

Emojis in Professional Communication: A Double-Edged Sword in Cross-Cultural Interactions between Zimbabweans and Chinese Employees in Zimbabwean Workplaces

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how emojis are used in professional communication, particularly in a diverse workplace with Zimbabwean and Chinese employees. The research adopted a qualitative research approach, a case study research design and data were thematically analyzed. The researcher gathered insights from 25 participants through semi-structured interviews. The focus was on understanding the advantages of using emojis, recognizing the potential pitfalls, and setting some guidelines for using them appropriately in a work setting. Findings showed that certain emojis like 😊, 👍, ❤️, 🙌, 🎉, 🤝, 🙏, 🍀, and ⭐ were seen as helpful digital cues. They helped make workplace communication feel warmer and enhanced team relationships. Participants appreciated that emojis could reduce the stiffness of text-based messages, especially in remote and multilingual environments. However, there were also concerns. Some emojis, such as 🤔, 😬, 😏, 🙄, 🙇, 🙊, 🙉, and 🙈, were seen as possibly confusing, inappropriate, or too casual for formal and sensitive communications. The study concluded that while emojis can enrich professional communication, they need to be used with care. Overusing or misusing them can lead to confusion, undermine professionalism, and disregard cultural sensitivities. To navigate this, the study recommends clear guidelines for digital communication that factor in context, audience, culture, hierarchy, and the intent of the message.

KEYWORDS: Emojis, Multicultural Workplace, Professional Settings, Cross-Cultural Communication, Zimbabwe, Chinese.

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's workplace, communication has evolved far beyond face-to-face meetings and formal letters. Employees now rely heavily on digital channels like emails, instant messaging apps, WhatsApp groups, Microsoft Teams, and Slack for sharing information, coordinating tasks, offering feedback, and nurturing workplace connections. While these tools have made communication more efficient, they often miss out on the crucial non-verbal cues like facial expressions, tone of voice, gestures, and body language that can add depth to our conversations. These cues help convey feelings, seriousness, politeness, and intentions behind our messages [1].

To bridge this gap, many people have started using emojis and emoticons like 😊, 😏, 👍, 🎉, and :-). These little symbols can really enhance our written messages by clarifying tone, expressing appreciation, softening instructions, fostering friendliness, and strengthening team bonds. For example, a message that says, "Well done 🎉" comes off as much more enthusiastic than just, "Well done." Similarly, a quick "Noted 👍" conveys agreement or acknowledgment in a way that plain text might not. However, using emojis in the workplace can be tricky. The same emoji can mean different things depending on cultural background, age, workplace dynamics, and context. A smiley face 😊 might be seen as friendly and polite in one situation but could also be interpreted as sarcastic or even emotionally distant in another. This is especially important in multicultural workplaces, where employees from various backgrounds may have different understandings of emoji meanings and communication styles [2]. This is particularly relevant when we consider workplaces that include both Zimbabwean and Chinese employees. There may be significant differences in language, communication approaches, emotional expression, and cultural interpretations of symbols. In these environments, emojis can sometimes help close communication gaps by adding warmth and emotional context. Yet, they can also lead to confusion or misinterpretation, potentially being seen as unprofessional if the shared meanings aren't clear. A thumbs-up 👍, a smiling face 😊, or a celebration emoji 🎉 might seem harmless, but their impact can shift based on the sender, the recipient, and the situation.

Thus, this study delves into the dual nature of emoji use in professional communication, particularly within cross-cultural interactions between Zimbabwean and Chinese employees. The focus is on how emojis can enhance communication by making messages feel more relatable and clear, while also recognizing the risks involved when they're used in formal settings, hierarchical interactions, performance feedback, or sensitive workplace discussions. Understanding how Zimbabwean and Chinese employees perceive and utilize emojis is crucial for fostering better communication in these

diverse environments. Misunderstandings can undermine trust, teamwork, satisfaction, and overall workplace relationships. By exploring the benefits, potential pitfalls, and interpretation of emojis, the study aims to offer insights that can help organizations craft clearer and more culturally sensitive communication practices. This, in turn, can guide employees to use emojis thoughtfully, minimizing the chances of misunderstandings and fostering a more harmonious workplace.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 DIGITAL COMMUNICATION, EMOJIS, AND WORKPLACE INTERACTION

Digital communication has become a crucial part of how we interact in the workplace today. Platforms like emails, instant messaging, video calls, collaborative tools, and social media have largely taken the place of many traditional face-to-face conversations. However, one challenge with text-based communication is that it misses out on essential non-verbal cues, things like facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, tone of voice, and body language, that help us understand each other better. To bridge this gap, emojis and emoticons like 😊, 😄, 👍, 🎉, and the like have emerged as valuable tools. They allow us to express emotions, clarify our tone, soften our messages, and build stronger relationships in an online setting.

Research by Skovholt *et al.* [3] points out that emoticons in workplace emails do more than just show how we feel; they serve as cues that guide the reader on how to interpret the message. For instance, an emoticon like :-) can convey friendliness, humor, or gratitude, depending on how it's used in the message. Their findings indicate that these little symbols perform three key roles: they signal a positive attitude, highlight jokes or irony, and soften directives or enhance greetings and expressions of thanks. This suggests that emojis are not just playful extras in our professional messages; they genuinely affect how our communications are understood.

Moreover, the rise of emoji usage reflects a shift in workplace culture. Communication today transcends formal memos and set-in-stone emails; it includes quick replies, informal chats, team updates, and virtual conversations. In tools like Slack, Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp, and Discord, emojis can convey agreement with a thumbs-up 👍, celebrate success with a party popper 🎉, soften a response with a smile 😊, or even show someone's vacation status with a palm tree 🌴. These symbols help make our conversations feel quicker, friendlier, and more relatable. However, their meanings can vary widely; what feels casual and friendly in one team might come across as too informal or even inappropriate in another, especially where professional boundaries and cultural norms are strongly felt.

Stark and Crawford [4] provide an interesting perspective by viewing emojis as not just communication tools, but as cultural and economic artifacts. They argue that emojis represent forms of emotional labor because they assist us in managing our feelings, showing warmth, and maintaining social connections in a digital space. For example, sending a smiley face 😊 can warm up an otherwise stark message, conveying friendliness. Yet it also highlights how modern workplaces increasingly expect employees to engage in emotional work, even through digital means.

2.2 BENEFITS OF EMOJI USE IN PROFESSIONAL AND VIRTUAL WORKSPACES

One of the key advantages of using emojis in professional communication is that they help to humanize text-based interactions. When we're communicating in writing, it can sometimes come across as cold, harsh, or even ambiguous due to the absence of voice tone and facial expressions. Emojis like 😊, 😄, 👍, and 🎉 can help fix this by infusing emotional tone and warmth into our messages. For example, saying "Well done 🎉" feels much more appreciative and enthusiastic than just "Well done." Likewise, a message like "Please revise this section 😊" carries a softer touch, making it sound less confrontational compared to the same request without an emoji.

Research by Glikson *et al.* [2] highlighted that using emojis or emoticons in work-related communication boosts perceptions of warmth. Their findings showed that supervisors who included emojis in their emails were viewed as more approachable than those who stuck to plain text. However, it's worth noting that these emoji-using supervisors were also seen as less assertive, suggesting that while emojis can aid in building relationships, they need to be used judiciously when conveying authority, seriousness, or leadership.

In the context of virtual workspaces, the role of emojis and other non-textual responses like GIFs, stickers, and memes becomes even more critical. Remote employees often find it challenging to forge social connections with colleagues they haven't met in person. A study by Shandilya *et al.* [5] found that new team members often use non-textual communication selectively and gradually to foster interpersonal relationships within virtual teams. New employees typically wait for their colleagues to initiate the use of emojis or GIFs before they feel comfortable joining in, indicating a desire to maintain professionalism while getting a feel for the team's communication culture.

Research by Riordan [6] signifies the relevance for multicultural workplaces, where new employees may be uncertain about the appropriateness of emoji use. For example, in some teams, a thumbs-up 👍 could be seen as a concise form of acknowledgment, while in others, it might seem too informal or even dismissive. Similarly, while a celebration emoji 🎉 might be fitting for congratulating someone, it could be perceived as inappropriate during serious discussions about underperformance, conflicts, or disciplinary matters. Therefore, the effectiveness of emojis hinges on timing, context, shared norms, and the nature of the relationship between the sender and the receiver.

Furthermore, emojis can also foster team cohesion by creating a feeling of inclusion and shared emotional experiences. In group chats, reactions like 👍, 😊, or 🎉 allow team members to engage without having to type out long responses. This is especially beneficial in fast-paced work environments where quick confirmation, encouragement, or acknowledgment is needed. However, it's essential that team members have a common understanding of these emojis; otherwise, what is meant to be a helpful shortcut might lead to confusion instead of clarity.

2.3 RISKS OF EMOJI USE IN MULTICULTURAL WORKPLACES

Emojis can add a friendly touch and make communication feel warmer, but they can also spark some concerns about professionalism and appropriateness in the workplace. In professional settings, there's a mix of formal and informal rules that guide how we express emotions. Typically, employees are expected to communicate clearly and respectfully, showing a level of seriousness. While emojis can enhance this by clarifying tone, overusing them or using them in sensitive contexts can backfire.

According to research by Courtice *et al.* [7], the type of emoji we use and the context of our messages can really affect how others perceive us at work. Positive emojis like 😊, 😄, and 👍 can actually boost our image when paired with upbeat or neutral messages. On the flip side, negative emojis like 😞 or 😡 can diminish perceptions of our professionalism, especially if they don't fit with the message we're trying to convey. This suggests that emojis carry weight and can influence how others evaluate our competence [3].

For instance, using a celebratory emoji in a message that praises good work, like "Great job on the report! 🎉," fits well. However, it might seem out of place if you're addressing a complaint or discussing less-than-stellar performance. Similarly, using a negative emoji can express frustration, but it might also make you seem a bit unprofessional or emotionally unstable. This emphasizes the need for thoughtful emoji use based on the nature of the message and workplace norms.

Rajan *et al.* [8] warn that we should be cautious with emojis, particularly in sensitive areas like performance reviews. Their case study points out that if managers frequently use positive emojis like 😊 or 👍 in casual feedback but then give less favorable formal appraisals, employees might feel confused or disheartened when these informal signals don't align with the more serious evaluations. This underlines a significant risk: while emojis can convey positivity, they shouldn't take the place of clear and accountable feedback.

2.4 MEANINGS AND CULTURAL INTERPRETATIONS OF EMOJIS IN THE CHINESE-ZIMBABWEAN WORKPLACE CONTEXT

Emojis and emoticons are more than just fun visuals; they carry different meanings depending on cultural backgrounds. Even if they seem universal, how we interpret them can vary greatly due to things like language, social norms, and the context in which they're used.

For example, research by Park *et al.* [9] reveals that people from different cultures have distinct preferences for emoticon styles. In Western countries, you might see a lot of horizontal emoticons like :-) or :- (, while in East Asia, vertical styles like ^_^ or T_T are much more common. This difference isn't trivial; it reflects deeper cultural patterns about how we express emotions, highlighting whether we focus more on facial expressions or eye movements.

This cultural nuance can lead to misunderstandings, especially in cross-cultural work environments. Imagine a Zimbabwean employee using a smiling emoji 😊 to convey friendliness and support, while a colleague from China interprets the same emoji differently, perhaps seeing it as something sarcastic or masking discomfort, depending on the situation. Such variations underline how emojis are not universally understood; they take on meaning based on shared cultural experiences.

Cui *et al.* [10] further explore this concept, finding that among younger Chinese users, the smiling emoji can sometimes indicate sarcasm in digital conversations. This shows how even the context and the sender's background, like their job, can influence how a message is received. In ambiguous scenarios, the same emoji might be interpreted in multiple ways, influenced by assumptions about the sender's sincerity or humor.

This is especially relevant in workplaces where Zimbabwean and Chinese employees interact. Communication styles, emotional expressions, and even attitudes toward hierarchy can differ significantly. Zimbabwean workers might use emojis like 😊, 👍, or 🎉 to express warmth or team spirit, while their Chinese colleagues might interpret these differently, especially in a context where hierarchy and indirect communication matter. For instance, minimal or ambiguous emojis from Chinese employees might be seen by Zimbabweans as cold or even sarcastic.

Table 1 provides a reference for understanding common emojis used in workplace communication, with attention to professional, cultural, and generational interpretations. It serves as a reference for understanding the common emojis used in workplace communication, focusing on their professional, cultural, and generational interpretations. It assists teams, particularly in multicultural environments, in using emojis more effectively and appropriately.

Table 1: Meanings and Cultural Interpretations of Emojis in the Workplace.

Emoji	General Meaning	Professional/Cultural Interpretation
😊 Smiling Face with Smiling Eyes	Warmth, friendliness, positivity	Polite and approachable in professional settings. May be seen as smug if overused.
😎 Smiling Face with Sunglasses	Cool, Confident, Aloof	Can be interpreted as confidence or smugness, depending on tone and setting.
🙄 Upside-Down Face	Sarcasm, Passive-aggression, Playfulness	Highly context-dependent. Can express irony, frustration, or light sarcasm.
😐 Neutral Face	No emotion, Displeasure, Lack of enthusiasm	Might come off as cold, unimpressed, or dismissive.
😬 Face Without Mouth	Speechless, Awkward, no comment	Could imply discomfort or uncertainty; easily misinterpreted.
👍 Thumbs Up	Approval, agreement, 'Okay'	Universally positive, but can be seen as rude in some African and Middle Eastern cultures.
🙏 Folded Hands	Thank you, prayer, request	Can be interpreted as gratitude, a religious gesture, or a high-five depending on culture.
😂 Face with Tears of Joy	Something is extremely funny	Could imply mockery in formal settings. Less favored by Gen Z.
🤣 Rolling on the Floor Laughing	Extreme laughter, Sarcasm	May be seen as genuine laughter or mockery. Not universally interpreted the same way.
😓 Smiling Face with Sweat	Nervous relief, awkwardness	Expresses tension or relief. May confuse recipients due to mixed signals.
🔥 Fire	Awesome, trending, 'hot'	Used to praise work. Can be too casual or inappropriate without context.
😬 Grimacing Face	Awkward, nervous, or 'oops'	Can be interpreted as sarcasm or discomfort. Use cautiously.
🤝 Handshake	Agreement, cooperation, respect	Positive in teamwork. Reinforces formal and respectful tone.
🥳 Partying Face	Celebration, joy, excitement	Great for team celebrations. Too informal for traditional or governmental roles.
😘 Face Blowing a Kiss	Affection, love, or thankfulness	Avoid in professional settings; often seen as flirtatious.
😬 Thinking Face	Pondering, skeptical, unsure	Signals reflection but may be read as passive-aggressive.
⌚ Hourglass Not Done	Waiting, delay, time running out	Implies urgency or pressure. Risk of seeming impatient.
👁️ Eyes	Looking, watching, attention	Used to monitor or highlight. Informally implies suspicion or curiosity.
💀 Skull	Dead (literally), laughing to death, Creepy	Gen Z uses it to mean extreme laughter, while others may see it as dark or morbid.
✅	Signify a completed task	Some can interpret it as meaning 'correct or rightfully said'

2.5 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is centered on Hall's High-Context and Low-Context Communication Theory, along with Social Semiotics, both of which shed light on the use and interpretation of emojis in cross-cultural professional settings. Hall's 1979 theory emphasizes how cultural backgrounds influence reliance on implicit or explicit communication cues, while Social Semiotics explores how emojis function as meaningful symbols shaped by social and cultural influences. Together, these theories offer a comprehensive framework for understanding how employees from China and Zimbabwe use emojis in the workplace.

2.5.1 SOCIAL SEMIOTICS THEORY AND ITS RELATION TO THE STUDY

Social semiotics, a theory developed from Michael Halliday's groundbreaking work, delves into how individuals create and share meaning through signs, symbols, and various forms of communication within our social environments [11]. This theory emphasizes that communication goes beyond just words; it embraces a range of semiotic tools, such as images, gestures, colors, and even emojis in our digital conversations that help us convey deeper meanings.

In exploring the topic of "Emojis in Professional Communication: A Double-Edged Sword in a Cross-Cultural Workforce," social semiotics acts as a valuable lens for examining how emojis serve as visual signs that play a crucial role in shaping workplace communication. Emojis, like other semiotic resources, are far from neutral; their meaning is influenced by social norms, cultural backgrounds, and the intentions of both the sender and the receiver [2]. This perspective invites us to appreciate the richness and complexity of how we communicate across diverse contexts.

2.5.2 HALL'S HIGH-CONTEXT AND LOW-CONTEXT COMMUNICATION THEORY

This research draws on Edward T. Hall's 1976 High-Context and Low-Context Communication Theory, providing a key perspective on how culture influences communication styles. Hall argued that cultural groups differ in their reliance on implicit contextual cues versus explicit verbal messages. This difference is crucial for understanding the interpretation and usage of emojis, non-verbal, often ambiguous symbols across cultures. In high-context cultures, communication tends to be subtle, indirect, and depends heavily on shared background knowledge, social hierarchies, and non-verbal cues. Messages are often implied rather than clearly expressed [12].

Hall associates countries like China with this high-context style. In these cultures, emojis are used sparingly and are understood within a framework of cultural codes and social relationships. Conversely, low-context cultures favor direct, clear, and explicit communication, with messages that are self-explanatory and require less context for understanding. Zimbabwean professional communication, shaped by Western business norms and the use of English as the medium of instruction, shows characteristics of a low-context culture. In such environments, emojis are more likely to serve as simple emotional or relational indicators, like showing positivity, agreement, or appreciation.

3. METHOD(S)

This study took a closer look at how emojis are used in professional communication between Zimbabwean and Chinese managers, using a qualitative case study approach. The qualitative approach allowed participants to share rich, detailed stories about their experiences with emojis in the workplace.

The researchers selected 25 participants through purposive sampling, aiming for those who had firsthand experience navigating cross-cultural communication in their jobs; these include the Chinese and Zimbabwean managers. These individuals were drawn from human resources, technical, finance, and management departments within two multicultural organizations in Zimbabwe. They regularly employed digital communication tools and interacted with colleagues from different cultures, making them ideal candidates for the study. Data collection was primarily carried out through semi-structured interviews, which allowed researchers to ask specific questions yet gave participants room to express their thoughts and experiences fully. An interview guide featuring open-ended questions covered various topics, including commonly used emojis, their perceived meanings, potential misunderstandings, cultural differences, and professional guidelines. Whenever possible, participants shared anonymized examples of their messages, provided identifying details were removed; however, sensitive organizational communications were not included in the study.

To ensure the research findings were robust, trustworthiness was carefully considered through aspects like credibility and dependability. Credibility was bolstered by conducting in-depth interviews and accurately interpreting participants' insights. Transferability was enhanced by thoroughly describing the study context and participant backgrounds. Ethical considerations were at the forefront of the study, with a focus on informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and participant safety. Individuals were briefed on the purpose of the research, their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. To preserve anonymity, specific details like names, job titles, and company names were omitted from the final report, and participants were assigned codes or pseudonyms.

4. RESULTS

4.1 PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF EMOJI USAGE AND CONTEXT WHERE THEY ARE APPROPRIATE TO USE IN THE WORKPLACE

Below are results from the first objective in the research, "Emojis in Professional Communication: A Double-Edged Sword in a Cross-Cultural Workforce".

4.1.1 EMOJIS AS EMOTIONAL SOFTENER AND HUMANIZING COMMUNICATION

A fascinating insight from the study revealed that emojis are seen as a form of digital body language, serving as gentle cues of warmth, empathy, and personality. Respondents shared that the right emoji, when used thoughtfully, could change a straightforward or directive message into a friendlier and more inviting one. This is especially crucial in jobs that involve constant collaboration, like human resources, project management, and customer service. For example, during performance feedback or when sending deadline reminders, professionals mentioned that adding emojis like 😊 (smiling face) or 🤝 (handshake) helped express support and foster mutual respect. Emojis were perceived as tools that bridge the emotional gap created by virtual communication, allowing team members to feel more connected and less alone, especially in remote work environments.

Many Zimbabwean employees appreciated emojis for humanizing the tone of messages, particularly in situations that might otherwise seem cold or abrupt.

A few Chinese employees also observed that emojis can "soften" messages and lessen the risk of misunderstandings in text conversations. *"A simple smiley face 😊 at the end of a message makes it feel friendlier and less like a command,"* explained an HR officer. *"Especially when communicating with colleagues overseas, a thumbs up 👍 or smile 😊 adds a touch of warmth,"* noted two of the Chinese project managers.

4.1.2 CLARIFYING INTENT AND EMOTION

Another key benefit noted by participants was the role emojis play in managing tone, especially in situations where written words might be misinterpreted due to their brevity or the lack of vocal cues. Emojis act like emotional signposts, guiding readers to interpret messages in the way they were intended. Respondents from multilingual teams shared how emojis helped them bridge linguistic gaps. For instance, a Chinese team member working in logistics found it easier to express appreciation or a sense of urgency with emojis when their English vocabulary felt limited. Similarly, Zimbabwean developers remarked that emojis clarified when they were being light-hearted versus serious, particularly during fast-paced conversations.

In addition to the folded hands emoji (🙏), symbols like the thinking face (🤔) and red heart (❤️) were highlighted as effective ways to convey curiosity, care, or reflective emotions that are difficult to express in plain text without becoming ambiguous. Several respondents appreciated how emojis helped express their intent, especially in short messages that might otherwise seem curt or cold. *"When I write 'Thanks,' it feels abrupt. But 'Thanks! 🙏' feels much more appreciative,"* shared one Zimbabwean software engineer. *"It helps me grasp tone better, particularly since English isn't my first language,"* added a Chinese logistics coordinator.

4.1.3 BUILDING TEAM CULTURE AND RAPPORT

Emoji usage has been found to significantly boost team spirit, especially in virtual workspaces where chances for spontaneous interactions can be pretty limited. Many respondents described emojis as a form of "social glue", a way to celebrate wins, lighten the atmosphere during tense moments, and show empathy in tough times.

Teams juggling long-term projects shared that using emojis like 🎉 (party popper), 🥳 (celebration face), and 💪 (flexed biceps) to acknowledge small victories fostered a culture of encouragement and motivation among team members. Some organizations even went a step further, creating custom emoji reactions tailored to their unique team cultures, including symbols representing team values or inside jokes. This really helped reinforce a sense of identity and belonging within the group. Fun emojis, such as 🎉 (party popper) or 🥳 (celebration face), have become staples for celebrating small wins and birthdays.

One Zimbabwean marketing executive explained, *"We use emojis in our Slack channels to react to updates. It keeps the mood light and inclusive."* Our Chinese colleagues were initially quite formal, but after we introduced emojis, everyone became more expressive.

Emojis also played a role during company-wide announcements. Reactions with clapping hands (👏), fire (🔥), or star (★) emojis allowed team members to show support and engagement without the need for lengthy responses. This asynchronous yet interactive method helped remote teams feel more involved and connected.

4.2 POTENTIAL RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH EMOJIS IN WORKPLACE COMMUNICATION

Emojis have certainly added a fun and expressive flair to our digital interactions, but bringing them into professional communication can be tricky. In diverse workplaces that include people from different countries and generations, using emojis might sometimes complicate things instead of making them clearer. In this section, we'll explore some of the worries shared by employees and managers from various departments and backgrounds. We'll focus on how emojis can lead to misunderstandings, issues with how people are perceived, and even potential legal problems in the workplace.

4.2.1 MISINTERPRETATION AND AMBIGUITY

A common concern voiced by respondents was how easily emojis can be misinterpreted due to their deeply subjective nature. Unlike words, which are influenced by clear grammar and context, emojis are often read through the lens of personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, or the mood of the moment. This means the same emoji can take on completely different meanings depending on who receives it. In cross-cultural teams, particularly those with African and Asian professionals, emojis meant to convey humor or empathy often miss the mark. The laughing emoji (😂), for example, is usually used to lighten the mood, but it may sometimes come across as mocking, especially when used in response to a mistake or during serious discussions. This kind of confusion can lead to awkward tensions or embarrassment, particularly in high-pressure situations. Additionally, emojis like 😓 (grinning with sweat) or 😬 (grimacing face) can be interpreted as awkward, sarcastic, or evasive, depending on the tone of the surrounding message. This leaves the door open for subtle miscommunications that can chip away at trust or slow down how quickly conflicts are resolved.

4.2.2 PERCEIVED UNPROFESSIONALISM

Another concern that came up was the chance of coming off as unprofessional. While emojis can really brighten up casual team chats, using them too much or in the wrong situations might hurt the seriousness of the message or how credible the sender seems.

Several people shared stories where emoji use didn't fit the weight of the message. For instance, getting an apology email packed with cheerful smiley faces after a missed deadline felt dismissive and inappropriate to some. Such communications often miss the mark on the expected tone of responsibility or seriousness.

"When I get an email with three smiley faces 😊😊😊 after a missed deadline, it feels tone-deaf," a project manager from Zimbabwe commented. *"We had to guide a junior staff member who was sending kiss emojis 😘 to coworkers; it made everyone a bit uneasy,"* shared a colleague from China.

There were also instances where certain emojis crossed the line, such as the kiss emoji (😘), which made some people feel uncomfortable because of its personal or flirty implication. These situations often required managers to step in and provide guidance to reinforce professional boundaries in online communication. Additionally, emojis like 😎 (smiling face with sunglasses) or 💄 (lipstick mark) led to confusion or discomfort, especially in formal settings like reports, evaluations, or communication between departments.

4.2.3 CULTURAL AND GENERATIONAL GAPS

Cultural and generational differences continue to influence how emojis are seen and used in the workplace. For younger employees, especially those from Gen Z and younger millennials, emojis are a natural part of their communication style. They tend to view emojis as essential tools for expressing feelings, enthusiasm, or empathy in digital interactions.

In contrast, older employees or those working in more traditional, hierarchical organizations may see excessive emoji use as informal, unprofessional, or even lazy. This difference in perception can sometimes lead to misunderstandings, particularly when there's no clear discussion about communication expectations.

For instance, respondents from China highlighted a more cautious approach to using emojis at work. In many formal workplace environments in China, emoji use is restricted and needs to be contextually appropriate. Using them too often can come off as immature or unserious. Even seemingly neutral emojis like ⌚ (hourglass) or 👁️ (eyes) can carry unexpected passive-aggressive meanings if interpreted differently from what was intended.

One supervisor shared, *"I've noticed our younger interns are quick to use emojis, while older staff see it as casual or even lazy communication."* A senior Chinese accountant noted, *"In China, we tend to use emojis sparingly at work. Too many can make someone seem unserious."*

These cultural and generational divides can lead to misaligned expectations, which might hinder clarity in messages, particularly within intergenerational teams or international collaborations.

4.2.4 BALANCING EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION AND PROFESSIONALISM IN EMOJI USE

Emojis can really enhance how we communicate at work by bringing in emotional depth, but it's important to use them wisely to prevent misunderstandings and keep our professional image intact. Many people in this study raised concerns about emojis coming off as unprofessional, particularly when used too much or in the wrong way. One respondent shared their experience of receiving an apology email loaded with cheerful emojis after a deadline was missed; this was seen as dismissive and lacking responsibility. Such stories illustrate the delicate balance between expressing our emotions and upholding professionalism.

4.3 GUIDELINES FOR THE APPROPRIATE AND EFFECTIVE INTEGRATION OF EMOJIS IN PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION

As emojis become more common in workplace communication, particularly in our increasingly connected and diverse work environments, it's crucial to create clear and thoughtful guidelines for their use. While emojis can bring warmth, expressiveness, and subtlety to our messages, they can also cause confusion or give off unintended impressions if misused. This section shares practical strategies and best practices from professionals across different multinational sectors in Zimbabwe, giving us insights on how to effectively integrate emojis into our business communication.

4.3.1 UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT AND AUDIENCE

One of the most consistent themes shared by participants was how vital it is to be aware of context and your audience. Using emojis isn't just a fun addition; it really hinges on who you're chatting with and where the conversation is taking place. Many professionals felt at ease peppering their messages with emojis when communicating with peers, close team members, or in relaxed spaces like internal chats. Emojis like 😊 (the smiley face) or 👍 (thumbs up) were commonly used to convey support, warmth, or agreement. However, when it came to interactions with clients, senior leadership, or external stakeholders, the general consensus was to adopt a more formal approach and steer clear of emojis altogether.

For example, a Zimbabwean supervisor shared, *"When I message my peers or close team members, I might throw in a smiley 😊 or thumbs up 👍. But when I'm dealing with clients or upper management, I keep it strictly professional."*

Meanwhile, a senior HR specialist from Zimbabwe added, *"We teach new hires to watch and learn first. If the team's using emojis, it's fine to join in. If not, it's better to hold back."*

The unspoken guideline among seasoned employees was to "read the room." New hires were often encouraged to observe how their team communicates before diving into using emojis. If emojis were a common feature among team leaders or in internal chats, it was seen as safe to join the fun. On the flip side, if the tone leaned more towards formal or reserved, the recommendation was to exercise a bit of restraint. It's all about adjusting your emoji game to fit the situation, keeping things professional when liaising with management or clients and feeling free to express yourself with emojis in more casual, peer-level conversations.

4.3.2 USE EMOJIS TO SUPPORT, NOT TO REPLACE THE MESSAGE

Another important takeaway is the significance of using emojis to enhance clear and well-structured messages, rather than substituting them for words. Emojis can be wonderful tools for conveying emotion or tone, but on their own, they often leave too much to interpretation. Many respondents emphasized that emojis should aim to clarify meaning, not cloud it. For example, instead of just sending a single 🔥 emoji in response to a colleague's work, a clearer message would be, *"Great job on the presentation! 🔥"* This way, the recipient understands the intent, reducing the chance of miscommunication.

"Don't just send a fire emoji 🔥 and expect someone to understand what you mean. Say, 'Great job on the presentation! 🔥' to make it clear," shared one Chinese project member. *"Use emojis to enhance clarity, not to create confusion,"* suggested a project manager.

There was also some concern about using emojis in place of words, especially in brief replies. Some professionals pointed out that depending solely on emoji reactions in platforms like Slack or WhatsApp might appear dismissive or unclear, especially in professional conversations. Ultimately, emojis should complement the written word and not replace meaningful content.

4.3.3 BE CULTURALLY SENSITIVE AND AVOID AMBIGUITY

Cultural interpretation significantly influences how we perceive emojis. While they often appear universal, the meanings attached to them can change dramatically based on our regions, cultural backgrounds, and personal experiences. This variance is especially important in diverse, multicultural teams where misunderstandings may arise from differing interpretations.

Participants expressed that an emoji like 🙏 (folded hands) could symbolize gratitude, prayer, or even a friendly high-five, depending on the cultural lens through which it's viewed. An emoji considered fun and playful in one society might come across as overly casual or even inappropriate in another, highlighting the nuances of communication.

A Chinese interpreter rightly pointed out, *"Some emojis, like the folded hands 🙏, can be viewed differently from one culture to another. It's best to use them sparingly unless you're certain of their meaning."* He further emphasized, *"What feels friendly in one culture can appear too casual or even rude in another."*

Experts suggest focusing on emojis that are widely recognized and understood, such as simple smileys, thumbs up, or clapping hands (👏). They advise against using symbols that may carry cultural, religious, or suggestive meanings unless you fully understand their implications. In cross-cultural contexts, being cautious and deliberate in our emoji usage is the best approach.

4.3.4 SET ORGANIZATIONAL GUIDELINES

Many participants shared their thoughts on the need for internal communication guidelines that clearly address the use of emojis. As emojis increasingly find their way into our professional communications, having clear policies can help maintain consistency, avoid misunderstandings, and foster professionalism among teams. Some organizations have created friendly digital etiquette handbooks that guide tone, punctuation, and emoji usage across various communication platforms. These resources are invaluable for employees, particularly newcomers, as they clarify the appropriate use of emojis in different situations. For remote teams, such guidelines play a crucial role in harmonizing communication expectations across diverse time zones, cultures, and levels of seniority.

"We developed a digital etiquette guide that includes a section on emoji use. It ensures everyone is on the same page," shared a young supervisor from Zimbabwe. This perspective was echoed by a young accountant from China, who emphasized, *"It would be helpful to have training focused on tone and professionalism in our online messages, especially in remote teams."*

4.3.5 LIMIT USE IN FORMAL AND EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION

There was unanimous agreement among respondents that emojis should be used sparingly, if at all, in high-level or external communications. While emojis are suitable for informal internal interactions, they were seen as inappropriate for official documents, legal communications, proposals, or client-facing materials.

Participants pointed out that using emojis in formal reports, contracts, performance evaluations, or executive memos could diminish the seriousness of the message or even be perceived as unprofessional. In legal or archival contexts, emojis can also create confusion when tone and interpretation are later examined out of context.

"Avoid emojis in client proposals, legal memos, or official announcements," said a Zimbabwean senior HR Officer. "Emojis have their place, but not in contracts or performance reviews," added an administrative manager from China. In branding or marketing, especially on social media, emojis may be more acceptable depending on the target audience. As digital communication continues to dominate professional environments, scholars emphasize the need for clear guidelines around emoji use to maintain clarity, professionalism, and cultural sensitivity.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF EMOJI USAGE AND CONTEXTS WHERE THEY ARE APPROPRIATE IN THE WORKPLACE

According to Hall's Context Theory of 1979 and Social Semiotics, emojis serve as emotional softeners, helping to build rapport among colleagues. In high-context cultures, like China, where people often express emotions indirectly and rely on subtle non-verbal cues, emojis are a useful way to maintain friendly interactions without saying too much outright. For instance, Chinese workers mentioned that a simple 😊 emoji could lighten the mood of a serious or authoritative message, reflecting a cultural sensitivity towards preserving face and respect within the hierarchy.

On the other hand, Zimbabwean professionals, who are part of a lower-context and more explicit communication culture, see emojis as vibrant indicators that add warmth and personality to formal conversations. Social Semiotics enhances our understanding of this by showing that emojis are not just fun images; they are tools that help shape the emotional atmosphere and interpersonal dynamics of online discussions. Icons like 🍷 or 🍷 convey specific feelings and carefully crafted meanings that are shaped by workplace traditions. They function like emotional guides, helping to reduce misunderstandings and clarify intentions, especially in diverse teams that may span generations or languages.

The findings also highlight the significant role emojis play in enhancing communication in the workplace, making it feel more relatable, emotionally expressive, and socially connected. Participants shared that emojis serve as digital non-verbal cues, helping to fill the gap left by the absence of facial expressions, tone of voice, and gestures that we typically rely on in face-to-face conversations. This aligns with what Skovholt *et al.* [3] discussed, suggesting that emoticons in workplace emails act as contextual cues that guide readers on how to interpret messages. Emojis like 😊, 🍷, 🍷, 🍷, 🍷, 🍷, 🍷, 🍷, 🍷, and 🍷 were widely recognized for conveying warmth, appreciation, encouragement, agreement, and support among team members.

Interestingly, the results showed that emojis can soften the tone of workplace communication. Participants noted that adding emojis to short or directive messages can lessen their harshness, especially in communications about deadlines or feedback. For instance, incorporating a simple 😊 or 🍷 made messages feel more polite and respectful. This finding resonates with Skovholt *et al.* [3], who indicated that emoticons can ease the delivery of directives while amplifying positive gestures like greetings and thanks. Hence, emojis are not just decorative flourishes; they serve meaningful purposes in shaping the emotional tone of professional exchanges.

The study also indicated that emojis help clarify intent and emotions, especially in multilingual or cross-cultural teams. When sending brief messages like "Thanks," "Noted," or "Okay," without emojis, they can sometimes come off as cold or curt. However, adding emojis such as 🍷, 😊, or 🍷 transforms those messages into something warmer and more appreciative. This finding complements research by Gesselman *et al.* [12] showing that the use of emojis in job-related communication can foster a sense of warmth. Similarly, Courtice *et al.* [7] discovered that positive emojis can improve perceptions of professionalism and appropriateness when paired with positive or neutral workplace interactions. This suggests that when used thoughtfully, emojis can effectively enhance professional communication by aligning with both the content and emotional essence of a message.

In remote work environments, emojis also play a vital role in team cohesion and rapport. Participants described them as a type of "social glue" that helps teams celebrate achievements, recognize efforts, and maintain morale, particularly in remote or hybrid setups. Emojis like 🍷, 🍷, 🍷, 🍷, 🍷, and 🍷 were commonly used to acknowledge small victories, birthdays, and project milestones. This finding supports Shandilya *et al.* [5], who reported that non-textual communication methods like emojis, GIFs, and memes help foster interpersonal connections within virtual teams. Emoji reactions enable team members to engage in workplace discussions without the need for lengthy responses, making digital interactions feel quicker, warmer, and more inclusive.

However, participants emphasized that the appropriateness of emojis heavily depends on the context, audience, and workplace dynamics. They generally felt that emojis fit well in casual internal communications, peer interactions, team chats, and celebratory messages, but were less fitting in formal reports, performance evaluations, official announcements, or correspondence with clients and senior management. This perspective aligns with Courtice *et al.* [7] suggesting that the use of emojis in professional settings must be carefully considered in relation to message content, emotional tone, and overall appropriateness.

5.2 POTENTIAL RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH EMOJIS IN WORKPLACE COMMUNICATION

Misinterpretation remains a significant concern in multicultural workplaces, best understood through Hall's Context Theory and Social Semiotics. High-context cultures embed meaning in shared norms and subtle cues, while low-context cultures actively seek clarity and straightforwardness. Despite their popularity in casual conversations, emojis come with certain risks when used in professional settings. Since emojis can be understood differently based on factors like culture, age, and context, they might not always convey the intended message. For instance, while the 🙏 emoji might express gratitude for some, others might see it as a prayer or even an apology. Similarly, 😜 might be taken as a sign of humor, but in a serious context, it could seem mocking. This finding is supported by Park *et al.* [9], who found that emoticon meanings and styles differ across cultures and languages. Their study shows that digital symbols are not universal but are shaped by socio-cultural norms and communication habits. For example, Zimbabwean employees often view emojis as friendly and warm, while their Chinese counterparts may adopt a more cautious approach, interpreting them based on context and relationships. This difference highlights the importance of understanding that an emoji that feels welcoming to one person might come off as too casual or even inappropriate to someone else.

Another concern raised was the perception of unprofessionalism. Many participants felt that using too many emojis or using them inappropriately could undermine the seriousness of a message. For instance, sending a cheerful emoji-filled apology after missing a deadline could be seen as trivializing the situation. Research backs this up, showing that while emojis can add warmth to communication, they may also affect how confident and professional a sender appears. This supports Stark and Crawford's [4] view that emojis carry complex social and cultural meanings and cannot be treated as fixed or universally understood symbols.

Certain emojis are considered inappropriate in the workplace too. Emojis like 🍑, 💩, and 🤪 might come off as too personal or playful, especially in formal situations or when communicating with colleagues one doesn't know well. This cautions against the careless use of emojis that could lead to misunderstandings or feelings of discomfort. This finding supports Rajan *et al.* [8], who caution that emojis should be used carefully in workplace communication because inappropriate or excessive use may create confusion, discomfort, or unintended expectations.

Ganster *et al.* [13] emphasized that generational differences also play a role in how emojis are received. Younger employees tend to embrace emojis as a standard part of digital communication, while older generations often view their frequent use as unprofessional. This can create tensions where expectations around communication styles clash. Moreover, relying solely on emojis for responses like just sending 🙌 or 🔥 can come across as vague or dismissive. Skovholt *et al.* [3] suggest that emojis work best as a complement to text rather than a replacement for it, emphasizing the need for clear and meaningful communication in professional environments.

5.3 GUIDELINES FOR THE APPROPRIATE AND EFFECTIVE INTEGRATION OF EMOJIS IN PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION

Hall's theory introduces the concept of high-context and low-context cultures. High-context cultures, like China, rely heavily on non-verbal cues and shared experiences. In contrast, low-context cultures, such as Zimbabwe's Western-influenced corporate environment, value clear and direct communication. Therefore, when using emojis, it's essential to consider your audience; what feels playful or friendly in one culture might come off as too informal or even disrespectful in another. According to Social Semiotics [4,8,11], emojis aren't just cute symbols; they're complex signs that change meaning based on context and the cultural background of the audience. An emoji could convey joy, sarcasm, or even discomfort, depending on who's reading it.

The findings emphasize the importance of having clear guidelines for emoji use in professional communication. While many participants agreed that emojis can add warmth, clarity, and a sense of connection within teams, they also stressed the need to be cautious when using them, especially in formal or sensitive situations, or in cross-cultural contexts. This reflects the broader literature, which shows that emoji meaning depends on message context, relationship, culture, and perceived appropriateness [3,7,9].

First and foremost, employees should think about the situation and their audience before adding emojis to their messages. They're often a good fit for casual team conversations, friendly exchanges between peers, internal updates, and acknowledgments of birthdays or work milestones. However, it's best to steer clear of emojis when communicating with senior management, clients, or external partners, as well as in formal documents. Research by Glikson *et al.* [2] points out that while emojis can make senders appear warmer, they may also undermine their assertiveness.

Next, emojis should complement written communication rather than replace it. For example, saying "Great job on the presentation! 🍌" conveys a clearer message than simply sending 🍌 on its own. In a professional environment, the aim should be to use emojis to clarify tone and enhance meaning, rather than introduce any ambiguity. It's wise to refrain from relying solely on emojis when a message demands clear confirmation, explanation, or accountability. This finding is supported by Park *et al.* [9], who found that emoticon meanings and styles differ across cultures and languages. Their study shows that digital symbols are not universal but are shaped by socio-cultural norms and communication habits.

Additionally, employees must be mindful of cultural differences when using emojis in diverse workplaces. The research revealed that the meanings of certain emojis like 🙏, 😜, 🤪, and 🍑 can vary across different cultural contexts.

Park *et al.* [9] demonstrate that emoticon use differs across cultural and linguistic communities, while Cui *et al.* [10] show that even a smiling emoji 😊 may carry sarcastic or ambiguous meanings in some Chinese communication contexts. Thus, in multicultural workplaces, it's crucial to avoid assuming that everyone interprets emojis in the same way.

Finally, organizations should create digital communication guidelines addressing emoji use. These guidelines should clarify where emojis are acceptable, where they should be avoided, and which emojis might be deemed inappropriate. Research by Rajan *et al.* [8] underscores the need to manage emoji use in workplace communication to prevent misunderstandings and unrealistic expectations that may arise from informal emotional cues.

6. CONCLUSION

The study shows that when used thoughtfully, emojis can really enhance professional communication. They help soften the tone, clarify emotional intent, and bring teams closer together especially valuable in remote and multicultural environments. Think of emojis as digital body language; they help us navigate emotional nuances and bridge gaps between different languages and generations. Emojis work particularly well in informal chats, team bonding, and quick feedback loops. However, the research also points out some risks. Misunderstandings can arise across cultural and generational lines, and some might see emoji use as unprofessional in formal contexts. There are also potential legal concerns. Without clear boundaries or shared understanding, emojis can unintentionally undermine credibility and clarity, especially in situations involving hierarchy, external communications, or legal matters. So, while emojis can be beneficial, we need to use them carefully, considering context, organizational policy, and cultural awareness.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 DEVELOP CLEAR ORGANIZATIONAL POLICIES AND DIGITAL COMMUNICATION GUIDELINES

Organizations should establish formal digital communication policies that clearly outline the appropriate use of emojis in workplace communication. These guidelines should specify suitable contexts for emoji use, discourage their inclusion in formal documents, legal communication, client correspondence, and performance evaluations, and provide examples of acceptable and unacceptable emoji practices. Integrating emoji etiquette into employee orientation and onboarding programs can further promote consistency and professionalism across teams.

7.2 PROMOTE CROSS-CULTURAL AND GENERATIONAL COMMUNICATION AWARENESS

Organizations should provide regular training on cross-cultural communication, digital professionalism, and emotional intelligence in online interactions. Employees need to understand that emojis may carry different meanings depending on cultural background, age group, and workplace context. Encouraging awareness of generational communication differences can help minimize misunderstandings and strengthen collaboration in multicultural and intergenerational teams.

7.3 ENCOURAGE CONTEXT-APPROPRIATE AND PROFESSIONAL EMOJI USAGE

Encourage employees to assess the audience, communication platform, and message purpose before using emojis. Emojis may be suitable in informal internal communication, peer interactions, and team-building activities, but should be used sparingly in communication involving clients, senior management, or sensitive workplace matters. Organizations should also discourage the use of ambiguous, overly casual, or potentially inappropriate emojis that may undermine professionalism or create discomfort.

7.4 USE EMOJIS TO SUPPORT CLEAR AND INCLUSIVE COMMUNICATION

Emojis should be used to complement written communication rather than replace it. Employees should combine emojis with clear text to reinforce tone, appreciation, empathy, or encouragement while avoiding overreliance on emoji-only responses. When used appropriately, emojis can help humanize digital communication, strengthen workplace relationships, foster team spirit, and improve engagement in remote or hybrid work environments.

7.5 ENCOURAGE RESPONSIBLE USE AND FURTHER RESEARCH ON WORKPLACE EMOJIS

Organizations should encourage employees to use emojis responsibly, particularly in high-stakes communication such as disciplinary discussions, legal matters, contracts, or crisis communication where clarity and seriousness are essential. Additionally, future research should continue exploring the impact of emojis in professional communication across industries, cultures, and technological environments to better understand evolving workplace communication trends and best practices.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest, whether financial or otherwise, linked to this work.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data supporting this study's findings can be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Due to confidentiality agreements, ethical restrictions, and privacy concerns, these data are not publicly accessible.

PARTICIPANT CONSENT STATEMENT

All participants in the study provide a written informed consent prior to their involvement in the study. They received detailed explanations of the purpose, procedures, possible risks, and benefits of the study. Participants were also told they could withdraw at any point without any penalty.

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