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Cultural Encodings in Digital Symbols: Exploring Emoji and Sticker Pragmatics Among Chinese and Egyptian Social Media Users

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Abstract
Digital symbols, like emojis and stickers, serve as integral components to computer-mediated communication across different cultures; however, their pragmatic functions are considered to be culturally encoded. This study discusses their usage on two of the most popular means of communication around the world, which are in WhatsApp and WeChat in Egypt and China respectively, based on about 50 chat samples and 13 theoretical references. After conducting a thorough comparative analysis of the digital symbols' pragmatic functions, cultural embedding, and miscommunication risks, a distinct pattern has been detected: Chinese WeChat users prefer to use cute cartoon memes and stickers but not too many emojis to show interpersonal harmony, while, on the other hand, Egyptian WhatsApp users depend on specific types of stickers and common, repetitive emojis that relate to each individual's community identity. Such dissimilarities come from factors such as contextuality norms, and platform affordances. The study's final conclusion is that digital symbols work as cultural carriers, and recognizing their embedded values is essential for reducing intercultural and interpersonal miscommunication. It can highly contribute to cross-cultural pragmatics and offer practical insights.

Keywords: Cultural encoding, Computer-mediated communication, Cross-cultural pragmatics, Digital symbols, Emoji/sticker use, Intercultural communication, Chinese/Egyptian social media users.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

In a modern, intertwined world, computer-mediated communication (CMC) governs world-wide interaction, with WeChat, having registered 1.3 billion active users per month, and WhatsApp with roughly 2 billion monthly active users, as leading platforms (Mehner, 2022). Unlike direct face-to-face communication, CMC lacks one of the factors that greatly impact mutual understanding, which is nonverbal cues. Nonetheless, emojis and stickers, being categorized as "graphicons"; (Herring & Dainas, 2017) compensate this fact by conveying feelings and true purposes of the sent messages. In light of the fact that 92% of internet users utilize emojis (Team Communication Hub, 2022), their interpretation is totally shaped according to one's own culture. Symbols as food emojis carry differing connotations across diverse cultures (Hakami et al., 2021). Both Chinese and Egyptian users exemplify cultural contexts that are noticeably unlike one another. To illustrate, China's secular collectivism underlines harmony as well as meme culture (Zhou et al., 2017), while Egypt's ever-known religious collectivism highlights its ancient Islamic identity and historical, cultural heritage (Aljasir, 2024). That being said, despite recent increasing research on digital symbol pragmatics, few studies have compared the two above-mentioned, leaving wide gaps in understanding how culture explains symbols use.

1.2. Research Questions

1) What are the predominant pragmatic functions of emojis and stickers among Chinese WeChat and Egyptian WhatsApp users?
2) How are the distinct cultural values represented in the selection of digital symbol by the mentioned groups?
3) What exact cross-cultural dissimilarities in symbol use pose potential miscommunication risks?

1.3. Significance

This study discusses both theoretical and practical importance. To demonstrate, it links digital symbol application to the three theories of Hall's contextuality theory (1976), Hofstede's cultural dimensions, and the dialect theory of emotion (Elfenbein et al., 2007). Practically, it directs intercultural interaction by detecting potential symbol-related miscommunication risks and assisting users, designers of social media platforms, and educators.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Digital Symbols in CMC

Emojis, which are standardized pictographs, and stickers, namely customizable graphics, enhance CMC by accurately expressing the emotions of the messages, modulating the sender's tone, and reinforcing intended meanings (Derks et al., 2008). Emojis are added to texts for subtle yet significant adjustments, while stickers, that are most often sent as standalone messages, stresses intents through animated images and cultural references (Cha et al., 2018). Platform advantages and design also shape users' use. For instance, one can find on WeChat cartoon and meme stickers, while WhatsApp supports customizable content from one's image library or facial traits (Konrad et al., 2020).

2.2. Cultural Influences on Symbol Use

Culture forms symbol interpretation through display rules and contextuality (Elfenbein et al., 2007). Both China and Egypt are known for their high-context cultures, but China's secular collectivism gives priority to harmony among people (Yang et al., 2023), while Egypt's religious collectivism prefers Islamic identity as an established personal trait (Aljasir, 2024). Religious norms further differentiate them. To exemplify, Egyptian symbols strictly avoid any content that, directly or indirectly, conflicts with Islam, while Chinese symbols do not have a precise background; they are simply common used, normal, respectful and cute

symbols (Ge-Stadnyk et al., 2024).

2.3. Miscommunication Risks

Miscommunication is usually caused by platform-specific emoji renderings (Miller et al., 2015) and existing cultural gaps. Culture-specific symbols, taking Chinese memes and Egyptian religious imagery as examples, are unintelligible across large groups, while tone differences, portrayed in Chinese subtlety from one side versus repetition from the Egyptian side, often lead to frequent intercultural misperception (Hakami et al., 2021).

3. Methodology

3.1. Data Collection

Chat Samples: A total of precisely 49 elements, divided as 18 WeChat chat screenshots containing conversations between Chinese people, and 31 WhatsApp chat screenshots containing conversations between Egyptian individuals, aged between 23 and 45, covering friend/family/semi-formal chats. Samples were collected via convenience sampling, and anonymized to protect participants' privacy.

Theoretical References: 18 key studies on symbol pragmatics, cross-cultural communication, and regional case studies.

3.2. Analytical Framework

A comparative qualitative analysis was used that focused on three particular dimensions:

1) **Pragmatic Functions**: Emotional expression, tone modulation, identity construction, group cohesion.
2) **Cultural Embedding**: Religious/secular themes, collectivism expression, cultural specificity.
3) **Miscommunication Risks**: Ambiguity, tone misalignment, cultural inaccessibility.

Inter-coder reliability was ensured by independent coding of samples and resolving discrepancies through discussion.

4. Findings

4.1. Pragmatic Functions

4.1.1 Chinese WeChat Users

- **Tone Moderation**: The Emojis (😉, 😂) along with popular cute stickers were used to soften the intensity of blunt statements (e.g., "汉字课不适合你们" + 😂😂) to preserve the harmony of the conversation (Zhou et al., 2017).
- **Humor & Memes**: Meme stickers, in areas of edited art and pop culture references, prevailed in casual chats, which reinforces easygoing informality.
- **Collective Rituals**: Stickers based on cultural themes, such as the Chinese Spring Festival and Dragon Boat Festival, also play a part in strengthening group cohesion.
- **Subtle Emotions**: Sparse emojis like a single 💔 or 😢 convey speakers' feelings without seriously overwhelming conversations.

4.1.2. Egyptian WhatsApp Users

- **Identity Affirmation**: Religious stickers, taking hijab figures, Islamic calligraphy for instances, and cultural emojis, such as traditional attire and tea scenes indicate strong community affiliation (Aljasir, 2024).
- **Emotional Amplification**: Repetitive emojis (💔💔💔, 😂😂😂) are observably employed to amplify feelings (e.g., "أنا ناجح!" + 🎉🎉🎉💔💔💔).
- **Etiquette Balance**: Religious phrases and emojis (e.g., "ان شاء الله ✨") are used together to strike a balance between formality and intimacy.

- **Conversational Warmth**: Stickers inspired by real people, sometimes the two participants of the chat, such as friends or local influencers, add unique authenticity and warmth to the conversation.

4.2. Cultural Encoding

Cultural Dimension	Chinese WeChat Users	Egyptian WhatsApp Users
Religious Influence	Secular symbols (memes, festivals)	Religious symbols (hijab, Islamic calligraphy)
Collectivism Expression	Group harmony-focused (cute cartoons, festivals)	Community identity-focused (cultural/religious imagery)
Contextuality	Tone modulation (soften conflict)	Identity signaling (implicit community membership)

4.3. Miscommunication Risks

- **Interpretation Gaps**: There is a high possibility that the Egyptian emoji repetition may seem excessive to Chinese users, to which only one item (sticker or emoji) is enough to convey related emotion. On the other hand, the Chinese subtlety in graphonics usage may appear rather cold to Egyptians.
- **Cultural Inaccessibility**: Chinese memes and Egyptian religious stickers can be unintelligible to one another.
- **Tone Misalignment**: The Chinese 😂 to soften direct criticism may seem quite dismissive. Egyptians' occasional directness may somehow appear pretty confrontational.

5. Discussion

5.1. Cultural Roots of Differences

As discussed earlier, the Chinese symbol use echos the characteristics of the secular collectivism and "harmony" norms (Zhou et al., 2017), which is, in turn,

sustained by the WeChat's meme library. On the other side of the coin, the Egyptian use is shaped by the religious collectivism and Islamic norms (Aljasir, 2024), and is supported by WhatsApp's custom sticker tools. Such differences in fact align with Hall's (1976) contextuality theory, as both are high-context, but China prefers to encode "politeness" in communication while Egypt alternately manifests "identity."

5.2. Practical Implications

- **Users**: Prioritise universally used symbols, such as 😊 and 👍 in cross-cultural chats; adapt tone (Egyptian users tend to employ emoji repetition; the Chinese reduce it).
- **Platforms**: Curate hybrid sticker libraries of diverse cultures with context hints; efficiently refine cross-platform compatibility.
- **Educators**: Integrate literacy of digital symbol into intercultural training by using multi-cultural chat samples as references.

6. Limitations and Future Work

This study mainly centers on 23–45-year-old social media users. Future research could cover either even younger or older populations. Qualitative analysis provides depth, but at the same time lacks generalizability, while quantitative surveys could complement the outputs. Subsequent work might as well compare the use of symbols across further social media platforms, taking Instagram and Snapchat as references, as well as track long-term variations with globalisation.

7. Conclusion

Not only do digital symbols convey emotion to supplement the feeling of messages, but also they serve as transmitters of users' cultures. Chinese WeChat users are prone to utilize cute as well as humorous graphicons to preserve harmony within chats, whereas Egyptians on WhatsApp are inclined to put the cultural and religious emojis and stickers to use in order to affirm their identity. Such

discrepancies arise from secular versus religious collectivism along with contextuality standards and platform affordances. Perceiving similar cultural encodings in symbol use is essential for successfully conducting intercultural CMC. Since globalization bonds diverse users from every corner in the world, embracing such distinctions bridges existing gaps and fosters mutual understanding.

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