AN ANALYSIS OF WHATSAPP SMILEY EMOJI USAGE AND INTERPRETATION AMONG ST. AUGUSTINE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN MWANZA, TANZANIA.

JOANITA KOKUSHEKYA RWEZAHULA

A RESEARCH REPORT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE MASTER'S DEGREE OF MASS COMMUNICATION (MAMC)

DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA AND LIBRARY STUDIES, OF THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF TANZANIA

2025

ABSTRACT

This study examines the analysis and interpretation of emojis used in WhatsApp text messages among students at St. Augustine University in Tanzania. The aim of this study is to determine whether there is a universal understanding of emoji usage. Since University students are digital natives and keen on using emojis frequently to express themselves emotionally in their digital communication, such as WhatsApp Messenger. The study aimed in identifying the most common WhatsApp smiley emoji used by St. Augustine University students, establish diverse interpretations of WhatsApp smiley emoji among St. Augustine University students, examine the influence of WhatsApp smiley emoji usage on communication patterns and social interactions among St. Augustine University students and identifying challenges encountered by SAUT students when using WhatsApp smiley emoji's. Symbolic interactionism and Semiotic theory are used to analyze patterns of communication, interpretation, and adjustment between individuals in society. These theories have a framework for understanding how individuals interact with each other and within society through the meanings of symbols.

Mixed research approach used with sequential explanatory design so as to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. Purposive and simple random sampling was used to get the total number of 153 students, whereby 121 students were given a questionnaire, and the remaining 32 were grouped into four groups, each group containing eight students for focus group discussion. Data were analyzed by using both qualitative and quantitative methods of data analysis.

The findings indicated that there is plenty of meaning interpretation for each emoji smiley. Out of the examined smileys used as the variable in this research, only seven smileys which are Love, kiss, lying, drooling, sleepy, crying, delicious, were interpreted similarly by all the respondents (100%), whereas the rest was interpreted differently according to their understandings of the smileys' meaning. Nevertheless, some smileys are not yet well understood by the users of their intended meaning, causing them to interpret the smileys based on their perception and understanding. The lowest percentages of correct interpretations (lesser than 50%) are mostly the smileys that has same intended meaning as other common smileys but has different visual expressions such as zipper face, hushed face, cold sweat, smiling face with halo, screaming with fear, unamused, flushed face, disappointed face, confounded face, fearful face, hugging face, teasing face, rolling eyes face, expressionless face, frowning face with open mouth, pouting face that looks like kissing, and worried face.

It is recommended to incorporate Emoji Studies into Digital Communication and Media Curricula, as emojis are now a fundamental part of digital communication. Academic institutions, especially media and communication schools, should integrate emoji interpretation into their curriculum. This will help students develop critical digital literacy skills, equipping them to analyse emoji use in various professional, academic, and social contexts.

Also, WhatsApp Messenger should introduce a built-in guide or emoji glossary within the application that provides users with official definitions of each emoji as intended by its developers. This feature should be easily accessible in the chat interface, allowing users to tap and view the meaning of an emoji before using it.

Key terms: WhatsApp, Smiley Emoji, Usage and Interpretation, St. Augustine University students

DECLARATION

I, JOANITA K. RWEZAHULA, declare that this research is a result of my effort and has never been presented anywhere for whatever reason, be it for purposes of academic award or for publication. It is presented to the Department of Media and Library Studies for the prescribed purposes: as a partial fulfillment for the award of a Master's Degree in Mass Communication.

Joanita K. Rwezahula

Signature _____

Date _____

CERTIFICATION

I acknowledge that this work has been done under my supervision and that it is now ready for submission to the Department of Library and Media Studies.

………………………..

Dr. Albert Tibaijuka

(1st Supervisor)

………………………….

………………………

Dr. Henry Mambo

(2nd Supervisor)

…………………………..

COPYRIGHT

No part of this dissertation may be reproduced, stored in any retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without prior written permission of the author or the Open University of Tanzania on that behalf.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family and my Lovely late parents. May God rest their souls in eternal peace.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SAUT   St. Augustine University of Tanzania

ICT   Information and Communication Technology

SNS   Social Networking Sites

ITU   International Telecommunication Union

LIST OF TABLES

ix

LIST OF FIGURE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

xiv

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This chapter consists of the background of the study, the statement of the problem addresses the gap in understanding how students interpret WhatsApp smiley emojis, research objectives and questions, significance of the study is also discussed, scope and limitation of the study and additionally, the chapter includes definitions of key terms and organizational of the study.

1.2 Background of the Study

In social media, individuals can convey messages through the use of emojis. Emoji means pictographs that are commonly used in instant messages on social media, websites, and apps. Since Apple included them in their iOS devices in 2009, they have grown in popularity worldwide. Emojis were created by Shigetaka Kurita in the late 90s. Unlike emoticons, they were not only meant to represent faces but concepts and objects too (Burge 2019)

There are two types of emoji: smiley and pictogram. Smiley is the face symbol used to indicate the sender's emotional state, and pictographs are various visual metaphors such as hand gestures, vehicles, food, animals, and many more. Smileys are thought to supplant facial expressions, which are absent in digital communication. This can also be observed in the WhatsApp conversations, where the smileys fulfil the function of the absent facial expressions. However, it is to be noted that many of the smileys offered by WhatsApp cannot really be used to visualize the sender's actual facial expression at the moment of sending the message (Hinz, 2015). There are

numerous types of smileys, including happy, sad, angry, and surprised faces. In addition to smileys, there are also hand gestures, heart symbols, and other graphical representations of emotion (Yus, 2014).

Emoji, which were first encoded in Unicode as a worldwide character in 2010, are now built into multiple devices and applications, As a result, these digital icons are popularly shared by users from varying countries, cultures, and demographic groups. Despite being encoded in Unicode, however, emoji renderings tend to differ across platforms because of varying fonts (Lu et al., 2016). Major fonts include Apple (used on Messages on iOS and WhatsApp), Google (used on Android interfaces, Google Hangouts, and Gmail), 2 Samsung (built in on devices with Samsung's Touch Wiz skin), Microsoft (on Windows PCs, Microsoft Surface, and Windows Phones), and face book (on face book and Facebook Messages). Social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat also have their own emoji languages (Neal, 2015).

Various apps, such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger, have their own set of emojis. Presentation of emojis depends on the app and device you use. The rise of social media has led to a significant increase in online communication, particularly among younger generations. As a result, there has been a corresponding increase in the use of smiley emojis, which have become a central aspect of online interaction. University students, who are digital natives, are keen on using smiley emojis frequently to express themselves emotionally in their digital communication, such as WhatsApp Messenger. Nevertheless, sometimes, they get into a misunderstanding due to the different emojis between the sender and the recipient (Wicke 2017). Emojis help to improve the reader's comprehension of the digital message in a fresh,

visual, and condensed way. Emoji has become a powerful way to express emotions that are hard and subtle, and write effectively (Kelly & Watts, 2015). Emoji conveys its meaning through its graphic resemblance to a physical object, for example, a smiling face, food, vehicles, etc (Miller et al., 2016).

For instance, in early 2023, Google released the second Beta version of Android 13 QPR2, notable for the inclusion of 21 new emojis. The update includes support for Unicode 15, the latest standard for displaying symbolic artwork. Among the 21 new icons made available are a variety of options to amplify expression in conversations, such as a quivering face, a jellyfish, a donkey, a goose, and hands pushing objects both left and right. The added emojis cover several categories, being present in the face, food, and symbol groups. Following such technological advancements in creating emojis, which also begs for a prompt understanding of the emojis themselves, a question of whether the users capture the underlying meanings of the emojis or not is important, and a central concern of this study. Smileys have become increasingly popular within texting and social media conversations. Communication via texting, social media, email, and other online means.

Emoji popularity and frequent use have made them a part and parcel of digital communication. The wide and rapid adoption of emojis raises questions about their effect on communication outcomes. The Unicode Consortium has currently standardized emoji, and they are now available in all major operating systems and social networks around the world.

Frequent use of mobile phones opened up new doors for innovations in the communication process. Many messaging applications like WhatsApp, Line,

Instagram, Book Messenger, etc. are in vogue and have made communication more effective and easier. The new generation is very keen and efficient in using WhatsApp to communicate with their peers, friends, family, and others. They use verbal and non-verbal communication tools, one of which is the use of emoji (Guibon et al. 2016) has been reported that 92% of the online population uses smiley emoji in their messages.

Although research on the use and interpretation of emoji is still limited but emoji have been shown to communicate affect, disambiguate message content, serve important verbal and nonverbal communication functions, provide insight into the user's personality, and allow users to perform the emotion work required for relationship development and maintenance while not physically present (Kaye, Malone, & Wall, 2017; Riordan, 2017; Yuasa, Saito, & Mukawa, 2011).

As of June 2023, there were approximately 2.78 billion unique active WhatsApp users globally. WhatsApp is available in 180 countries, out of which India has the highest number of WhatsApp users globally (535.8 million), followed by Brazil in the second position with 148 million users and Indonesia in third place with 112 million users. There were 21.00 million internet users in Tanzania in January 2023. Tanzania's internet penetration rate stood at 31.6 percent of the total population at the start of 2023. With the rise in social media use, emojis have become a popular addition to text-based communication. The sudden increase in the number and variety of emojis used raises questions about how individuals interpret messages containing emojis. WhatsApp was officially launched in November 2009 as a chat app service for iOS in August 2010, WhatsApp released an app for Android users.

Using emojis in digital text communication by WhatsApp gives users a highly expressive manner to represent their feelings.

In Tanzania, the smiley emoji is not as widely understood or used as it is in other parts of the world, particularly in countries with higher internet penetration rates, research on emoji usage in Tanzania is limited, but available data suggest that as internet penetration increases, the use of emojis is becoming more common. A study referenced in The Citizen, a Tanzanian publication, underscores the significant impact emojis have on Gen Zs, particularly in emotional communication. This indicates that younger generations in Tanzania are likely to be familiar with and use emojis, including the smiley emoji, in their digital interactions.

WhatsApp has become an indispensable part of the digital landscape in Tanzania, revolutionizing the way people communicate and connect with one another. With its user-friendly interface and wide range of features, WhatsApp has seen remarkable growth and adoption throughout the country. Younger Tanzanians (youth and young adults) tend to be more fluent and flexible in their use and interpretation of emojis, including the smiley, they often use it to express a wider range of emotions, including irony or playful sarcasm, and are more accustomed to its varied contextual meanings, older generations, or those less digitally native, might interpret the smiley more literally as a sign of happiness or politeness, potentially missing subtle nuances or finding its use in certain contexts inappropriate or informal (Mushi, A 2024).

The specific example or study that explored the use of smiley emojis or emoticons in Tanzania includes a cross-cultural experimental study among Cameroon and Tanzania. This study was conducted by Kohske Takahashi, Takanori Oishi, and

Masaki Shimada and published on October 24, 2017, in the Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology. The study found that while Japanese people were sensitive to the emotion conveyed by emoticons like ☺, people from Cameroon and Tanzania hardly read emotion from these symbols.

However, as it will further be elucidated in the statement of the problem below, there is no clear-cut understanding of the way people interpret the meaning of emoji (see Miller et al., 2016). It is apparent that most often people misconstrue the emoji in digital communications. Emoji is originally designed as a carrier of affective states and emotions, containing nonverbal information that in real settings is communicated through facial expression and other physical indicators. The triangle clearly depicts that every emoji is just a signifier, which is the graphical representation of a sign. It can be interpreted differently by the receiver or the sender and can create different meanings in different contexts, i.e., gender, social setup, culture, etc. Emojis do not have a universal understanding, and identifying the gender differences in users' behaviour has always been an important topic in human interaction.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

In the era of digital communication, WhatsApp has become an indispensable tool for social interaction, particularly among university students. With its diverse range of features, WhatsApp enables instant messaging, multimedia sharing, and the use of emojis as non-verbal cues to enhance communication. Among these, smiley emojis have gained widespread popularity as a means of expressing emotions, reinforcing textual messages, and fostering engagement in digital conversations. Ideally, smiley

emojis should serve as universally understood visual symbols that enhance clarity, emotional depth, and efficiency in communication (Mushi, A 2024).

However, in reality, the interpretation of smiley emojis is neither universal nor consistently understood across different users. While some students rely on these symbols to communicate emotions, others struggle to accurately decode their intended meaning, leading to misinterpretations, confusion, or even unintended offense. The same emoji may be perceived differently depending on the user's cultural background, social context, and personal experience, which undermines the effectiveness of digital communication. The absence of standardized interpretations creates a communication gap, where an emoji meant to express friendliness might be received as sarcasm, or an expression of sadness might be misread as humor. This misalignment not only affects interpersonal communication but may also distort social relationships, academic discussions, and online discourse among university students.

The consequence of this semantic inconsistency is the emergence of miscommunication, misrepresentation of emotions, and even digital conflicts among students. Instead of enhancing understanding, emojis sometimes complicate conversations, dilute intended messages, or cause relational misunderstandings. The lack of empirical research on how Tanzanian university students perceive and interpret WhatsApp smiley emojis further exacerbates the issue, leaving a gap in knowledge on how digital literacy and symbolic interaction influence communication outcomes.

This study, therefore, seeks to analyse how university students at St. Augustine University in Mwanza, Tanzania, use and interpret WhatsApp smiley emojis, identify the common smiley emojis used by students, examine their impact on communication effectiveness and social interactions, and identify the challenges encountered by students when using emojis. By bridging this research gap, the study aims to provide valuable insights into emoji interpretation, improve digital literacy, and enhance the clarity of online communication among students in a rapidly evolving digital landscape.

1.4 Research Objectives

1.4.1 Main Objective

The main objective of this study is to analyse WhatsApp Smiley Emojis' interpretation among St. Augustine University of Tanzania in Mwanza.

1.4.2 Specific Objectives

i. To identify the most common WhatsApp smiley emoji used by St. Augustine University students

ii. To establish diverse interpretations of the WhatsApp smiley emoji among St. Augustine University students

iii. Examine the influence of WhatsApp smiley emoji usage on communication patterns and social interactions among St. Augustine University students

iv. To identify challenges encountered by St. Augustine University students when using WhatsApp smiley emojis

1.5 Research Questions

i. What are the most common WhatsApp smileys emojis used by St. Augustine University students?

ii. What are the diverse interpretations of the WhatsApp smiley emoji among St. Augustine University students?

iii. How does WhatsApp smiley emoji usage influence communication patterns and social interactions among St. Augustine University students?

iv. What are the challenges encountered by St. Augustine University students when using WhatsApp smiley emojis?

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study is very important in various aspects such as communication practices, media policies, and laws of the country, as well as its significance to the body of knowledge. Firstly, the study holds significant implications for understanding and enhancing communication practices in the digital age, particularly among university students. By exploring the interpretation and use of WhatsApp smiley emoji, it can provide valuable insights into how emotions are conveyed and perceived in non-verbal communication.

To University Students, Academic Institutions, and Media Practitioners

The study will contribute to incorporating Emoji Studies into Digital Communication and Media Curricula, as emojis are now a fundamental part of digital communication, academic institutions, especially media and communication schools, should integrate emoji interpretation into their curriculum. This will help students develop critical digital literacy skills, equipping them to analyse emoji use in various

professional, academic, and social contexts by providing empirical evidence on the role of smiley emoji in digital communication, expanding the understanding of how emotions are encoded, interpreted, and negotiated in online environments. The results of this analysis will highlight the advantages of understanding the intended meaning of the emoji and the usage of proper smiley emojis in pursuit of meaningful communications in WhatsApp messaging. This research also attempts to help the users achieve a more positive communication experience by reducing the miscommunication due to misinterpretation of the WhatsApp emoji, especially the smileys.

Also, the study will help to provide knowledge to training Journalists and Content Creators on Emoji Use in Digital Media – Since journalists, advertisers, and social media influencers use emojis extensively in online content, media studies programs should provide training on how to use emojis effectively in digital storytelling, marketing, and brand communication. This will help media professionals ensure that emojis reinforce rather than distort their intended messages.

To other Researchers

Also, this research will be useful to other researchers as a starting point since digital communication is growing every day, and the means of communication are increasing every day, so it can be a great help for reference. Studies should be conducted in the future to determine the course of action that will be taken as far as the use and application of symbols are concerned. Also, the means by which the public is going to be educated about the use of emojis, so that they do not end up abusing others using emojis in their conversation. This will be a very significant way

of ensuring that only acceptable emoji symbols whose meanings are approved can be used in advertisements, teaching in schools, as well as day-to-day communication.

To Policy and Regulatory makers

The study will be very significant to Regulators and policymakers to develop and revise both personal and professional spheres, media policies, laws, and regulations, since digital communication is growing fast. Standardization of Emoji Meaning Across Digital Platforms. Regulatory bodies such as the Unicode Consortium, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), and national communication regulators should work towards ensuring greater uniformity in emoji meaning and interpretation across different devices and applications. Since emoji renderings differ across platforms, creating standard guidelines for emoji semantics can help mitigate miscommunication and unintended misinterpretations.

Also, regulating the Use of Emojis in Official and Legal Communications, as emojis increasingly become a part of formal and legal communication, their usage should be regulated within legal frameworks to avoid ambiguity. Courts and legal institutions should establish clear guidelines on how emojis are interpreted in digital evidence, contracts, and workplace communication, preventing cases where misunderstood emoji messages lead to unintended legal consequences.

1.7 Scope and Limitations of the Study

1.7.1. Scope of the study

The study was carried out in Mwanza at St. Augustine University of Tanzania and does not extend to other universities across the country. Although the University provides a relevant case study, the findings may not fully represent the broader

experiences, perceptions, and communication behaviours of students from other Tanzanian universities. A more comprehensive study covering multiple institutions would offer a comparative analysis across different academic and social environments. The study involved students from the Faculty of Social Sciences and the School of Education. This was done purposely to enable the researcher to investigate in detail with relevant information about the problem.

1.7.2. Limitation of the study

While this study provides valuable insights into the use and interpretation of WhatsApp smiley emojis among university students, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations that have influenced the study.

Time constraints posed a challenge to data collection and analysis. Given the academic schedule and the need to meet deadlines, the researcher had a limited period to conduct extensive fieldwork, analyse findings, and compile results. A longer timeframe might have allowed for a more in-depth exploration of emoji usage trends, including longitudinal analysis of changing communication patterns over time. Despite this, the researcher ensured rigorous data collection and analysis within the available period by employing efficient research methodologies and seeking continuous guidance from the academic supervisor.

Additionally, the study relies on self-reported data from students, which may be influenced by personal biases or selective memory recall. Participants may not always provide completely accurate reflections of their WhatsApp emoji usage, leading to potential discrepancies between reported and actual behaviors. Future

studies could benefit from triangulating self-reported data with digital conversation analysis to obtain a more objective understanding of emoji usage patterns.

Finally, cultural and technological factors may also impact the generalizability of the findings. The interpretation of WhatsApp smiley emojis is influenced by individual experiences, cultural backgrounds, and evolving digital trends. Given that emoji meanings can change over time and across different social contexts, future research could explore how emerging emojis, regional dialects, and cross-cultural interactions shape digital communication dynamics.

Despite these limitations, this study provides a strong foundation for understanding emoji communication among university students in Tanzania and contributes valuable knowledge to the field of digital communication studies. The identified constraints also present opportunities for further research, encouraging broader investigations that encompass a wider demographic and a more extensive dataset.

1.8. Definition of the Key Terms

Emoji's

Small digital icons used to express ideas or emotions in electronic communication, as it is defined in the English Oxford Living Dictionaries (2017). The word "emoji" is actually derived from the Japanese characters 絵 ("e," picture), 文 ("mo," write) and 字 ("ji," character), which is fitting given the role of emojis in enhancing text-based electronic communication with visual cues previously only present in face-to-face communication, such as facial expressions and gestures (Pardes, 2018; Prisco, 2018).

Smiley emojis

Smiley is the face symbol used to indicate the sender's emotional state, and pictographs are various visual metaphors such as hand gestures, vehicles, food, animals, and many more (Hinz, 2015).

Emoticons

According to the Cambridge dictionary (2017), emoticons are a representation of a facial expression, such as a smile, formed by various combinations of keyboard characters and used to convey writers' feelings or intended tone. They are commonly used in digital communication, such as Facebook, WhatsApp, to express emotion or convey meaning.

WhatsApp

According to the Cambridge dictionary is a free messaging application that allows users to text, chat, share media, and make calls with individuals or groups using Wi-Fi or cellular data. It works on various phone and computer operating systems, it is popular in different countries.

1.9. Organization of the Study

Smiley emojis have emerged as powerful tools in our digital communication toolbox. They enable to expression of emotions, add context, and build relationships in online interactions. Their ability to convey emotions, bridge cultural divides, and enhance psychological well-being makes them an indispensable part of our digital conversations. Whether in personal messaging, branding, or marketing strategies, smiley emojis have a profound impact on how we connect and communicate in an increasingly interconnected world.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the literature related to WhatsApp smiley emoji usage and interpretation, It also assists the researcher to determine what has been done related to the research problem and to know what suggestions and recommendations were made by other researchers concerning further studies in the area.

2.2 Related Literature Review

2.2.1 Emergence of Smiley Emoji

The rise of the internet gave birth to a method of communication today. The emoji has become the shortest version of expressing messages non-verbally. Sometimes people even judge the attitude of others by the kind of emojis they use. This has become a modern trend in communication. With the advent of instant messaging and social media, smileys quickly transitioned from text to graphics. The rise of platforms like MSN Messenger and AOL Instant Messenger introduced graphical smileys that added a visual element to conversations. As technology advanced, these smileys became more detailed and expressive. Today, we have an array of smileys at our disposal, ranging from simple yellow faces to animated expressions, all designed to enhance our digital communication.

Emojis may seem like a recent phenomenon, but their origins can be traced back to the late 1990s when they were first introduced in Japan by Shigetaka Kurita, but not officially added to the Unicode Standard until 2009 (Davis & Edberg, 2012). Initially, emojis were a set of 176 simple, black and white icons created for a mobile

internet platform. Fast forward to today, and emojis have become a universal language with thousands of options available on our smartphones and social media platforms. They have also evolved to reflect a diverse range of cultures, with emojis now representing various skin tones and cultural symbols. (Sugiyama, 2015)

In 2009, the first emojis were added to "laughing face with tears of joy," and today the list contains more than 1500 different emojis. Today, almost all mobile platforms offer their own rendering of emojis based on the Unicode standard, and emoji usage has increased, as reported by Eisenstein and Pavalanathan (2015). On Instagram, a social media platform where users are able to upload and edit pictures along with a caption, more than 50% of the posts contain emojis, and the social media platform has reportedly implemented the function to use emojis as hash tags (Dimson, 2015). One artist's fascination with emoji lead to a crowd funded translation of the classical novel Moby Dick into an emoji version called Emoji Dick where all of the more than 10,000 sentences were translated into only emojis. Today, it seems like emojis are everywhere, and in 2015, Oxford Dictionaries (2016) chose an emoji as their "word of the year".

They motivated this by saying that the chosen emoji, "face with tears of joy", was the word that best described the mood and preoccupation of 2015. Furthermore, they add that the "face with tears of joy" is the most commonly used emoji, making up approximately 20% of the emoji usage as logged by Swift Key in 2015. The face with tears of joy emoji, chosen as the "word of the year" in 2015 by Oxford Dictionaries. Moreover, they state that 2015 was the year that people started using emojis more, and that having an emoji as the word of the year reflects the changes in

communication. Because emojis are a relatively new phenomenon in communication, the research is yet to uncover what their role is in online communication. However, so far, research seems to suggest that emojis can be used to enhance emotions and modify messages in the same way that emoticon does (Miller et al, 2016). Emojis enable people to be more expressive in conveying their feelings and moods via text-based communication (Tauch & Kanjo, 2016).

WhatsApp Messenger is one of the popular social messenger applications that has replaced the traditional short messaging system (SMS) and has become the mode of digital communication at present. It allows users to send real-time text messages, voice notes, videos, and documents as long as the application is connected to the internet.   (Hashim, Abdullah, Isa & Janor, 2015). Using emojis in digital text communication via WhatsApp gives users a highly expressive manner to represent their feelings. This can also be observed in the WhatsApp conversations, where the smileys fulfil the function of the absent facial expressions.

However, it is to be noted that many of the smileys offered by WhatsApp cannot really be used to visualize the sender's actual facial expression at the moment of sending the message (Hinz, 2015). Some of the smileys have been called "unrealistic" due to the fact that they cannot be produced by the sender or recipient in the very short time period of sending or reading the message (Hinz, 2015). Not only that, these smileys may be intentional and acquire an intensive status, leading to a specific interpretation based on their own understanding. The emergence of smiley emojis has forever changed the way we communicate in the digital world. They

have become the language of emotions, transcending barriers and connecting us in ways we never thought possible.

2.2.2. Emoji Usage on Communication Patterns and Social Interactions

The rapid advancement of digital technology and social media has fundamentally altered communication patterns, reshaping how individuals engage in social interactions. The increasing reliance on social networking platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp has shifted communication away from traditional face-to-face interactions toward instantaneous, multimedia-based exchanges in virtual spaces (Widodo et al., 2022). As a result, emojis have emerged as a crucial component of digital communication, serving as visual cues that complement or replace textual expressions to convey emotions, enhance clarity, and create a sense of engagement in online conversations (Danesi, 2017).

One of the most significant transformations in digital communication is the ability to connect with others globally in real time. Social media and messaging applications enable instant communication regardless of geographical location, fostering continuous social interaction among individuals from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Prada et al., 2018). The incorporation of emojis in digital exchanges adds a new dimension to this communication by helping users express emotions more vividly, bridging potential gaps in understanding that arise from text-only conversations (Evans, 2017). The ability of emojis to convey tone, sentiment, and non-verbal cues enhances the effectiveness and emotional depth of digital discourse, making interactions more dynamic and engaging (Kaye et al., 2016).

Furthermore, social media and digital messaging have redefined self-expression, providing users with platforms where they can curate and project their identities through text, images, videos, and symbolic elements such as emojis (Gesselman et al., 2019). The integration of emojis in online communication allows individuals to convey emotions more efficiently, reducing the ambiguity often associated with written text (Tigwell & Flatla, 2016). The use of emojis in status updates, captions, and direct messages enhances digital storytelling, allowing users to add emotional context to their narratives (Riordan, 2017). However, while this increased emotional expressiveness enhances digital interactions, it also raises critical concerns related to privacy, identity construction, and data vulnerability (Widodo et al., 2022). The use of emojis can sometimes lead to misinterpretation, as different users may assign varied meanings based on cultural norms, personal experiences, or platform-specific emoji renderings (Barbieri et al., 2016).

Despite these challenges, the integration of emojis into digital communication has become indispensable, as they facilitate faster and more intuitive interactions, helping individuals communicate complex emotions in a concise and universally relatable manner (Cohn et al., 2019). The evolution of digital communication, particularly through social media and messaging platforms, continues to reinforce the role of emojis as non-verbal digital expressions that bridge emotional gaps, strengthen social bonds, and enhance the overall experience of online interactions (Danesi, 2017). However, as their use becomes more widespread, it is essential to further examine how emojis influence language evolution, emotional intelligence in

digital spaces, and social dynamics across different online communities (Prada et al., 2018).

2.2.3 The Impact of Smiley's Emoji on Digital Communication

As an important visual symbol in computer-mediated communication, smiley emoji can express various content, including people, animals, food, and activities, and can be used both as an independent language and a non-verbal cue to convey meanings. In the fast-paced world of social media and messaging, smiley emojis have become essential for enhancing the user experience. They bring a visual element to our conversations, making them more visually appealing and captivating. Moreover, smileys provide a sense of familiarity and comfort, making it easier for users to navigate through conversations and understand the underlying emotions. These little icons have truly transformed the way we connect and engage with others online.

Today, in this millennial generation, emojis have created a new language for communication. Every technological platform, like Apple, Google, and Microsoft, has given a great position to emojis. Every person on the planet can access with a digital device and send and receive emojis. Emojis have created a human connection between people that transcends mere cultures, which really defines the revolution created by emojis. The world will continue in this and a faster pace of technology, with more innovative and creative emoji characters with every OS update. The future of emojis looks brighter, and it can even emerge to be one of the most effective languages for communication through the web. Hashim et. al. (2015) reported that it has become an application that can create a major impact on communication in the digital era. A study done by Muhammad (2017) mentioned that the young adults use

smiley emojis frequently by using WhatsApp messenger, and the most reasons of using emojis were to express their feelings and emotions through the emoji chosen, to make the conversations more interesting, to strengthen what they meant in texts, and make the conversation less tense, emojis can help manage the conversation and younger people use more emojis than older people. Smiley emojis help reveal people's moods, with variations ranging from the most basic expressions such as happiness, sadness, and anger, to more complex emotions such as embarrassment, boredom, or sarcasm.

Because of their rich emotional meanings, smiley emojis are often used to express emotions in online communication. In general, users tend to use emojis in positive messages and to use them less in sad or angry messages (Cheng, 2017). Different emojis affect people's attention and responses in divergent ways. Although both facial and non-facial emoji can express emotions (Riordan, 2017a), facial emoji outperform non-facial emoji. Using non-facial emoji can bring about positive emotions, especially joy, but it can't change the valence of the message (Riordan, 2017b). Different combinations of emojis also have subtle differences in emotional expression. For example, Lopez and Cap (2017) found that when combining a frog emoji or a hot beverage emoji with other emojis, there will be subtle but observable emotional changes.

According to Sugiyama (2015), emojis have two basic functions: They help people, especially young ones, to manage the communication climate as well as to construct and express their aesthetic self. The first function includes emotional expressions, but the emotional expression is not necessarily used to convey the emotions these users

feel; it is the emotions that they need to convey in order to construct and maintain pleasant relationships. In this way, people engage in a sort of affective labour via emoticons. This helps them monitor and fine-tune their background feelings about themselves and their interactions, contributing to an amiable communication climate. In the second function, emojis serve as an aesthetic expression rather than an emotional expression. By using the correct emoji in the correct situations, even adults may express their taste and improve their aesthetic point of view. This aesthetic aspect of emoji use appears to be quite gendered. The use of emojis is an essential part of fashioning the self, as the aesthetic aspect of emojis becomes a part of how they define and redefine themselves, just like mobile decoration.

Here are some of the **frequently used smiley emojis in WhatsApp:**

😃The "Smiling Face with Open Mouth" emoji is often used to indicate happiness, joy, satisfaction, enthusiasm, or fun in a conversation or message.

😍 The heart-eyed smiley face is often used to indicate that you are in love or delighted with something or someone, and is also often used to express happiness.

🥰The "Smiling Face with Hearts" emoji is generally used to convey a feeling of love, affection, or admiration for someone or something that has been said in a conversation or message.

😎This glasses-wearing emoji is very hip and is often used to convey a feeling of confidence, style, or relaxation.

😟The "Worried Face" emoji is used to indicate worry, anxiety, or sadness. It is used a lot when we want to express that we are sad about something.

😇Has anyone ever sent you this little face with a halo on its head? It is usually used to indicate innocence, purity, goodness, or a person who is considered an angel, but it can sometimes be used in an ironic context.

😭This crying face with two waterfalls coming out of the eyes is used to indicate deep sadness, despair, emotional pain, or suffering in a conversation or message.

😘The "Face blowing a kiss" emoji is used when you want to indicate affection, love, or friendship for someone or something. It is one of the most used and, therefore, is on our list with the meaning of WhatsApp emojis. (https://www.apptuts.net/ Meaning of emojis from WhatsApp in 2023 | AppTuts)

Although WhatsApp is considered as an innovation advancement in communication technology (Shamare, 2014), it does have some drawbacks, especially the exposure to false or unregulated information or media contents (Ahad & Lim, 2014) and the possibility of miscommunication as a result of misinterpretation of messages and visual cues (Ling, 2016). Moreover, the misinterpretations of the visual cues, such as emojis' meaning, could lead to a communication breakdown, and in some cases, may damage relationships (Tigwell & Flatla, 2016). Ling (2016) reported that there is the possibility of miscommunication through WhatsApp due to misinterpretation of the message, especially the visual cues.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism theory has nearly a hundred-year history as an approach to understanding human communication. With its roots in pragmatism (Dewey), social

theory (Mead, Blumer), and later social psychology (Goffman), symbolic interactionism contends that humans interpret and assign meaning to events through an elaborate set of symbols. The meanings of these symbols originate and evolve through human social interaction. These interactions form the foundation for people's notions of self and society.

Symbolic interactionism is a theory of language, communication, and socialization that centers on the subjective interpretation of meaning by individual actors. It emphasizes symbolic meaning, human agency, and interpretive epistemology, compelling it toward discourse and textual analysis, ethnography, observation, and performance studies (Vilar, 2001). It is a theory that analyses patterns of communication, interpretation, and adjustment between individuals in society. The theory is a framework for understanding how individuals interact with each other and within society through the meanings of symbols.

Symbolic interactionism is founded on the analysis of three major premises. First, human beings behave toward things based on the meaning those things carry for them. Things encompass anything from physical objects like tables and chairs, to other humans, institutions, guiding ideals, activities of others, and situations that arise as part of daily life. The second premise rests on the idea that the meaning of these things is derived from the social interaction one has with other humans who are part of one's life. The third and last premise is that these meanings are modified through an interpretative process employed by the person dealing with the things he or she might encounter (Vilar, 2001).

The new media with services such as e-mail, chat, mobile phone, and messages change interpersonal communication (Krotz, 2008). Given that media communication is a modification of face-to-face communication among people, every understanding depends on the reception of imaginary roles and perspectives, and when something is said or understood, every media communication accompanies an internal dialogue. Hence, media communication is a form of symbolic action and a modification of interaction (Krotz,2007).

According to Blumer (1969), humans form "meaning" in two ways:
(1) Meaning is something attributed to objects, events, phenomena, etc. (2) Meaning is a "physical attachment" imposed on events and objects by humans. Blumer believes that meaning is a condition that emerges as a result of the interaction of group members and not an intrinsic feature of the object. Consequently, meaning is created as a result of the interaction between people, and meaning allows people to produce some of the facts forming the sensory world. These facts are related to how people form meaning. Thus, fact consists of the interpretation of various definitions. Symbolic interaction is a process including the interpretation of actions because symbolic meanings might be formed differently for anyone (Tezcan, 2005). Mead assumes that symbols develop the mind and are used as means for thinking and communication (Ashworth, 2000). Mead focused on how people interact in their daily lives by means of symbolic interaction and how they create order and meaning (Korgen & White, 2008). This means the way you act toward someone or something is based on the meaning you have for a person or thing. To effectively communicate, people use symbols with shared cultural meanings. Symbols can be constructed from

just about anything, including material goods, education, or even the way people talk. Consequently, these symbols are instrumental in the development of the self.

The theory relates to this study simply because symbolic interaction is a communication theory that suggests that people are motivated and stay active when they communicate using symbols. The theory puts more emphasis on the use of symbols as a way of improving the nature and effectiveness of communication. In this theory, people are the ones to decide on the type of symbols they would like to use and the ones that they would find easy to interpret as well as use efficiently. Misinterpretation of a communication symbol is a very discouraging thing insofar as effective communication is concerned. In many cases, people fail to understand and differentiate the meaning of some confusing symbolic signs; the way adults interpret the meaning of various emojis is entirely different from what teens and youths understand the same symbols. Referring to the title, by using symbolic interactionist theory, researchers can look at the ways media affects a society's shared symbols and, in turn, the influence of those symbols on the individual (Jansson-Boyd, 2010).

Also, Semiotic theory, which was introduced by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913). Saussure defined a sign as any motion, gesture, image, pattern, or event that conveys meaning. He defined langue as the structure or grammar of a language and parole as the choices made by the speaker to communicate that information.

The semiotics model consists of three main concepts. The first concept is sign. According to De Saussure (1916), a sign is composed of both the form it takes

in physical reality and how it is conceived or interpreted. A sign can be manifested in many ways, including sounds, smells, and body language.

The second concept is context. According to Bowcher (2018), in semiotics, context refers to those aspects in a conversation or interaction that provide relevant and specific meaning to the particular exchange that is occurring. This enables the recipient in this exchange to make proper sense of the interaction and derive the intended meaning from it.

The third and final concept is meaning. In cognitive semiotics, Zlatev (2018) proposes that meaning is the relationship between the recipient of a sign and their personal experience of the world around them. This means that meaning is created when the recipient makes sense of the sign by connecting and interacting with their surrounding reality.

Semiotic Theory (Chandler, 2017) suggests that meaning is not inherent in symbols but rather constructed by users based on their context, culture, and prior knowledge. Common examples of semiotics include traffic signs, emojis and emoticons used in electronic communication, and logos and brands used by international corporations to sell their product, therefore, semiotics emphasizes the importance of providing appropriate social and cultural context for a communicant so that the message does not get "lost in translation." It also helps people to think deeply about the meaning that is attached to colors, images, sounds, and events, and to consider how perceptions may have been predetermined by people and other external factors.

The misinterpretation of emojis among St. Augustine University students underscores the semiotic complexity of these digital symbols, demonstrating that

emoji communication, like any linguistic system, is dependent on the shared conventions and cultural literacy of its users.

2.4. Conceptual Framework

This study is structured around three key types of variables that shape its theoretical foundation: the independent variable (use of WhatsApp smiley emojis), mediating variables (cultural background, age, sex, user group, social environment, and literacy level), and the dependent variable (construction and interpretation of WhatsApp smiley emojis).

The independent variable represents the primary communicative behaviour under analysis, how students use smiley emojis in digital conversations. The mediating variables act as influential factors that determine how individuals construct, interpret, and perceive emojis. Finally, the dependent variable focuses on the outcomes of emoji usage, assessing whether students have a shared understanding of these symbols or whether their varied interpretations lead to miscommunication. The interaction between these variables plays a crucial role in answering key research questions, such as how students use WhatsApp smiley emojis, what factors influence their interpretation, and whether emoji-based communication enhances or complicates digital interactions.

At the core of this study is the use of WhatsApp smiley emojis, which serve as the independent variable. Emojis have become a fundamental feature of digital communication, enabling users to reinforce emotional expression, convey humor, and replace or supplement textual content (Danesi, 2017). However, their effectiveness in communication depends on whether both the sender and receiver

share a mutual understanding of their intended meaning. Research has shown that emojis are widely used among younger digital users, but they may also lead to misinterpretations depending on the social context (Riordan, 2017). This study aims to explore the frequency of emoji use among students, the contexts in which they are most commonly applied, and the specific purposes they serve, such as expressing emotions, sarcasm, humor, or politeness. Understanding these aspects will help determine whether emojis facilitate communication or contribute to ambiguity and misinterpretation.

While the use of WhatsApp smiley emojis forms the foundation of the study, the interpretation of these symbols is influenced by a range of mediating variables that shape meaning attribution. One of the most significant of these is cultural background, as different cultures attach distinct symbolic meanings to emojis. Studies have demonstrated that cultural differences can lead to varied interpretations of the same emoji, sometimes resulting in misunderstandings (Miller et al., 2016). For example, what may be interpreted as a friendly gesture in one culture may be perceived as sarcasm or even disrespect in another (Sugiyama, 2015). In Tanzania, where traditional communication relies heavily on verbal and non-verbal cues, emojis may sometimes be perceived as inadequate substitutes for genuine emotional expression. This study examines whether cultural diversity leads to variations in emoji interpretation and whether students from different backgrounds assign unique meanings to commonly used smiley emojis.

Another key mediating factor is age, which significantly influences how individuals engage with emojis. Younger students, particularly digital natives, tend to

incorporate emojis seamlessly into their daily communication, often adopting new trends and assigning evolving meanings to emoji symbols (Prada et al., 2018). Conversely, older students or digital immigrants may struggle with shifting emoji interpretations, leading to potential misalignment in communication. For instance, the 😂 (face with tears of joy) emoji is commonly used among younger individuals to signify intense laughter, but some older users may misinterpret it as an expression of sadness (Evans, 2017). This study investigates whether age-related differences contribute to communication challenges, particularly in intergenerational interactions among university students.

Gender also plays a significant role in emoji use and interpretation. Research suggests that women use emojis more frequently and expressively, employing them to reinforce emotional connections and enhance social bonding, while men tend to use emojis more selectively (Tigwell & Flatla, 2016). For instance, a female student might use (red heart) to express friendship, whereas a male recipient might interpret it as a romantic gesture. These gendered differences in emoji perception highlight how socialized communication patterns influence digital interactions. This study aims to explore whether gender norms impact emoji frequency, emotional tone, and the likelihood of miscommunication between male and female students.

Beyond personal and demographic factors, the social context in which emojis are used also affects their interpretation. University students engage in diverse WhatsApp interactions, including casual conversations with peers, academic discussions, and professional exchanges. In informal peer groups, emojis are used liberally to express humor, sarcasm, and emotional reinforcement, while in academic

and professional settings, their use is often restricted to maintain a formal tone (Kelly & Watts, 2015). A student may frequently use 😏 (smirking face) in casual chats but would likely avoid it in an academic group discussion. This study seeks to determine whether students adjust their emoji use based on the social context and whether different WhatsApp user groups develop unique emoji meanings that outsiders may not easily understand.

The broader social environment also plays a crucial role in shaping emoji usage patterns. A student's upbringing, whether in an urban or rural setting, can impact their exposure to digital communication trends and their ability to interpret emojis accurately. Urban students, who are more likely to engage with global digital culture, may be better equipped to understand the evolving meanings of emojis, while students from rural areas may rely on more traditional interpretations (Widodo et al., 2022). Additionally, the institutional culture of a university may influence how students use emojis, particularly in formal academic or administrative communications. This study examines whether social background and digital exposure affect emoji literacy and whether institutional policies influence students' use of emojis in professional or academic settings.

Another critical mediating factor is literacy level, particularly digital literacy, which determines how effectively students can decode emoji meanings. Those with high digital literacy are more proficient in understanding emojis in various contexts, recognizing their fluid and evolving nature (Danesi, 2017). In contrast, those with lower digital literacy may struggle with interpretation, leading to miscommunication or emoji avoidance. For example, a digitally literate student may recognize that

(loudly crying face) can signify both sadness and uncontrollable laughter, while a student with limited digital exposure may assume it always conveys distress. This study seeks to determine whether higher digital literacy correlates with more effective emoji use and whether students with lower literacy levels are more likely to experience emoji-related communication breakdowns.

The dependent variable in this study is the construction and interpretation of WhatsApp smiley emojis, which focuses on how students assign meaning to these symbols in their digital conversations. Given the influence of mediating variables, emoji meanings are not static but instead evolve based on individual experiences, cultural exposure, and social interactions. Some students may construct emoji meanings with clarity and intended precision, ensuring effective communication, while others may experience misinterpretation, leading to unintended emotional cues or confusion. This study investigates whether students have a shared understanding of commonly used emojis, what factors contribute to emoji misinterpretation, and whether misunderstandings impact relationships and digital conversations.
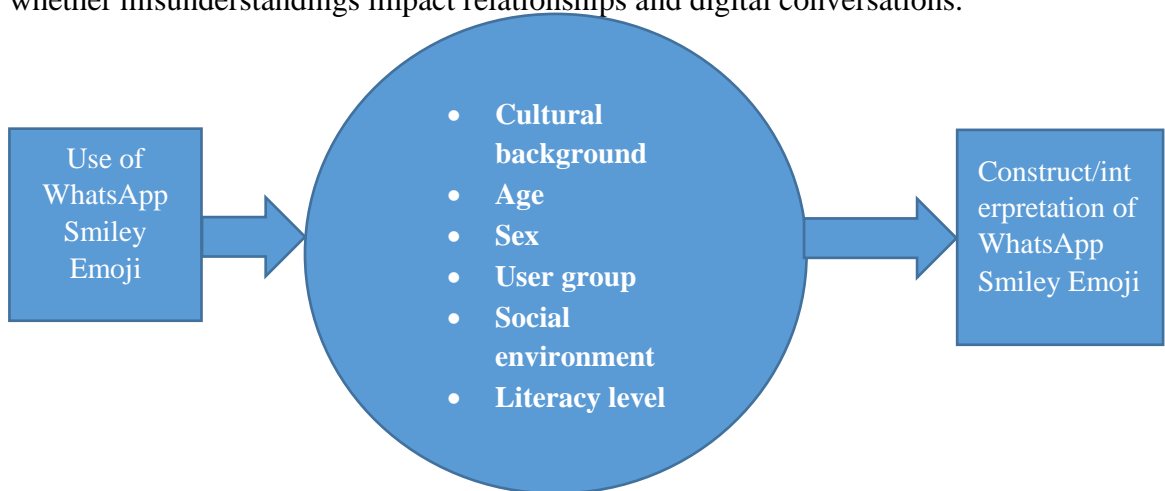
Figure 2.1: The relationship between variables in the conceptual framework

2.5 Empirical Literature Review

Emojis are the fastest-growing language in history (Emogi Research Team, 2015). In the Emoji Research report, various factors were studied to ascertain the factors responsible for this growth. It was uncovered that the rise in the usage of smartphones and instant messaging applications is a major contributor to Emoji usage; with this, communications have become shorter, making emojis a universal language that promotes universality. 'Emoji Report' further found that instant messaging applications update the emojis regularly to reflect societal changes.

Udenze (2020) explored the phenomenon of nonverbal communication with its focus on emojis. Basically, the researcher examined five social networking sites (SNS), that is, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter, in order to ascertain which of the SNS populations uses emojis more often. Findings from the study indicate that a considerable number of the research population (48.93%) considers WhatsApp's emojis as the most often used, followed by Facebook and others.

Wicke (2017) also conducted research and found that Emojis show vagueness in their meaning and only a few are assumed to be universally understood. He also stated that emojis tend to be used symbolically and conceptually, which may be interpreted in a varied way by the readers. Moreover, Barbiere et.al (2016) also claimed that preferences in the use of Emojis vary from country to country. Annamalai & Salam (2017) also found varied interpretations of 75 Emojis when asked undergraduate students of a public university in Malaysia. Chen et.al. (2018) conducted research on emoji usage at a large scale. He collected data from 183 countries involving 134419 users and found that females use Emojis more

frequently. They also found differences in preferences for emoji usage by males and females, along with sentiment expressions.

The study done by the Social Science and Humanities of Indonesia investigated the types and functions of emojis in the Indonesian Intergenerational WhatsApp group. This study found that the five most frequently used emojis by both men and women are 'folded hands', 'beaming face with smiling eyes', 'palms up together', 'thumbs up', and 'face with hand over mouth.

According to data collected by the Unicode Consortium, the not-for-profit organization responsible for digitizing the world's languages, 92% of the world's online population uses emoji, but which emoji is mostly used?

In the 20 years since the first set of emojis was released, research on them has been on the increase. Despite studies conducted on emojis, there are still limitations in the existing research domain. Most studies focused on one category of emojis and their function, types of emojis used, mostly gender using emojis, and what type of social media is mostly used in emoji communication. There has not been a study that considered the using of emojis to university students especially in Tanzania, thus, this study come to investigate the usage of emojis as a non-verbal communication in social media especially in WhatsApp by university students by looking effectiveness or reflection of the communicated message among the students in their daily communication.

2.6 Research Gap

Research has been done on the usage of WhatsApp emoji (Barbieri, Ronzano & Saggion, 2016; Logan, 2015; Muhammad, 2017; Tigwell & Flatla, 2016), but little has been done on the university students' interpretation of the emoji meaning, especially smileys. The current University students are digital natives who basically evolved together with digital messengers such as WhatsApp.

A study done by Muhammad (2017) mentioned that young adults use emojis frequently, and the main reasons for using emojis were to express their feelings and emotions through the emoji chosen, to make the conversations more interesting, to strengthen what they meant in texts, and to make the conversation less tense. In addition to this, the results also show that emojis can help manage the conversation, and younger people use more emojis than older people. To date, there has been limited research exploring the interpretation of WhatsApp smiley emojis among university students in Tanzania.

Existing research largely relies on one research approach, which captures a little of emoji usage and interpretation. A mixed approach is needed so as to get different feelings, views, and emotions at a time. Also, there is limited research on their role in more formal settings, such as academic, online learning platforms, and university group chats (Pérez, 2020). Understanding the role of smiley emojis in different communication contexts would contribute to a deeper understanding of their multifunctionality.

36

This study aims to address the mentioned gaps by investigating how St. Augustine University students in Mwanza interpret and use WhatsApp smiley emojis in their daily communication by using a different methodological research approach.

2.7. Organization of the Study

While smiley emojis are generally used to enhance communication, it is important to remember that they can be open to interpretation, depending on the context and cultural differences, a smiley emoji can have varying meanings. It is crucial to consider the recipient's understanding and be mindful of potential misinterpretation. There can be regional variations in the usage and interpretation of smileys and emojis. Different cultures and regions may have their conventions and understandings of certain symbols. It is interesting to explore these cultural influences and adapt the usage accordingly when communicating with individuals from diverse backgrounds.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter indicates the methodology employed in both data collection and data analysis. It covers the research approach, research design, area of the study, population of the study, sampling procedures, data collection methods, data analysis, and ethical considerations. The chapter directed the researcher on how to collect and analyse data.

3.2 Research Approach

This study adopts a mixed-research approach, which integrates both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. The mixed-methods approach was chosen because it allows for a more complete and in-depth exploration of how WhatsApp smiley emojis are used and interpreted among students at St. Augustine University. By combining numerical data with rich, descriptive insights, this approach ensures that the study does not rely solely on one method, thereby minimizing biases and enhancing the reliability and validity of the findings (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007).

The qualitative approach was applied to explore the social and contextual dimensions of emoji interpretation. Since emoji meanings are often subjective and dependent on social interactions, qualitative methods were essential in capturing participants' thoughts, emotions, and cultural influences on emoji usage. This approach helped uncover the underlying reasons behind emoji interpretations, enabling the study to

gain a deeper understanding of students' perceptions, communication behaviours, and digital interactions.

By integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches, this study was able to enhance data triangulation, validate findings through multiple sources, and provide a holistic view of how students construct and interpret WhatsApp smiley emojis. The combination of methods ensured that subjective experiences and numerical trends were both accounted for, strengthening the overall credibility and applicability of the research findings.

3.3 Research Design

A research design is the procedures for collecting, analysing, interpreting and reporting data in research studies (Creswell & Plano Clark 2014), In other words, the research design sets the procedure on the required data, the methods to be applied to collect and analyse data, and how all of this is going to answer the research question (Grey, 2014). In this research, a sequential explanatory design was employed, which is a mixed-methods research design that involves collecting and analyzing quantitative data first, followed by qualitative data to explain the quantitative results. This design uses narrative data to explain or interpret numeric findings, especially those that are unexpected.

Sequential explanatory design allows researchers to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, which can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem, and the quantitative data collected in the first phase can be used to identify patterns and trends, which can then be explored in more detail in the second phase using qualitative data. Also, the qualitative data collected in the second phase

helps to explain the quantitative findings from the first phase. The design helps to refine, extend, or explain the general picture provided by the quantitative data based on WhatsApp as a social media where smiley emojis have been used frequently for communication.

3.4 Area of the Study

This study was conducted in the urban area setting in Nyamagana District in the town of Mwanza in northern Tanzania, where St. Augustine University is located. It is a private university founded by the Catholic Bishops of Tanzania in 1998 (accredited in 2002) as a secular, non-profit, private institution. Before 1998, SAUT was called first Nyegezi Social Training Centre and then the Nyegezi Social Training Institute. SAUT has over 10,000 students with an anticipated minimal rise each new academic year. The university attracts students from Tanzania and elsewhere, particularly Kenya, Uganda, Sudan, Ethiopia, Burundi, Malawi, Zambia, and recently Germany and other foreign nations. SAUT admits students of all nationalities and religious affiliations.

The study used St. Augustine University since it has the courses relating to languages and communication taught to students and being the key informants who are having the needed information based on their knowledge on the subject matter and experience of sending and receiving smiley emoji in WhatsApp since the emoji's play a significant role in text-based electronic-mediated communication between students. This study, therefore, intends to find out how university students perceive and interpret emoji's specifically the smileys, as supporting tools in conveying the intended WhatsApp messages.

3.5 Population of the Study

A population is the group of objects in the world in which the researcher is interested, where objects may include individuals, families, students in a university class, and people sharing a nationality, ethnicity, or cultural background (Groves et al, 2009). Population is the totality of objects or individuals having one or more characteristics in common that are of interest to the researcher and where inferences are to be made (Sarandakos, 1993). The population of the study involved 7769 students from St. Augustine University of Tanzania of the academic year 2023/2024, who are in the faculty of social sciences and the school of education. The selection of these two units is particularly because most students are involved in studies related to communication, comprehension, and languages, therefore likely to have details information needed by the present study.

3.6 Sample Size and Sampling Procedures

3.6.1 Sampling Techniques

Sampling is the process of selecting a number of individuals for a study in such a way that the individual selected represents the larger group from which they were selected (Orodho and Kombo, 2002). The purpose of sampling is to secure a representative group, which enables the researcher to get information about a population. Purposive and simple random sampling were used.

Purposive Sampling

Purposive sampling is a technique widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources. This involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of

individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Purposive sampling technique used in selecting St. Augustine University Students, particularly from two units, that is, the Faculty of Social Sciences and the School of Education, as the key informants who have the needed information based on their knowledge on the subject matter and experience of sending and receiving smiley emojis in WhatsApp. The power of purposive sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for in-depth analysis related to the central issues being studied.

Simple Random Sampling

Simple random sampling is selected for populations that are highly homogenous, where the members of the research are randomly selected to participate in the research (Bhardwaj, 2019). It is the simplest and most common method of selecting a sample, in which the sample is selected unit by unit, with equal probability of selection for each unit at each draw. In this method, every individual has an equal chance of being selected in the sample from the population, Sampling makes sure that every person in a population has an equal probability of being chosen as a response (Thomas, 2020).

Under simple random sampling, students were chosen by using the random number method, whereby the researcher constructed a sampling frame, that is, a list of student records, and included names and addresses of sample units in alphabetical order and numbered accordingly. Numbers were randomly selected from which names were identified. This type of sampling gave all units of the target population

an equal chance of being selected, which allows for high reliability, a strong degree of representation, and high generalizability of the results.

3.6.2 Sample Size

A sample is a group of people, objects, or items that are taken from a larger population for measurement. This means that from the large group of people where the research was done (population), the representatives who are selected from that group are what is called the sample. Moreover, Scott (2013) comments that sample size determination is the act of choosing the number of observations or replicates to include in a statistical sample.

The sample size for this study was specifically obtained from the Faculty of Social Sciences and Communication and the School of Education at St. Augustine University of Tanzania, whereby 153 students were selected from Undergraduate Programmes. The samples are by using Yamane's (1967) simplified formula for calculating sample size. The formula for the Sample Size for the mean is:

n= N/1+N(e)2

Where the number of samples

 N = Population size and e =   level of precision (exactness)

n= 7769/1+7769(0.08)2

n=153

Therefore, number of sample size is 153.

Yamane (1967) proposes the level of precision to be 0.08 in most of the qualitative research, as comments that the probability of making mistakes is not too big, rather recommending the perfection to be triggered by the seriousness of the researcher.

The author also gives the precautions that, because of different issues, including materials and the costs, and sometimes other factors beyond the researcher's capability, the level of precision can vary from 0.05 to 0.1. This study applied a precision level of 0.08, because of some factors as aforementioned.

Therefore, from the sample size of 153, a purposive sampling technique was used to get 32 participants, and simple random sampling helped to get 121 students. The study makes sure it gets equal representation from the school of education and the faculty of social sciences and communication.

3.7 Data Collection Methods and Instrument

The tool used for the purpose of data collection for this research is a focus group discussion, questionnaires, also content and document review.

3.7.1 Focus Group Discussion

Focus Group Discussions are in-depth discussions with small groups of six to twelve people who are carefully selected on a set of criteria, with the discussion usually lasting one to two hours. Focus groups are a qualitative method of social science research widely used in audience attitudes and behaviour (Wimmer and Dominick, 2000).

A focus group allows researchers to collect preliminary information about a topic. It can be conducted quickly, focus groups are cheap to conduct, and it is flexible in question design and follow-up. Focus group responses are often more complete and less inhibited than individual interviews. The study applied this method by selecting four groups by considering the age, gender, and year of the study; two groups were

selected from the School of Education and two from the Faculty of Social Sciences and Communication, whereby each group comprised 8 members.

3.7.2 Questionnaires

A questionnaire is a research instrument consisting of a series of questions for the purpose of gathering information from respondents, It can be carried out face to face, by telephone, computer, or post. Questionnaires provide a relatively cheap, quick, and efficient way of obtaining large amounts of information from a large sample of people. A questionnaire, as described by Sreejesh (2014), is fundamentally a structured series of questions presented to respondents during an interview, accompanied by clear instructions detailing the sequence and selection criteria. This tool holds significant versatility across various research domains, encompassing survey research and experimental design, providing researchers with a structured framework to gather insights systematically for data collection and analysis.

The questionnaire was used as an instrument to conduct this method by using both structured and unstructured questions, administered in gathering primary data from 121 students from both the School of Education and the Faculty of Social Sciences. Questionnaires were used to collect data on how St. Augustine University students interpret smiley emojis in their daily WhatsApp communication. The method gave ample time for the respondents to think about the questions and the answers to provide.

3.7.3 Document Review/Analysis

Document analysis is a qualitative research technique used by researchers. The process involves evaluating electronic and physical documents to interpret them, gain an understanding of their meaning, and develop upon the information they provide. Document analysis is important because it allows researchers to make sense of their resources and select the appropriate pieces for their studies. Documents contain qualitative data, which refers to non-numerical information that researchers organize into categories. Organizing the data allows researchers to combine document analysis with other types of research. Documents often provide qualitative data that can help the researcher understand complex issues in depth by using different secondary sources, such as published literature or data. Magazines, newspapers, trade literature, and academic literature are commonly used in the explanatory type of research. By employing document review, researchers can tap into a wide range of resources, including reports, articles, case studies, and official documents.

In this study, the researcher gathered credible data from the internet, particularly through search engines, articles, and journals, which allows the researcher to study different documents related to emoji uses, types of smiley emojis, as well as the interpretation of different emojis. The method was a guide to help the researcher get meaningful information that aids the analytical strategy of this study and takes advantage of benefiting from the work that has already been done in the field.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Research ethics refer to principles that researchers follow to protect the rights in developing research strategies and building a trusted relationship between the study participants and the researcher. Ethics in research helps in minimizing the risk of harm to the participant, securing informed consent from the identified research participants, protecting the anonymity and con-identically of the participants, and avoiding deceptive practices. (Homan et al,2006). The researcher tried to take care of various obligations during the research process to ensure that the research was conducted with honesty, objectivity, and integrity. The researcher also seeks consent from the participants for their participation and respects people, their cultures, values, religions, economic status, and so on. Researchers have an obligation to take care of the confidentiality and personal information or identity of the participants as per their/choice.

During data collection, information consent was introduced to the respondents after explaining to them the purpose of the study. The researcher ensured ethical considerations by being responsible for maintaining the dignity, privacy, and welfare of all participants. Data manipulation and plagiarism were avoided.

3.9 Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of analyzing data from the field, which entails examining, tabulating, and categorizing. Data analysis is, therefore, a process that involves examining and moulding collected data for interpretation to discover relevant information, draw or propose conclusions, and support decision-making to solve a research problem. This involves interpreting data to answer research

questions and making research findings ready for dissemination. (Martin, 2005). The data collected from the field was analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative methods of data analysis.

3.9.1. Analysis of qualitative data

Qualitative data from focus group discussions and document reviews were coded and categorized as a way of organizing the qualitative data in line with research objectives. This involved going through the data and numbering them sequentially, carefully searching through the data for regularities and patterns related to the research objectives, which the study intended to answer, and writing down words and phrases to represent regularities and patterns. The words and phrases were coded in categories and were used as a means of sorting out the data so that material bearing on a given research objective was physically separated from the other data.

3.9.2. Analysis of quantitative data

Quantitative data analysis is a systematic process of examining, interpreting, and drawing meaningful conclusions from numerical data. It involves the application of statistical methods, mathematical models, and computational techniques to understand patterns, relationships, and trends within data sets. Under this study, the findings from the questionnaire were analyzed quantitatively, whereby all responses were pre-coded. They were taken from the list of responses, and a number corresponding to a particular selection was given. This process was applied to every earlier question that needed this treatment. Upon completion, the data were then entered into a statistical analysis software package, SPSS. Data was analyzed by

using SPSS software by applying tables, percentages, graphs, and some descriptions and explanations so as to let the quantitative results complement the qualitative ones.

3.10. Data Quality Control Measures

Triangulation is a powerful tool for enhancing the credibility, validity, and richness of research findings (Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L., 2017). The researcher applied methodological, theoretical, and data triangulation so as to ensure findings are not dependent on a single source or sample. Qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches were used to validate results by comparing findings across different methods, like using a questionnaire, document review, and focus group discussion. Incorporating multiple theories, that is, symbolism and semiotics, helps to provide a multi-dimensional understanding of the phenomenon and improve validity, enhance reliability, flexibility, and deeper insights.

Pre-testing takes place before the actual data collection. In this study, pre-testing of the questionnaire and focus group discussion was conducted. Two groups from each unit, with eight students, were interviewed, and forty students, twenty from each unit, were given questionnaires, and all were returned. Some errors were identified and solved. This helped test the validity, reliability, practicability, and sensitivity of the tool before it was used for actual data collection.

3.11 Organization of the Study

While smileys and emojis are generally used to enhance communication, it is important to remember that they can be open to interpretation, depending on the context and cultural differences, a smiley emoji can have varying meanings. It is crucial to consider the recipient's understanding and be mindful of potential

misinterpretation. There can be regional variations in the usage and interpretation of smileys and emojis. Different cultures and regions may have their own conventions and understandings of certain symbols. It is interesting to explore these cultural influences and adapt the usage accordingly when communicating with individuals from diverse backgrounds.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS, AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the data is presented, analyzed, and discussed in relation to the information obtained from questionnaires, focus group discussions, and the documentary method of data collection. This is done under the four research objectives that guided the study. These were i) To identify the most common WhatsApp smiley emoji used by St. Augustine University students ii) To establish diverse interpretations of WhatsApp smiley emoji among St. Augustine University students iii) Examine the influence of WhatsApp smiley emoji usage on communication patterns and social interactions among St. Augustine University Students iv) To identify challenges encountered by St. Augustine University students when using smiley emoji. The chapter also relates these patterns explicitly back to the reviewed literature.

Data for this study were collected from 121 students who completed hard-copy questionnaires, supplemented by focus group discussions comprising four groups of eight participants each, leading to a total of 153 respondents. Before delving into the core findings, the study begins with a demographic and socio-economic analysis of the participants, as these variables play a crucial role in influencing emoji usage and interpretation. Factors such as age, gender, and level of education have been linked to variations in emoji use and interpretation in digital communication. Thus, understanding the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of respondents

provides a foundation for making evidence-based recommendations and contextualizing the research findings within the broader communication landscape.

4.2. Demographic and socio-economic characteristics of respondents

4.2.1. Age group of the respondents

Understanding the age distribution of respondents is crucial in analysing how WhatsApp smiley emojis are used and interpreted among university students. As shown in Table 4.1, the study involved 153 respondents, with the vast majority, 126 participants (82%), falling within the 18-25 age group, followed by 27 participants (18%) in the 26-35 age group. Notably, there were no respondents aged 36 and above, which means the study exclusively reflects the perspectives of younger university students.

The dominance of the 18-25 age group suggests that the study is largely shaped by the perspectives of digital natives, a generation that has grown up with digital communication tools and is more accustomed to using emojis in their daily conversations. Research has shown that younger individuals, particularly those between 18-25, are more likely to integrate emojis as part of their digital literacy, using them to enhance emotional expression, reduce ambiguity in text-based communication, and engage in online social interactions (Danesi, 2017). The prevalence of this age group in the study implies that the findings will provide a deep insight into youthful digital behaviours, but they may not fully capture generational differences in emoji usage, particularly among older individuals who may have different interpretations of emojis or less frequent engagement with them.

On the other hand, the 26-35 age group, which represents only 18% of respondents, may have different digital communication habits compared to the younger group. Individuals in this category may be working professionals or postgraduate students who tend to use WhatsApp for both social and professional communication. Research suggests that as individuals grow older, their use of emojis tends to become more intentional and context-dependent, often reserved for informal conversations rather than academic or work-related discussions (Evans, 2017). Their lower representation in the study suggests that while their views are included, the overall findings will be more reflective of the younger demographic's emoji habits rather than those of older users. Information on this particular aspect has been presented in Figure 4.1.
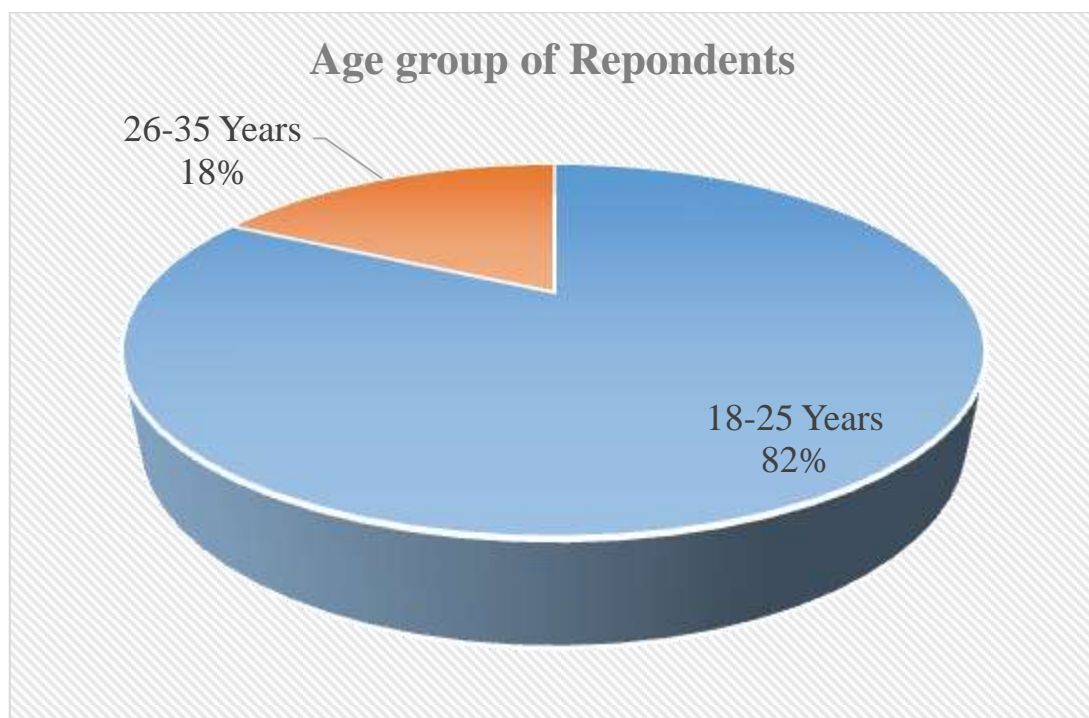
Figure 4.1 . Distribution of respondents by age:

Source: Data: 2024

Interestingly, the data reveal that there were no participants aged 36 and above. This absence indicates that the study does not capture perspectives from middle-aged and older individuals, who might have different attitudes toward emoji usage due to differences in digital adaptation and communication preferences. Previous studies have found that older individuals tend to use emojis more sparingly and often interpret them more literally rather than figuratively, which may lead to misinterpretations when engaging in conversations with younger individuals who use emojis in more creative and context-dependent ways (Tigwell & Flatla, 2016). The absence of respondents in this age group limits the ability of this study to make broader generalizations about emoji use across multiple generations.

Another noteworthy point is the potential impact of age on emoji interpretation. Younger individuals, particularly those within the range of 18-25 years of age, are more likely to use emojis innovatively, assign new meanings to existing emojis, and participate in evolving digital trends. This aligns with findings from studies on digital semiotics, which argue that younger individuals are more likely to engage with emojis as a "visual language" that complements or even replaces words (Prada et al., 2018). Meanwhile, older individuals tend to rely more on traditional written language and may use emojis more conservatively, often limiting them to basic emotional expressions such as happiness, sadness, or surprise.

4.2.2. Sex group of the respondents

The findings indicate that female respondents constituted 64% of the total sample, while male respondents accounted for 36%. This data suggests that women were more actively involved in the study than men, which could be indicative of their

greater engagement with digital communication tools or their higher willingness to participate in discussions about emoji usage. Since women form the majority of respondents, the findings of this study will predominantly reflect female perspectives on emoji interpretation and usage. However, the presence of male respondents still provides valuable insights into gender-based differences in digital communication behaviors.

The higher representation of female respondents aligns with existing research, which suggests that women are more expressive in their use of emojis and rely on them as a key element of digital communication (Prada et al., 2018). Women tend to use emojis to convey emotions, establish social connections, and reinforce the tone of their messages, making them an integral part of their online interactions. Additionally, studies have found that women often use a wider range of emojis, particularly those related to emotions, facial expressions, and affection (such as, 😀 , and 😭) (Danesi, 2017). This suggests that their participation in the study may provide more diverse insights into how emojis are used to enhance communication and express emotions in WhatsApp conversations.
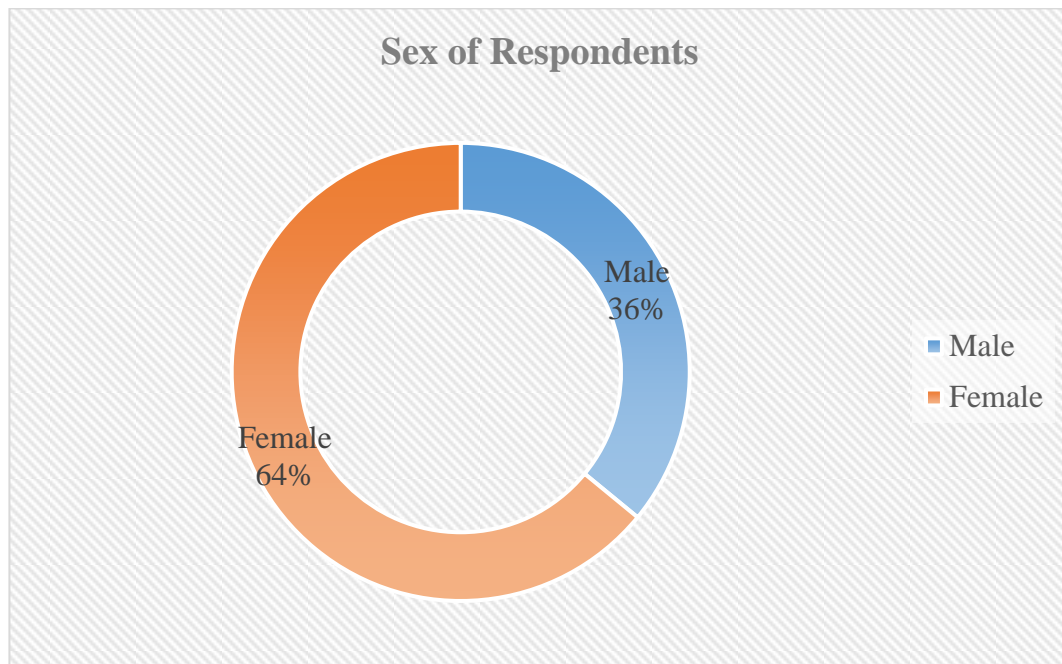
Figure 4.2 Distribution of Respondents by Sex

Source: Field Data 2024

On the other hand, the lower participation of male respondents (36%) suggests that men may either use emojis less frequently or place less emphasis on them in digital communication. Research indicates that men are generally more reserved in their emoji usage, preferring neutral or humor-related emojis such as the face with tears of joy and thumbs up (Evans, 2017). Unlike women, who often use emojis to reinforce emotions and social bonds, men tend to use them in a more functional or humorous manner (Tigwell & Flatla, 2016). The relatively lower male participation in this study could reflect their lesser engagement in discussions about emoji interpretation or their tendency to view emojis as secondary to text-based communication.

4.2.3. Level of education

According to the findings, the majority of respondents (98%) were bachelor's degree students, while a small minority (6%) were advanced diploma students. Notably, there were no respondents from certificate, diploma, or master's degree levels, indicating that the data primarily reflects the perspectives of undergraduate students. This skewed distribution suggests that the study's findings will be heavily influenced by the emoji usage patterns and interpretations of bachelor's degree students, while perspectives from lower or higher academic levels remain unrepresented.

The dominance of bachelor's degree students in the sample can be attributed to the fact that most questionnaire responses were collected during classroom sessions, making it easier to engage undergraduate students compared to those in advanced diploma or postgraduate programs, who may have had different schedules or academic commitments. The higher response rate from this group suggests that bachelor's degree students were more accessible and willing to participate in the study, reflecting a higher engagement in research-related activities within this educational tier.

From a digital communication perspective, the educational background of individuals significantly influences their emoji interpretation and usage. Studies indicate that individuals with higher education levels tend to use emojis in more strategic and nuanced ways, incorporating them to enhance communication, clarify tone, and reduce ambiguity in text-based conversations (Danesi, 2017). They may also be more aware of the socio-linguistic variations in emoji meanings, particularly

in multicultural digital interactions, where an emoji might carry different connotations depending on the context (Evans, 2017).
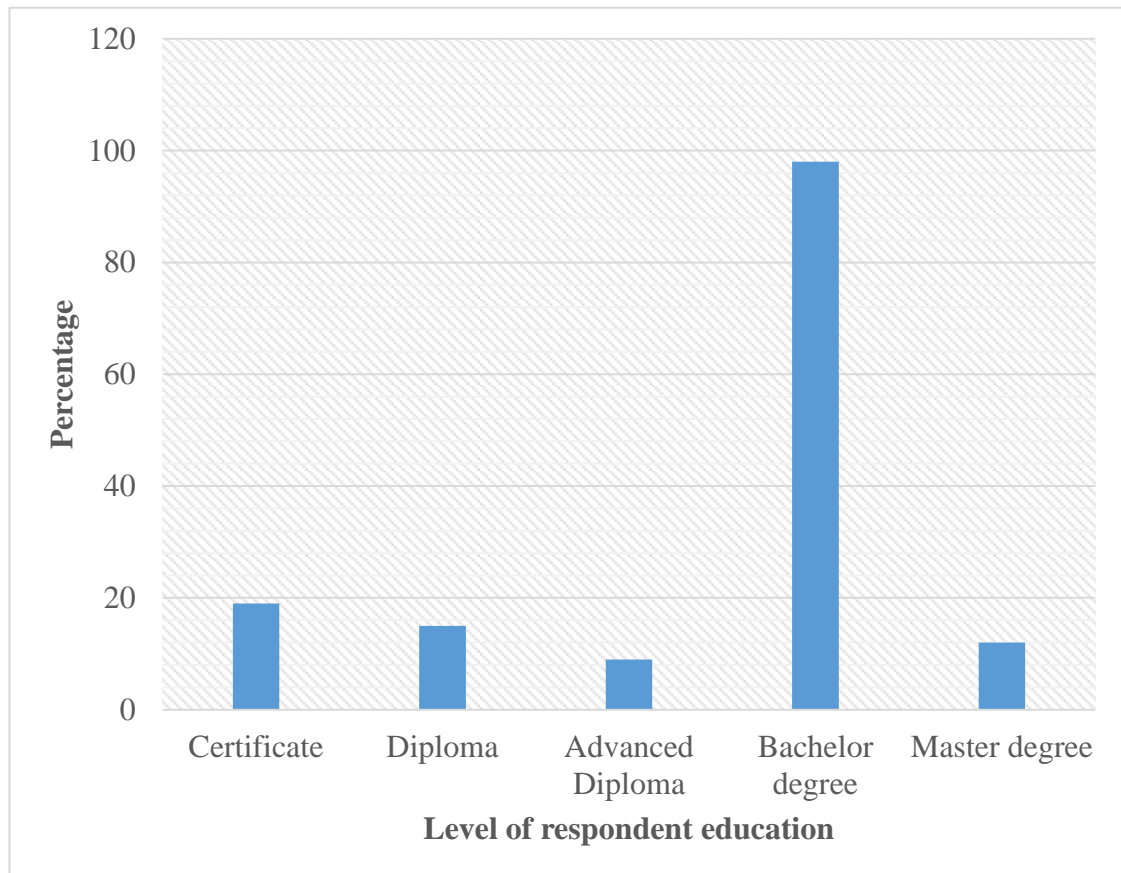
Figure 4.3 Distribution of the respondents by their level of education.

Source: Field Data.. 2024

Conversely, individuals with lower levels of education may rely on emojis more literally, using them primarily as direct emotional expressions rather than for complex linguistic functions (Prada et al., 2018). This aligns with research suggesting that digital literacy plays a key role in emoji comprehension, as more educated individuals are often more adept at understanding evolving digital trends and the fluid meanings of emojis across different platforms and cultural contexts (Tigwell & Flatla, 2016).

The low representation of master's degree students in this study presents a methodological limitation, as it prevents an in-depth comparison between undergraduate and postgraduate emoji usage patterns. Previous research suggests that postgraduate students and individuals in professional settings tend to use emojis more selectively, often reserving them for informal communication while maintaining a more formal tone in academic and professional interactions (Kelly & Watts, 2015). The absence of master's degree participants means that this study may not capture the full spectrum of emoji usage behaviors that could vary between undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

4.3.   Objective one: To identify the most common WhatsApp smiley emoji used by St Augustine University of Tanzania students.

The first objective of this study was to identify the most commonly used WhatsApp smiley emojis among students at St. Augustine University of Tanzania (SAUT). To achieve this, respondents were asked a series of questions regarding which smiley emojis they frequently use, how often they incorporate them in their WhatsApp conversations, and with whom they typically share these emojis. Understanding emoji usage patterns provides valuable insights into how students engage in digital communication, the emotions they express, and how emoji use varies based on social context, relationships, and gender dynamics.

4.3.1 The heart-eyed smiley face

The findings indicate that one of the most frequently used emojis among students at

SAUT is the heart-eyed smiley face emoji . This emoji is widely recognized as a symbol of affection, admiration, or delight, often used to express romantic feelings,

deep appreciation, or excitement about a person, object, or event. However, while this emoji is commonly associated with romantic expressions, the study revealed that students also frequently use it in non-romantic contexts, particularly in friendship-based conversations and group chats.

The use of the heart-eyed emoji extends beyond romantic relationships and is often employed in a light-hearted and enthusiastic manner to convey excitement, admiration, or support. For example, students reported using this emoji to react positively to messages from friends, to compliment someone, or to show excitement about an event, a picture, or an achievement. This aligns with previous research on emoji use, which suggests that certain emojis originally associated with romantic meanings have evolved into more generalized expressions of enthusiasm and admiration in digital conversations (Danesi, 2017).

Additionally, gender differences were observed in the use of the heart-eyed emoji. The data indicates that female students are more likely to use this emoji compared to male students. Women tend to use expressive and affectionate emojis more frequently, which is consistent with research suggesting that females generally incorporate emojis as a means of reinforcing emotional tone and social bonding (Prada et al., 2018). On the other hand, male students were less likely to use this emoji, especially in conversations with other men. This aligns with findings from previous studies, which indicate that men often limit their use of emotionally expressive emojis, particularly in male-to-male interactions, to avoid misinterpretations regarding their intentions or emotional state (Evans, 2017).

Despite these gender differences, the heart-eyed emoji remains a widely used and socially accepted symbol among students at SAUT, reflecting a broader trend in digital communication where emojis are used to enhance emotional expression, clarify intent, and reinforce positive social interactions. The findings highlight the importance of considering both social and contextual factors when analysing emoji usage patterns, as their meanings and applications can vary depending on the relationship between the sender and the recipient.

4.3.2. Crying face with waterfalls.

The crying face with waterfalls emoji emerged as one of the most commonly used emojis among students at St. Augustine University of Tanzania (SAUT). According to the respondents, this emoji is primarily used to express deep emotions, sadness, disappointment, or overwhelming feelings. The study revealed that students frequently rely on this emoji when they want to convey strong emotional reactions in digital communication, as it is perceived as an effective and relatable symbol of intense emotion.

One respondent, a first-time emoji user, described the crying face with waterfalls emoji as particularly impactful, stating,

"It is very easy to use, easy to understand, and very touching and emotional" (Respondent 7, Personal Communication, March 2024).

This statement highlights how students view this emoji as a convenient and universally understood expression of deep emotion, making it a preferred choice over textual descriptions of sadness or disappointment. This aligns with previous research

suggesting that visual symbols, such as emojis, serve as efficient tools for conveying emotions that may be difficult to express through words alone (Danesi, 2017). Furthermore, participants reported that the crying face with waterfalls emoji is particularly effective in expressing dissatisfaction, sadness, or emotional distress. One interviewee emphasized its emotional depth, stating,

"It is very easy to understand and touches deeper feelings" (Respondent 18, Personal Communication, March 2024).

This perception is consistent with findings from Prada et al. (2018), which suggest that emojis help users intensify emotional messages, making digital communication more expressive and emotionally resonant. The ability of the crying face emoji to evoke a strong emotional response makes it a powerful tool in digital interactions, allowing users to connect with others on an emotional level, even in text-based conversations.

Moreover, context plays a significant role in the interpretation of this emoji. While it is commonly associated with sadness or distress, some respondents noted that it can also be used ironically or humorously in informal digital conversations. For instance, in peer-to-peer interactions, students may playfully use the crying face emoji to exaggerate reactions or dramatize minor inconveniences, such as expressing frustration over academic deadlines or making light-hearted complaints about everyday situations. This reflects previous research indicating that emoji meanings are often fluid and dependent on context (Evans, 2017).

4.3.3. Wrinkly Smile Face

Among the various emojis commonly used in WhatsApp conversations, the winking smiley face emoji emerged as one of the most popular among students at SAUT. According to the respondents, this emoji is widely used across all demographic groups, including different genders, age groups, and educational levels. The study findings indicate that the winking smiley face emoji is perceived as friendly, universally acceptable, and contextually flexible, making it an integral part of digital communication.

Participants revealed that this emoji is frequently used not only by active WhatsApp users but also by passive users, demonstrating its versatility in different digital interactions. One respondent described the emoji as an "all-weather emoji", stating,

"I like using the winking smiley face emoji because it is easy to understand, friendly, and accommodating. No one can feel embarrassed when this emoji is used in a WhatsApp discussion" (Respondent 12, personal communication, March 2024).

This statement suggests that students perceive the winking emoji as non-threatening, inclusive, and suitable for various conversation types, including casual chats, academic discussions, and group interactions.

Another key finding from the study is that students often use the winking smiley face emoji to signal participation in group conversations. One interviewee explained how they strategically use this emoji to engage in discussions, stating,

"When the discussion is hot, friendly, and attractive, this has been my best emoji to use as a way of showing that I am part of the group conversation, and my group

members understand me and most of the time respond to me using a related emoji"
(Respondent 6, personal communication, March 2024).

This highlights how emojis, particularly the winking smiley face, serve as digital
engagement tools that allow users to indicate presence, agreement, or friendly teasing
in online discussions.

The study findings align with previous research on emoji use in digital
communication, which suggests that emojis such as the winking smiley face function
as social bonding mechanisms that help users establish rapport, express humour, and
enhance conversational tone (Danesi, 2017). The playful and slightly mischievous
nature of the wink emoji allows for a subtle layer of meaning, making it useful for
both light-hearted and mildly sarcastic exchanges (Evans, 2017).

One significant aspect of the winking smiley face emoji is that its meaning is highly
context-dependent. While it is generally used to express friendliness, humour, and
warmth, it can also convey sarcasm, irony, or subtle flirtation, depending on the
nature of the conversation and the relationship between the sender and receiver
(Prada et al., 2018). This makes the winking emoji one of the more nuanced digital
expressions, requiring users to consider context and familiarity when interpreting its
meaning.

Additionally, gender differences may influence how this emoji is used and
understood. Research suggests that men are more likely to use the winking emoji in
humour or sarcasm, while women often use it to reinforce friendliness and inclusivity
in conversations (Tigwell & Flatla, 2016). However, in group discussions, both male

and female respondents reported using this emoji as a way of showing engagement and participation, demonstrating its broad social acceptance across different demographic groups.

4.3.4. Friendly and attractive

The smiley face emoji 😃 has been identified as one of the most commonly used and widely accepted emojis among students at SAUT. This emoji is recognized for its friendliness, ease of interpretation, and universal applicability, making it a preferred choice for both group and individual conversations. Unlike other emojis that might carry context-dependent or ambiguous meanings, the smiley face emoji is perceived as simple, positive, and universally understood across different demographic groups, including age, gender, and education levels.

The study findings indicate that students often choose smiley face emojis to maintain a warm, friendly, and engaging tone in WhatsApp conversations. One participant emphasized the convenience and inclusivity of smiley face emojis, saying,

"Using emojis in group conversations requires smartness so as not to confuse your colleagues and partners in the conversation. Some emojis are difficult to understand, but smiley face emojis are the easiest to interpret across all demographic categories" (Respondent 14, personal communication, March 2024).

This suggests that students prefer emojis that are clear, unambiguous, and widely recognized to avoid miscommunication, particularly in group discussions where multiple people with different backgrounds and levels of emoji literacy are involved.

Moreover, many respondents highlighted that smiley face emojis are perceived as more friendly and attractive than text-based responses. One participant shared,

"I am always using emojis to respond to any message in WhatsApp conversations. I see using a smiley face emoji as more friendly and attractive than using words when responding to a message" (Respondent 22, personal communication, March 2024).

This statement reinforces the idea that smiley face emojis enhance social interactions by making responses more engaging, approachable, and emotionally expressive.

The emojis function as non-verbal cues in digital conversations, helping to clarify tone, reduce misunderstandings, and reinforce positive social interactions (Danesi, 2017). Unlike plain text, which can sometimes appear neutral or even harsh, smiley face emojis signal positive intent, warmth, and emotional openness, making digital conversations feel more natural and engaging (Evans, 2017). This aligns with the findings of this study, where students reported that using smiley face emojis makes their interactions more enjoyable and socially inviting.

Additionally, the findings indicate that the universality of smiley face emojis makes them ideal for cross-demographic communication. Unlike more complex or culturally specific emojis that may require contextual understanding, smiley face emojis are easily interpreted by individuals of different ages, genders, and educational backgrounds. This highlights their function as bridging tools in digital communication, ensuring that messages are received with clarity and the intended emotional tone (Prada et al., 2018).

4.3.5 Emotion and empathy

Emotions and empathy play a fundamental role in digital communication, as they help to bridge the gap between sender and receiver, ensuring that messages are understood with the intended emotional tone. However, in text-based communication, expressing emotion and empathy effectively can be challenging, as words alone may not fully capture the depth of feeling, tone, or intent behind a message. This study found that students at St. Augustine University of Tanzania (SAUT) frequently rely on emojis to enhance emotional expression and create empathetic connections in their WhatsApp conversations.

Respondents highlighted that emojis serve as powerful visual tools that simplify emotional expression, making it easier to convey feelings such as happiness, sadness, sympathy, or excitement. One participant explained their preference for using emojis when expressing empathy, stating,

"I prefer emojis over words when I want to communicate something with empathy and emotion. Even when I write a message in words, it must be accompanied by an emoji" (Respondent 9, personal communication, March 2024).

This statement reflects the growing reliance on emojis as an essential element of digital communication, supporting previous research suggesting that emojis function as non-verbal cues that help clarify tone and emotion in online interactions (Danesi, 2017).

The study findings indicate that emojis enhance emotional communication in ways that text, voice, or even video sometimes cannot achieve instantly. Participants

reported that while written text or spoken words require time for emotional meaning to be processed, emojis provide an immediate and intuitive representation of feelings, making them more effective in evoking empathy between the sender and receiver. This aligns with Evans (2017), who argues that emojis serve as emotional amplifiers, helping users to reinforce the sentiment behind their messages and ensure that the intended emotion is accurately conveyed.

Furthermore, the use of emojis to express empathy is particularly significant in digital interactions where non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions and body language, are absent. In face-to-face communication, individuals rely on visual and auditory signals to interpret emotions and intentions. However, in WhatsApp conversations, such cues are missing, making it easier for messages to be misinterpreted or perceived as cold or indifferent. By integrating emojis into their messages, students compensate for the lack of physical expressions, ensuring that their messages are emotionally engaging and empathetically resonant (Prada et al., 2018).

One of the most notable aspects of emoji-based emotional expression is its impact on psychological well-being and digital social bonding. The findings suggest that students feel more emotionally connected to their peers when emojis are used, as they help to create a sense of warmth, relatability, and human presence in digital conversations. This supports research by Tigwell and Flatla (2016), who found that emojis play a key role in reducing the emotional distance between communicators in online interactions, fostering stronger social bonds and digital empathy.

Moreover, the preference for emojis over plain text suggests a wider shift in digital communication behaviours, where users increasingly rely on visual symbols to convey emotions more effectively. The ability of emojis to transmit emotions instantly and universally makes them a valuable tool for cross-cultural and intergenerational communication, ensuring that emotional messages are understood without the need for extensive explanation (Kelly & Watts, 2015).

4.3.6. Colleagues

The study findings indicate that smiley face emojis are most frequently used in conversations with colleagues, highlighting their role in enhancing friendly and professional digital interactions. According to the data collected, 84% of respondents (54%) reported using smiley face emojis in conversations with their colleagues, making it the most common social context for emoji use. The results suggest that students at St. Augustine University of Tanzania (SAUT) perceive emoji-based communication with colleagues as a more engaging, friendly, and approachable way of interacting in digital spaces.

The preference for using smiley face emojis among colleagues can be attributed to their ability to create a positive and informal atmosphere in WhatsApp group discussions. Unlike formal professional conversations, interactions with colleagues, who share similar academic or workplace environments, often involve light-hearted exchanges, teamwork discussions, and casual updates. One possible explanation for this trend is that emojis help soften the tone of text-based communication, making interactions feel more personal and relatable (Danesi, 2017). The study findings align with previous research indicating that smiley face emojis play a crucial role in

maintaining social harmony and reducing the ambiguity of written messages in professional or academic settings (Evans, 2017).

Table 4.1. Showing how emoji users use it

SN	Emojis	Frequency	Percentage
1	Colleagues	84	54
2	Lovers	14	9
3	Friends	37	25
4	Relatives	18	12
	Total	153	100

Source: Field Data: 2024.

The study also found that 25% of respondents reported using emojis frequently in conversations with close friends. This finding reinforces prior research suggesting that emojis help strengthen social bonds in informal conversations (Prada et al., 2018). Friends often use emojis to express emotions, humor, and shared experiences, making them an essential feature of digital social interactions. Given that friendship-based conversations are typically informal, students feel more comfortable using a wide range of emojis to convey playfulness, affection, and shared understanding. The presence of emojis in these interactions enhances the emotional depth of messages, creating a sense of closeness and rapport between users.

In contrast to colleagues and friends, emoji use is considerably lower among romantic partners, accounting for only 9% of reported cases. The findings suggest that emojis are primarily used in private, one-on-one conversations between lovers, rather than in group discussions where romantic partners are present. This indicates that romantic emoji usage is context-dependent, often appearing in intimate settings rather than public or shared digital spaces. The selective use of emojis in romantic

conversations may be attributed to the personal and emotionally charged nature of these exchanges, where individuals may prefer direct verbal expressions or more personalized emoji choices that carry deeper meaning between partners (Evans, 2017).

The study also highlights that only 12% of respondents reported using emojis in conversations with family members, suggesting that emojis are less frequently used in family-based digital communication compared to peer interactions. The findings indicate that text-based messages are more commonly used than emojis in family WhatsApp groups, particularly when communicating with older relatives. This could be due to differences in digital literacy and communication preferences across generations, as older family members may perceive emojis as informal or unnecessary in structured conversations (Tigwell & Flatla, 2016). Furthermore, younger students might intentionally limit their emoji use in family settings to maintain a sense of formality and respect in their interactions with elders.

Table 4.2. Showing how often they use smiley emojis

SN	Emoji's use	Frequency	Percentage
1	Rarely	24	16
2	Occasionally	35	23
3	Frequently	94	61
	Total	153	100

Source: Field Data 2024

The study findings indicate that smiley emojis are frequently used in WhatsApp conversations, with the majority of respondents (61%) reporting that they use them regularly. This highlights a significant shift in digital communication habits, where

emojis have become an essential feature of text-based interactions. The preference for emojis over traditional text responses suggests that students view them as a quicker, more expressive, and engaging way to communicate emotions and intentions. Additionally, 23% of respondents reported using emojis occasionally, demonstrating that while emojis are popular, their use is often context-dependent. Some individuals may choose to limit their use in formal conversations or when interacting with certain people, such as family members or lecturers. Meanwhile, 16% of respondents rarely use emojis, indicating that some students still prefer text-based communication without visual elements.

The frequent use of smiley emojis suggests that students value non-verbal cues in digital messaging, as emojis help clarify tone, reduce misunderstandings, and create a more engaging conversational experience. Research suggests that emojis function as digital substitutes for facial expressions and gestures, making interactions feel more natural and emotionally rich (Danesi, 2017). The study also reveals that emojis are more common in peer-to-peer conversations, where informality and emotional expression are prioritized. In contrast, some individuals may avoid using emojis in professional or family interactions, as they may perceive them as too informal for structured communication (Prada et al., 2018). This differentiation in emoji use highlights the nuanced nature of digital communication, where individuals strategically adapt their messaging style based on social norms and relationship dynamics.

Overall, the study confirms that smiley emojis are a dominant feature of WhatsApp communication, particularly among younger users who prefer visual-based

interactions over purely text-based exchanges. The results suggest that as digital communication evolves, non-verbal elements such as emojis will continue to play a crucial role in shaping how people express themselves online. While frequent emoji users demonstrate a preference for quick and emotionally expressive messaging, occasional and rare users reflect the continued relevance of traditional text-based communication. Future research could explore how generational and cultural differences influence emoji adoption, shedding light on the broader impact of visual symbols on digital literacy and communication trends.

4.2.2. Objective two: To establish diverse interpretations of the WhatsApp smiley emoji among St. Augustine University students.

Table 4. 3. Diverse interpretations of the WhatsApp smiley emojis

SN	Emoji	Different Interpretation	Frequency	percentage%
1		sadness, despair, emotional pain, or suffering	153	100
2		love, affection, or friendship for someone or something	153	100
3		Happiness, joy, satisfaction, enthusiasm, or fun in a conversation or message.	140	91.5
4		In love or delighted with something or someone, and is also often used to express happiness.	153	100
5		A feeling of love, affection, or admiration for someone or something that has been said in a conversation or message.	150	98
6		A feeling of confidence, style, or relaxation.	80	52
7		Sadness about something.	124	81
8		Innocence, purity, goodness, or a person who is considered an angel	114	74.5
9		Confused, feeling bored, Disgusted	70	46

10		Kissing, Whistling, Pouting	95	62
11		Thinking, wondering, sadness	120	79
12		Goodnight, sleeping	153	100
13		Not talking, keep secret, shut up	130	85
14		Sick	60	39
15		Teasing, curious	55	36
16		Laughter, happiness	153	100
17		Joking, funny	60	39
18		Delicious, yummy	153	100
19		Joke, feeling naughty	40	26

Source: Field Data 2024

The findings of this study indicate that WhatsApp smiley emojis carry multiple interpretations among students at St. Augustine University of Tanzania (SAUT), reflecting both shared and varied understandings of their meanings. Out of the examined emojis, seven (love, kiss, lying, drooling, sleepy, crying, and delicious) were consistently interpreted the same way by 100% of respondents, suggesting that their visual representation strongly aligns with their intended emotional expression. The finding is similar to Wicke (2017), who argued that emoji meanings are often vague and open to multiple interpretations, with only a few being universally recognized. He further noted that emojis tend to be used both symbolically and conceptually, leading to diverse interpretations among different users.

The high level of agreement on these emojis implies that they are widely recognized and frequently used in digital communication, making them easier to interpret (Danesi, 2017). Additionally, certain emojis, such as those representing happiness, joy, or enthusiasm, received high recognition rates (91.5%), reinforcing the idea that emojis with clear facial expressions and universally understood emotions tend to be interpreted correctly. However, emojis with more abstract or context-dependent meanings, such as those depicting confidence (52%), confusion (46%), or teasing (36%), were less consistently interpreted, indicating that some emojis lack a universally fixed meaning and may be influenced by individual perception, cultural background, or personal experience. This is supported by Barbiere et al. (2016), who argued that preferences in emoji usage differ across countries, reflecting cultural variations in communication norms and emotional expression. Similarly, a study by Annamalai & Salam (2017), which analyzed the interpretation of 75 different emojis among undergraduate students at a public university in Malaysia, found that students assigned varied meanings to the same symbols based on their individual experience and cultural experiences.

The study further highlights that some smiley emojis are often misinterpreted due to their ambiguous visual representations, leading to inconsistencies in meaning across users. Emojis such as the zipper face, hushed face, flushed face, and pouting face, which resemble a kissing gesture, received the lowest percentages of correct interpretations, with some being understood differently by more than half of the respondents. The variation in interpretation suggests that while emojis serve as digital expressions of emotion, their meaning is not always universally fixed and can

be shaped by factors such as digital literacy, frequency of use, and individual exposure to emoji-based communication (Prada et al., 2018). These findings underscore the fluid and evolving nature of emoji usage, reinforcing previous research that suggests emoji meanings are largely subjective and dependent on social, cultural, and contextual factors. Moving forward, further research could explore how different age groups, linguistic backgrounds, and technological familiarity affect emoji interpretation, contributing to a deeper understanding of how digital symbols function as an emerging visual language in modern communication.

4.2.2.2. Emotion or deep, sad interpretation 😭

The findings suggest that facial emojis play a crucial role in conveying emotions, particularly when words fail to fully express the intended sentiment. Many respondents indicated that emojis serve as a more immediate and impactful way of communicating feelings, as they require less effort and creativity compared to written text. One respondent emphasized this preference, stating,

"I should utilize emoji rather than words, as words require greater creativity to capture the attention of both sender and receiver" (Respondent 98, personal communication, March 2024).

This response aligns with previous research that suggests emojis function as digital non-verbal cues, allowing users to express emotions more efficiently and reducing ambiguity in digital conversations (Danesi, 2017). The study further confirms that emojis are particularly effective in bridging emotional gaps in digital communication, as they replicate human facial expressions and gestures that are

often lost in text-based interactions (Evans, 2017). Miller et al. (2016) argue that while current research suggests that emojis can enhance emotional expression and alter message interpretation, the broader implications of their use remain underexplored.

In addition to their emotional expressiveness, smiley emojis are widely used to communicate happiness, joy, satisfaction, enthusiasm, or fun, depending on the context of the conversation and the intent of the sender. The study indicates that emoji interpretation is highly dependent on the emotional state of the sender and the tone of the discussion, reinforcing the idea that emojis are not static in meaning but rather fluid and adaptable to various social settings (Prada et al., 2018). While a simple smiley face may universally convey happiness, its use in a sarcastic or ironic context could completely alter its intended meaning, demonstrating how digital communication relies on shared understanding and contextual awareness. These findings highlight the dynamic and evolving role of emojis in modern messaging, emphasizing their importance in enhancing emotional clarity and interpersonal connection in digital conversations.

4.2.2.3. Affection, love, affection, or friendship for someone or something 🥰

The study findings indicate that emojis play a significant role in expressing affection, love, and friendship, often conveying emotions more deeply than words alone. Many respondents noted that using emojis with close companions or romantic partners enhances emotional connection, as visual symbols can evoke greater impact and resonance in digital communication. One participant emphasized the emotional weight of emojis in romantic interactions, stating,

"My partner and I choose emojis over words, which are very touching. I greatly appreciate it when she sends me emojis at night before I sleep" (Interviewee 8, personal communication, March 2024).

This response aligns with existing research that suggests emojis serve as non-verbal emotional enhancers, reinforcing intimacy and strengthening relational bonds in digital conversations (Danesi, 2017). The use of affectionate emojis in private conversations, WhatsApp messages, or status updates suggests that users associate specific visual cues with emotional closeness, reinforcing shared meaning between communicators (Evans, 2017).

Additionally, the majority of respondents reported using smiley face emojis to express friendliness and affection, emphasizing their ease of engagement and universal interpretability. The collective significance of these emojis has established them as direct and approachable tools for conveying emotional warmth, making them integral to digital expressions of friendship and love. Unlike plain text, which may sometimes feel detached or formal, emojis help soften conversations, adding a personal and emotionally rich element to communication (Prada et al., 2018). These findings highlight the growing reliance on emojis as a form of digital emotional expression, demonstrating that emojis are more than just playful symbols—they actively contribute to shaping interpersonal relationships in the digital space. Future research could explore how different cultural and generational groups interpret and use affectionate emojis, further examining their role in digital communication dynamics.

4.2.2.4. In love or delighted with something or someone, and is also often used to 😍 express happiness.

The findings reveal that smiley emojis play a crucial role in expressing love, delight, and happiness, making them versatile tools for digital communication. Respondents indicated that emojis help convey affection not only in romantic relationships but also in non-romantic contexts, such as appreciation for objects, experiences, or personal achievements. One participant emphasized this perspective, saying,

"I believe that all smile emojis are intended to convey different kinds of love messages" (Respondent 124, personal communication, March 2024).

This finding aligns with previous research indicating that emojis function as emotional amplifiers, allowing users to communicate positive emotions with clarity and immediacy (Danesi, 2017). The ability of smiley emojis to transmit warmth and affection across different social interactions highlights their role as essential non-verbal cues in digital messaging, reducing the risk of misinterpretation in text-based conversations (Evans, 2017).

Moreover, the study highlights that the expression of love and delight through emojis is not restricted to romantic contexts, as respondents noted that emojis can signify admiration for people, objects, or experiences. This reinforces the idea that emoji meanings are fluid and adaptable, shaped by both personal interpretation and the surrounding conversational context (Prada et al., 2018). The broad use of smiley emojis for expressing joy, gratitude, and enthusiasm suggests that they serve as a universal language of positivity in digital communication. These findings indicate

that as emoji usage continues to evolve, their function as emotional enhancers will remain central to digital conversations, contributing to more engaging and expressive online interactions. Future studies could explore how cultural and linguistic factors influence emoji interpretation, further enriching our understanding of visual communication in the digital era.

4.2.3. Objective three: Examine the influence of WhatsApp smiley emojis usage on communication patterns and social interactions among St. Augustine University students

4.2.3.1. Emotional nuances'

The study findings indicate that WhatsApp smiley emojis play a significant role in conveying emotional nuances, making digital communication more expressive and engaging. The majority of respondents reported that they prefer using emojis to express emotions when communicating with friends, family, and colleagues, as they provide a straightforward and visually intuitive way of expressing happiness, sadness, excitement, or disappointment. One participant highlighted the effectiveness of emojis in emotional communication, stating,

"Conveying emojis to express both sadness and happiness is more comprehensible than utilizing words or vocalization" (Interview 8, personal communication, March 2024).

Similarly, another respondent noted that using emojis adds an emotional layer to conversations, making them more touching and relatable. These findings align with prior research suggesting that emojis act as digital non-verbal cues, helping users

enhance emotional expressiveness and avoid misinterpretations in text-based conversations (Danesi, 2017). Also, Widodo et al. (2022) argue that social media provides a forum for open and creative self-expression, enabling users to share their thoughts, opinions, images, and personal experiences more freely.

4.2.3.2. Clear communication

Beyond their role in expressing emotions, emojis help maintain clarity in communication by preserving the intended meaning of a message. Widodo et al. (2022), who examined the impact of technology and social media on human communication patterns, confirmed that digital tools such as emojis enable individuals to connect on a global scale in real time, altering interpersonal relationships and the way messages are conveyed.

Many respondents acknowledged that words can often be subject to multiple interpretations depending on how they are constructed by the sender and understood by the receiver. In contrast, emojis provide a more direct and universally recognized visual representation of emotions and intentions. One respondent remarked,

"Emojis possess a singular meaning; their interpretation cannot be altered", emphasizing their role in ensuring consistency in communication (Questionnaire Response, March 2024).

These findings support previous research indicating that emojis reduce ambiguity in digital conversations by reinforcing the sender's intended emotional tone, thus preventing misunderstandings (Evans, 2017).

4.2.3.4. Engaging

Another key finding from the study is that emojis enhance engagement in WhatsApp conversations, making digital communication more interactive and participatory. The majority of respondents cited participation as one of the main reasons they prefer using emojis, as they facilitate bilateral engagement between the sender and receiver. One respondent emphasized,

"The inclusion of emotion in verbal communication enhances its appeal and engagement", reinforcing the idea that emojis serve as conversational enablers that encourage active participation in digital interactions (Prada et al., 2018).

These insights suggest that as WhatsApp continues to be a primary communication tool among university students, the role of emojis in fostering engagement and maintaining social connections will remain critical.

4.2.4. Objective Four: To identify challenges encountered by SAUT students when using WhatsApp smiley emoji

Despite their benefits, the study findings also reveal several challenges associated with emoji use among students at St. Augustine University of Tanzania. While emojis enhance emotional expression, clarity, and engagement, some students struggle with interpretation, particularly when encountering new or less frequently used emojis. The study identifies four major challenges faced by students when using WhatsApp smiley emojis: delusion, unfamiliarity with newly introduced emojis, infrequent use of certain emojis, and difficulties in interpreting emojis with color variations.

4.2.4.1. Delusion

One of the most commonly reported challenges is delusion or difficulty in discerning the intended meanings of emojis, as many emojis appear to have multiple interpretations. Younger respondents, particularly first-time emoji users aged 18 to 19, reported struggling with understanding emoji meanings, primarily due to Tanzania's educational policy prohibiting secondary school students from using mobile phones. One participant described their experience, stating,

"After getting admitted to university and receiving my first loan, I began using my phone to participate in digital interactions, notably in our WhatsApp groups of university and school colleagues. However, I struggled to learn how to use emoji for communication" (Interview 10, personal communication, March 2024).

Additionally, many respondents pointed out that there are no formal lessons or guidelines on emoji usage, making it difficult for new users to grasp their meanings without relying on external resources such as Google. These findings highlight the importance of digital literacy and the need for increased awareness of emoji usage to prevent communication barriers among first-time users (Evans, 2017).

4.2.4.2. New-fangled emoji

Another significant challenge is the introduction of new emojis, which can create confusion for novice users. Respondents noted that emoji developers continuously introduce new emoticons, and their interpretation depends on the curiosity and familiarity of both the sender and recipient. One participant shared their struggle, stating,

"As a novice user of emoji on WhatsApp, I had challenges in comprehending the meanings of some emoticons" (Questionnaire Response, March 2024).

Furthermore, some users reported feeling left out when interacting with more experienced emoji users, who often assume that others understand newly introduced symbols. This suggests that while emojis are meant to enhance communication, their evolving nature can also act as a barrier for those unfamiliar with the latest additions to the emoji lexicon (Prada et al., 2018).

4.2.4.3. Sporadic use

The study also found that students face difficulties interpreting emojis that are rarely used in their personal or group WhatsApp conversations. Respondents explained that when an emoji is not commonly used, its meaning becomes harder to recognize, requiring additional effort to interpret. One participant described their experience, stating,

"There are common emojis that I find easy to comprehend. I recall during my first year, a classmate sent an emoji that I had never seen or used before, making it challenging to understand his meaning until I resorted to Google for interpretation" (Questionnaire Response, March 2024).

This finding indicates that frequent use of specific emojis within a communication group increases familiarity and ease of interpretation, while sporadically used emojis often cause confusion (Evans, 2017). It also suggests that emoji literacy improves through exposure and repeated interaction, meaning that users become more proficient in interpreting commonly used symbols over time.

4.2.4.3. Colour interpretation

A final challenge identified in the study is color-based misinterpretation, where students struggle to discern the meaning of emojis featuring different colors. Some respondents reported that color variations in smiley emojis create confusion, particularly for individuals with color blindness or limited knowledge of color symbolism. One respondent with color vision deficiency expressed frustration, stating, *"I am blind in color. If you want me not to understand the content, use color to communicate. I do not like using color as a key interpretation of the message"* (Questionnaire Response, March 2024). These findings indicate that while color differentiation enhances emoji diversity, it can also create barriers for individuals who rely on shape and facial expressions rather than color to interpret meaning. Future research could explore how color perception influences emoji comprehension among different user demographics, contributing to more inclusive digital communication strategies (Tigwell & Flatla, 2016).

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Introduction

This chapter presents a summary of findings, conclusions drawn from the research, recommendations, and suggested areas for further research.

5.2. Summary of findings

The study sought to analyse WhatsApp smiley emoji usage and interpretation among St. Augustine University Students in Mwanza, Tanzania. Four research objectives that guided the study were: i) To identify the most common WhatsApp smiley emoji used by St. Augustine University students ii) To establish diverse interpretations of WhatsApp smiley emoji among St. Augustine University students iii) Examine the influence of WhatsApp smiley emoji usage on communication patterns and social interactions among St. Augustine University Students iv) To identify challenges encountered by St. Augustine University students when using smiley emoji.

Given the increasing reliance on digital platforms for social and academic engagement, it was essential to explore which emojis dominate WhatsApp conversations and the factors influencing their popularity. Findings revealed that emojis conveying emotions related to love, affection, friendship, and admiration for a person or an object are the most frequently used. These are closely followed by emojis representing happiness, joy, satisfaction, enthusiasm, and fun, suggesting that students prioritise emotional expressiveness and social bonding in their digital interactions.

The findings indicated that there is plenty of meaning interpretation for each smiley emoji. Out of the examined smileys used as the variable in this research, only seven smileys which are Love, kiss, lying, drooling, sleepy, crying, delicious, were interpreted similarly by all the respondents (100%), whereas the rest was interpreted differently according to their understandings of the smileys' meaning. Nevertheless, some smileys are not yet well understood by the users of their intended meaning, causing them to interpret the smileys based on their perception and understanding. The lowest percentages of correct interpretations (lesser than 50%) are mostly the smileys that has same intended meaning as other common smileys but has different visual expressions such as zipper face, hushed face, cold sweat, smiling face with halo, screaming with fear, unamused, flushed face, disappointed face, confounded face, fearful face, hugging face, teasing face, rolling eyes face, expressionless face, frowning face with open mouth, pouting face that looks like kissing, and worried face.

More so, the findings indicated that WhatsApp smiley emojis play a significant role in conveying emotional nuances, making digital communication more expressive and engaging. The majority of respondents reported that they prefer using emojis to express emotions when communicating with friends, family, and colleagues, as they provide a straightforward and visually intuitive way of expressing happiness, sadness, excitement, or disappointment. One participant highlighted the effectiveness of emojis in emotional communication, stating,

Despite their benefits, the study findings also revealed several challenges associated with emoji use among students at St. Augustine University of Tanzania. One of the

most commonly reported challenges is delusion or difficulty in discerning the intended meanings of emojis, as many emojis appear to have multiple interpretations. Students face difficulties interpreting emojis that are rarely used in their personal or group WhatsApp conversations, as well as color-based misinterpretation, where students struggle to discern the meaning of emojis featuring different colors. Some respondents reported that color variations in smiley emojis create confusion, particularly for individuals with color blindness or limited knowledge of color symbolism.

In general, this study has demonstrated that young adults, particularly students at St. Augustine University of Tanzania, are avid users of smiley emojis on WhatsApp, employing them to express emotions, reinforce intended meanings, and create more engaging and dynamic conversations. However, despite their widespread use, emoji interpretation is not uniform, often leading to ambiguities, misinterpretations, and occasional miscommunication due to differences in personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, and digital literacy levels.

5.3 Conclusion

From the findings of the study, the following conclusions were drawn:

The emergence of smiley emojis has fundamentally reshaped digital communication, evolving into a universal yet nuanced visual language that facilitates emotional expression, social interaction, and conversational engagement. As digital interactions increasingly replace face-to-face conversations, emojis serve as non-verbal cues that add depth, clarity, and emotional context to messages, enabling users to convey feelings that text alone may fail to express.

This study affirms that WhatsApp smiley emojis have become an indispensable component of digital communication, shaping how individuals express emotions, navigate social interactions, and construct meaning in online conversations. However, their interpretation remains highly dependent on user experience, cultural context, and conversational dynamics, highlighting the subjective and evolving nature of digital symbols.

The research findings also contribute to the broader discourse on digital literacy and online communication strategies. As emojis become increasingly embedded in everyday digital interactions, the study highlights the need for greater awareness of how different demographic groups perceive and utilize emojis in communication. The findings suggest that while emojis enhance expressiveness, they also introduce new complexities, requiring users to develop interpretive skills that go beyond basic textual comprehension. This reflects the evolving nature of digital literacy, where successful communication now necessitates an understanding of visual, contextual, and symbolic cues in addition to traditional linguistic proficiency.

This research contributes to the understanding of digital semiotics and social interaction in online spaces, reinforcing the notion that while emojis enhance communication, they also necessitate a nuanced approach to interpretation and meaning-making. As such, users must develop greater digital literacy and contextual awareness to fully harness the communicative potential of emojis in contemporary digital discourse.

5.4 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is evident that emoji usage in digital communication, particularly on WhatsApp, presents both opportunities and challenges. While emojis enhance expression, engagement, and emotional connection in conversations, misinterpretations, inconsistencies in meaning, and usability difficulties among first-time users continue to create communication barriers. To address these challenges effectively, the following recommendations are proposed, targeting policy development, academic institutions, digital platforms, and user practices.

5.4.1 Policy and Regulatory Recommendations

Given the growing significance of digital communication in both personal and professional spheres, media policies, laws, and regulations should be developed or revised to reflect the evolving nature of emoji-based communication. Regulators and policymakers should consider:

Standardization of Emoji Meaning Across Digital Platforms. Regulatory bodies such as the Unicode Consortium, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), and national communication regulators should work towards ensuring greater uniformity in emoji meaning and interpretation across different devices and applications. Since emoji renderings differ across platforms, creating standard guidelines for emoji semantics can help mitigate miscommunication and unintended misinterpretations.

Inclusion of Digital Literacy in Media and Communication Policies. Governments and education ministries should integrate emoji interpretation into digital literacy training, particularly in secondary and higher education curricula. This would ensure

that students develop a stronger understanding of emojis as part of modern digital communication, reducing miscommunication and strengthening their ability to use emojis effectively in professional and academic discourse.

Regulating the Use of Emojis in Official and Legal Communications, as emojis increasingly become a part of formal and legal communication, their usage should be regulated within legal frameworks to avoid ambiguity. Courts and legal institutions should establish clear guidelines on how emojis are interpreted in digital evidence, contracts, and workplace communication, preventing cases where misunderstood emoji messages lead to unintended legal consequences.

5.4.2 Recommendations for Digital Platforms and Technology Companies

Implementation of an Emoji Guide in WhatsApp, one of the key findings of this research, is that WhatsApp users struggle with emoji misinterpretations. To address this, WhatsApp Messenger should introduce a built-in guide or emoji glossary within the application that provides users with official definitions of each emoji as intended by its developers. This feature should be easily accessible in the chat interface, allowing users to tap and view the meaning of an emoji before using it.

Emoji Awareness Campaigns by Social Media Companies, platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, should invest in awareness campaigns educating users on emoji interpretation. This could involve interactive tutorials, infographics, or AI-powered emoji suggestions that ensure users apply emojis in the appropriate context.

More Inclusive and Context-Aware Emoji Development – The Unicode Consortium and digital platforms should focus on making emojis more universally recognizable, particularly by addressing concerns related to color perception and cultural variations in emoji meaning. Emoji developers should consider user feedback from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds when designing and categorizing new emojis to reduce ambiguities and misinterpretations.

5.4.3 Recommendations for Academic Institutions and Media Studies

Incorporating Emoji Studies into Digital Communication and Media Curricula, as emojis are now a fundamental part of digital communication, academic institutions, especially media and communication schools, should integrate emoji interpretation into their curriculum. This will help students develop critical digital literacy skills, equipping them to analyze emoji use in various professional, academic, and social contexts.

Encouraging More Research on Emoji Semantics and Digital Semiotics – Given that emoji interpretation varies based on personal, cultural, and linguistic factors, more academic research should be conducted on emoji semantics, social perceptions, and digital semiotics. Universities should promote interdisciplinary studies on digital communication, semiotics, and social media linguistics, helping to expand knowledge on how emojis shape human interaction in a globalized digital space.

Training Journalists and Content Creators on Emoji Use in Digital Media – Since journalists, advertisers, and social media influencers use emojis extensively in online content, media studies programs should provide training on how to use emojis effectively in digital storytelling, marketing, and brand communication. This will

help media professionals ensure that emojis reinforce rather than distort their intended messages.

5.4.4 Recommendations for WhatsApp Users and Digital Communication Practices

Encouraging Responsible and Context-Aware Emoji Use – WhatsApp users should be more conscious of the context in which they use emojis, ensuring that their intended meanings align with the way their messages may be perceived. This requires careful selection of emojis based on cultural sensitivity, recipient familiarity, and situational appropriateness.

Developing Digital Literacy Among First-Time Emoji Users – First-time users, particularly students who have had limited exposure to digital communication, should be given more opportunities to develop digital literacy skills. Peer mentoring, online tutorials, and university-led digital literacy initiatives can play a key role in helping new users understand how emojis are interpreted in different communication settings.

Utilizing AI-Powered Emoji Suggestions for Better Communication – Users can benefit from AI-powered emoji suggestions, which analyze chat content to recommend the most contextually appropriate emojis. Leveraging WhatsApp's predictive text and AI capabilities can help reduce emoji misinterpretations by suggesting emojis that align with the sender's intended meaning.

5.4.5 Final Recommendations and Future Research Directions

This study highlights the critical role of emoji literacy in digital communication while also shedding light on the challenges associated with emoji misinterpretation. As emojis continue to shape contemporary communication, there is an increasing need for further interdisciplinary research to explore their impact across different contexts. Understanding how emojis function in diverse digital environments will be essential in enhancing their effectiveness, inclusivity, and clarity in communication.

First, research should focus on cross-cultural emoji interpretation, examining how different cultural backgrounds shape the meaning and usage of emojis. Given that symbols can carry distinct connotations in different societies, understanding how cultural diversity influences emoji perception will help reduce misinterpretations and promote more effective intercultural communication. Future studies could explore whether certain emojis carry unintended meanings across various cultural settings and how digital users adapt their emoji use when engaging in conversations with individuals from different backgrounds.

Second, the cognitive impact of emojis should be explored in greater depth. Understanding how emojis influence reading comprehension, emotional response, and user engagement in digital conversations will provide valuable insights into their cognitive effects. Research in this area could examine whether emojis enhance or hinder message interpretation, how they affect users' emotional reactions, and whether they facilitate or distract from meaning-making in written communication. By understanding the psychological and cognitive aspects of emoji usage,

researchers can contribute to more informed strategies for incorporating emojis into education, digital literacy programs, and professional communication.

Third, artificial intelligence (AI) presents a promising avenue for improving emoji communication. Future research should investigate how AI and machine learning can be leveraged to minimize misinterpretations in emoji-based conversations. With advancements in natural language processing, AI-powered systems could assist users in selecting contextually appropriate emojis or provide real-time explanations of emoji meanings. This could be particularly useful for first-time users, individuals communicating across language barriers, and professional settings where clear communication is critical. AI-driven emoji recommendation tools could enhance message clarity while preserving the expressive and emotive nature of digital conversations.

Fourth, emojis in professional communication remain an area requiring further exploration. While emojis have become commonplace in informal messaging, their role in workplace emails, legal documents, and academic writing remains ambiguous. Future studies should assess whether certain emojis should be standardized for professional contexts, ensuring that they enhance rather than undermine clarity and professionalism. Additionally, research could explore how businesses, government institutions, and legal professionals incorporate emojis in formal communication and whether guidelines should be established for their appropriate use.

By addressing these key research areas, policymakers, educators, technology companies, and users can work collaboratively to enhance the effectiveness of emoji

communication. As digital interactions continue to evolve, ensuring that emojis are inclusive, accurately interpreted, and contextually appropriate will be essential in promoting effective digital communication. Future studies in these areas will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of emojis as a visual language, ensuring their responsible and meaningful use across various communication contexts.

5.5 Practical Implications and areas for future Research

The study's findings have practical implications for both digital communication and education. For students, understanding the subjective nature of emoji interpretation can help minimize misunderstandings and unintended communication breakdowns, especially in academic and professional contexts. Moreover, as digital communication becomes increasingly multimodal, educators and communication professionals may need to incorporate digital literacy training that emphasizes the role of emojis in meaning-making, online etiquette, and cross-cultural digital interaction.

Future research should explore how generational, linguistic, and cultural differences shape emoji perception, as well as how emoji-based communication influences cognitive and emotional processing in digital interactions. Given the rapid expansion of emoji use in professional and academic settings, further investigation into the formalization of emoji meaning within digital discourse communities could also be beneficial.

REFERENCES

Annamalai, N., & Salam, A. R. (2017). A study of emoji usage among undergraduate students of a public university in Malaysia. *Journal of Language and Communication, 4*(1), 50-65.

Ashworth, P. D. (2000). Psychology and human nature. *Routledge.*

Barbieri, F., Ronzano, F., & Saggion, H. (2016). What does this emoji mean? A vector space skip-gram model for Twitter emojis. *Proceedings of the 10th International Conference on Language Resources and Evaluation (LREC 2016)*, 3967–3972.

Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method.* University of California Press.

Bowcher, W. L. (2018). The semiotic sense of context vs. the material sense of context. *Functional Linguist, 5*(5), 1-19.

Burge, J. (2019). The history and evolution of emoji: How emoji went from a Japanese experiment to global communication. *Emojipedia*. Retrieved from https://blog.emojipedia.org/the-history-and-evolution-of-emoji

Cambridge Dictionary. (2017). Emoji definition. *Cambridge University Press.* Retrieved from https://dictionary.cambridge.org

Cohn, N., Roijackers, T., Schaap, R., & Engelen, J. (2019). Are emojis a poor substitute for words? Sentence processing with emoji substitutions. *Behavior Research Methods, 51*(5), 2489–2501. https://doi.org/10.3758/s13428-019-01243-0

Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2007). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research.* SAGE Publications.

Crystal, D. (2001). *Language and the Internet.* Cambridge University Press.

Danesi, M. (2017). *The Semiotics of Emoji: The Rise of Visual Language in the Age of the Internet.* Bloomsbury Publishing.

Davis, M., & Edberg, P. (2012). Unicode technical report: Unicode emoji. *Unicode Consortium.* Retrieved from https://www.unicode.org/reports/tr51/

Dimson, T. (2015). Inside Instagram: Emoji trends. *Instagram Engineering Blog.* Retrieved from https://engineering.instagram.com/emoji-trends-on-instagram-3f5e6e7fa6f

Eisenstein, J., & Pavalanathan, U. (2015). Emoji in social media: Patterns and meaning. *Computational Linguistics, 41*(4), 765-790.

Evans, V. (2017). *The Emoji Code: How Smiley Faces, Love Hearts, and Thumbs Up are Changing the Way We Communicate.* Michael O'Mara Books.

Gesselman, A. N., Ta, V. P., & Garcia, J. R. (2019). Worth a thousand interpersonal words: Emoji use and relationship satisfaction. *PLoS ONE, 14*(8), e0221297. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0221297

Goode, W. J., & Hall, P. K. (1968). *Methods in social research.* McGraw-Hill.

Grey, D. E. (2014). *Doing research in the real world.* SAGE Publications.

Hinz, M. (2015). The role of smileys in digital communication: A linguistic perspective. *Journal of Digital Linguistics, 7*(3), 78-92.

Hashim, K., Abdullah, M., Isa, S., & Janor, H. (2015). The role of WhatsApp Messenger in digital communication. *Asian Journal of Communication Studies, 5*(2), 120-135.

Homan, R., & Bulmer, M. (2006). *Ethics in social research.* Springer.

Kaye, L. K., Malone, S. A., & Wall, H. J. (2016). Emojis: Insights, affordances, and possibilities for psychological research. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 20*(2), 67–68.

Korgen, K. O., & White, J. M. (2008). *The Engaged Sociologist: Connecting the Classroom to the Community.* Pine Forge Press.

Krotz, F. (2007). *Mediatization: A concept with which to grasp media and societal change.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Krotz, F. (2008). Social communication in the digital age. *Journal of Media and Society, 4*(1), 42-58.

Lu, X., Ai, W., Liu, X., Li, Q., Wang, N., Huang, G., & Mei, Q. (2016). Learning from the ubiquitous language: An empirical analysis of emoji usage of smartphone users. *Proceedings of the 2016 ACM International Joint Conference on Pervasive and Ubiquitous Computing*, 770-780.

Martin, W. J. (2005). *Digital literacy and society.* SAGE Publications.

Miller, H., Thebault-Spieker, J., Chang, S., Johnson, I., & Terveen, L. (2016). "Blissfully happy" or "ready to fight": Varying interpretations of emoji. *Proceedings of the 10th International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*, 259–268.

Muhammad, S. (2017). The impact of emojis on digital communication among young adults. *International Journal of Digital Humanities, 5*(4), 43-57.

Neal, L. (2015). How social media platforms shape emoji language. *Journal of Digital Semiotics, 8*(1), 34-50.

Oxford Dictionaries. (2016). Word of the year: The rise of the emoji. *Oxford University Press.* Retrieved from https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2015/

Pardes, A. (2018). The secret life of emoji: How emojis are changing language. *Wired.* Retrieved from https://www.wired.com/story/emoji-changing-language/

Prada, M., Rodrigues, D. L., Garrido, M. V., & Lopes, D. (2018). Motives, frequency, and perceived efficacy of emoji use in text messaging. *Computers in Human Behavior, 85*, 24–34.

Riordan, M. A. (2017). Emojis as tools for emotion work: Communicating affect in text messages. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 36*(5), 549–567.

Sugiyama, S. (2015). The global expansion of emoji: Culture and communication. *Journal of Digital Society Studies, 7*(2), 56-73.

Tauch, A., & Kanjo, E. (2016). The emotional impact of emojis in digital messaging. *Journal of Digital Culture, 9*(1), 15-30.

Tezcan, M. (2005). Understanding communication in the digital age. *New Media & Society, 7*(4), 22-41.

Tigwell, G. W., & Flatla, D. R. (2016). Oh, that's what you meant! Reducing emoji misunderstanding. *Proceedings of the 18th International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction*, 1-10.

Yus, F. (2014). Not all emoticons are created equal. Linguagem Em (Dis) Curso, 14(3), 511-529

Widodo, S., Arifin, Z., & Sutrisno, H. (2022). The influence of technology and social media on human communication patterns. *Journal of Digital Society Studies, 14*(2), 45-61.

Wicke, P. (2017). Understanding the semiotics of emojis. *Journal of Digital Communication, 5*(3), 123-139.

Zlatev, J. (2018). Meaning making from life to language: The semiotic hierarchy and phenomenology. *Cognitive Semiotics, 11*(1), 1-18.

Mushi, A. (2024). Digital Communication Trends Among Tanzanian Youth: A Study of Social Media Language Use. [Journal of African Digital Studies]

Kessy, L. (2023). The Ambiguity of Emojis in Cross-Generational Communication in Tanzania. [East African Journal of Communication]

Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority (TCRA). (2024). Annual Report on Digital Literacy and Social Media Adoption in Tanzania. [TCRA Official Website]

Bhardwaj P. (2019). Types of sampling in research. Journal of the Practice of Cardiovascular

Sciences, 5(3), 157. DOI: 10.4103/jpcs.jpcs_62_19

Sreejesh, S., Mohapatra, S., & Anusree, M. R. (2014). Questionnaire Design. In Springer

Books. Business Research Methods (pp. 143–159). doi:10.1007/978-3-319-00539-3

APPENDICES

APPENDIX I: QUESTIONNAIRES FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Introduction

Dear Participant,

My name is Joanita Rwezahula, a Master's student at the Open University of Tanzania, interested in gathering information on **"Interpretation of WhatsApp Smiley Emojis.** The findings of this study will shed light on **understanding and Enhancing Communication Practices in the Digital Age, Particularly Among University Students."** Please take time to complete this questionnaire, and the information you provide will be treated confidentially and used for academic purposes only. The questionnaire has two sections (A and B); the first section (A) is demographic data, and the second section (B) contains questions on the topic under study. The question may take you approximately 10 minutes to fill out. If you encounter any problem while responding to any question(s), please contact me via sms/ call mobile number +255 754 303 181.

Thank you

Please note: Do not write your name in this questionnaire.

SECTION A:

(Please circle)

1. Gender

  a) Male

  b) Female

2. Education level

    a) Ordinary diploma student

    b) Basic Technician Certificate student

    c) Undergraduate student

3. Your Age

    a) Under 18

    b) 18 – 25

    c) 25 – 30

    d) 30 and above

SECTION B

4. How often do you use smiley emojis on WhatsApp?

    a) Rarely

    b) Occasionally

    c) Frequently

    d) Very frequently

With whom do you often share the smiley emojis in WhatsApp?

    a) Peers

    b) Parents

    c) Fellow students

    d) Relatives

    e) Friends

    Any other …………….……………………………………………………

How many of the messages that you send include emojis?

    a) No messages

    b) 25%

    c) 50%

    d) 75%

    e) 100%

6. **How many of the messages that you receive include emojis?**

    a) No messages

    b) 25%

    c) 50%

    d) 75%

    e) 100%

7. **Which smiley emojis do you use most on WhatsApp? (Select all that apply by cycling.) Use the space to give the meaning of the selected emojis.**

😃 ……………………..…………………………………...………………..

😍 ………………………………………………………………………………

🥰 ……………………………………………………………………..…

😎 …………………………………………………………………………

😣 …………………………………103…………………………………………..

😇 ....

😭 ....

😏 ....

😫 ....

😅 ....

😷 ....

🙄 ....

😴 ....

😜 ....

😞 ....

😘 ....

😝 ....

🤣 ....

😢 ....

😱 ....

🤧 ....

😬 ....

😗 ....

🤔 ....

8. Do you think emojis can change the meaning of text?

a) Strongly Agree

b) Agree

c) Disagree

d) Strongly Disagree

Please, explain your answer to question nine (8)
….…………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………………

Have you ever misinterpreted a smiley emoji in a WhatsApp conversation? If yes, please provide an example.

…………………………………………………………………………
…………………………………………………………………………
…………………………………………………………………………

9. How do you think the usage of smiley emojis influences communication patterns on WhatsApp?

a) Facilitates clearer communication

b) Adds emotional nuances to messages

c) Makes conversations more engaging

Any other**………………………………………………………………………………**

10. **Do you believe the usage of smiley emojis affects social interactions among St. Augustine University students on WhatsApp?**

a) Yes

b) No

c) Unsure

11. **Have you ever failed to understand the meaning of smiley emojis in a WhatsApp conversation? If yes, please describe the situation.**

………………………………………………………………………………………

………………………………………………………………………………………

………………………………………………………………………………………

………………………………………………………………………………………

Have you ever met any challenge (s) while communicating by using smiley emojis?

   a) Yes

   b) No

If Yes, please explain:

…………………………………………………………………………………

…………………………………………………………………………………

14. **What are your overall perceptions of using smiley emojis in digital communication?**

……………………………………………………………………………………

……………………………………………………………………………………

APPENDIX II: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Introduction

Dear Participant,

My name is Joanita Rwezahula, a Master's student at the Open University of Tanzania, interested in gathering information **on the interpretation of WhatsApp Smiley Emojis.** The findings of this study will shed light on **understanding and enhancing communication practices in the digital age, particularly among university students.** Please take the time to discuss this, and the information you provide will be treated confidentially and used for academic purposes only. The questions have two sections (A and B), the first section (A) is demographic data, and the second section (B) contains questions on the topic under study. The discussion may take approximately 20 minutes,

Thank you

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

    a) What is your age?

    b) What is your level of education?

    c) Gender (was observed by the researcher)

WHATSAPP SMILEY EMOJI USAGE:

    a) Which smiley emojis do you use most often on WhatsApp?

    b) Can you share some of the most common WhatsApp smiley emojis you use in a conversation?

    c) Why do you choose these specific smiley emojis?

d) Do you think there are certain emojis that are more commonly used among St. Augustine University students? Why or why not?

e) How often do you use WhatsApp on a daily basis?

f) What role does WhatsApp play in your communication with fellow students at St. Augustine University?

g) With whom do you often share the smiley emojis in WhatsApp?

INTERPRETATION OF WHATSAPP SMILEY EMOJI:

a) How do you interpret the meaning of emojis in general?

b) Do you think emojis can change the meaning of text?

c) Have you ever misinterpreted a smiley emoji in a WhatsApp conversation? If yes, please provide an example.

d) Have you ever failed to understand the meaning of smiley emojis in a WhatsApp conversation? If yes, please describe the situation.

e) Do you think cultural background, age, sex, level of education, or regional differences can cause different interpretations of smiley emojis?

INFLUENCE ON COMMUNICATION PATTERNS AND SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

a) Have you ever used emojis to convey emotions that are difficult to express through text alone?

b) How do you think the usage of emojis influences the tone and mood of a conversation?

c) Do you believe the usage of smiley emojis affects social interactions among St. Augustine University students on WhatsApp?

d) Do you think the usage of emojis affects the closeness or intimacy of your relationships with fellow students?

e) Have you ever had a misunderstanding or conflict arise due to the use of emojis in a conversation?

PERCEPTIONS OF WHATSAPP SMILEY EMOJI:

a. What are your overall perceptions of using smiley emojis in digital communication?

b. Do you believe that emojis have become an integral part of modern communication? Why or why not?

c. How do you envision the future of emoji usage in digital communication?

d. Have you ever met any challenge (s) while communicating by using smiley emojis?