regarded as a foundational figure in European semiology, conceptualized the sign as a relationship between the signifier, the observable form of a sign, and the signified, the concept or meaning associated with that form (Hervey, 2016; Falvian-Obasi, 2026; Curtin, 2009). Peirce, working independently within the American philosophical tradition, developed a broader triadic conception comprising the representamen, the object, and the interpretant. Thus, while Saussure emphasized the relational and structural character of signs within systems, Peirce focused on the process through which signs stand for objects and generate interpretation. These two traditions constitute the principal foundations from which modern semiotic theory developed (Aiello, 2020; Hervey, 2016). Subsequent scholars extended semiotic analysis to cultural texts, media, advertising, literature, photography, and other forms of representation. Roland Barthes, for example, extended semiotic analysis towards cultural and ideological meanings, while later approaches increasingly considered the social circumstances in which signs are produced and interpreted (Aiello, 2020; Hervey, 2016). Contemporary semiotics consequently encompasses linguistic, visual, social and multimodal forms of communication rather than treating language as the only meaningful sign system. Aiello (2020) observes that visual semiotics has developed through the contributions of Saussure, Peirce, Barthes and other scholars, while social semiotics has placed greater emphasis on context, practice and the social production of meaning.

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The central concern of semiotics is therefore not merely the identification of signs but the explanation of how signs acquire and communicate meaning (Behera, 2024). A sign does not necessarily possess meaning independently of the system or context in which it is encountered. Meaning emerges through relationships among signs, conventions, social practices, and the interpretation of users (Behera, 2024; Olurotimi, 2022). Saussure's dyadic model demonstrates that the relationship between the signifier and signified is largely conventional rather than naturally determined. Peirce extended this understanding by showing that interpretation is an active process involving the relationship among a sign, what it represents, and the meaning produced by an interpreter (Curtin, 2009). Consequently, semiotics provides a useful basis for examining communication because it recognizes that meaning is constructed, rather than simply transmitted from sender to receiver (Olurotimi, 2022). In digital communication, this principle is particularly important because users increasingly communicate through combinations of written language, images, symbols, icons, and other visual resources.

The expansion of semiotics is particularly relevant to digital communication because contemporary messages rarely depend on words alone. Digital workplace communication may incorporate emojis, punctuation, photographs, GIFs, reaction icons, abbreviations and other visual resources alongside written language. These elements function as signs because they can represent emotions, attitudes, relationships, actions or social intentions. Curtin (2009) explains that semiotics is concerned with how representations, including language, images and objects, generate meaning and how individuals comprehend or attribute meaning to them. From this perspective, an emoji can be analyzed as a visual sign whose meaning is produced through its relationship with accompanying text, the communication situation and the knowledge of the sender and recipient.

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Flavian-Obasi (2026) similarly demonstrates the relevance of semiotic analysis to emoticons and emojis by treating them as communicative resources that may either supplement written messages or operate as meaningful forms of expression in their own right.

Semiotics also provides a basis for distinguishing different dimensions of meaning. A sign may have a relatively direct or denotative meaning, while also acquiring connotative meanings associated with emotions, cultural conventions, relationships and social practices (Cheurfa, 2026). The same emoji may therefore communicate different meanings depending on who uses it, who receives it, the accompanying message, and the circumstances of communication. Behera (2024) emphasizes that signs do not contain meaning inherently; rather, meaning is constructed through processes of interpretation. Similarly, Olurotimi (2022) argues that meaning is inseparable from communication and that signs are socially and culturally polysemous. This perspective is particularly significant for emojis because their apparent simplicity can conceal multiple possible interpretations. A smiling face, thumbs-up or folded-hands emoji may communicate approval, appreciation, politeness, agreement, gratitude or another culturally recognized meaning depending on the communicative context.

The development of semiotics has nevertheless attracted criticism. One limitation is that semiotic interpretation can be highly dependent on the analyst and therefore may lack the objectivity associated with approaches that rely on measurable variables. Different researchers may identify different meanings in the same sign because interpretation is influenced by their theoretical assumptions and cultural knowledge (Kalelioğlu, 2017). Another criticism concerns the possibility of treating signs as stable structures when meanings may change across time, cultures and

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communication contexts. Olurotimi (2022) therefore stresses the socially and culturally polysemous character of signs, while Aiello (2020) highlights the importance of context and practice in contemporary visual semiotics. Semiotic analysis can also become overly focused on representation at the expense of the material and technological conditions through which communication occurs. In digital environments, for example, the meaning of an emoji may be affected not only by cultural convention but also by platform design, device rendering, message sequencing, and the relationship between communicators. These limitations do not invalidate semiotics but indicate the need to apply it systematically and contextually. Kalelioğlu (2017) consequently emphasizes the importance of systematic analytical procedures when using semiotic concepts to interpret meaning.

The present study applies semiotics because emojis are treated as visual signs whose meanings emerge through their use within digital workplace communication. The study is concerned not simply with identifying which emojis employees use but with examining what those signs communicate within workplace interactions. Semiotics enables the study to examine how emojis operate alongside textual messages to represent emotions, attitudes, interpersonal relationships, and communicative intentions. It also provides a basis for comparing how similar signs may function across the two universities and whether their meanings remain consistent across different workplace situations. The Saussurean emphasis on the relationship between the form of a sign and its associated concept assists in examining the signification of particular emojis, while the Peircean approach draws attention to interpretation and the relationship between the sign, its referent, and the recipient's understanding (Aiello, 2020; Hervey, 2016).

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The theory is further appropriate because workplace communication is socially situated. Employees communicate within institutional cultures, professional hierarchies, and established interpersonal relationships, all of which can influence how emojis are selected and interpreted. An emoji used between colleagues may communicate friendliness or solidarity, whereas the same emoji in communication between a supervisor and subordinate may carry different interpersonal implications. The semiotic perspective therefore allows the study to examine both the sign itself and the contextual processes through which employees assign meaning to it. Manik (2026) similarly presents semiotics as applicable to everyday communication, culture and society, reinforcing its usefulness for examining how signs operate across different communicative contexts. Ultimately, semiotics provides the study with a framework for analyzing emojis as meaningful visual signs rather than decorative additions to text. Its emphasis on signification, interpretation, context, and cultural meaning makes it suitable for comparing emoji use across the two Machakos County universities and for explaining how emojis contribute to employee interaction and workplace communication.

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2.4.2 Politeness Theory

Politeness Theory was formulated by Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson and most comprehensively presented in *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*, first published in 1978 and substantially revised and reissued in 1987. The theory emerged within linguistic pragmatics and sought to explain how individuals manage interpersonal relationships while performing communicative acts that may threaten the social identity or autonomy of others (Brown & Levinson, 1987). They built their framework around the concept of face, drawing substantially

on Goffman's (1955) earlier conceptualization of face as the positive social value a person claims during interaction. Their contribution was to provide a systematic account of the strategies speakers employ when communicating potentially face-threatening acts. The theory distinguishes between positive face, referring to a person's desire to be approved of, appreciated, and accepted by others, and negative face, referring to the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition (Sadeghoghli & Niroomand, 2016). Politeness therefore involves selecting communicative strategies that manage these competing social needs and reduce the interpersonal risks associated with communication. Brown and Levinson's original formulation identifies several broad strategies, including bald-on-record communication, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies. These strategies allow communicators to adjust the directness of an utterance according to factors such as social distance, relative power, and the degree of imposition involved in an act (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

A central concept in the theory is the face-threatening act (FTA). Brown and Levinson (1987) argue that many ordinary communicative acts potentially threaten either the speaker's or hearer's face. Requests, orders, criticism, and disagreement, for example, may threaten the hearer's negative or positive face because they can impose on the hearer or challenge their desired self-image. Similarly, apologies and admissions may threaten the speaker's positive face. The theory therefore assumes that communicators make strategic choices about how directly an act should be expressed depending on the social circumstances surrounding the interaction. Sapitri et al. (2019) note that politeness strategies provide mechanisms for reducing the social impact of such face-threatening acts and maintaining harmonious interaction. This is particularly relevant in university

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workplaces where employees communicate across different levels of authority, professional roles, and interpersonal relationships.

Brown and Levinson (1987) identify four principal strategies for dealing with face-threatening acts: bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies. Bald-on-record communication involves expressing an intended message directly and without substantial redress, particularly where efficiency, urgency, or clarity is prioritized (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Sapitri et al., 2019). Positive politeness, in contrast, addresses the hearer's positive face by expressing approval, solidarity, friendliness, shared interests, or cooperation. Fathi (2024), in revisiting the Brown and Levinson framework, explains that positive politeness includes strategies for establishing common ground, conveying cooperation, and demonstrating approval of the hearer's wants. Negative politeness focuses on respecting the hearer's autonomy by reducing imposition, often through indirectness, hedging, deference, or expressions that give the recipient room to respond (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Off-record strategies communicate indirectly, allowing the intended meaning to be inferred rather than explicitly stated. Rajik (2025) demonstrates the continuing relevance of these four strategies in contemporary communication, showing that speakers can combine assertiveness, respect, rapport-building, and image management according to the communicative context.

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Within professional environments, especially within a hierarchy like a university institution, it's necessary to maintain solidarity, collegiality, and to minimize negative face-threatening acts. This is particularly important because workplace communication may involve requests from supervisors, corrections from colleagues, reminders about deadlines, responses to institutional

instructions, and disagreements concerning work-related decisions. The degree of social distance, power difference, and perceived imposition can influence the extent to which a communicator needs to mitigate a message. Haugh and Watanabe (2017) emphasize that politeness and impoliteness should be understood in relation to workplace interaction and the social relationships within which communicative practices occur. Thus, communication between a senior administrator and a junior employee may require different face-management practices from communication between colleagues of similar status.

In digital workplace communication, however, employees do not have access to many of the non-verbal resources available in face-to-face interaction, such as facial expressions, vocal intonation, and gestures (Skovholt et al., 2014). Emojis can therefore become resources through which communicators provide additional interpersonal and emotional cues. Skovholt et al. (2014), in their study of workplace emails, found that emoticons can function as contextualization cues that help recipients interpret how written utterances are intended and can contribute to organizing interpersonal relations. Similarly, Beißwenger and Pappert (2019) demonstrate that emojis can participate in face-work strategies in computer-mediated communication by helping users manage interpersonal relationships and mitigate potentially threatening expressions. In this sense, emojis are not merely decorative symbols but can contribute to the pragmatic interpretation of digitally mediated messages.

Beißwenger and Pappert (2019) further show that emojis can function as a politeness strategy that helps reduce the potential aggression or rudeness in a written message, strengthen social harmony, and promote good feelings and sociability. For example, a directive such as "Please send the report

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today" may appear relatively direct and potentially imposing when transmitted without additional contextual cues. Adding a smiling face may soften the perceived force of the directive and signal friendliness, thereby helping to protect the recipient's positive face. Similarly, a thumbs-up emoji can communicate acknowledgement, agreement or cooperation in response to an institutional instruction. In a university workplace, therefore, emojis may operate as visual resources that modify how employees interpret the interpersonal meaning of otherwise concise digital messages. Positive politeness is particularly useful in explaining emojis that express friendliness, approval, solidarity and shared understanding. A smiling face, clapping hands, heart or celebratory emoji may indicate appreciation or encouragement and thereby support the recipient's positive face (Skovholt et al., 2014). Such use can contribute to collegiality by signaling that the sender recognizes the recipient as a valued member of the workplace community. Fathi (2024) observes that positive politeness is fundamentally concerned with demonstrating approval and establishing common ground between interactants. Within the present study, this concept can therefore help explain whether employees in the two universities use emojis to establish solidarity, acknowledge colleagues' contributions, or express interpersonal warmth.

Negative politeness, on the other hand, is concerned with reducing imposition and respecting the recipient's autonomy. In workplace communication, this may be relevant when employees make requests, issue reminders, or communicate potentially sensitive information (Skovholt et al., 2014). An emoji accompanying a request may reduce the perceived harshness or seriousness of the message, although its interpretation depends on the relationship between sender and recipient. The choice to use or avoid an emoji may consequently reflect awareness of professional distance, institutional hierarchy, and the potential face threat associated with a particular message. Brown

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and Levinson's (1987) framework is therefore useful for examining how employees negotiate the tension between communicating efficiently and maintaining respectful workplace relationships.

Nevertheless, the application of Politeness Theory should recognize the importance of cultural and contextual variation. Alabdali (2019) argues that Brown and Levinson's framework remains useful across different settings but that cultural, social, and contextual factors can influence how face and politeness are understood. This consideration is important in the Kenyan university context because the meaning attached to an emoji cannot automatically be assumed to be universal. The same thumbs-up, smile, or laughing emoji may communicate agreement, friendliness, irony, informality, or even dismissal depending on the relationship between employees, the communication platform, and the surrounding text (Cavalheiro et al., 2024). Santoso (2025) similarly demonstrates the continuing relevance of Brown and Levinson's framework while emphasizing the role of cultural and normative values in interpreting politeness.

Cefaratti-Bertin (2024) notes that emojis can emphasize ideas and convey emotional meanings that may be difficult to communicate through words alone. Thus, in written university communication where verbal tone and facial expression are absent, emojis may help employees manage emotional context and interpersonal distance. For instance, adding a smiling face or a thumbs-up emoji to an email or workplace message may signal agreement, acknowledgement, or friendliness and thereby maintain the sender's social connection with the recipient. In this regard, emojis may serve as pragmatic resources through which employees negotiate politeness, solidarity and relational distance.

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The relevance of politeness theory to the present study therefore lies in its ability to explain what emojis do socially within digital workplace interaction, rather than merely identifying which emojis employees use. The theory provides concepts for examining whether particular emojis soften face-threatening acts, express positive politeness, reduce perceived imposition, communicate solidarity, or manage interpersonal distance. Qoriib (2026) demonstrates the continuing application of Brown and Levinson's strategies to contemporary discourse, while Rajik (2025) shows that the strategies can be used to examine how communicators balance respect, persuasion, and relationship management. Accordingly, the theory will guide the comparative semiotic analysis of emoji use in the two Machakos County universities by examining how emojis function alongside written language to manage face, politeness, and workplace relationships. It will particularly assist in interpreting whether similar emojis perform comparable politeness functions across the two institutions or whether their meanings and functions vary according to institutional context, workplace relationships, hierarchy, and communicative situations.

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2.4.3 Technological Determinism Theory

Technological Determinism, popularized by McLuhan (1964), posits that technological innovations shape human communication, societal structures, and cultural practices. McLuhan's Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (1964) provides the principal theoretical foundation for understanding how communication technologies influence patterns of human interaction. His famous assertion that "the medium is the message" emphasises that the social consequences of a communication medium arise not only from the content transmitted but also from the characteristics of the medium itself. McLuhan (1964) argues that media alter the scale, pace and pattern of human affairs and consequently influence how people associate and act. Thus,

communication technologies should not be understood merely as neutral channels through which information passes; their characteristics can influence the forms, expectations and practices of communication.

A key concept within McLuhan's perspective is therefore the medium, which refers to the technological environment through which communication occurs. McLuhan (1964) considered media to be extensions of human faculties because they expand or reorganise existing ways of perceiving, communicating and interacting. His argument suggests that when a new medium becomes incorporated into everyday life, it can alter established patterns of social behaviour even when the content communicated remains similar. Jan et al. (2020) applies this perspective to social media and explain that mediated technologies can facilitate cultural diffusion and influence human behaviour. Mezentsev (2020) similarly argues that technology has become an important determinant of social relations and communication in the information society. This provides a useful basis for examining digital workplace platforms because the introduction of email, instant messaging and other computer-mediated communication technologies may alter how university employees exchange information and maintain professional relationships.

Technological Determinism therefore draws attention to the capacity of technological change to transform communicative practices. Mardiana and Daniels (2019) note that technological change and new literacies influence communication and ways of thinking and acting within university environments, particularly as institutions adopt online systems and new forms of communication. In today's digital workplace, communication platforms such as instant messaging applications and emails, which often integrate emojis, have transformed traditional communication norms (Hauer,

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2017; Adler et al., 2006). The technological environment creates possibilities for employees to supplement written language with visual symbols, including emojis, that were not available in conventional letters or many forms of formal written communication. Consequently, the adoption of emojis in professional contexts can be understood as part of a broader transformation in the technological form of workplace communication.

The concept of technological change as a driver of behavioural change is particularly relevant to emoji use. Jan et al. (2020) demonstrate that McLuhan's ideas remain applicable to contemporary social media because digital technologies influence patterns of interaction, participation, and social connection. Similarly, Mezentsev (2020) argues that technological development contributes to transformations in social relations and communication. Within university workplaces, the availability of emojis through digital platforms may consequently encourage employees to incorporate visual symbols into messages to communicate emotions, reactions, emphasis, and interpersonal meanings. The technology does not simply provide employees with another channel for expressing an already existing message; its features may also encourage new communicative practices and expectations. The theory also helps explain how technological affordances can shape communicative behaviour. Digital platforms provide functions that make certain forms of interaction easier, faster, or more visible. Emojis are one such feature because they can be inserted directly into written digital messages, allowing employees to supplement textual communication with visual signs. This is consistent with McLuhan's (1964) argument that the characteristics of a medium influence the forms of human association and action. In this study, therefore, the availability and integration of emojis within workplace communication platforms provide an

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important technological condition for examining why employees use such symbols and how their use may become incorporated into institutional communication practices.

However, technological determinism does not necessarily imply that technology completely controls human behaviour. Webster (2017) questions deterministic assumptions through empirical research and demonstrates that technology leaders may simultaneously perceive technology as something that must be adopted while also recognising human decision-making and agency. Feng (2022) similarly highlights the complexity of the relationship between technological determinism and social constructionism, indicating that technology and society can influence one another rather than existing in a simple one-way relationship. Almakaty (2025) further observes that contemporary digital platforms, including social media and artificial intelligence systems, continue to exert significant influence on social behaviour, while acknowledging criticisms that technological determinism can overlook human agency and social contexts. This qualification is important for the present study because employees do not necessarily use emojis simply because digital platforms make them available; their choices may also be shaped by institutional norms, professional expectations, personal preferences, and relationships with colleagues.

The distinction between hard, soft and non-deterministic interpretations of technological influence is also relevant. Mathisen and Johansen (2025) demonstrate that technological determinism can be understood along a continuum in which people may perceive technology as having little control over human action or recognise varying degrees of human control over technological development and use. Applied to the present study, this perspective allows emoji use to be examined without assuming that technology automatically determines employee behaviour. Instead, the study can

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investigate how the availability of emojis through digital communication platforms interacts with employees' choices and institutional communication practices.

The adoption of emojis in professional contexts, including university communication, therefore reflects broader technological shifts that influence how employees convey messages, express emotions, and manage interpersonal relations. For the multi-generational workforce common in Machakos County universities, emojis may bridge differing communication styles and technological proficiencies (Myers, 2016; Verčič & Špoljarić, 2020). Technological Determinism is consequently relevant to this study because it provides a framework for examining how digital communication technologies create new conditions for employee interaction and how the integration of emojis into these technologies may influence workplace communication practices. Specifically, the theory will guide the study in examining how the technological characteristics of digital workplace platforms facilitate emoji use, shape communicative patterns, and contribute to changing expectations concerning how employees communicate within the two universities. At the same time, the theory allows the study to examine differences between the institutions without assuming that technology produces identical outcomes, thereby recognising that technological influence occurs within particular organisational and social contexts.

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2.4.4 Structuration Theory

The first approach, Structuration Theory, developed by Anthony Giddens, focuses on the interaction between human action and social structures, proposing that social practices are neither determined entirely by structures nor produced independently by individuals (Giddens, 1984). Giddens developed the theory to overcome the conventional opposition between structure and

agency by explaining how social structures and human actions are mutually constitutive. Giddens' central argument is that structure and agency should not be treated as separate or competing forces because social structures are reproduced through the actions of knowledgeable social agents (Chatterjee et al., 2019). Similarly, Cohen (1989) emphasises that structuration is concerned with social praxis and with how social systems are reproduced through the activities of actors across time and space. Thus, in the university workplace, communication practices, including employees' use of emojis, are not simply predetermined by institutional structures but are continuously produced and reproduced through the actions of employees and through institutional practices such as communication norms, expectations and conventions (Giddens, 1984).

A central concept in Giddens' Structuration Theory is the duality of structure. Rather than viewing structure as something external that simply constrains individuals, Giddens (1984) argues that structures are both the medium and outcome of social practices. In other words, employees draw upon existing rules and resources when communicating, while their repeated actions simultaneously reproduce or modify those rules and resources. Chatterjee et al. (2019) similarly describe structure and agency as mutually constitutive, meaning that organisational practices emerge through the continuing interaction between what employees do and the structures within which they act. This concept is particularly useful in explaining workplace emoji use because employees may initially adopt emojis since digital communication platforms make them available, or colleagues already use them. However, repeated use may gradually establish expectations about when particular emojis are appropriate, who can use them, and what meanings they convey within the university. Over time, such repeated practices may become recognised as part of the informal communication culture of the institution.

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Giddens (1984) further conceptualises social structure through rules and resources. Rules provide the procedures, conventions and interpretive understandings that guide social interaction, while resources provide actors with the means through which they exercise power and accomplish social activities. Cohen (1989) notes that structures therefore involve both enabling and constraining dimensions. In the context of digital workplace communication, university employees may rely on formal rules concerning professional communication as well as informal rules concerning acceptable digital behaviour. For example, an employee may understand that emojis are acceptable when communicating informally with a colleague but may avoid them when addressing a senior administrator or communicating in a highly formal institutional context. Such behaviour demonstrates that emoji use is shaped by employees' knowledge of workplace rules, relationships and expectations rather than by the technological availability of emojis alone.

The theory also places considerable emphasis on human agency. Giddens (1984) regards social actors as knowledgeable and capable of monitoring their own conduct and the conduct of others. The concept of reflexive monitoring means that individuals continuously observe and evaluate their actions and adjust their behaviour according to the circumstances in which interaction occurs (Canary & Tarin, 2017). Giddens' later reflections on structuration continue to emphasise the importance of knowledgeable agents and the ongoing production of social practices (Giddens, 2014). In the present study, an employee deciding whether to add a smiling face, thumbs-up, or laughing emoji to a workplace message is exercising agency. The employee considers the recipient, purpose of the message, existing relationship, institutional expectations, and the possible interpretation of the emoji before deciding whether to use it. Emoji use can therefore be understood

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as an intentional communicative practice through which employees negotiate meaning and relationships within particular organisational circumstances.

The concept of recursiveness is equally important because social practices become established through their repeated performance. Bryant and Jary (2014) demonstrate the continuing importance of understanding structuration in terms of the reproduction of social practices, while McPhee et al. (2014) apply structuration thinking to organisational communication by emphasising the relationship between communication practices and the structures through which organisations are constituted. Similarly, Canary and Tarin (2017) position structuration theory as relevant to organisational communication because communication is not merely an activity occurring within organisations; it also contributes to the ongoing production of organisational relationships and practices. Consequently, when university employees repeatedly use particular emojis to express agreement, appreciation, friendliness, humour or acknowledgement, those practices may gradually become normalised within workplace interaction.

The relationship between agency and structure also means that employees can reproduce existing communication norms or alter them. Kort and Gharbi (2013) identify the duality of structure as one of the central features of the theory while also noting criticisms concerning the complexity of the relationship between agents and structures. Kolasi (2020) similarly explains that structuration theory seeks to move beyond the conventional dichotomy between agents and structures. Khairul Anam (2025) further demonstrates the continuing relevance of the theory in explaining how individual practices can reproduce or transform institutional arrangements.

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Structuration Theory is therefore particularly useful for explaining why emoji use may differ between the two universities under investigation. Although employees in both institutions may have access to similar digital communication technologies and similar emoji collections, their actual use may vary because communication practices are shaped by institutional norms, interpersonal relationships, professional hierarchies and employees' interpretations of appropriate workplace behaviour. Parker (2010) similarly presents structuration theories as concerned with the relationship between social action, structure and social reproduction. Thus, differences in emoji use between the two universities may indicate differences in the social structures and communication practices through which employees produce meaning.

Finally, the theory helps demonstrate why apparently small communicative practices can have broader organisational significance. Mills (2019) suggests that the effects of emojis are "not trivial but potentially very significant," particularly because visual symbols can contribute to the expression of emotions, attitudes and judgements in digital communication. Rather than treating emojis as merely decorative additions to written messages, structuration theory enables this study to examine them as recurring social practices through which university employees express meaning, negotiate relationships and reproduce or modify workplace communication norms. The theory therefore provides an appropriate framework for the comparative semiotic analysis because it connects the meanings attached to emojis with the agency of employees and the institutional structures within which those meanings are produced. It allows the study to examine not only what emojis mean, but also how their meanings are produced, negotiated, and reproduced through everyday employee interaction in the two Machakos County universities.

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2.4.5 Sensemaking Theory

Sensemaking Theory explains how individuals and groups interpret situations, organize information, and construct plausible meanings that guide subsequent action (Weick et al., 2005). Although sensemaking has roots in several intellectual traditions, its development, as an organizational theory is strongly associated with Karl E. Weick, particularly through *Sensemaking in Organizations*, in which Weick (1995) conceptualized sensemaking as an ongoing process through which organizational members interpret equivocal situations and construct meanings that enable them to act. The theory therefore shifts attention from the assumption that meaning is simply transmitted from a sender to a receiver towards the process through which people actively interpret events, information and experiences. Weick's formulation emphasizes seven properties of sensemaking: identity construction, retrospection, enactment of environments, social interaction, ongoing activity, extraction of cues, and plausibility rather than absolute accuracy (Weick, 1995; Namvar et al., 2018). These properties make the theory particularly relevant to digital workplace communication, where employees frequently encounter brief, incomplete or ambiguous messages that require interpretation.

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The development of sensemaking has however, extended beyond Weick's original organizational formulation. Sensemaking has developed across communication, information science, human-computer interaction, education and organizational studies, with different traditions emphasizing individual, social, technological or organizational processes (Urquhart et al., 2020). Urquhart et al. (2025) further demonstrate that the field is multifaceted rather than represented by a single universally accepted model, identifying distinct traditions associated with Dervin, Weick,

Snowden, Russell and Klein. This development indicates that sensemaking is better understood as a family of related approaches concerned with how people construct meaning from information and experience. Turner et al. (2023) similarly demonstrate that sensemaking has evolved substantially from its earlier formulations and identify it as a multifaceted perspective that incorporates processes such as sensing, interpretation, action and sense-giving. Thus, contemporary applications of the theory recognize that meaning is not merely received but continually constructed, negotiated and reconstructed as people interact with their environments.

Within organizational communication, Weick et al. (2005) further developed the theory by positioning sensemaking as a central process through which circumstances are converted into situations that can be understood and acted upon. They emphasize the relationship between sensemaking, identity and action, suggesting that the meanings organizational members construct influence how they understand themselves, others and appropriate courses of action. Sensemaking is therefore both cognitive and social because individuals interpret situations while drawing upon interactions, organizational experiences and shared understandings. Yeoman (2023) similarly describes sensemaking as the process through which people give meaning to collective experiences, particularly through processes of action, selection and interpretation. This collective dimension is important in workplace communication because employees may not interpret the same message in identical ways; instead, interpretations are influenced by previous interactions, organizational norms, relationships, and contextual knowledge. Coetzee and Wilkinson (2020), for example, demonstrate how Weick's sensemaking properties can be used to understand how individuals retrospectively interpret complex experiences and construct meaning from them.

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The theory is particularly useful for understanding communication containing ambiguity or incomplete contextual information. Sensemaking assumes that individuals extract cues from their environment and use these cues to develop plausible interpretations rather than necessarily seeking objectively complete or certain explanations (Weick et al., 2005). In digital communication, emojis can constitute such cues. An emoji may supplement a textual message by signalling humour, friendliness, appreciation, irony, concern, or emotional emphasis, influencing how the accompanying words are interpreted (Boutet et al., 2021). The meaning of an emoji is nevertheless not fixed because interpretation depends on the sender, receiver, relationship, organizational context, and previous communication experience. Xiaofang et al. (2021) demonstrate the importance of contextual experience in sensemaking, showing that individuals' interpretations are shaped by their experiences, interactions and environments. Consequently, an emoji may reduce ambiguity for one employee while creating ambiguity for another when the two employees attach different meanings to the same visual symbol.

Sensemaking theory has also been critiqued for recognising that the meanings people construct is not necessarily accurate or complete. Weick (2022) illustrates this limitation through the concept of "arrested sensemaking", where reliance on familiar assumptions and established interpretations can constrain an individual's ability to recognise emerging information or alternative explanations. This suggests that sensemaking may sometimes reinforce existing understandings rather than facilitate an accurate interpretation of a situation. Weick (2020) further emphasises that sensemaking is an ongoing process in which individuals continually reconstruct understanding as they encounter new experiences and information. Thus, meanings are not necessarily stable because organisational members may revise their interpretations as circumstances and interactions change. Golob (2024) similarly locates sensemaking within organisational communication, where

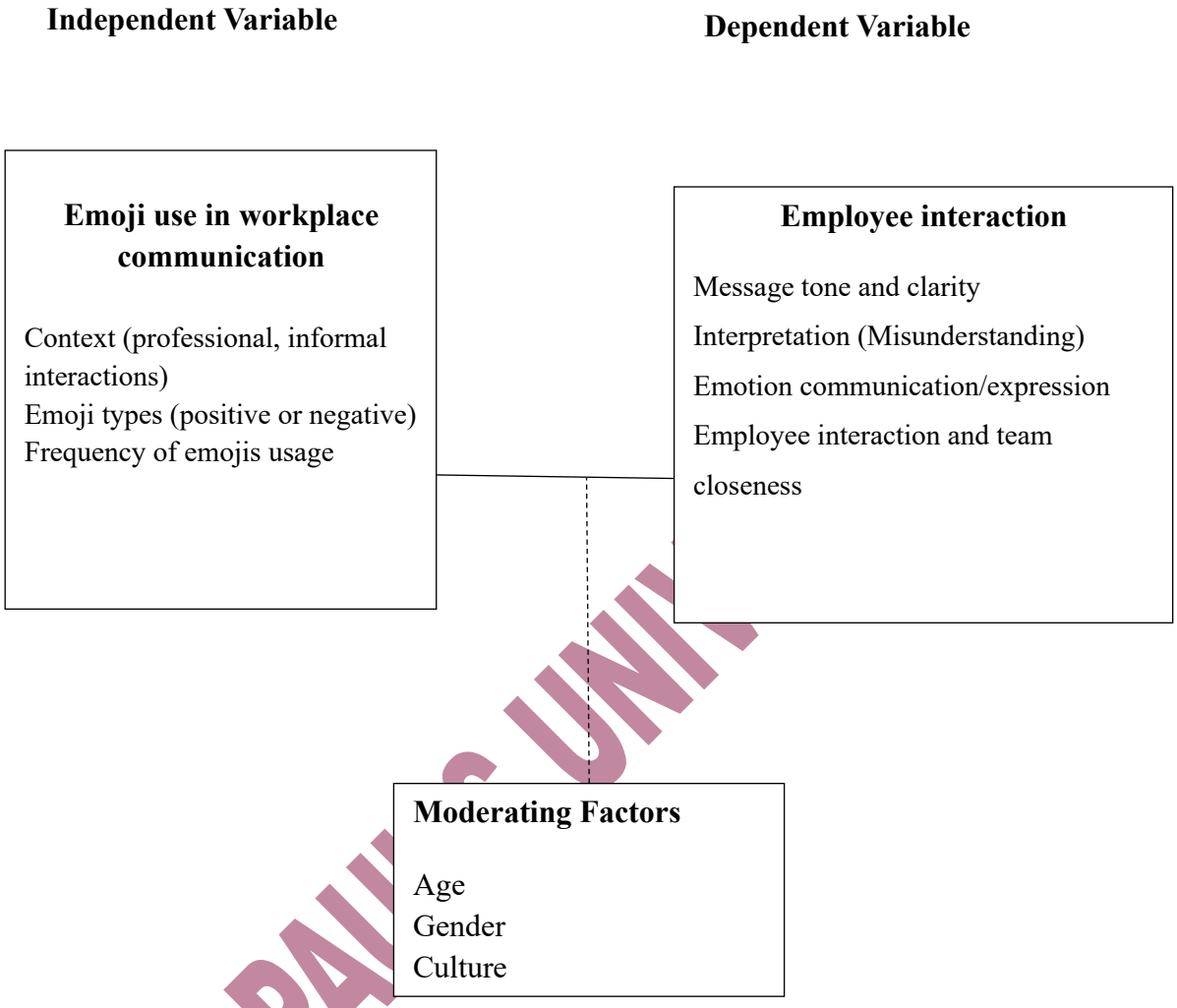
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meaning is constructed through the interpretation of messages, situations and interactions. A further limitation is that sensemaking is concerned primarily with plausibility rather than establishing one objectively correct interpretation (Weick et al., 2005). This limitation is particularly relevant to the present study because emojis do not necessarily have fixed or universally shared meanings. Employees may interpret the same emoji differently depending on their previous experiences, interpersonal relationships, organisational context and understanding of digital communication conventions. Consequently, an emoji intended by one employee to express friendliness or appreciation may be interpreted by another as sarcasm, informality or something else altogether.

For the current study, the theory provides a useful lens for explaining how employees in the two selected universities in Machakos County interpret emojis within digital workplace communication. It enables the study to examine how employees extract meaning from emojis in conjunction with textual messages, contextual cues, interpersonal relationships, and organizational experiences. The theory is particularly relevant to the comparative dimension because employees in the two universities may construct different meanings around similar emojis depending on their communication cultures, workplace relationships, and shared experiences. Malik et al. (2025) demonstrate the continuing relevance of organizational sensemaking to digitally enabled organizational environments, showing how organizations interpret and respond to information and technological change through interconnected sensemaking processes. In the present study, this perspective makes it possible to investigate whether emojis contribute to clarity, emotional expression, relational connection, and shared understanding, or whether they generate ambiguity and misunderstanding.

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2.5 Conceptual Framework



Source: Author's conceptualisation (2026)

Figure 2. 1: Diagrammatic representation of conceptual framework

The study's conceptual framework presents the interaction between the use of emoji in workplace communication and its effects on employees' interaction in two universities in Machakos County. The framework is based on an integrated theoretical approach consisting of the theory of Semiotics, Politeness Theory, Technological Determinism, Structuration Theory, and Sensemaking Theory. It demonstrates how various factors interact to produce various communication outcomes within the organizational context.

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The independent variable is emoji use in workplace communication, operationalised in terms of the communication context, types of emojis used, and frequency of emoji use. The study specifically examines emoji use in digital communication conducted through workplace email, instant messaging or chat applications, and workplace-related social or group communication platforms used by employees in the two selected universities. The inclusion of these platforms recognises that the meaning and function of emojis may vary according to the communication environment in which they are used. For example, an emoji used in a formal email may be interpreted differently from the same emoji used in an informal employee group chat.

The dependent variable is employee interaction, which is reflected in message tone and clarity, interpretation of messages, emotional communication and expression, and interpersonal interaction and team closeness. The framework therefore assumes that emojis may supplement textual communication by conveying emotional and relational cues, influencing how employees interpret messages and perceive the tone of workplace interactions. At the same time, emoji use may produce ambiguity or misunderstanding where employees attach different meanings to the same visual symbol.

The framework further recognises age, gender and organisational role, as well as cultural factors such as norms, values and traditions, as moderating factors. These factors may influence how employees interpret and respond to emojis and, consequently, may affect the relationship between emoji use and employee interaction. Thus, the effects of emoji use are not assumed to be uniform across employees or across the two universities. Differences in workplace culture, communication practices, and employee characteristics may result in similar emojis being interpreted differently.

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The comparative focus of the study is therefore important because the framework allows emoji use and its implications for employee interaction to be examined across the two selected universities in Machakos County. The framework does not assume that emoji use necessarily produces positive communication outcomes. Rather, it provides for both facilitating and constraining effects. Emojis may enhance message clarity, express emotion, and strengthen interpersonal rapport, but they may also create misunderstanding, affect perceptions of professionalism, or generate different interpretations among employees. The conceptual framework consequently provides a basis for examining how emoji use operates across different digital workplace platforms and how contextual and demographic factors shape employee interaction within the two university settings.

2.6 Research Gap Analysis

A review of past research reveals several gaps relevant to this study. First, global research acknowledges cultural and contextual differences in emoticon usage, interpretation, and misinterpretation (Guntuku et al., 2019; Li & Zheng, 2024; Rathgeber, 2024; Chen et al., 2024; Gabbiadini et al., 2020; Udoudom et al., 2024). Scholarship within Africa has begun to address this gap, examining translanguaging and code-switching in emoji-mediated communication in Southern Africa (Shibeshi et al., 2025), the evidentiary use of emojis in South African legal proceedings (Docrat & Kaschula, 2024), and the reinterpretation of emojis among isiXhosa-speaking social media users (Mgogo & Nokutywa, 2023). However, these studies remain concentrated on social media and general digital discourse rather than institutional workplace settings, and in the Kenyan context specifically, studies such as Sadia (2018) and Mohammed (2022) have similarly focused on general CMC and student social-media use (Instagram) rather

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than employee communication. Consequently, there remains limited research on how cultural differences affect the meaning, interpretation, and usage of emoticons specifically among university employees in Kenya, and correspondingly limited knowledge of how such differences affect the effectiveness of workplace communication.

Second, global studies have found notable differences in the usage of emotion icons in formal and informal communication, with the younger generation generally finding a more flexible way of balancing text messages and emoticon use in formal settings (Lawrence, 2022; Bosch, 2018). Despite this, the use of emoticons for professional and interpersonal communication, and the associated risk of unprofessionalism in formal communication, remains considerably less explored in Sub-Saharan Africa and Kenya (Hayes & Fatima, 2024; Shalahuddin & Fajrianti, 2024). The one Kenyan-context study involving university staff communication, Banerjee and Bute (2017), was conducted outside Kenya (Amity University, India), leaving a contextual and population gap: no identified study has examined emoji use for professional, interpersonal purposes among university employees within Kenyan institutions specifically.

Third, the majority of current research investigating these phenomena has relied on cross-sectional survey or interview designs conducted at a single point in time (Neel et al., 2023; Du Plessis, 2020; Mohammed, 2022; Amadu, 2024). There is a need for longitudinal research to explore the evolving use and impact of emoticons on digital communication, particularly across different generations, given their differing levels of technology adoption (Krohn, 2004).

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Finally, while several studies have assessed the role of emoticons in modifying message tone and clarity (Neel et al., 2023; Iqbal et al., 2020; Erle et al., 2022), these studies have largely measured outcomes such as perceived sentiment and emotional tone without examining the underlying cognitive processes through which such effects occur. There remains a knowledge gap regarding the influence of cognitive processes on this relationship, and future experimental research is needed to understand the psychological dimension through which emotion icons such as emojis and memes influence the tone and clarity of communication.

2.7 Summary

This chapter has presented a review of literature on the study subject. The chapter includes a theoretical framework, a review of general literature, an empirical framework, a research gap summary, and a conceptual framework.

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CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This study is quantitative, involving a survey questionnaire to collect relevant data, which was analysed using statistical methods, and results were interpreted to explain the impact of emoji use among employees in universities and how demographic and cultural differences influence the usage of emojis. This section discusses the research design, methodology, population, sampling technique, sample size, data collection methods, reliability and validity, ethical considerations, and the summary of the analysis plan.

3.2 Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative approach using a descriptive survey design. The design was considered appropriate because the study objectives focused on obtaining measurable information on employees' use, perceptions, and experiences regarding emojis in workplace communication. It provided a structured means of collecting data from a relatively large number of respondents under comparable conditions, thereby facilitating the description and statistical analysis of the study variables.

The design was aligned with the nature of the study objectives, which focused on examining emoji use in relation to message tone and clarity, cultural influences on perception and interpretation, and perceived communication effectiveness. Rather than manipulating the communication environment, the study examined these phenomena as they occurred within the existing workplace setting. The descriptive survey design therefore provided an appropriate framework for identifying patterns and relationships among the study variables using quantitative data.

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Survey research is useful for gathering information that describes the characteristics of a population and examining relationships among variables (Ponto, 2015). In this study, a standardised questionnaire was used to collect data on the use of emojis, including their perceived importance and effectiveness in workplace communication. The questionnaire also captured participants' views on message tone, perception, and communication effectiveness. Standardisation of the instrument ensured consistency in data collection and facilitated comparison of responses across participants.

The design further allowed the collected data to be subjected to appropriate descriptive and inferential statistical analysis. Descriptive analysis was used to establish patterns in the responses, while inferential analysis facilitated the examination of differences and relationships among the study variables and the association between emoji use and perceived communication effectiveness. Although a mixed-methods approach could have provided additional qualitative insights into participants' experiences and interpretations of emoji use, it was not adopted because the study objectives were formulated to generate quantitative evidence on the identified variables. Mixed-methods research is appropriate where the research questions require the collection and integration of both quantitative and qualitative evidence to obtain a broader or more comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon (Creswell & Hirose, 2019). In contrast, the present study was designed to measure the identified variables quantitatively and examine patterns and relationships among them. The quantitative descriptive survey design was therefore considered sufficient for addressing the research questions within the defined scope of the study.

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However, survey research may be affected by limitations such as non-response, inaccurate responses, and intentional misreporting by participants (Christopher & Udoh, 2020). The findings were therefore interpreted with consideration of the fact that the data represented participants' self-reported perceptions and experiences rather than direct observations of their workplace communication practices.

3.3 Population

A population is the set of elements or cases such as people, objects, or events that meet specific criteria and to which the study intends to generalize the study's findings (Babbie, 2020). The population under this study included staff from two universities in Machakos County; these were Machakos University (MksU) and Scott Christian University (SCU). Machakos University (2023) and Scott Christian University (2023), in their respective staff records, show that there are 142 staff in MksU and 56 staff in SCU, which brings the total number of staff members who participated in the study to 198, consisting of academic, administrative, and support staff.

3.4 Target Population

The target population comprises the group of people from whom the study aim to collect their data and use it to draw generalizations from (Kegler et al., 2019). In this study, the population comprised participants from two universities in Machakos County: Machakos University and Scott Christian University, both situated in Machakos County, Kenya. The population for this study is staff from Machakos University (MksU) and Scott Christian University (SCU). The staff list database for Machakos University (2023) and Scott Christian University (2023) consists of 142

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staff members in MksU and 56 staff members in SCU, giving the total study population of 198, comprising academic, administrative, and Support Staff.

Table 3.1: Target Population

University	**Number of Employees**	**Percentage**
Machakos University (MksU)	142	71.72%
Scott Christian University (SCU)	56	28.28%
Total Population	***198***	**100%**

Inclusion Criteria

Staff who are employees of Machakos University or Scott Christian University as at the time of the study. Academic, administrative, and support staff who communicate using digital platforms such as email, WhatsApp, or others. Employees who are 18 years old or older and have given consent to participate.

Exclusion Criteria

Temporary staff, interns, or part-time employees who do not frequently engage with the institutional communication channels. Staff members on long-term absence (e.g., study leave, sabbatical, or extensive sick leave) during the data collection process. Persons who decline to participate or are not in a position to consent.

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3.5 Sampling Techniques

Sampling involves the process of selecting a sample from the target population for engagement in the study (Turner, 2020). The goal of the sampling strategy is to determine and select a subset of the population that is representative of the entire population. A stratified random sampling technique was used to select employees from the study institutions for inclusion in the sample. The target population was heterogeneous, and a stratified sampling technique improved the accuracy and representativeness of the sample and also reduced sampling bias. The technique allowed the study to estimate within- and between-strata outcomes, improving the accuracy of results (Howell et al., 2020). The population was stratified according to the two universities in Machakos, and respondents were selected from each stratum proportionally.

3.6 Sample Size

A sample size is the number of individuals or observations included in a study to represent a larger population. The sample size for this study was 132 as shown in Table 3.2. The computation of the sample size for this survey study adopts a formula advanced by Yamane (1967) as illustrated below:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e^2)}$$

Where n= sample size

N=Total Population.

e= the degree of accuracy developed, set at+/- 5%

$$n = \frac{198}{1 + 198\ (0.05^2)}$$

$$\underline{\boldsymbol{n = 132}}$$

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Table 3.2: Sample Size

University	**Sample**	**Percentage**	**Proportionally**
Machakos University (MksU)	142	71.72%	*95 Respondents*
Scott Christian University (SCU)	56	28.28%	37 *Respondents*
Total	**198**	**100%**	**132 *Respondents***

3.7 Data Collection Instruments

A survey questionnaire was developed and administered to the selected sample to gather needed data for the study. The questionnaire comprised a series of questions to probe and gather insights, views, and opinions from participants about the study. Research has indicated that the questionnaire tool is a suitable data collection tool in quantitative studies because of its ability to gather data on multiple variables from a large sample to describe population characteristics and predict relationships between the variables (Taherdoost, 2022). Questionnaires are also less expensive to develop and administer, hence suitable for this study because of the time and budget constraints. The questionnaire is provided in Appendix A.

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The survey was organized into two sections. The first section contained questions capturing demographic characteristics of the sample, including age, gender, education, marital status, and work experience. This information was important in predicting how different demographics perceive and use emotion icons in digital communication. The other sections contained questions to gather information related to each of the study objectives. Participant responses were measured

using a 5-point Likert Scale ranging from 1= strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree, which allowed them to express their degree of agreement or disagreement with the question statements.

3.8 Validity

Validity refers to the extent to which a research instrument accurately measures the concepts it is intended to measure (Taherdoost, 2016). To establish the validity of the questionnaire, both content and face validity were assessed before the main data collection exercise. The questionnaire was reviewed by three experts comprising two university lecturers in communication studies and one statistician. The experts evaluated the relevance, clarity, wording, and adequacy of the questionnaire items in measuring the study constructs. Based on their recommendations, several revisions were made, including rephrasing ambiguous statements, simplifying technical language, improving the sequencing of questions, and removing repetitive items to enhance clarity and relevance. The revised questionnaire was subsequently pilot-tested among 13 university employees, who were not included in the final study. Feedback from the pilot study confirmed that the questions were understandable, appropriately worded, and relevant to the study objectives. The suggestions obtained during the pilot exercise informed the final refinement of the questionnaire before its administration in the main study.

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3.9 Reliability

Reliability refers to the extent to which a phenomenon can be reproduced when measured over and over again. The questionnaire in this study was said to be reliable if it produced the same results on multiple occasions when administered to different samples (Taherdoost, 2016). The reliability analysis was conducted using Cronbach's alpha coefficient to assess the internal consistency of the

questionnaire items measuring the study's variables. The results indicate that all the constructs achieved Cronbach's alpha values above the recommended threshold of 0.70, demonstrating acceptable levels of reliability. Specifically, the Use of Emojis in Digital Communication construct recorded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.812, indicating good internal consistency among its items. The Message Tone and Clarity construct had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.796, suggesting that the items reliably measured the intended concept. The Cultural and Contextual Considerations in Emoji Usage construct recorded the highest reliability coefficient ($\alpha = 0.890$), indicating a high level of internal consistency and that the items consistently measured the same underlying construct. Similarly, the Communication Effectiveness construct achieved a Cronbach's alpha of 0.872, reflecting strong reliability. Overall, the findings confirm that all the study constructs were reliable, indicating that the questionnaire items consistently measured their respective variables and were therefore suitable for the main data collection and subsequent statistical analyses.

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Table 3.3: Reliability for Study Variables

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Verdict
Use of Emojis in Digital Communication	.812	Acceptable
Message Tone and Clarity	.796	Acceptable
Cultural and Contextual Considerations in Emoji Usage	.890	Acceptable
Communication Effectiveness	.872	Acceptable

Source: Researchers analysis of field data (2026)

3.10 Data Collection Procedures

The data for this research study were collected via an online questionnaire implemented via Google Forms, chosen because of its availability and ease of use, overcoming constraints of distance and time (Singh & Sagar, 2021). The questionnaire opened with two questions to ensure participants fit the inclusion criteria with regard to their age and job within the University. A pilot study with a subset of respondents (10% of the sample size), who belonged to the target population but who did not form part of the study sample, was used to evaluate the clarity, relevance, and reliability of the questionnaire. Based on feedback from participants, revisions were made to the wording, format, and structure of the survey before main data collection was launched.

Eligible participants were contacted via their institutional email and WhatsApp platforms. Each prospective respondent was provided with an introduction outlining the aim, objectives, the confidentiality of the research study, and their rights as a participant in this research, as presented in Appendix B. They were further asked to consider an information letter and read and sign an electronic consent form prior to participating in the research study, thus giving their informed voluntary consent to do so without being coerced. The informed consent form was provided in Appendix G. Once consent was received, participants were provided with a link to the online questionnaire that was administered in Google Forms.

They were provided with a two-week window to fill in the online survey at their leisure. The responses were stored in the Google Forms responses, and they were given a chance to review and change their answers before they submitted the online questionnaire. The data was collected

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following ethical guidelines regarding informed, voluntary, and confidential participation, and the right to withdraw at any point.

3.11 Data Analysis Plan

Data from the completed questionnaires were downloaded into an Excel sheet for screening and scrutiny before being analysed using the IBM SPSS Statistics software, Version 28. Descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation, and frequencies, were generated to determine the distribution of the sample. Tables and graphs were used to present the descriptive results. The regression model was constructed to evaluate the impact of emojis on effective communication. The statistical tests were performed at a 95% confidence level. The study adopted a multiple linear regression model as follows:

$y= a + b_1X_1 + b_2X_2+ b_3X_3+ \ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots b_nX_n + e$

y = dependent variable

a = constant value

b = slope of the regression line

x = independent variable

n = Total number of independent variables

e = the error term

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3.12 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations in research involve safeguarding the privacy, confidentiality, and autonomy of participants while ensuring the study complies with established ethical standards (Resnik, 2020; Israel & Hay, 2007). Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the institutional ethics

review committee of the participating universities, as well as from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI), in accordance with Kenyan research regulations (NACOSTI, 2023). The ethical approval documentation was provided in Appendix C, while the NACOSTI research permit was provided in Appendix D.

The privacy of participants was protected through the use of informed consent, obtained prior to survey participation, in line with best practice guidelines (World Medical Association, 2013). Anonymity was assured, and confidentiality was maintained by ensuring no identifying information was present in the dataset presented; i.e., no participants can be traced by their name. Participants were allocated a pseudonym, and any answers potentially providing identifiable information were removed (Resnik, 2020). No contact details such as email address or geolocation data were requested. Approval documentation from Machakos University and Scott Christian University were provided in Appendices E and F, respectively, while the informed consent form was provided in Appendix G.

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3.12.1 Data Management and Research Dissemination

In order to protect participant confidentiality and autonomy, all electronic survey responses were kept on a password-protected private computer. Only the researcher had access to the responses, which were kept until the study was successfully submitted to the university where after which they will be destroyed (British Psychological Society, 2021). The findings of the study were disseminated through a master's thesis report, academic conferences, and publication in peer-reviewed journals. In addition, summary findings will be shared with the participating universities

to inform communication practices and policies while ensuring that no individual participant is identifiable.

3.13 Summary

This study took a quantitative approach. The study used a descriptive survey design. The study population was the two universities in Machakos County, i.e., Machakos University (MksU) and Scott Christian University (SCU). The target population was employees in the universities, including professors, lecturers, and assistant lecturers, as well as the administrative staff. The target population for this study was 198 employees in the two universities in Machakos County. A stratified random sampling technique was used to select employees from the study institutions for inclusion in the sample. The population is 198, and the sample size for this study is 132. A survey questionnaire was developed and administered to the selected sample to gather the needed data for the study. Descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation, and frequencies, were generated to determine the distribution of the sample. The regression model was constructed to evaluate the effect of emojis on effective communication. The statistical tests were performed at a 95% confidence level. Tables and graphs were used to present the descriptive results.

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CHAPTER FOUR

DATA ANALYSIS, PRESENTATION AND INTERPRETATION

4.1 Introduction

This chapter includes the data analysis, presentation, and interpretation following the survey of employees from Machakos University and Scott Christian University. The study sought to answer the following research questions: How do emojis affect the tone, clarity, and intended meaning of workplace messages among university employees in Machakos County? In what ways do demographic factors and cultural backgrounds influence the perception, interpretation, and use of emojis in digital communication among university employees in Machakos County? How does the use of emojis impact perceived communication effectiveness, particularly clarity, relational rapport, and professionalism in the workplace?

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4.2 Response Rate

The study achieved a high response rate, with 125 out of 132 distributed questionnaires successfully returned, representing 94.7% of the total sample. Only 7 questionnaires, accounting for 5.3%, were not returned. According to survey research standards, a response rate above 70% is considered very good. Therefore, this high rate significantly enhances the reliability and credibility of the findings. The level of participation suggests that the respondents were engaged and found the study relevant to their workplace context. Moreover, the minimal non-response

reduces the likelihood of bias, thereby ensuring that the results are representative of the wider population of university employees in Machakos County.

Table 4.1: Response Rate

Questionnaire	Count	Percentage
Returned	125	94.70%
Not returned	7	5.30%
Total	**132**	**100.00%**

Source: Researcher's analysis of field data (2026)

4.3 Demographic Information

The demographic profile of respondents indicates a nearly balanced gender representation, with 56.0% male and 44.0% female participants. This balance suggests that the findings capture perspectives across both genders, reflecting the gender composition typical of Kenyan higher education institutions. In terms of age, the largest group of respondents falls within the 25–34 years category (39.2%), followed by those aged 35–44 years (31.2%). Only a small proportion were above 55 years (3.2%) or below 24 years (9.6%). This distribution shows that the workforce in universities in Machakos County is predominantly young to middle-aged, which is consistent with the age profile of employees in many higher education settings in Kenya, where early-career professionals form the majority.

Regarding educational attainment, the majority of respondents held at least a Master's degree (40.8%), followed by PhD qualifications (24.0%) and Bachelor's degree holders (19.2%), while

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16.0% had attained a Diploma qualification. This educational distribution highlights the relatively high qualification levels among employees, especially academic staff, reflecting the knowledge-intensive nature of the university sector. In terms of job category, academic staff formed the largest proportion (48.0%), followed by administrative staff (28.8%) and support staff (23.2%). This indicates that nearly half of the respondents were directly involved in teaching and research, while the remainder represented the administrative and operational functions of universities. Such representation provides a well-rounded understanding of workplace communication across different job roles.

Concerning emoji use in workplace communication, the majority reported using emojis at varying frequencies, with 34.4% using them "sometimes" and 28.8% "often", while 16.0% indicated "always." Only a small fraction reported "rarely" (15.2%) or "never" (5.6%) using emojis. This distribution suggests that emojis are widely used among university employees, especially for informal communication, although a minority remain cautious or avoidant in professional exchanges. The high proportion of at least occasional users highlights the growing integration of digital expression tools in higher education workplace communication.

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Table 4.2: Demographic Information

Variable	Indicator	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	70	56.00%
	Female	55	44.00%
Age Group	18-24 years	12	9.60%
	25-34 years	49	39.20%
	35-44 years	39	31.20%
	45-54 years	21	16.80%

	55 years and above	4	3.20%
Highest Level of Education	Diploma	24	16.00%
	Bachelor's Degree	51	19.20%
	Master's Degree	30	40.80%
	PhD	20	24.00%
Job Category	Academic Staff	60	48.00%
	Administrative Staff	36	28.80%
	Support Staff	29	23.20%
How frequently do you use emojis in workplace communication?	Never	7	5.60%
	Rarely	19	15.20%
	Sometimes	43	34.40%
	Often	36	28.80%
	Always	20	16.00%

Source: Researcher's analysis of field data (2026)

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4.4 Descriptive Analysis

In this section, the variables advanced in the study investigation were evaluated for their descriptive statistics in order to indicate their occurrence in the study area. These comprised the use of emojis in digital communication, the role of Emojis in Modifying Message Tone and Clarity, Cultural and Contextual Considerations in Emoji Usage, and the effectiveness of Communication. Responses were captured on a 5-point Likert scale where, 1=strongly disagree: 2=disagree: 3=neutral: 4=agree: 5=strongly agree. The mean score was computed and interpreted as: 1.0 –

1.4=strongly disagree; 1.5 – 2.4 =disagree; 2.5 – 3.4 =neutral; 3.5 – 4.4=agree; 4.5 – 5.0 =strongly agree. Findings are presented next, starting with the use of emojis in digital communication.

4.4.1 RQ1: How do emojis affect the tone and clarity of workplace messages among university employees in Machakos County?

The analysis of responses on the role of emojis in modifying message tone and clarity among university employees in Machakos County shows an overall mean of 3.74 (SD = 1.09). This indicates that, on average, respondents agreed that emojis play an important role in shaping tone, enhancing clarity, and adding emotional expression in workplace digital communication.

Looking at individual items, the highest mean was observed for the statement that "the meaning of an emoji can vary depending on the user's cultural background" (M = 3.86, SD = 1.08). These finding highlights employees' recognition of cultural and contextual diversity in emoji interpretation, suggesting that while emojis enhance communication, they also introduce potential variability in meaning. Similarly, participants strongly agreed that emojis are effective for communicating non-verbal expressions in digital communication (M = 3.82, SD = 1.06) and that they enhance the clarity of intended messages (M = 3.79, SD = 1.01). These results emphasize the perceived value of emojis in bridging the gap between text and non-verbal cues.

Moderately agreement was also reported for statements such as "misinterpretation of emojis can lead to confusion" (M = 3.76, SD = 1.04) and "emojis help humanize digital conversations" (M = 3.74, SD = 1.21). This suggests that while emojis are seen as tools for adding warmth and emotional tone, respondents are also aware of the risks of misinterpretation. The results further show that employees perceive emojis as more effective in informal than formal settings (M = 3.68,

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SD = 1.05), consistent with the idea that formal workplace communication still values professionalism and may limit emoji use.

The lowest mean score, though still within the "agree" range, was recorded for the statement that "using emojis in workplace communication improves message clarity and emotional expression" (M = 3.60, SD = 1.17). This indicates that while emojis are generally valued, some employees remain cautious about their overall contribution to workplace clarity, possibly reflecting generational or professional differences in attitudes.

Overall, the findings suggest that emojis are widely recognized as useful in enhancing clarity, tone, and emotional depth in digital communication among university staff, though their interpretation remains context- and culture-dependent, and their appropriateness is more strongly associated with informal than formal exchanges.

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Table 4.3: Role of Emojis in Modifying Message Tone and Clarity

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Adding emojis to text messages enhances the clarity of the intended message.	3.79	1.01
The presence of positive emojis in a message makes the message feel more emotionally positive.	3.65	1.17
Negative emojis contribute to making a text message feel more emotionally negative.	3.78	1.07
Emojis are an effective way to communicate non-verbal expressions in digital communication.	3.82	1.06
Using emojis in digital communication helps create stronger relationships between colleagues.	3.68	1.00

Misinterpretation of emojis can lead to confusion or miscommunication in online conversations.	3.76	1.04
The meaning of an emoji can vary depending on the user's cultural background.	3.86	1.08
Emojis are more effective in informal digital conversations than in formal communication settings.	3.68	1.05
Using emojis in workplace communication improves message clarity and emotional expression.	3.60	1.17
Emojis help humanize digital conversations by adding emotional expression to text-based messages.	3.74	1.21
Average	**3.74**	**1.09**

Source: Researcher's analysis of field data (2026)

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4.4.2 RQ2: In what ways do cultural backgrounds influence the perception, interpretation, and use of emojis in digital communication among university employees in Machakos County?

The findings indicate that respondents generally agreed that cultural and contextual factors influence emoji usage in workplace communication, with an overall mean score of 3.74 (SD = 1.09), which falls in the "agree" category (3.5–4.4). This suggests that employees in universities in Machakos County recognize emojis not only act as expressive tools but also as culturally nuanced symbols whose meaning and use can vary across contexts. The strongest agreement was recorded for the statement that differences in meaning arise when communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds (M = 3.87, SD = 0.99), followed closely by the view that emojis effectively help in expressing emotions and feelings in online communication (M = 3.85,

SD = 0.99). These results underscore the dual function of emojis: while they facilitate emotional expression, their interpretation is not universal and may shift across cultural contexts.

Similarly, employees agreed that their cultural background influences emoji preferences (M = 3.77, SD = 1.12) and that they use emojis differently in formal and informal communication settings (M = 3.75, SD = 1.07). This highlights the role of both personal cultural identity and workplace norms in shaping communication practices. Additionally, the preference for multi-colour, gender-specific, and culturally representative emojis (M = 3.74, SD = 1.03) reflects the importance of inclusivity and self-representation in digital communication.

Moderate agreement was also expressed on the potential for misinterpreting emojis from different cultural backgrounds (M = 3.72, SD = 1.18) and the belief that cultural differences significantly affect emoji interpretation (M = 3.58, SD = 1.19). These findings reinforce the idea that cultural diversity can enrich communication but also introduce risks of misunderstanding. Respondents also noted that some emojis, such as simple smiley faces, are easier to use compared to more complex symbols like the loudly crying face emoji (M = 3.64, SD = 1.07), suggesting that familiarity and simplicity may influence usage patterns. Finally, there was strong agreement that future research should explore how text and emojis are combined in cross-cultural communication (M = 3.81, SD = 1.08), pointing to employees' awareness of the evolving nature of digital expression in multicultural contexts.

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Overall, the results indicate that emojis are valued as culturally sensitive tools that aid emotional expression and inclusivity, but their interpretation remains highly context-dependent, with cultural differences shaping how they are perceived and used in workplace communication.

Table 4.4: Cultural and Contextual Considerations in Emoji Usage

Cultural and Contextual Considerations in Emoji Usage	Mean	Std. Deviation
Emojis help me express emotions and feelings effectively in online communication.	3.85	0.99
I often find differences in the meaning of emojis when communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds.	3.87	0.99
My cultural background influences my preference for certain types of emojis (e.g., food, drink, and activity emojis).	3.77	1.12
I believe that emojis improve inclusivity and cultural representation in digital communication.	3.62	1.20
I sometimes misinterpret the meaning of emojis sent by people from different cultural backgrounds.	3.72	1.18
I prefer using multi-colour, gender-specific, and culturally representative emojis when communicating online.	3.74	1.03
I use emojis differently in formal and informal online communication settings.	3.75	1.07
I find it easier to use some emojis, like smiley or frowny faces, compared to others like loudly crying face emoji.	3.64	1.07
I believe that cultural differences significantly impact the interpretation of emojis in digital communication.	3.58	1.19
I think future research should explore how text and emojis are used together in cross-cultural communication.	3.81	1.08
Average	**3.74**	**1.09**

Source: Researcher's analysis of field data (2026)

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4.4.3 RQ3: How does the use of emojis impact perceived communication effectiveness, particularly clarity, relational rapport, and professionalism in the workplace?

The findings on the effectiveness of emojis in workplace communication reveal an overall mean score of 3.64 (SD = 1.13), which falls in the "agree" category (3.5–4.4). This suggests that university employees in Machakos County generally view emojis as beneficial in enhancing message effectiveness, particularly in terms of clarity, emotional expression, and engagement, though concerns about professionalism remain.

The highest levels of agreement were recorded for the statements that using emojis enhances message clarity and understanding (M = 3.86, SD = 1.15) and that stronger emojis, such as exaggerated facial expressions, increase the emotional impact of messages (M = 3.86, SD = 1.01). This demonstrates that employees perceive emojis as effective tools for reinforcing meaning and amplifying emotional tone in digital communication. Similarly, respondents agreed that emojis help reduce ambiguity in text-based communication (M = 3.68, SD = 1.14) and that they strengthen emotional connections between sender and receiver (M = 3.65, SD = 1.19). These findings suggest that emojis function as non-verbal cues, bridging the limitations of text-only exchanges by adding social and emotional depth.

Respondents also agreed that emojis influence how messages are received and interpreted (M = 3.73, SD = 1.13) and that they enhance the appeal and emotional intensity of messages (M = 3.74, SD = 1.07). Additionally, participants acknowledged the practical role of emojis in replacing words and shortening messages (M = 3.78, SD = 1.11), as well as their use in expressing emotions

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that are difficult to convey through text alone (M = 3.78, SD = 1.04). These responses highlight the functional efficiency of emojis in improving digital workplace communication.

However, the lowest mean score was observed for the statement that using emojis in professional or formal communication may be perceived as unprofessional (M = 2.58, SD = 1.25). Falling within the "disagree" range (1.5–2.4, though close to neutral), this result indicates that many employees do not strongly view emojis as inappropriate in formal contexts, though opinions may still be divided. It reflects a shifting perception in which emojis, while traditionally seen as informal, are becoming increasingly acceptable even in professional communication, albeit with caution.

Overall, these results suggest that employees widely regard emojis as effective in enhancing communication clarity, reducing ambiguity, and deepening emotional connections in digital workplace interactions. At the same time, concerns about professionalism persist, particularly in formal settings, highlighting the importance of context in determining the appropriateness of emoji use.

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Table 4.5: Effectiveness of Communication

Effectiveness of Communication	Mean	Std. Deviation
Using emojis in digital communication enhances the clarity and understanding of messages.	3.86	1.15
Emojis help to reduce ambiguity in text-based communication.	3.68	1.14
The use of emojis in interpersonal communication strengthens the emotional connection between the sender and the receiver.	3.65	1.19

Emojis influence how the receiver perceives and responds to a message.	3.73	1.13
The inclusion of emojis in digital messages enhances their appeal and emotional intensity.	3.74	1.07
Using emojis in professional or formal communication may be perceived as unprofessional.	2.58	1.25
Emojis help to replace certain words and reduce the need for lengthy written messages.	3.78	1.11
The interpretation of emojis varies across different cultural and contextual backgrounds, leading to potential misunderstandings.	3.74	1.17
The use of stronger emojis (e.g., exaggerated facial expressions) increases the emotional impact of a message.	3.86	1.01
I frequently use emojis in my digital communication to express emotions that are difficult to convey through text alone.	3.78	1.04
Average	**3.64**	**1.13**

Source: Researcher's analysis of field data (2026)

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4.4.4 Use of Emojis in Digital Communication

The results show that the average mean score for the use of emojis in digital communication among university employees in Machakos County was 3.45 (SD = 1.15). This falls within the neutral range (2.5–3.4) but is very close to the agree category (3.5–4.4), suggesting that while respondents generally acknowledge the usefulness of emojis, opinions remain mixed depending on the communication context.

Several items recorded relatively high levels of agreement. Respondents agreed that emojis help convey social and emotional cues in digital communication (M = 3.71, SD = 1.13) and that emojis, memes, and GIFs improve engagement and communication among university staff (M = 3.72, SD

= 1.17). Similarly, there was strong agreement that the use of emojis helps in setting the tone and emotional context of messages (M = 3.74, SD = 1.09) and that misinterpretation of emojis is common due to discrepancies between their visual form and intended meaning (M = 3.80, SD = 1.17). These findings highlight the dual role of emojis as tools for enhancing expressiveness while at the same time carrying the risk of misunderstanding.

Respondents also agreed that emojis serve functions similar to non-verbal cues in face-to-face interactions (M = 3.56, SD = 1.12) and that users often combine multiple emojis to enhance message understanding or substitute words (M = 3.72, SD = 1.06). This underscores the idea that emojis are integrated into workplace digital conversations as a supplement to, rather than a replacement for, written communication.

On the other hand, two items fell in the disagree category. Respondents disagreed with the statement that the placement of emojis in professional email communication enhances clarity (M = 2.37, SD = 1.27), and similarly disagreed that using emojis in formal educational settings is appropriate across staff ranks (M = 2.40, SD = 1.30). These findings indicate strong reservations about the professionalism of emoji use in formal academic contexts, reflecting the cultural expectations of higher education workplaces where formal communication is often preferred.

Taken together, the findings suggest that while emojis are widely recognized as useful for adding emotional cues, fostering engagement, and setting the tone of digital communication, their use in formal workplace communication such as emails and hierarchical staff interactions remains

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contested. The results point to a clear distinction between informal versus formal contexts, with emojis embraced in casual exchanges but resisted in structured, professional correspondence.

Table 4.6: Use of Emojis in Digital Communication

Use of Emojis in Digital Communication	Mean	Std. Deviation
Emojis help convey social and emotional cues in digital communication.	3.71	1.13
The placement of emojis in professional email communication, such as in signatures, enhances message clarity.	2.37	1.27
The frequency of emoji use in professional emails is influenced by workplace culture and familiarity with the receiver.	3.71	1.11
Emojis, memes, and GIFs improve engagement and communication among university staff.	3.72	1.17
Using emojis in formal educational settings may risk unprofessionalism in interactions between staff members at different ranks.	2.40	1.30
Emojis in digital communication serve similar functions as non-verbal cues in face-to-face interactions.	3.56	1.12
Misinterpretation of emojis is common due to discrepancies between their visual form and intended meaning.	3.80	1.17
Users combine multiple emojis to enhance message understanding or as a substitute for words.	3.72	1.06
The use of emojis in online communication helps in setting the tone and emotional context of messages.	3.74	1.09
The interpretation of emojis is highly context-dependent, making them inadequate as a form of structured written grammar.	3.74	1.11
Average	**3.45**	**1.15**

Source: Researcher's analysis of field data (2026)

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4.5 Inferential Analysis

The regression model produced an R value of 0.702. This indicates a strong positive correlation between the independent variables and the dependent variable, suggesting that changes in the use and interpretation of emojis are strongly associated with changes in communication effectiveness among university employees in Machakos County. The R-squared value of 0.492 shows that approximately 49.2% of the variation in communication effectiveness can be explained by the combined influence of the three predictors: use of emojis in digital communication, message tone and clarity, and cultural/contextual considerations in emoji usage. The model demonstrates that the identified predictors, particularly the way emojis are used, their impact on tone and clarity, and the cultural/contextual context of their interpretation, play a substantial role in shaping communication effectiveness. However, since 50.8% of the variation remains unexplained, other factors not included in the model may also influence communication effectiveness, such as organizational culture, leadership communication style, or technological factors.

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Table 4.7: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.702a	0.492	0.48	0.2863

a Predictors: (Constant), Use of Emojis in Digital Communication, Message Tone and Clarity, Cultural and Contextual Considerations in Emoji Usage

The ANOVA test was conducted to determine whether the overall regression model significantly predicts communication effectiveness among university employees in Machakos County. The F-statistic is 39.094, with a corresponding p-value of 0.000, which is less than the 0.05 significance

threshold. This shows that the regression model has statistical significance. Collectively, the three predictors' effect has a meaningful and reliable influence on communication effectiveness, and the likelihood that this result occurred by chance is extremely low. Therefore, the ANOVA results provide strong evidence that use of emojis in digital communication, message tone and clarity, and cultural/contextual considerations collectively contribute to explaining differences in communication effectiveness within the universities studied.

Table 4.8: ANOVA

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	9.613	3	3.204	39.094	.000b
	Residual	9.918	121	0.082		
	Total	19.531	124			

a Dependent Variable: Communication Effectiveness

b Predictors: (Constant), Use of Emojis in Digital Communication, Message Tone and Clarity, Cultural and Contextual Considerations in Emoji Usage

The regression analysis examined the effect of emoji use, message tone and clarity, and cultural and contextual considerations on communication effectiveness among university employees in Machakos County. The results indicate that all three predictors significantly and positively influence communication effectiveness ($p < 0.001$ for all). Specifically, the use of emojis in digital communication ($B = 0.125$, $\beta = 0.357$) was found to enhance communication effectiveness by helping convey meaning and emotional context. Message tone and clarity emerged as the strongest predictor ($B = 0.121$, $\beta = 0.398$), highlighting that the ability of emojis to clarify messages and shape tone contributes most significantly to effective communication. Cultural and contextual considerations ($B = 0.113$, $\beta = 0.317$) also had a meaningful impact, showing that differences in

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cultural interpretation influence how emojis support communication. Together, these findings suggest that while all three factors play important roles, the greatest value of emojis lies in their capacity to improve tone and clarity, complemented by their role in fostering cultural sensitivity and emotional expression.

Table 4.9: Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2.291	0.117		19.509	.000
	Use of Emojis in Digital Communication	0.125	0.023	0.357	5.458	.000
	Message Tone and Clarity	0.121	0.02	0.398	5.97	.000
	Cultural and Contextual Considerations in Emoji Usage	0.113	0.024	0.317	4.764	.000

a Dependent Variable: Communication Effectiveness

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4.6 Chapter Summary

The findings of this study show that emojis play a significant role in workplace communication among university employees in Machakos County. Descriptive results revealed that employees moderately use emojis, with most agreeing that they enhance clarity, convey emotions, and improve engagement, though concerns about professionalism in formal contexts were noted. Respondents also acknowledged the influence of cultural differences on emoji interpretation and usage, emphasizing their role in inclusivity and context-dependent communication. Inferential results confirmed these patterns, with regression analysis indicating that the use of emojis, message

tone and clarity, and cultural and contextual considerations together explained 49.2% of the variance in communication effectiveness. All three factors had significant positive effects, with message tone and clarity emerging as the strongest predictor. Overall, emojis were found to improve clarity, reduce ambiguity, and strengthen emotional connections, underscoring their importance in enhancing communication effectiveness in academic workplaces.

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CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the results in chapter four. It also provides the conclusions and recommendations made from the study findings. The study sought to answer the following research questions: How do emojis affect the tone, clarity, and intended meaning of workplace messages among university employees in Machakos County? In what ways do demographic factors and cultural backgrounds influence the perception, interpretation, and use of emojis in digital communication among university employees in Machakos County? How does the use of emojis impact perceived communication effectiveness, particularly clarity, relational rapport, and professionalism in the workplace?

5.2 Discussion of Key Findings

5.2.1 Use of Emojis in Digital Communication

The findings of this study show that university employees in Machakos County acknowledged the value of emojis in conveying social and emotional cues, enhancing engagement, and helping to set

the tone of digital communication, consistent with Banerjee and Bute (2017), who found that university staff in India favoured emoticons for greetings, acknowledgments, and enhancing tone in email communication. In a similar view, Hasan (2018) indicates that emojis extend the meaning of written text by providing emotional and contextual information that may otherwise be difficult to communicate through words alone. (Hasan, 2018). The findings therefore suggest that employees recognize emojis as more than decorative symbols because they provide additional cues that support the interpretation of digitally mediated messages. However, unlike the Amity University study where participants even preferred emoticons in email signatures, respondents in the present study expressed clear reservations about emojis in professional emails (M = 2.37) and formal staff interactions (M = 2.40), reflecting concerns about professionalism also echoed in Hayes and Fatima (2024). Their research with university students in South England similarly showed that while emojis, memes, and GIFs strengthened connections in higher education teaching, they simultaneously carried risks of unprofessionalism in formal exchanges between staff and students. This contrast suggests that although emojis may support social connection, their acceptability is shaped by the communication setting and the degree of formality attached to the interaction.

This finding can also be understood through Technological Determinism Theory, which recognizes that the characteristics of digital communication technologies influence patterns and practices of communication. Jan et al. (2020) and Mezentsev (2020) indicate that digital technologies influence interaction, participation, social connection, and social relations. In line with these observations, the availability of emojis within email and instant messaging platforms provides employees with an additional visual resource for expressing emotions and reactions.

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Nevertheless, the theory does not suggest that technology completely determines behaviour; employees continue to make choices according to institutional norms, professional expectations and interpersonal relationships. This helps explain why the same employees may accept emojis in informal communication while showing reservations about their use in formal workplace communication.

The dual role of emojis, enhancing expression but risking misinterpretation, was further emphasized in this study, as respondents agreed that emojis often function as substitutes for non-verbal cues (M = 3.56) and can be combined to substitute words (M = 3.72), findings that align with Saida (2018), who argued that emojis perform gesture-like functions, aid tone-setting, and are often used in combinations to strengthen message clarity. At the same time, participants highlighted the potential for misinterpretation (M = 3.80), which resonates with Chiedu (2024), who observed that emoji use in WhatsApp conversations mirrors non-verbal communication but carries risks due to discrepancies between form and meaning. Similarly, Amadu (2024) noted that although emojis were commonly used to convey feelings and foster social connections, they were not uniformly interpreted by users. This is also consistent with Boutet et al. (2021), who indicated that an emoji may supplement a message by signalling friendliness, appreciation, humour, or emotional emphasis, while its meaning may depend on the sender, receiver, relationship and organizational context.

The finding is further explained by semiotic theory, which views emojis as visual signs whose meanings are produced through interpretation and social context rather than existing independently of the communication situation. Behera (2024) and Olurotimi (2022) emphasise that meaning

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emerges through relationships among signs, conventions, social practices and users' interpretations. Thus, the respondents' recognition of emojis as substitutes for non-verbal cues, together with their concern about misinterpretation, indicates that the meaning of an emoji is not simply contained in the symbol itself. Instead, employees interpret the symbol in relation to the accompanying text and the context in which it is used.

The finding can further be viewed through sensemaking theory. Weick et al. (2005) explain that organizational members construct plausible meanings from information and cues, while Xiaofang et al. (2021) show that interpretation is shaped by experience, interaction and environment. In relation to the present findings, an emoji intended to clarify tone for one employee may not produce the same interpretation for another employee. The relatively high mean for possible misinterpretation (M = 3.80) therefore reflects the sensemaking challenge inherent in digital communication, where employees have to interpret brief visual and textual cues without the facial expressions, gestures, and vocal tones available in face-to-face interaction. Taken together, both the present findings and prior literature underscore the integrative but context-sensitive role of emojis in digital communication. While they are widely valued for emotional expressiveness and enhancing engagement in informal exchanges, their appropriateness in formal academic communication remains contested. This reinforces the conclusion that the use of emojis in higher education workplaces is highly context-dependent, welcomed in casual, collegial interactions but resisted in structured, hierarchical, or professional correspondence.

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5.2.2 Role of Emojis in Modifying Message Tone and Clarity

The findings from this study reveal that university employees in Machakos County generally agreed that emojis play an important role in shaping message tone, enhancing clarity, and adding

emotional expression in workplace digital communication (M = 3.74, SD = 1.09). This supports Neel et al. (2023), who found that adding emojis to text messages significantly altered emotional perception, with positive emojis increasing positive sentiment and negative ones amplifying negativity. Similarly, respondents in this study strongly agreed that emojis enhance clarity (M = 3.79) and are effective in communicating non-verbal expressions (M = 3.82), aligning with Iqbal et al. (2020), who emphasized the essential role of emoticons in enhancing clarity and emotional expression, especially in informal contexts.

The recognition of cultural and contextual differences in emoji interpretation resonates with du Plessis (2020), who showed that emoji meanings vary depending on age, gender, culture, and organizational hierarchies, often leading to misinterpretation and miscommunication. This was reflected in the current study, where employees acknowledged that misinterpretation of emojis could cause confusion (M = 3.76). In line with this finding, Guntuku et al. (2019) caution that cultural differences can affect emoji interpretation and may result in misunderstanding of thoughts, emotions and feelings. Similarly, Rwezahula (2026) found that several emojis were interpreted differently by users and that some intended meanings remained unclear. These findings support the present study by demonstrating that the ability of emojis to improve clarity is not universal; rather, clarity depends on whether the sender and receiver attach sufficiently similar meanings to the symbol.

Additionally, respondents agreed that emojis help humanize digital conversations (M = 3.74), which echoes the findings of Mkhwanazi (2021), who reported that visual expressions like emojis and memes enhance relatability, foster stronger online connections, and humanize computer-

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mediated communication. This finding also relates to politeness theory because emojis may provide interpersonal and emotional cues that are absent from written text. Skovholt et al. (2014) found that emoticons can function as contextualization cues that assist recipients in interpreting written utterances and organizing interpersonal relations. Similarly, emojis expressing friendliness, approval or acknowledgement may establish solidarity and maintain social connection between employees. Thus, the finding that emojis humanize digital conversations may reflect their role in managing interpersonal relationships rather than merely conveying information.

However, while the present study confirmed that emojis are valuable in bridging the gap between text and non-verbal cues, it also revealed caution regarding their role in formal workplace settings (M = 3.68). This distinction reinforces the conclusions of Iqbal et al. (2020) that emojis are predominantly effective in informal contexts, while their use in professional exchanges remains contested due to concerns about professionalism. This finding is also consistent with Hayes and Fatima (2024), who found that although visual expressions strengthened connections within higher education, their use in formal teaching contexts could raise concerns about unprofessionalism. On the contrary, the present finding does not suggest that employees reject emojis altogether; rather, it indicates that employees distinguish between situations in which emotional expression is useful and situations where formal communication norms may take precedence.

Structuration Theory provides a further explanation for this distinction. Giddens' perspective views social practices as shaped through the interaction of agency and structure, while Kort and Gharbi (2013) and Kolasi (2020) emphasize the relationship between individual action and

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existing structures. Applied to the present finding, employees may choose to use emojis where they are consistent with informal workplace norms but avoid them where institutional expectations, professional hierarchy or the nature of the message require greater formality. Repeated choices of this kind may also reproduce or modify workplace communication norms over time.

Overall, both the current findings and prior literature converge on the idea that emojis enrich message tone, emotional depth, and clarity, while also carrying risks of misinterpretation. Importantly, the study adds to existing scholarship by highlighting how employees in a higher education workplace navigate the tension between the expressive benefits of emojis and the cultural-professional norms that limit their appropriateness in formal communication.

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5.2.3 Cultural and Contextual Considerations in Emoji Usage

The findings from this study demonstrate that university employees in Machakos County generally agree that cultural and contextual factors strongly shape emoji usage in workplace communication (M = 3.74, SD = 1.09). This aligns with Guntuku et al. (2019), who found that emoji usage varies across Eastern and Western cultures, with differences especially pronounced in food, drink, and activity-related emojis, showing that cultural backgrounds influence interpretation and preferences. Similarly, in this study, employees strongly agreed that differences in meaning arise when communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds (M = 3.87) and that their own cultural identity influences emoji preferences (M = 3.77). This finding is consistent with sensemaking theory, which explains that individuals construct meaning from cues using their previous experiences, interactions, and environments. Xiaofang et al. (2021) similarly show that

contextual experience influences interpretation. In relation to the present findings, employees from different cultural or organisational backgrounds may extract different meanings from the same emoji because they approach the symbol with different experiences and expectations. Thus, the high agreement that cultural identity influences emoji preferences provides evidence that emoji interpretation involves an active process of meaning construction.

The results also highlighted that respondents value inclusivity, reflected in their agreement with the usefulness of multi-colour, gender-specific, and culturally representative emojis (M = 3.74). This corresponds with Lingfeng and Xiangwen (2024), who found that emojis carry substantive cultural and emotional meanings and that the introduction of culturally inclusive emojis enhances clarity and inclusivity in digital communication. Both studies stress that while emojis enrich communication, they are not universally interpreted and can lead to misunderstandings, a theme echoed in this study where employees moderately agreed that cultural differences often cause misinterpretation (M = 3.72). In a similar view, Amadu (2024) found that although emojis were widely used to convey feelings and foster social connections, users did not always interpret them in the same way. Rwezahula (2026) likewise found that some emojis had several possible meanings and that certain intended meanings remained unclear to users. These findings strengthen the present result by showing that cultural and contextual variation can affect whether an emoji improves communication or creates ambiguity.

Regionally, the findings are reinforced by Mohammed (2022) in Kenya, who reported that cultural and demographic factors significantly influence emoji usage and interpretation, with simpler emojis like smiley faces being easier to understand than more complex ones, a point mirrored in

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this study, where respondents indicated that simple emojis are more straightforward to use than complex symbols (M = 3.64). This similarity is particularly important because it places the current findings within the Kenyan context rather than relying only on evidence from other cultural settings. It also suggests that the relationship between simplicity and ease of interpretation identified by Mohammed (2022) is reflected among employees in the two universities under study. The cultural and contextual findings can further be understood through Structuration Theory, which explains that communication practices are produced and reproduced through the interaction between employees and the social structures within which they operate (Giddens, 1984; Chatterjee et al., 2019). In this study, institutional communication norms, workplace relationships, and expectations may therefore influence which emojis employees consider appropriate and how their meanings are understood. Finally, the current study's recommendation for further research on the combination of text and emojis in cross-cultural contexts (M = 3.81) echoes both Guntuku et al. (2019) and Lingfeng and Xiangwen (2024), who similarly suggested that future work should examine how emojis and text interact across cultures.

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Overall, both the present study and the literature converge on the idea that emojis are not only emotional and expressive tools but also culturally nuanced symbols. While they promote inclusivity and enrich communication, their interpretation is highly context-dependent, making cultural awareness critical in digital workplace communication.

5.2.4 Effectiveness of Communication

The findings of this study show that university employees in Machakos County generally agree that emojis enhance the effectiveness of workplace communication (M = 3.64, SD = 1.13),

particularly in improving clarity, reducing ambiguity, and reinforcing emotional tone. Respondents strongly agreed that emojis enhance message clarity and understanding (M = 3.86) and that stronger emojis amplify emotional impact (M = 3.86). These results are consistent with Hasan (2018), who demonstrated that emojis enrich digital conversations by expressing and modifying sentiments, thereby deepening interpersonal connection. Similarly, Shalahuddin and Fajrianti (2024) found that emojis increase clarity, strengthen relationships, minimize ambiguity, and influence perceptions, which mirrors the current study's findings that emojis not only enhance message interpretation (M = 3.73) but also strengthen emotional bonds between sender and receiver (M = 3.65). In a similar view, emojis can influence the emotional interpretation of written messages. Neel et al. (2023) found that adding emojis to text altered perceptions of sentiment and shaped the tone of messages, while Iqbal et al. (2020) found that emoticons enhanced message clarity, tone, and emotional expression, particularly in informal communication. The convergence between these studies and the present findings suggests that employees perceive emojis as contributing to both the informational and emotional dimensions of workplace communication.

The results also align with Erle et al. (2022), who found that emojis function as non-verbal cues in digital communication, reducing ambiguity and conveying emotional states in ways comparable to face-to-face interactions. This supports the present finding that employees use emojis to express emotions difficult to convey through text alone (M = 3.78) and to replace or shorten written communication (M = 3.78), highlighting their efficiency in workplace exchanges. Likewise, Suresh (2018) noted that emojis reduce lengthy text while maintaining subtle tones, a point directly echoed in this study. These findings are consistent with sensemaking theory, which emphasises the role of cues in helping individuals construct meaning from communication (Weick, 1995). In

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digital workplace communication, emojis can provide additional cues that help employees interpret emotional emphasis, intended meaning, and relational connection, although differences in interpretation may also produce ambiguity.

However, concerns about professionalism remain evident. In this study, employees expressed the least agreement with the statement that emojis are unprofessional in formal communication (M = 2.58), suggesting that while many do not strongly view emojis as inappropriate, caution persists. This parallels the caution raised by Shalahuddin and Fajrianti (2024), who observed that cultural and contextual differences create risks of misinterpretation and unprofessionalism in formal communication settings. The finding also relates to politeness theory because emojis may be used to manage interpersonal relationships and soften the social meaning of written communication. Skovholt et al. (2014) found that emoticons can operate as contextualisation cues that assist recipients in interpreting written utterances and organising interpersonal relations. Similarly, Beißwenger and Pappert (2019) show that emojis may help reduce the potential harshness of written expressions and support social harmony. In the workplace, therefore, an emoji may contribute to effectiveness not only by clarifying emotional meaning but also by managing the relationship between the sender and recipient. On the contrary, the same relational function can make emoji use sensitive in formal or hierarchical interactions. Politeness Theory recognises that social distance, hierarchy and the degree of imposition can influence how communicative acts are interpreted. The choice to use or avoid an emoji may therefore reflect an employee's awareness of professional distance and institutional expectations. This provides a theoretical explanation for why employees in the present study could acknowledge the communicative value of emojis while remaining cautious about their use in formal workplace communication.

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The inferential results further reinforce these insights. The regression analysis revealed that the three predictors, emoji use, message tone and clarity, and cultural/contextual considerations, significantly and positively influence communication effectiveness ($p < 0.001$). Message tone and clarity emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.398$), underscoring that emojis' greatest contribution lies in clarifying messages and setting tone, a finding consistent with Erle et al. (2022) who emphasized emojis' role in shaping message perception. The model's explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.492$) shows that emojis account for nearly half the variance in communication effectiveness, highlighting their substantive but context-dependent role. The strength of message tone and clarity as a predictor is also consistent with the empirical evidence from Neel et al. (2023) and Iqbal et al. (2020), which demonstrates that emojis can alter emotional perception and enhance the clarity and tone of digital messages. Thus, the inferential finding does not stand separately from the descriptive findings; rather, it reinforces the earlier observation that employees primarily recognise emojis for their ability to supplement written communication with emotional and contextual cues.

The regression finding can further be interpreted through the combined theoretical framework. From a Semiotics perspective, emojis provide signs that add meaning to written messages; from a Sensemaking perspective, recipients interpret those signs together with the textual and contextual cues available to them. Technological Determinism Theory further explains why such visual communication has become possible and increasingly incorporated into workplace interaction as digital platforms provide integrated emoji functions (Jan et al., 2020; Mezentsev, 2020). At the same time, Structuration Theory explains why the use of these technological possibilities varies according to institutional norms, relationships and professional expectations. Politeness Theory

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then explains the interpersonal dimension, particularly how emojis may soften expressions, communicate solidarity or manage relational distance. The theories therefore complement rather than stand apart from the empirical findings, showing that communication effectiveness emerges from the interaction between the technological medium, the symbolic meaning of emojis, employee interpretation, workplace structures and interpersonal relationships.

Overall, both this study and prior literature converge in showing that emojis enhance communication effectiveness by clarifying meaning, strengthening emotional expression, and improving relational connection. At the same time, cultural interpretations and professionalism concerns highlight the importance of context and audience in determining the appropriateness of emoji use in workplace settings.

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5.3 Conclusion

5.3.1 Use of Emojis in Digital Communication

The findings indicate that university employees in Machakos County view emojis as valuable tools for enhancing expressiveness, setting tone, and fostering engagement in digital communication, particularly in informal interactions. Emojis are widely perceived as functional equivalents of non-verbal cues in face-to-face exchanges, helping to convey emotions and supplement written text. However, concerns remain regarding their professionalism, with respondents strongly disagreeing about their appropriateness in formal emails and hierarchical staff communication. This highlights a contextual divide: while emojis are embraced in casual workplace conversations, they are resisted in structured and formal academic settings, reflecting the tension between digital expressiveness and institutional communication norms.

5.3.2 Role of Emojis in Modifying Message Tone and Clarity

The findings reveal that university employees in Machakos County generally perceive emojis as important tools for modifying message tone and enhancing clarity in digital communication. Emojis are widely valued for their ability to communicate non-verbal expressions, humanize conversations, and bridge the gap between text and emotional cues. However, employees also acknowledge that emojis can be subject to cultural differences and misinterpretation, which may sometimes lead to confusion. While they are embraced more readily in informal interactions, their use in formal workplace communication remains limited due to concerns about professionalism. This demonstrates that the effectiveness of emojis is both context- and culture-dependent, with employees recognizing their benefits while exercising caution in structured communication settings.

5.3.3 Cultural and Contextual Considerations in Emoji Usage

The findings show that cultural and contextual factors play a significant role in shaping emoji usage among university employees in Machakos County. While emojis are recognized as effective tools for enhancing emotional expression and inclusivity in digital communication, their meaning is not universal and often varies across cultural backgrounds and communication settings. Employees acknowledged that cultural identity, workplace norms, and familiarity with specific emojis influence their preferences and interpretations, with simpler emojis being easier to use than more complex ones. Although emojis enrich workplace communication, they also carry the risk of misinterpretation, particularly in cross-cultural interactions, underscoring their context-dependent nature.

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5.3.4 Effectiveness of Communication

The findings demonstrate that emojis are generally perceived as effective tools for enhancing communication among university employees in Machakos County. They contribute to greater message clarity, reduced ambiguity, stronger emotional expression, and improved engagement, thereby functioning as valuable non-verbal cues in digital communication. Regression results further confirm that the use of emojis, message tone and clarity, and cultural/contextual considerations significantly and positively influence communication effectiveness, with tone and clarity emerging as the strongest predictor. While emojis are increasingly accepted in professional communication, concerns about appropriateness in formal settings remain, reflecting the importance of context. Overall, the study highlights that emojis are most effective when used thoughtfully, balancing emotional expressiveness with professional standards in workplace communication.

5.4 Recommendation

5.4.1 Use of Emojis in Digital Communication

It is recommended that universities develop clear communication guidelines that differentiate between formal and informal contexts of emoji usage. Training and awareness programs could help staff understand how to use emojis appropriately to enhance clarity, emotional expression, and engagement while avoiding potential misinterpretation or unprofessionalism in formal exchanges. Additionally, fostering open dialogue around evolving communication practices may help balance the benefits of digital expressiveness with the need to maintain professionalism in academic and workplace settings.

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5.4.2 Role of Emojis in Modifying Message Tone and Clarity

It is recommended that universities encourage the mindful use of emojis in digital communication by promoting awareness of both their benefits and potential risks. Staff should be guided on how to leverage emojis effectively to enhance tone, clarity, and emotional expression in informal settings, while exercising restraint in formal or hierarchical communication. Training on cross-cultural sensitivity in emoji use could also reduce risks of misinterpretation and foster inclusivity. By striking a balance between professionalism and expressiveness, institutions can optimize the role of emojis in workplace communication.

5.4.3 Cultural and Contextual Considerations in Emoji Usage

It is recommended that universities promote awareness and sensitivity toward cultural and contextual differences in emoji use by incorporating training on inclusive and context-appropriate digital communication practices. Encouraging employees to consider both the cultural background of their colleagues and the formality of the communication setting before using emojis can help minimize misinterpretation and foster clearer interactions. Furthermore, institutions should support research and dialogue on evolving digital practices, particularly on how text and emojis combine across cultures, to enhance inclusivity and ensure effective communication in increasingly multicultural workplaces.

5.4.4 Effectiveness of Communication

It is recommended that universities develop clear guidelines on the appropriate use of emojis in workplace communication, emphasizing their role in enhancing tone, clarity, and engagement while maintaining professionalism in formal contexts such as emails and official reports. Training

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sessions or workshops could be introduced to help employees navigate cultural and contextual differences in emoji interpretation, reducing the risk of miscommunication across diverse teams. Since the regression model shows that emojis strongly influence communication effectiveness, institutions should encourage their strategic use in digital platforms to complement text, foster inclusivity, and strengthen interpersonal connections, while continuing to explore additional factors, such as organizational culture and communication technologies, that may further enhance workplace effectiveness.

5.5 Suggestions for Future Studies

Future studies should examine emoji use across different workplace communication contexts, particularly formal emails, informal staff conversations, hierarchical communication and peer-to-peer interaction, to establish how the level of formality influences employees' decisions to use, avoid or interpret emojis. Further research should investigate the cultural and contextual variation in emoji interpretation, especially among employees from different ethnic, linguistic, generational and organisational backgrounds, given the finding that the same emoji may be interpreted differently depending on the users and communication context. Studies should also examine the interaction between text and emojis in conveying meaning, focusing on how the combination, placement and sequence of emojis with written messages influence tone, clarity and intended meaning.

Future research should investigate the sources and consequences of emoji misinterpretation in workplace communication, including whether differences in cultural background, familiarity with digital communication, professional position or interpersonal relationships contribute to divergent interpretations. Comparative studies should further examine emoji practices across different types

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of organisations, including public institutions, private organisations, non-governmental organisations and corporate workplaces, to determine whether the patterns identified in the two universities are similarly reflected in other organisational environments. Research should also examine generational differences in workplace emoji use and interpretation, particularly given the coexistence of employees with different levels of exposure to digital communication technologies. Furthermore, studies should investigate the relationship between emoji use and specific dimensions of workplace communication effectiveness, such as employee engagement, interpersonal trust, teamwork, job satisfaction and conflict management, to establish whether the perceived benefits of emojis extend beyond clarity, tone and relational rapport. Longitudinal studies should examine how workplace norms surrounding emoji use change over time, particularly as digital communication practices and organisational expectations evolve. Finally, research should examine the influence of emerging digital communication technologies, including AI-assisted communication platforms, on emoji use and interpretation, particularly whether automated recommendations, predictive text and AI-generated messages alter employees' use of emojis and their understanding of emotional and relational cues in workplace communication.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Questionnaire

Tick (✓) in the box that matches your answer or fill in as applicable

Questionnaire – Emoji Use in the Workplace

The purpose of this study is to examine and analyze the effect of emojis use in the workplace on employee interaction within universities in Machakos County. Kindly complete the questions as accurately as you can by ticking the appropriate response.

The answers provided here will be used purely for academic purposes and will remain anonymous. Your responses are greatly appreciated.

Tick (✓) in the box that matches your answer or fill in as applicable

Section A: Demographic Questions

1. What is your gender?
○ ☐ Male
○ ☐ Female
2. What is your age group?
○ ☐ 18-24 years
○ ☐ 25-34 years
○ ☐ 35-44 years
○ ☐ 45-54 years
○ ☐ 55 years and above
3. What is your highest level of education?
○ ☐ Diploma
○ ☐ Bachelors' Degree

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○ ☐ Master's Degree
○ ☐ PhD
4. **What is your job category in the institution?**
○ ☐ Academic Staff
○ ☐ Administrative Staff
○ ☐ Support Staff
5. How frequently do you use emojis in workplace communication?
○ ☐ Never
○ ☐ Rarely
○ ☐ Sometimes
○ ☐ Often
○ ☐ Always

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Section B: Role of Emojis in Modifying Message Tone and Clarity

Indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements regarding the role of emojis in modifying message tone and clarity. (Responses: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Adding emojis to text messages enhances the clarity of the intended message.					
2. The presence of positive emojis in a message makes the message feel					

more emotionally positive.					
3. Negative emojis contribute to making a text message feel more emotionally negative.					
4. Emojis are an effective way to communicate non-verbal expressions in digital communication.					
5. Using emojis in digital communication helps create stronger relationships between colleagues.					
6. Misinterpretation of emojis can lead to confusion or miscommunication in online conversations.					
7. The meaning of an emoji can vary depending on the user's cultural background.					
8. Emojis are more effective in informal digital conversations than in formal communication settings.					
9. Using emojis in workplace communication improves message clarity and emotional expression.					
10. Emojis help humanize digital conversations by adding emotional expression to text-based messages.					

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Section C: Use of Emojis in Digital Communication

Indicate the extent to which you agree to the following statements regarding use of emoji in digital communication the role of emoji in modifying message tone and clarity (Responses: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree).

Use of emojis in digital communication	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
1. Emojis help convey social and emotional cues in digital communication.					
2. The placement of emojis in professional email communication, such as in signatures, enhances message clarity.					
3. The frequency of emoji use in professional emails is influenced by workplace culture and familiarity with the receiver.					
4. Emojis, memes, and GIFs improve engagement and communication among university staff.					
5. Using emojis in formal educational settings may risk unprofessionalism in interactions between staff members at different ranks.					
6. Emojis in digital communication serve similar functions as non-verbal cues in face-to-face interactions.					
7. Misinterpretation of emojis is common due to discrepancies between their visual form and intended meaning.					
8. Users combine multiple emojis to enhance message understanding or as a substitute for words.					
9. The use of emojis in online communication helps in setting the tone and emotional context of messages.					
10. The interpretation of emojis is highly context-dependent, making them inadequate as a form of structured written grammar.					

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Section D: Impact of Emojis on the Effectiveness of Communication

Indicate the extent to which you agree to the following statements regarding impact of emoji on the effectiveness of communication in professional and personal contexts (Responses: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree).

Effectiveness of Communication	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
1. Using emojis in digital communication enhances the clarity and understanding of messages.					
2. Emojis help to reduce ambiguity in text-based communication.					
3. The use of emojis in interpersonal communication strengthens the emotional connection between the sender and the receiver.					
4. Emojis influence how the receiver perceives and responds to a message.					
5. The inclusion of emojis in digital messages enhances their appeal and emotional intensity.					
6. Using emojis in professional or formal communication may be perceived as unprofessional.					
7. Emojis help to replace certain words and reduce the need for lengthy written messages.					
8. The interpretation of emojis varies across different cultural and contextual backgrounds, leading to potential misunderstandings.					
9. The use of stronger emojis (e.g., exaggerated facial expressions) increases the emotional impact of a message.					

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10. I frequently use emojis in my digital communication to express emotions that are difficult to convey through text alone.					

Section E: Cultural and Contextual Considerations in Emoji Usage

Indicate the extent to which you agree to the following statements regarding the potential cultural differences in emoji interpretation and use (Responses: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree).

Cultural and Contextual Considerations in Emoji Usage	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
1. Emojis help me express emotions and feelings effectively in online communication.					
2. I often find differences in the meaning of emojis when communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds.					
3. My cultural background influences my preference for certain types of emojis (e.g., food, drink, and activity emojis).					
4. I believe that emojis improve inclusivity and cultural representation in digital communication.					
5. I sometimes misinterpret the meaning of emojis sent by people from different cultural backgrounds.					
6. I prefer using multi-color, gender-specific, and culturally representative emojis when communicating online.					
7. I use emojis differently in formal and informal online communication settings.					
8. I find it easier to use some emojis, like smiley or frowny faces, compared					

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to others like loudly crying face emoji.					
9. I believe that cultural differences significantly impact the interpretation of emojis in digital communication.					
10. I think future research should explore how text and emojis are used together in cross-cultural communication.					

Thank you.

END.

ST. PAUL'S UNIVERSITY

Appendix B: Introductory Letter

Dear Participant,

I am conducting a research study titled *"The Effect of Emojis on Digital Workplace Communication and Employee Interaction in Machakos County Universities."*

You are chosen to be part of this study because your views and experiences are valuable to this research as an employee in one of the universities in Machakos County. Please fill the attached questionnaire with honestly and accuracy as possible, by choosing the most appropriate responses. Please rest assured that all information you give will be treated with the highest confidentiality, and identifying details will be documented. Your responses will remain absolutely anonymous. The collected information shall be used only for academic purposes.

Your voluntary participation is highly appreciated. Please note that you are at liberty to withdraw from the research at any point without consequence.

For any questions and or require clarification, please do not hesitate to contact me, the researcher.

Thank you for your time and contribution to this study.

Yours sincerely,

Ceciliah Ndinda Muange

macsnrb626620@spu.ac.ke

St. Paul's University

ST. PAUL'S UNIVERSITY

Appendix C: Ethical Approval

ST. PAUL'S UNIVERSITY

Private Bag 00217 Limuru,
Kenya
Email: office@spu.ac.ke
Website: www.spu.ac.ke

Tel Office: +254 (0) 20-2020505/10
Mobile: +254 (0) 728-669000
(0) 736-424440

REF: SPU/526/2025 **Date: 23rd August 2025**

TO: Ceciliah Muange
St. Paul's University

Dear Ceciliah,

==========

REF: The Effect of Emojis on Digital Workplace Communication and Employee Interaction in Machakos County Universities

==========

Greetings,

This is to inform you that SPU- Institutional Scientific Ethics Review Committee has reviewed the above-named research proposal. **Your ERB approval number is 536, for the period between 23rd August 2025 – 23rd August 2026 (1 year).**

This approval is subject to compliance with the following requirements;

i. Only approved documents including (informed consents, study instruments) will be used.
ii. All changes including (amendments, deviations, and violations) are submitted for review and approval by SPU- Institutional Scientific Ethics Review Committee.
iii. Death and life-threatening problems and serious adverse events or unexpected adverse events whether related or unrelated to the study must be reported to SPU- Institutional Scientific Ethics Review Committee within 72 hours of notification
iv. Any changes, anticipated or otherwise that may increase the risks or affected safety or welfare of study participants and others or affect the integrity of the research must be reported to *SPU- Institutional Scientific Ethics Review Committee* within 72 hours
v. Clearance for export of biological specimens must be obtained from relevant institutions.

vi. Submission of a request for renewal of approval at least 60 days prior to expiry of the approval period. Attach a comprehensive progress report to support the renewal.

vii. Submission of an executive summary report within 90 days upon completion of the study to SPU- Institutional Scientific Ethics Review Committee.

viii. Should there be any publications from your research, note that you are supposed to anonymize the particulars of the respondents, the identifiers and the name of institution (s) where you collected data.

ix. Please note that it is within the ISERC's mandate to monitor your research and to do random visits to the site. All research is subject to post approval monitoring. Kindly provide a closure report after the research.

Prior to commencing your study, you will be expected to obtain a research license from National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) if you are collecting data in the country - https://research-portal.nacosti.go.ke **or obtain other clearances needed in the country where you will collect your data from.**

Yours sincerely,



Dr. Daniel Nzengya, PhD
Chairperson
SPU- Institutional Scientific & Ethics Review Committee



Appendix D: NACOSTI Permit

REPUBLIC OF KENYA

NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR SCIENCE,TECHNOLOGY & INNOVATION

Ref No: 681909

Date of Issue: 02/September/2025

RESEARCH LICENSE



This is to Certify that Ms.. Ceciliah Ndinda Muange of Saint Paul University, has been licensed to conduct research as per the provision of the Science, Technology and Innovation Act, 2013 (Rev.2014) in Machakos on the topic: THE EFFECT OF EMOJIS ON DIGITAL WORKPLACE COMMUNICATION AND EMPLOYEE INTERACTION IN MACHAKOS COUNTY UNIVERSITIES for the period ending : 02/September/2026.

License No: **NACOSTI/P/25/4179074**

681909

Applicant Identification Number

Ag. Director General
NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR SCIENCE,TECHNOLOGY & INNOVATION

Verification QR Code

NOTE: This is a computer generated License. To verify the authenticity of this document, Scan the QR Code using QR scanner application.

See overleaf for conditions

Appendix E: Machakos University (MKsU) Approval

MACHAKOS UNIVERSITY
OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY VICE-CHANCELLOR
(RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND LINKAGES)
Telephone: +254 – (0)735 24793939
E-mail: dvc-ril@mksu.ac.ke
Website: www.mksu.ac.ke
P.O. Box 136-90100
Machakos
KENYA

REF: MksU/RIL/6/1/VOL.XIII 10th February, 2026

Ms. Ceciliah Muange
C/O St. Paul's University
P.O BOX Private Bag 00217
LIMURU
macsnrb626620@spu.ac.ke

Dear Ms. Muange,

RE: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT MACHAKOS UNIVERSITY

This is to inform you that your request for permission to conduct research at Machakos University on *"The Effect of Emojis on Digital Workplace Communication and Employee Interaction in Machakos County Universities"* has been approved. In granting you this permission, it is expected that you will familiarize yourself and comply with Machakos University Data Protection Policy found on the University website (http://ir.mksu.ac.ke). Your particular attention is drawn to the provisions of **Section 5.2** and **Section 10** of the Policy.

On completion of research, you are expected to submit soft copy of the data collected and a hard copy of the final research report to the undersigned.

Yours sincerely,

RESEARCH, INNOVATION & LINKAGES · P.O. Box 136 - 30100, MACHAKOS · 10 FEB 2026 · MACHAKOS UNIVERSITY

PROF. JAMES MUOLA, Ph.D.
FOR: DEPUTY VICE-CHANCELLOR (RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND LINKAGES)

Copy to: Vice-Chancellor

Appendix F: Scott Christian University Approval

Scott Christian UNIVERSITY
A Dynamic Centre of Academic Excellence

OFFICE OF THE DIRECTORATE OF RESEARCH AND POSTGRADUATE STUDIES

REF: RPGS/01/18/9/25 September 18, 2025,

Ms. Ceciliah Muange

Master's Candidate

C/O St. Paul's University

P.O. Box Private Bag 00217

Limuru, Kenya

Dear Ms. Muange,

RE: APPROVAL TO COLLECT DATA AT SCOTT CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

I acknowledge receipt of your letter dated September 10, 2025, requesting permission to collect data on the research study titled "The *Effect of Emojis on Digital Workplace Communication and Employee Interaction in Machakos County Universities.*"

Scott Christian University hereby grants permission for you to collect data within our institution, subject to the following conditions:

1. **Coordination:** Kindly liaise with the Director of Research and Postgraduate Studies to schedule activities and identify appropriate participant groups.
2. **Ethics and confidentiality:** Maintain strict confidentiality of institutional and participant information, obtain informed consent, and adhere to approved ethical standards throughout the study.
3. **Scope and timing:** Ensure the data collection activities do not disrupt normal university operations and are completed within your NACOSTI approval period (valid through July 28, 2026).
4. **Data use:** Use all data solely for academic purposes as stated, with no disclosure of identifiable information.
5. **Reporting**: Share a brief summary of the findings with the University upon completion.

Please present your NACOSTI research permit and institutional identification when engaging with our departments. Our office will connect you with the relevant units to facilitate smooth implementation.

We wish you success in your research study and look forward to the insights it may offer.

Yours sincerely,

SCOTT CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY DIRECTORATE OF RESEARCH AND POSTGRADUATE STUDIES P.O. BOX 49-90100 MACHAKOS

18 SEP 2025

Prof. Siring[illegible], PhD

Director Research & Postgraduate Studies

Cc: Vice Chancellor
Deputy Vice-Chancellor Academics and Administration

P.O. Box 49-90100, Machakos, KENYA +254 713 745 404 | 0706 381 396 info@scott.ac.ke www.scott.ac.ke
Building Leadership | Challenging Minds | Growing Faith

Appendix G: Informed Consent Form

Study Title:

"The Effect of Emojis on Digital Workplace Communication and Employee Interaction in Machakos County Universities."

Principal Investigator:

Ceciliah Ndinda Muange

Introduction

You are invited to participate in a research study that seeks to explore how emojis affect workplace communication among university employees. Before you decide whether to partake, please read the following information cautiously.

Purpose of the Study

This study purposes to explore the role of emojis in shaping workplace communication within universities in Machakos County. The study seeks to examine how emojis modify message tone and clarity in digital interactions, investigate how demographic and cultural factors affect the perception, comprehension and use of emojis in workplace communication, and assess the extent to which emojis affect communication effectiveness in terms of clarity, relational rapport, and professionalism.

ST. PAUL'S UNIVERSITY

Procedures

If you agree to participate, you will be requested to respond to a survey questionnaire. The questionnaire will need approximately 20 minutes to complete. You are at liberty to skip any question that you may not wish to answer.

Risks

Some respondents may experience slight uneasiness when reflecting on their workplace communication behaviors. That notwithstanding, there is no sensitive or harmful questions included.

Benefits

Even though there are no direct benefits respondents, your feedback will help generate insights that may inform better workplace communication practices within higher education workplaces such as universities.

Voluntary Participation and Right to Withdraw

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, decline to answer specific questions, or withdraw from the study altogether.

Confidentiality

Your responses will be kept strictly confidential. The survey will not collect names, employee numbers, or any other identifying information. Data will be stored securely in password-protected files, accessible only to the research team. Results will be reported in aggregate form and no individual participant will be identifiable.

Ethical Approval

This study was reviewed and subsequently permitted by the Institutional Scientific and Ethical Review Committee (ISERC) at St Pauls' University. In addition, a research permit was sought from the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI).

For any queries

If you have any questions about this study, please contact:

Ceciliah Ndinda Muange

ST. PAUL'S UNIVERSITY

macsnrb626620@spu.ac.ke
St. Paul's University

If you have any concerns about your rights as a participant, you may contact:

ISERC at St Pauls' University, E-mail: iserc@spu.ac.ke

Consent Statement

By signing below, you agree that you have information above is well understood. You freely consent to contribute in this study. Additionally, you also do understand that should you want to no longer participate, you are free to withdraw at any point with no consequence.

☐ I consent to take part in this study.

Name of Participant (optional): _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

ST. PAUL'S UNIVERSITY