

Cross-Cultural Semiotics of Emoji Use: A Comparative Content Analysis of 🙏, 💀, and 🍑

Sarvenaz Safavi

Correspondence: Sarvenaz Safavi, Faculty of Communication, Near East University, North Cyprus, Nicosia, Cyprus.

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Abstract

Although emojis are often hailed as a universal digital language, their meanings changes across cultures. By focusing on three polysemic examples—🙏 (hands pressed together), 💀 (skull), and 🍑 (peach)—this study examines how interpretations shift across English, Japanese, Hindi, Arabic, Spanish, and Chinese contexts. Also, this research combines content analysis with semiotic approach grounded in Saussurean, Peircean, and Barthesian theory. Results reveal clear divergences: 🙏 signifies “prayer” in English, “gratitude/politeness” in Japanese, and “Namaste” in Indian discourse; 💀 denotes “death” in Arabic, “humor” in Western slang, and “ancestral ritual” in Mexican culture; 🍑 represents sexual slang in English, fruit in European posts, and longevity in Chinese folklore. These findings demonstrate that emojis are culturally embedded, polysemic signs shaped by ideology, ritual, and online vernaculars, challenging the notion of emojis as neutral or universal symbols and positioning the study as an exploratory contribution to cross-cultural in digital semiotics.

Keywords: emoji, cross-cultural communication, semiotics, digital communication, cultural interpretation

1. Introduction

Emojis serve as visual clues that either enhance, replace, or change written language, making them essential in today's digital communication. Emojis are extensively marketed as a "universal language" that can cut beyond linguistic barriers by IT businesses and digital culture. However, no sign is ever fully universal, as semiotic theory reminds us; rather, its meaning is contingent upon the cultural, social, and ideological context in which it is used (Saussure, 1916; Peirce, 1931; Barthes, 1957). In reality, a seemingly straightforward pictograph might have several, even conflicting, interpretations for different tribes. The foundation of this study is the discrepancy between the cultural distinctiveness of emojis and the notion of their universality.

Some of the thousands of emojis that has standardized so far are particularly polysemic, meaning that they have radically different meanings depending on the cultural frame of reference. Three such emojis are the subject of this article: 🙏 (hands pressed together), 💀 (skull), and 🍑 (peach). Each chosen because it may shed light on the ways in which digital signs are reinterpreted in various social and cultural situations. The 🙏 emoji represents a gesture that, depending on the context, might mean prayer (Western/Christian), thanks or politeness (Japanese), or Namaste, a greeting having cultural and religious meanings in South Asian cultures. In Arabic cultures, the 💀 emoji frequently maintains a literal connotation with mortality, while in Mexico it resonates with the Día de los Muertos custom. However, in Western online lingo, the emoji has been re-coded to denote humor ("I'm dead" meaning "I'm laughing"). Last but not least, the 🍑 emoji, a literal fruit sign, has taken on strong sexualized connotations in English-language online discourse (as a symbol for buttocks). However, in Chinese contexts, it still serves as a folklore-based emblem for longevity and immortality. By representing various semiotic categories—gesture, symbol, and object—these three emojis collectively provide a more thorough comparative analysis of the ways in which cultural meanings are stored in digital communication. Examining these three emojis is important because they cast doubt on the notion that they are clear, widely recognized symbols. Rather, they show how emojis are culturally ingrained, context-dependent, and polysemic. This study aims to reveal the cultural myths and ideologies concealed in seemingly straightforward digital symbols by examining how users from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds use these emojis in social media conversation.

The following enquiries serve as the basis for this study:

1. How are the 🙏, 💀, and 🍑 emojis interpreted and used in online communication by various cultural groups?
2. Which ideological, religious, or cultural contexts influence these interpretations?

3. How much do localized cultural meanings get displaced or coexist with globalized digital culture (such as meme usage and online slang)?

By tackling these issues, the paper adds to the continuing discussions in media studies and semiotics regarding the connection between digital globalization, culture, and sign systems.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Semiotics and Digital Communication

The study of signs, or semiotics, offers a fundamental framework for comprehending the creation and interpretation of meaning. The arbitrary link between signifier and signified is highlighted in Saussure's (1916) theory, which postulates that meaning emerges from their correlation within a system of distinctions. Peirce (1931), divided signs into icons, indexes, and symbols, each of which has a specific form in communication. Emojis, which are visual signs that express emotions, actions, and concepts in text-based communication, are a contemporary extension of fundamental semiotic principles in the digital age.

scholars highlights that the relationship between semiotics and digital communication has become increasingly central to understanding meaning-making in online environments. Drawing on foundational semiotic theories, contemporary studies argue that digital communication operates through complex systems of signs that extend beyond written language to include emojis, memes, GIFs, and other multimodal elements (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2025). These studies emphasize that meaning in digital contexts is dynamically constructed through the interaction of visual, textual, and contextual cues, shaped by platform affordances and user practices (Jones, 2025). Furthermore, emerging research points out that digital semiotics is deeply influenced by cultural norms, power structures, and algorithmic mediation, which affect how signs are produced, circulated, and interpreted across global audiences (Chen, 2026).

2.2 Emojis as a Sign System

From basic emoticons, emojis have developed into a sophisticated sign system that cuts across linguistic boundaries. Despite being standardized by Unicode, emojis are understood differently across platforms and cultures, as discussed by Wilde and Sachs-Hombach (2023). They contend that emojis have cultural connotations that influence how they are interpreted and are more than just visual representations. This supports the idea that emojis serve as a novel kind of paralinguistics that infuses digital communication with emotion and subtlety (Ferretti, 2023).

Recent literature conceptualizes emojis as a complex sign system grounded in semiotic theory, where meaning emerges through the interaction of visual form, context, and social practice. Drawing on Peircean and social semiotics frameworks, scholars classify emojis as iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs, depending on whether they resemble objects, point to emotional states, or rely on culturally learned conventions (e.g., 🍀 symbolizing success). Contemporary research further argues that emojis function as a multimodal sign system that complements and sometimes substitutes language structures by simplifying expression while enhancing emotional clarity and pragmatic meaning in digital discourse. In addition, studies emphasize that emojis operate as part of a broader social semiotic process, where meaning is co-constructed through platform norms, user identities, and interactional contexts, rather than being fixed or universal (Rabi, 2025).

2.3 Cross-Cultural Interpretations of Emojis

Cultural circumstances greatly impact on how emojis are interpreted. The use of emojis to convey emotions and ideas differs significantly across Eastern and Western cultures, according to a 2019 study by Guntuku et al. For example, the 💀 emoji still has the literal connotation of death in many Eastern cultures, while being used playfully to indicate laughing in Western culture. Likewise, in Japanese culture, the 🙏 emoji, which is frequently linked to prayer in Western contexts, is used as a thank-you or polite gesture (Guntuku et al., 2019).

Recent 2025 literature underscores that emojis are interpreted through culturally specific frameworks, challenging the widespread assumption of their universality. Scholars argue that cultural context significantly shapes how users decode emojis, with variations in emotional expression, politeness norms, and communication styles leading to divergent meanings across societies (Chen & Park, 2025). For instance, high-context cultures tend to rely more on emojis for implicit emotional nuance, whereas low-context cultures often interpret them more literally, resulting in potential miscommunication (Rodriguez & Meyer, 2025). Additionally, new research highlights how linguistic background, social norms, and platform-specific practices further influence emoji interpretation, reinforcing the idea that emojis function as culturally embedded semiotic resources rather than universal symbols (Al-Saadi, 2025).

2.4 Cultural Myths and Ideologies in Emoji Usage

Cultural beliefs and ideologies are frequently ingrained in emojis, affecting how they are interpreted. The idea of "myth" as a second-order sign system that converts cultural signs into naturalized meanings was first proposed by Barthes in 1957. The 🍷 emoji is an example of how a simple fruit symbol in one culture can have sexual overtones in another,

reflecting underlying cultural views on modesty and sexuality. In order to prevent miscommunication, these differing interpretations emphasize the necessity of cultural literacy in digital communication (Li & Zheng, 2024).

scholars highlights that emoji usage is deeply embedded in cultural myths and ideological structures rather than functioning as a neutral or universal language. Studies show that emojis derive meaning through socially constructed norms, where platforms and user communities collectively negotiate symbolic interpretations shaped by cultural beliefs and shared narratives (Altındağ, 2025). Emerging research further demonstrates that emojis can reproduce ideological power relations by reinforcing stereotypes, exclusion, and even symbolic violence in digital spaces, revealing how seemingly simple icons may carry implicit cultural myths about gender, identity, and social hierarchy (Saber & Ghazali, 2025). Additionally, cross-cultural analyses indicate that emoji meanings vary significantly across societies, with interpretations influenced by local values, communication styles, and contextual norms, challenging the myth of emojis as a universal visual language (Yazid, 2025). Overall, the latest literature frames emoji use as an ideological practice in which cultural assumptions and myths are continuously reproduced, contested, and transformed within digital communication (Deng & Jiang, 2025)

2.5 The Need for Cross-Cultural Analysis

Even though emojis are used extensively, little is known about how they are perceived in various cultural contexts. In order to facilitate successful cross-cultural communication, Li and Zheng (2024) stress the significance of examining emojis' inclusivity and cultural representation. They contend that in order to promote diversity and avoid misunderstandings, it is essential to comprehend the cultural nuances of emojis as they are incorporated more and more into digital platforms.

In 2025 researchers emphasizes that cross-cultural analysis is no longer optional but essential for understanding increasingly interconnected social, economic, and technological systems. Researchers argue that globalization, digital communication, and transnational mobility have intensified cultural interactions, making single-culture frameworks insufficient for explaining human behavior and institutional dynamics (Lee & Kumar, 2025). Contemporary studies highlight how cross-cultural approaches improve the validity and generalizability of research findings by accounting for cultural variability in values, cognition, and communication styles (García & Smith, 2025). Moreover, emerging work links cross-cultural competence to more effective policy-making, international collaboration, and conflict resolution, particularly in multicultural and globalized contexts (Osei, 2025). Overall, the 2025 literature underscores that cross-cultural analysis is critical not only for academic rigor but also for addressing real-world global challenges.

3. Methodology

This study looks at how three polysemic emojis—🙏 (hands pressed together), 💀 (skull), and 🍑 (peach)—are interpreted across cultures by using a comparative content analysis. In order to capture contextual and cultural meanings in addition to frequency patterns, the methodology combines quantitative coding with qualitative semiotic analysis.

During the coding process, self-reported demographic cues (such as allusions to age, gendered language, or subcultural markers like fandom or religious affiliation) were recorded where they were available. However, platform anonymity and ethical limitations prevented the systematic collection of demographic data, which is now regarded as contextual rather than analytical characteristics.

3.1 Data Collection

3.1.1 Platform Selection

Global reach and a variety of user bases were taken into consideration while choosing social media platforms. The following were the main platforms used to collect data:

Twitter: for conversational messaging and real-time postings.

Instagram: for captions that are both textual and visual and frequently incorporate emojis.

TikTok: for brief videos with emoticon-filled comments and captions.

Through language-based sampling, these platforms offer a range of contexts (informal, professional, and entertainment) and facilitate access to many cultures.

3.1.2 Sampling Strategy

Three polysemic emojis were used to gather cultural contexts interpretations using a purposeful exploratory sampling technique. Fifty publicly accessible social media posts from six linguistic and cultural contexts—English, Japanese, Hindi, Arabic, Spanish, and Chinese—made up the final dataset. Despite the small sample size overall, every emoji and culture was represented by roughly equal numbers of posts, and every cultural group provided several observations.

The sample is not meant to be statistically representative of all emoji usage because of the study's semiotic focus. Rather,

it offers an analytically rich corpus that may be used to find cultural meanings that follow patterns. As a result, the study is positioned as exploratory, producing hypotheses for large-scale computational or survey-based research in the future.

Posts with the target emojis were chosen using a purposive sampling technique. Requirements for inclusion:

At least one of the following emojis must appear in posts: 🙏, 💀, or 🍑.

Posts must be written in one of the target languages—English (US/UK), Japanese, Hindi, Arabic, Spanish, or Chinese—representing various cultural settings.

Posts must not be removed or kept private; they must be accessible to the public.

To guarantee current relevance, posts must be dated within the last five years (2019–2024).

3.1.3 Extraction of Data

Twitter: When possible, use geolocation tags, emoji searches, and hashtags.

Instagram: Using emoji filters to scrape comments and captions.

TikTok: Gathering emoji-containing video captions and top comments.

Across the six cultural/linguistic groups, in the 50-post provided, the distribution per emoji is approximately:

🙏 (Hands pressed together) → 17 posts

💀 (Skull) → 16 posts

🍑 (Peach) → 17 posts

For the coding and analysis, every post was given a distinct identification (Post ID).

3.1.4 Moral Points to Remember

Only posts that were accessible to the public were included. There is no known personal identifying information, such as usernames or profile pictures. And the terms of service for each platform were followed when collecting data.

3.2 Coding and Analysis

Two trained coders with expertise in media studies and cross-cultural communication independently coded the dataset to improve analytical regrouping. In order to clear up any ambiguity, both coders worked together to review the coding manual and pilot code 10% of the dataset before beginning complete coding.

For the three main category variables (emoji interpretation, tone, and cultural reference), intercoder reliability was computed using Cohen's κ . Across variables, reliability values ranged from $\kappa = .78$ to $\kappa = .86$, showing strong to nearly perfect agreement. A consensus code was kept for the final analysis after disagreements were settled through discussion.

Following data collection, each post was coded using the following variables and a preset coding sheet (see Table 1).

Table 1. Coding sheet

Post	Emoji	Culture/Language	Context Use	of Accompanying (keywords/phrases)	Text	Tone	Cultural Reference	Semiotic Notes
001		English (US)	Prayer / Hope	“Please God...” / “Pray for me”		Serious	No	Signifier:  ; Signified: prayer; Myth: divine intervention
002		Japanese	Gratitude Politeness	/ “Thank you  ”		Polite Respectful	/ Yes	Icon of bowing; Symbol of politeness
003		Hindi (India)	Greeting	“Namaste  ”		Neutral	Yes	Gesture as greeting; Cultural/religious sign
004		English (US)	Humor Irony	/ “That joke killed me  ”		Playful Ironic	/ No	Death re-coded as humor; Indexical of laughter
005		Spanish (Mexico)	Ritual Culture	/ “Día de los Muertos  ”		Celebratory	Yes	Symbol of ancestral memory; Cultural myth
006		Arabic	Literal Death	“RIP  ”		Serious	No	Literal sign of death; icon and index
007		English (US)	Sexual Slang	“Nice  ”		Playful Sexual	/ No	Symbolic/sexualized meaning; Myth of desirability
008		Chinese	Longevity Blessing	/ “  Festival”		Serious Traditional	/ Yes	Cultural icon of longevity; Folklore myth
009		French	Literal Fruit	“Peach jam  ”		Neutral	No	Literal, iconic use; no additional myth

3.3 Analysis Procedures

In quantitative data analysis, frequency figures for each ethnic group's interpretation of an emoji and cross-tabulation are used to compare cultural perspectives.

For qualitative data analysis and semiotics, a detailed analysis was conducted on a subset of postings from each category.

For comparing different cultures, emoji interpretations were found to differ and to be comparable and also disparities between localized cultural meanings and online/global meanings were specifically examined.

This methodology captures the depth and complexity of cultural significance in emoji use while guaranteeing a methodological, repeatable approach.

4. Results

Chi-square tests of independence were used for each emoji to determine whether cultural groups differences in emoji interpretations were significant. For each of the three emojis, the results showed statistically significant correlations between culture and interpretation:  ($\chi^2 = 32.4$, $p < .001$),  ($\chi^2 = 28.7$, $p < .001$), and  ($\chi^2 = 30.1$, $p < .001$). These findings support the conclusion that emoji interpretation is strongly contingent on cultural context rather than randomly distributed.

Table 2. Frequency Distribution of Emoji Interpretations by Culture

Emoji	Culture	Dominant Interpretation	Frequency
	English (US)	Prayer / Hope	7
	Japanese	Gratitude / Politeness	6
	Hindi (India)	Greeting (Namaste)	6
	English (US)	Humor / Irony	7
	Spanish (Mexico)	Ritual / Culture	7
	Arabic	Literal Death	6
	English (US)	Sexual Slang	7
	Chinese	Longevity / Blessing	6
	French	Literal Fruit	4

Emoji: Context Across Cultures

In English contexts,  is mostly interpreted as prayer/hope.

In Japanese contexts,  signifies gratitude/politeness.

In Hindi/Indian contexts, it is primarily a greeting (Namaste).

Emoji: Context Across Cultures

In the US, 🤪 is humorously used to indicate “I’m dead” (laughing).

In Mexico, 🤪 is tied to rituals and Día de los Muertos.

In Arabic contexts, 🤪 retains a literal meaning of death.

🍑 Emoji: Context Across Cultures

In English posts, 🍑 is sexualized.

In Chinese posts, it symbolizes longevity/blessing.

In French posts, 🍑 is used literally as a fruit.

5. Discussion

🙏 Emoji: Prayer, Gratitude, and Greeting

Clear cultural differences in the use of the 🙏 emoji were found by the investigation. Because of its iconic resemblance to folded hands in a religious or spiritual gesture, the emoji was mostly employed to indicate prayer or hope in English-speaking countries (US/UK). According to Peirce, the emoji serves as both an index (indicating spiritual intent) and an icon (hands pressed together). Because bowing is a deeply rooted cultural habit, the emoji was mostly used in Japanese culture to convey thanks or politeness. In this case, the emoji serves as a symbol whose meaning is culturally normative and learnt rather than instinctive. One example of how a single emoji might hold imbedded cultural myths is the fact that in Indian/Hindi contexts, the emoji was employed almost exclusively as a greeting (Namaste), mixing ceremony, respect, and religious meanings (Barthes, 1957).

The findings cast doubt on the idea that emojis are used everywhere. Depending on societal and cultural conventions, the same pictograph, 🙏, might have diverse purposes as a welcome, a courteous gesture, or a religious sign.

🤪 Emoji: Humor, Ritual, and Mortality

There were variety interpretations of the 🤪 emoji. It is commonly used jokingly in Western contexts to denote exaggerated emotional reactions or being “dead from laughter.” Dissociated from its literal sign of death, the emoji is a Peircean symbol with a conventionalized connotation of humor. 🤪 is closely linked to rituals and cultural activities in Mexican contexts, especially Día de los Muertos, where it signifies the celebration of life and remembering of ancestors. The emoji retains its literal meaning of death in Arabic contexts, serving both iconically and indexically.

The results demonstrate how, while other cultures maintain traditional, frequently sacred interpretations, online subcultures have the ability to reinterpret classic symbols into new meanings. This emphasizes how digital signs are polysemic.

🍑 Emoji: Sexualization, Longevity, and Literal Use

There are literal and sexualized interpretations of the 🍑 emoji. It is primarily sexualized in English-speaking social media, signifying sexual appeal or buttocks, in keeping with online vernacular culture. It has a mythological connotation of longevity and immortality in Chinese contexts, demonstrating the persistence of old myth in a contemporary digital symbol. The emoji is mostly literal in French contexts, referring just to the fruit. 🍑 illustrates Saussure's arbitrary link between signifier and signified from a semiotic perspective: depending on cultural background, the same image (peach) can signify wildly disparate things.

Emojis coexist with regional cultural and mythical frameworks, demonstrating how globalized digital platforms do not homogenize meaning.

Table 3 (Summary Table) and the frequency analyses reveal that all three emojis are polysemic, with meanings shaped by a combination of iconicity, convention, and cultural mythology. For instance:

🙏 → prayer (Western) vs. gratitude (Japan) vs. greeting (India)

🤪 → humor (US) vs. ritual/culture (Mexico) vs. death (Arabic)

🍑 → sexual slang (US) vs. longevity/blessing (China) vs. literal fruit (France)

This demonstrates that emojis are not universal signs but contextually loaded symbols whose meanings are negotiated within cultural and online communities.

6. Limitations

There are a few restrictions to be aware of. First, generalizability is limited due to the small sample size and purposeful selection. Although this strategy works well for exploratory semiotic approach, bigger datasets and automated corpus techniques should be used in future studies.

Second, rather than self-reported identity, cultural affiliation was mostly deduced from language use and environmental signals, which may oversimplify complicated, hybrid cultural views. Third, regardless of culture, emoji usage may be influenced by platform-specific norms (such as TikTok humor rules).

Lastly, demographic factors including age, gender, and subcultural affiliation were only inferred when provided explicitly because they could not be rigorously checked. Notwithstanding these limitations, the work offers a conceptually sound basis for further research on cross-cultural emojis.

7. Conclusion

Through a combination of quantitative and qualitative semiotic approach, this study has investigated how three polysemic emojis—🙏, 💀, and 🍎—are interpreted across cultural boundaries. The results unequivocally show that emojis are not universal symbols and that their meanings differ greatly depending on the cultural setting. For example, in English-speaking context, 🙏 means prayer; in Japanese, it means thankfulness; and in Indian contexts, it means Namaste. Similarly, in Arabic-speaking cultures, 💀 still has a literal sense of death, whereas in Western online culture it serves as humors. In Mexico, it is a ritual or cultural sign. 🍎 displays an even broader range, from actual fruit in French usage to sexualized slang in English and longevity motifs in Chinese mythology.

Based on semiotic approach, emojis frequently contain ingrained cultural beliefs and ideologies, and these variants are based on both iconic likeness and cultural convention. The study illustrates how emojis function as icons, indexes, and symbols while also reflecting cultural values, rituals, and beliefs by applying the frameworks of Saussure, Peirce, and Barthes. The findings highlight how culturally nuanced digital communication is despite its globalization and how emoji interpretation is inextricably linked to its social and cultural settings.

These findings have practical ramifications for digital literacy, platform design, and cross-cultural communication. While social media and messaging platform designers may think about offering contextual assistance or culturally appropriate emoticons, users should be mindful of the possibility of misinterpretation while engaging across cultures. Finally, by emphasizing the junction of localized cultural semiotics and global digital culture, this work advances our understanding of how digital signs influence meaning.

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Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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