RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Sociopragmatic Study of Emojis as Non-Verbal Cues in Virtual Team Meetings

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ABSTRACT

The sociopragmatic study examines the use of emojis as non-verbal cues in virtual team meetings, analyzing their linguistic and pragmatic functions across professional domains, meeting types, and levels of formality. The study focuses on how emojis contribute to meaning-making in remote work settings using platforms like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Slack. It draws on a dataset of 50 virtual meetings from technology, education, health, and finance sectors, with informed consent from participants. This diverse sample allows for an exploration of emoji use across various organizational cultures and communication practices.

The study categorizes meetings into four types: routine check-ins, brainstorming sessions, project updates, and feedback meetings. This classification facilitates a detailed analysis of how meeting types influence emoji use. The research highlights how formality impacts the frequency, purpose, and nature of emoji use in professional interactions.

Grounded in speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1975) and politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), the study argues that emojis serve linguistic functions beyond decoration. By emphasizing their sociopragmatic role in maintaining transactional and relational communication, the paper provides a framework for understanding how digital non-verbal cues enhance communication in evolving virtual environments.

Keywords: Emoji Use, Virtual Team Meetings, Non-Verbal Cues, Digital Communication, Professional Discourse

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1.Introduction

1.1Introductory Remark

The increasing trend of working from homes has increased dependence on digital technologies, especially at workplaces. Virtual communication platforms, therefore, are becoming an important medium for professional interaction. Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Slack, among all such virtual platforms, ensure communication, sharing of ideas, holding meetings without any stress about the distance. However, virtual meetings lack non-verbal cues of face-to-face interactions, such as facial expressions and body language-not to mention the gestures that accompany such interactions. These non-verbal signals are crucial in meaning transmission, interpersonal dynamics management, and conveyance of emotions during interactions (Gumperz, 1982). Without these, participants in virtual meetings have become ever more reliant upon alternate forms of expression, such as emojis, to fill in the gaps left by missing communicative content (Danesi, 2017).

Emojis, originally designed for casual online communication, have found their way into professional settings, where they serve as substitutes for facial expressions, tone of voice, and other paralinguistic features of conversation (Dresner & Herring, 2010). Despite their informal origins, emojis have become essential tools for conveying nuanced social meanings in digital interactions. Thus, emojis can act in virtual team meetings as non-verbal cues, given the lack of physical presence that limits the range of expressive behaviors; they may help to communicate, manage politeness, and support relational work (Kavanagh, 2010).

1.2 The Problem

Although most studies have focused on emoji usage in casual and social conversations, little attention has been paid so far to the use of these avatars within professional settings, especially when virtual teams meet. Considering this method of communication as a predominant one increasingly in professional interaction, investigation into the use of emojis as non-verbal cues is crucial for the interpretation of such virtual meetings' dynamics. The present study attempts to fill in the significant gap in sociopragmatic research on emojis as non-verbal cues within a professional setting of virtual teamwork. Specifically, the research questions are: To what extent do emojis compensate for the lack of face-to-face contact during virtual meetings, and what is the range of their sociopragmatic functions in that context? This paper tries to fill this understudied lacuna by attempting to answer the question: What communicative functions do emojis perform in virtual team meetings?

1.3 Research Questions

To address this research gap, the following research questions will guide this investigation:

1. How are emojis used to perform non-verbal communicative functions in virtual team meetings?
2. What sociopragmatic roles do emojis fulfill in these professional interactions?
3. How does the use of emojis in virtual meetings influence the perceived formality, politeness, and interpersonal dynamics of the conversation?
4. To what extent do participants from different cultures interpret the same emojis differently in terms of politeness, agreement, or emotional expression in virtual team meetings?

1.4 The Aims

The aims of this study are multifaceted:

1. Analyze the ways in which emojis are used to substitute or complement non-verbal cues in virtual professional communication.

2. Investigate the pragmatic roles of emojis in managing politeness, expressing emotion, and indicating social relationships within virtual teams.
3. Assess the impact of emoji use on the perceived formality and effectiveness of communication in virtual meetings.
4. Identify cultural and contextual factors that influence emoji use and interpretation in virtual team interactions.

1.5 The Hypotheses

Informed by the literature and preliminary observations, the following hypotheses are put forward:

H1: Emojis in virtual team meetings function as non-verbal cues, substituting for physical gestures, facial expressions, and intonation, thereby aiding in conveying affective meaning.

H2: The use of emojis in virtual professional settings serves to soften or mitigate direct speech acts, particularly those involving requests, criticism, or disagreement, thus maintaining politeness and harmony in team dynamics.

H3: Emojis contribute to the perceived informality of virtual meetings, potentially blurring the boundaries between formal and informal communication in the workplace.

H4: Cultural differences will be evident in the frequency, type, and interpretation of emojis in virtual team meetings, with variations in their pragmatic functions based on the communicative norms of different linguistic communities.

1.6 The Procedures

This will adopt a mixed-method approach to analyze the use of emoji usage in virtual team meetings, hence qualitative and quantitative approaches. The data will be retrieved from recorded virtual meetings across many organizations that allow usage through their chat or reaction features. The participants are team members from various professional backgrounds into remote working. A pragmatic discourse analysis will be carried out regarding the different types of emoji and their contexts. Those instances will be coded regarding their sociopragmatic functions, such as expressions of approval, request softeners, and disagreement mitigators. What participants consider with regard to the use of emojis in virtual meetings will be sourced by means of a questionnaire if this may influence the effectiveness of the communication, politeness, or formality.

1.7 The Limits

There are various limitations involved here. For example, the fact that the focus was on virtual teams may not offer good grounds for generalization to other professional contexts of digital communication, such as email and instant messaging, where the emojis can play different roles. The cultural scope may be jeopardized as one may only have participants from certain regions or industries, hence a low generalization. Moreover, emoji actual use might differ during virtual meetings due to the platform itself-some tools have only limited emoji sets or reduced functionality. Finally, it is impossible to capture all contextual factors in the analysis of recorded meetings. For instance, the tone of voice or other paralinguistic cues co-occurring with emoji use in synchronous communication.

1.8 The Significance

This is particularly relevant for the area of sociopragmatics, since this paper discusses a new form of digital communication that has taken great precedence in professional settings. The present study contributes to the existing knowledge regarding emoji use from outside social and informal contexts through the usage of virtual team meetings regarding their function as non-verbal signals. It also provides information that is useful and shall help an organization communicate better in a virtual work environment. Such pragmatic functions of emoji use in professional contexts will contribute toward developing the strategy of virtual communication for better teamwork and reducing misunderstandings when working virtually. This paper contributes

to recent literature on digital discourses and distant communication related to work, providing novel insights on how technology-mediated communication influences and is influenced by the social dimensions of the workplace. Further research will be triggered on the issue of using non-verbal cues in virtual environments with continuous change in dimensionality while working at home and in hybrid models.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Sociopragmatics and Digital Communication

Sociopragmatics explores the relationship between language use and the social contexts that shape and are shaped by it. As Leech (1983) articulates, it is concerned with "the social conditions on language use" and how factors such as power, distance, and politeness influence pragmatic language practices. In face-to-face interactions, individuals utilize non-verbal cues like facial expressions, gestures, and body posture to convey meaning, manage politeness, and display emotions (Goffman 1959). These non-verbal elements are critical for fostering relationships and maintaining social cohesion. However, as communication increasingly shifts into digital environments, the ways in which social meaning is constructed have adapted accordingly.

Digital communication reconfigures traditional sociopragmatic concepts of physical co-presence, even within the context of virtual team meetings. Participants in these digital exchanges transmit non-verbal signals using visual symbols, such as emojis. As Herring and Androutsopoulos (2015) note, these visual and emotive resources have become significant aspects of online communication. This shift reflects how "the pragmatic function of non-verbal cues in virtual environments mirrors face-to-face interaction, helping to establish social and conversational norms." With remote work becoming more common, emojis now play an integral role in online interactions, providing emotional expression, enhancing politeness, and adding textual nuance, paralleling the sociopragmatic roles of non-verbal cues as highlighted by Dresner and Herring (2010).

2.2 Non-Verbal Cues and Virtual Communication

Non-verbal signals play a significant role in human communication as channels for conveying emotional expressions, intentions, and relational information that are typically not verbalized consciously or simultaneously (Mehrabian, 1971). In face-to-face interactions, these non-verbal messages support the speaker and provide essential feedback for the listener to achieve mutual understanding (Knapp, Hall, & Horgan, 2013). Additionally, non-verbal cues act as important markers of social rank, deference, and politeness, contributing to the balance of power and solidarity during interactions (Gumperz, 1982).

In virtual communication, where visual cues are often absent, these non-verbal signals are conveyed through alternative methods. Digital interactions often replace many of these kinesic signals with emojis—visual representations of emotions, objects, and actions (Danesi, 2017). Emojis help convey tone, sarcasm, or humor that may not be evident from text alone. In virtual team meetings, where participants frequently use text-based chats or reaction tools, emojis play a vital role in expressing agreement, disagreement, approval, or disapproval, aiding in managing interpersonal dynamics (Skovholt, Grønning, & Kankaanranta, 2014). According to Rahman and Al-Saad (2021), "understanding the pragmatic function of non-verbal cues such as emojis can deepen insights into the complexities of virtual team communication," highlighting the need to recognize how these digital symbols contribute to nuanced and effective interactions.

2.3 Emojis as a Form of Computer-Mediated Non-Verbal Communication

It is a fact that emojis have rapidly become significant tools for enriching digital communication, undertaking a role typical of non-verbal support which supplements or even replaces those available in face-to-face interaction. Indeed, concerning emojis in digital communication, Danesi, 2017 claims that these can undertake three basic functions of expressing

emotions, emphasizing, and illustrating verbal texts keeping social contact where physical contact is not possible. As a consequence, they have become essential in computer-mediated communication where they help to fill in the gap for missing non-verbal channels.

Emojis enact, according to Dresner and Herring 2010, in computer-mediated communication illocutionary functions, in that they are context-providing cues which shall change or modify speech acts. For instance, a thumb-up emoji would mean something was agreed or approved when having a virtual meeting; a frowning face will show disapproval or problems. Emojis in virtual team meetings will ensure that no room for misinterpretation will arise or that miscommunication will transpire, particularly when it involves sensitive topics like giving or receiving criticism and appraisal. By softening direct statements, emojis can function as politeness strategies, helping to maintain positive interpersonal relationships among team members (Kavanagh, 2010).

2.4 Sociopragmatic Functions of Emojis in Professional Settings

professional settings, communication is often shaped by the need to balance task-oriented language with relational concerns, such as managing politeness and maintaining professional decorum. In face-to-face meetings, non-verbal cues such as eye contact, nodding, and smiling help manage politeness and express social relationships. In the virtual environment, where such cues are absent, emojis offer a new means of performing these sociopragmatic functions (Skovholt et al., 2014). In professional communication, emojis perform several sociopragmatic functions. They first manage politeness, especially in communicative situations involving power dynamics or hierarchical relationships. Following Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, 1987, individuals use several strategies to save face themselves and not threaten the face of the other.

Emojis in virtual meetings can act as positive politeness tools, such as mitigating directives or criticisms and, consequently, reducing the possibility of the occurrence of face-threatening acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987). A heart emoji or a smiling face can, for example, be used in order to soften negative feedback so that it may be digested more easily by the recipient. Second, emojis serve to express affective meaning, providing emotional content that complements the informational content of text-based communication. In professional contexts, emotions are often underplayed or hidden to maintain a veneer of formality; however, emojis allow for subtle emotional expression, which can help build rapport and foster team cohesion (Derks, Fischer, & Bos, 2008). Finally, emojis enhance social bonding among members of professional teams whose opportunities for informal contact are limited by virtual working. Emojis can, thus, serve as a "relational tool" through which the members of the team manage to keep themselves connected, maintaining comradeship despite distances between them (Kavanagh, 2010).

2.5 Review of Previous Studies

Indeed, an increasing amount of research has looked at the use of emojis and its forerunner emoticons in various forms of digital communication. However, what emojis actually look like in real use in a professional setting, or more specifically, during virtual team meetings in real-time, is a relatively open question. Whereas most of the previous studies have dealt with the usage of emoticons and emojis in informal-mostly asynchronous-communication like e-mailing, SMS, and social network communication, this provides a basis for pragmatic, emotional, and social functions of emoji, thus leaving a wide gap to research on how emojis operate within professional real-time collaboration.

One key study delimiting the pragmatic functions of emoticons in online communication is by Dresner and Herring in 2010. Their study indeed revealed that emoticons do play very significant illocutionary functions aside from being emotive markers that may modify, emphasize, and explain in detail the intent of text-based messages. This will also agree with earlier theories of the functions of speech acts Austin 1962; Searle 1975, in that the non-verbal provided illocutionary

force to a communication. Findings make major proposals for understanding how emojis-as an evolution of emoticons-can enact a similar role in professional virtual team meetings. Skovholt, Grønning, and Kankaanranta (2014) extended this line of investigation into emoji use within work-related email.

They also explained that emojis chiefly function as politeness strategies in contexts of hierarchy or professional formality. Their study shows that in email, emojis work to soften directives, enhance relational communication, and maintain professional etiquette-functions that are key to workplace harmony. While the study is essentially enlightening, its limitation is that it has focused essentially on asynchronous communication; this, of course, begs the question about what changes in those dynamics in the course of the synchronous, rapid-fire interchange found in, say, virtual meetings. A different approach was represented by the work of Derks, Fischer, and Bos (2008), who actually investigated the emotional and social functions of emoticons within computer-mediated communication. Results of the research, conducted by the cited authors, underlined the affective dimensions of emoji use, outlining the fact that these non-verbal signs-emoticons-develop social bonding, express emotions, and enable interpersonal relations in the virtual space.

The other highly relevant strand of work in understanding the sociopragmatic functions of emoji in team-based virtual interaction, where emotional and relationship management are keys for team cohesion and collaboration. In fact, the work by Derks et al. is very useful to any understanding of how even within professional team's emoji can function as tools of emotional display and for interpersonal dynamic maintenance, even though it did not specifically concern professional and synchronous contexts such as virtual meetings. With such valuable inputs to the knowledge within the field of emoji usage in the digital communication, the real time use of emojis for professional purposes remains under-investigated. In this respect, the work by Kavanagh 2010 provides some insights into the issue by discussing the politeness strategies in the virtual teams. Kavanagh explores how the remotely working teams employ a big number of communicative strategies, including the non-verbal ones, to maintain the politeness and handle the face without conflict during an interaction. This is particularly relevant, as the current study will discuss where nonverbal communication and politeness theory converge in virtual teams, which is the subject of the current study. However, Kavanagh's study is well before widespread use of emoji, which these days are common currency in digital communications, let alone Slack, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom, enabling teams to collaborate in real time. Hence, while helpful in many ways, Kavanagh's framework falls short of completeness regarding the elaboration of subtle ways that, through contemporary team-based communication, such emojis are put to both transactional and relational use.

Most research into emoji is conducted within an informal, personal framework; little attention is paid to indicating in what ways emojis occur inside more structured, professional contexts. This is because traditional workplace communication research has targeted verbal communications, while even modern studies failed to appreciate the growth in visual and non-verbal features, like emojis being employed in virtual environments.

The widespread use of digital communication devices in professional contexts today renders virtual meetings among the most valued means of communication. Suffice it to say that this research into the role that emojis play as non-verbal cues in such contexts cannot be demeaned. This paper discusses the sociopragmatic functions of emojis within virtual team meetings, focusing on politeness, emotions, and team dynamics. While these studies have no doubt given a very promising theoretical basis, the current use of emojis in synchronous professional communications really needs investigation. This study, therefore, contributes something new by providing the leading in-depth exploration of emoji usage across industries and meeting contexts, with a central focus on their use as crucial tools in digital workplace communication. That is to

say, though the above-named studies provided the most valuable insight regarding the role of emojis in informal, asynchronous communication, there is an urgent need to extend the above-mentioned findings into synchronous, professional settings of virtual team meetings. Drawing on that earlier work but distinctive in its investigation of how emojis function as socio-pragmatic tools in real-time professional digital exchange, this research furthers an understanding of how non-verbal signals operate within an ecology of remote working currently in emergence.

Methodology

3.1 The Collected Data and Discussion

The study has adopted a holistic approach to ascertaining how emojis give non-verbal cues in virtual team meetings at a place of work. The mixed-methods design is the approach to research that this study has adopted, where it merges the qualitative and quantitative methods of collection, analysis, and interpretation of data. This paper explores the procedure for pragmatic analysis of the emojis in virtual meetings with the aim of ascertaining their socio-pragmatic functions, especially about politeness, emotion, and relational work. The following sections discuss the method and procedures of data collection, the analytical framework used in the study, and how the data was interpreted.

The data collection will be from various sources in trying to achieve comprehensive coverage of virtual team meetings in different professional contexts. Primary data will involve recordings of virtual team meetings held on the communication medium, such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Slack. The platforms were chosen because they are among the most commonly used while working from home; each of these has integrated emoji usage within their chats or reaction features. This corpus of data was analyzed within this paper, based on consent-assured recorded meetings.

The selected meetings will cover teams involved in various technological, educational, health care, and financial fields of operation.

It required a large variety of industries to ensure a range of professional communication styles; perhaps even emoji variation dependent upon the field. The sampling was performed in such a manner that subjects would join in virtual meetings on a regular basis within the course of everyday professional communication. These have ranged from small groups of 5-10 participants to larger meetings of 20 or more. These included regular meetings, brainstorming sessions, project updates, and feedback meetings. The variety in meeting types also allowed the researcher to study the use of emoji for different communicative functions-signaling agreement, tempering criticism, indicating emotions, and showing politeness in more formal communications. A total of 50 meetings were recorded, each ranging from 30 minutes to 2 hours in length, so a very substantial data set was obtained for analysis.

Table (1): Sociopragmatic Functions of Emojis in Virtual Team Meetings

Category	Emoji Examples	Pragmatic Function	Example
Speech Acts	🙏, 👏, 😐	Requests, Thanks, Apologies	"We can discuss this later 🙏"
Conversation Analysis	💡, 😜	Completing adjacency pairs	"Let's move on 💡"
Politeness Strategies	😊, 👏, ✔, 😐	Positive politeness, Negative politeness	"Great work 👏"

Institutional vs. Casual Conversations	✔️, ✅	**Task orientation**	**"Please confirm by EOD ✔️"**
Sociopragmatic Instruction	😡, 👍	**Testing pragmatic understanding**	**"Give feedback on the proposal 😡"**
Differential Validity Evidence	💔, 🎉	**Measuring effectiveness**	**"I'm so disappointed 💔"**

Ethics, in this respect, given the professional and private nature of such virtual meetings, were tight. It had been made clear that recordings were to be used for the research study to which informed consent from all participants was collected. Meetings anonymized the identity of participants and any organizations concerned. All names, positions, and company names will be de-identified during the process of transcription. This collection is performed in conformation with and above the Institutional Ethical Review Board to ensure the confidentiality of data and participants.

Transcription tools as the first output and then manually verified for accuracy. This transcript contains all the verbal interactions and the non-verbal components of this meeting, including emojis and reactions. Emojis that came up during this meeting were written within dialogues, showing where each fell within the flow.

Each emoji has been annotated with its context: where it occurred within a conversation, and what function the emoji had in that location. Initial coding of data had first of all to be performed to categorize variant types of Emoji usage and their probable communicative functions. Such emojis were, therefore, divided into approval-use-for example, thumbs-up; emotion-use-for instance, smiling face and heart; humor-use-for instance, laughing face-and any other possible disapproval or critique-used emojis. The coding here served as a basis upon which further detailed discourse analysis was able to be elaborated in the subsequent steps of this research.

3.2 Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA)

Herring's 2007 Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) serves as a foundational model for systematically examining discourse within computer-mediated environments. CMDA operates across four levels: structure, meaning, interaction, and social function. This paper will utilize the CMDA model to investigate how emojis contribute to interactional coherence in virtual team meetings. It explores how elements such as turn organization, the timing of emoji usage, and their placement within specific speech acts shape interactions, recognizing that emojis can signal agreement, soften directives, or express solidarity among team members.

While sociopragmatics emphasizes the social dimensions of language use, particularly how context influences the interpretation of both verbal and non-verbal elements, emojis in virtual team meetings function as intermediaries that modulate social meaning. They mitigate the directness of speech acts, indicate agreement or support, and reveal subtle emotional undertones. This study considers how these emphatic emojis align with verbal communication to fulfill sociopragmatic roles. For example, an emoji might follow a directive to imply acceptance without a verbal response, maintaining the communication flow without challenging the speaker's authority or request. "Context and cultural background play significant roles in how visual elements, like emojis, are interpreted in professional online settings," emphasizing that the interpretation of these non-verbal signals varies based on social and cultural contexts. Emojis are very often used as a politeness-management tool in virtual communication. Brown and Levinson's theory (1987) suggests that people use language to redress face-threatening acts such

as issuing directives or making criticism. Here, in the absence of abundant non-verbal signals on the web, emojis serve as a way to soften these face threats. This takes into consideration that emojis enact both positive politeness strategies, and negative politeness strategies-which in this line would be enacting indirectness through using a more vague or neutral emoji. It discusses how different face-saving emojis were deployed so as not to threaten the face of members in those meetings. For example, responding critical or disagreeing emojis show how teams navigate around what could be a very contentious moment in protecting social harmony.

3.3 The Model

This paper investigates the purpose of using emojis to provide a non-verbal cue during virtual team meetings through the sociopragmatic linguistic model. According to this model, discussing how people deal with the face in interactions-that is, the public self-image-relies on Brown and Levinson's politeness theory of 1987. Emojis can be thought of as digitized signs of emotions and intentions used to enhance politeness, mitigate face-threatening act, and point toward cooperative communication. All these operate within the framework that was used to analyze how emoji contribute to conversational implicature and to the conversation maxim of quality, quantity, relevance, and manner, including Goffman's 1959 conceptualization of face-work and Grice's cooperative principle. This brings into account the theories of discourse analysis and computer-mediated communication in attending to the unique features this type of digital interaction creates. Unlike face-to-face, which would have provided paralinguistic cues such as gestures and facial expressions, and even the tone of voice, virtual communication uses text and symbols, for example emojis, in lieu of these subtleties. Hence, emojis stand in for those non-verbal signals, allowing participants to communicate emotion, politeness, and tone of interaction that would have been absent in textual communication. Derks, Fischer, & Bos 2008.These are, therefore, the ingredients constituting the model explaining the pragmatic functions that emoji use would come in for virtual team meetings:

1. Politeness Strategies: Building on Brown and Levinson’s (1987) framework, the model posits that emojis are employed to both preserve the positive face of the interlocutor and reduce the negative face threats in potentially contentious or formal meetings. For example, in feedback meetings, participants often used emojis like 😊 (Smiling Face) or 👏 (Clapping Hands) to offer positive reinforcement, softening the potential harshness of critical comments and ensuring a supportive atmosphere. These emojis serve as markers of positive politeness, emphasizing solidarity and appreciation.
2. Conversational Maxims and Implicature: Drawing from Grice’s (1975) cooperative principle, the model suggests that emojis contribute to maintaining relevance (maxim of relevance) and enhancing clarity (maxim of manner) in digital conversations. Emojis such as 👍 (Thumbs Up) or ✅ (Checkmark) frequently function as non-verbal cues signaling agreement or task completion, ensuring that communication remains efficient and clear without disrupting the flow of the conversation.
3. Face-Work and Mitigation: As proposed by Goffman (1959), emojis serve as tools for face-saving and face-giving in virtual meetings, particularly in professional settings where maintaining interpersonal harmony is crucial. In sectors like healthcare and education, where the emotive content of communication can be high, emojis like 💖 (Heart) or 🙏 (Thank You) are used to manage the emotional tone of interactions, demonstrating empathy and fostering a supportive communicative environment. The use of these emojis mitigates potential threats to face, particularly in sensitive conversations involving feedback or criticism.
4. Discourse Pragmatics: The model also draws on discourse analysis theories to explore the sequential nature of emoji use within conversation. Similar to Schegloff’s (2007) concept of adjacency pairs, emojis can function as part of response patterns that mirror non-verbal cues

in spoken language. For example, the use of 🎯 (Target) following a statement of goal achievement or 🏆 (Trophy) after reporting success reinforces the completion of adjacency pairs (e.g., statement-response), ensuring pragmatic closure to conversational sequences.

5. Contextual Adaptation: Herring's (2007) faceted classification scheme for CMC is incorporated to account for the context-dependent nature of emoji use. In informal meetings, the model suggests higher emoji usage, with symbols like 🤣 (Laughing Face) and 😊 (Smiling Face) playing a key role in building rapport and reducing formality. In contrast, in formal meetings or more structured interactions (e.g., finance sector), emoji use is more restrained, with a focus on task-oriented symbols like ✔ (Checkmark) and 👍 (Thumbs Up), reflecting the professional tone and expectations of the interaction.

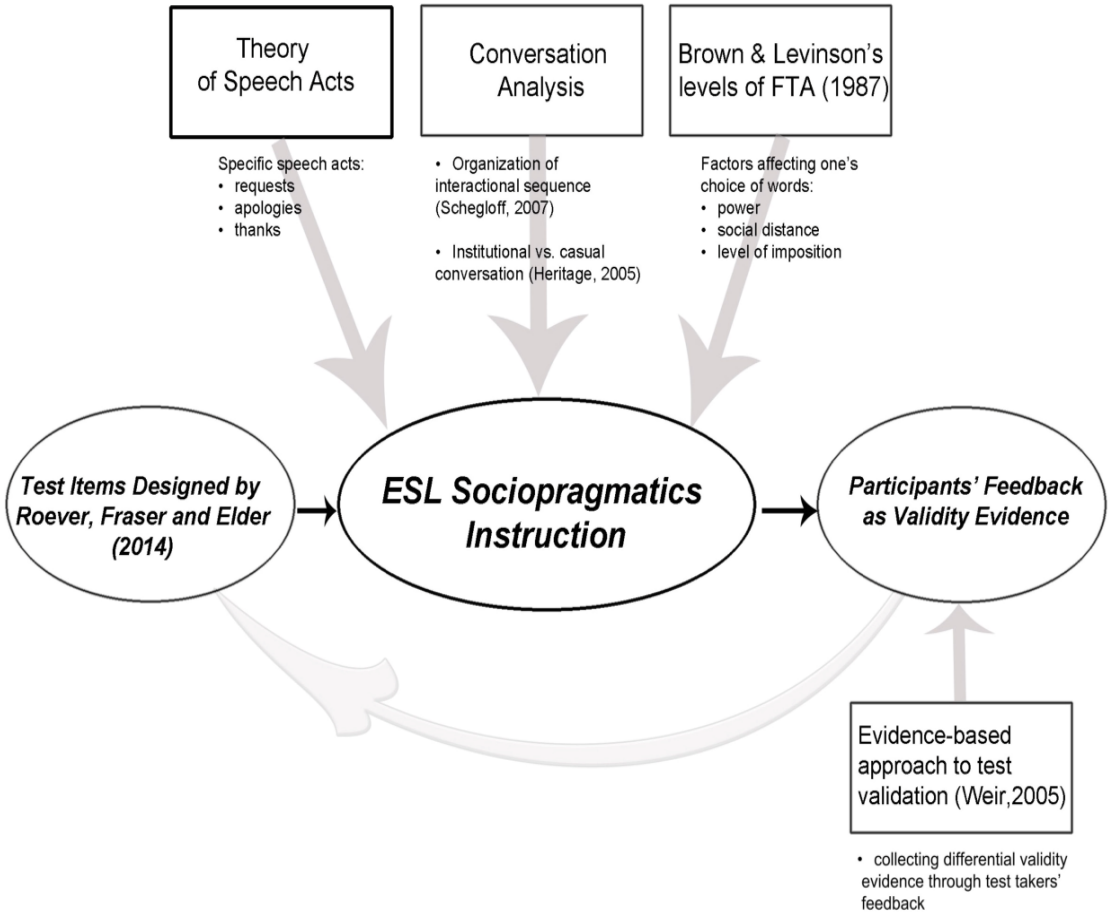

Figure (1): A Sociopragmatic Linguistic Framework for Emoji Use in Virtual Team Meetings

The collected data from virtual meetings across diverse sectors, such as technology, healthcare, education, and finance, demonstrates how the Sociopragmatic Linguistic Model can be applied to understand emoji use in distinct professional settings. For instance, in the technology sector, where the frequency of emoji use reached 75%, emojis are used to sustain politeness and facilitate efficient acknowledgment in a fast-paced, innovation-driven environment. Conversely, in the finance sector, with only 55% emoji use, the model reveals a more restricted deployment of emojis, focusing on task acknowledgment and confirmation rather than emotion or politeness.

In addition, the model captures the differing functions of emoji use in routine check-ins versus brainstorming sessions. In check-ins, emojis serve to maintain social harmony and politeness, while in brainstorming, they foster creativity and open-ended discussion, signaling

encouragement and acceptance of ideas through symbols like 💡 (Light Bulb) or 🤔 (Thinking Face). The Sociopragmatic Linguistic Model provides a comprehensive framework for understanding emoji use in virtual team meetings by integrating key theories from politeness, face-work, discourse analysis, and CMC. By analyzing how emojis are used to perform various communicative functions, the model sheds light on the evolving role of non-verbal cues in digital professional interactions, illustrating how these symbols maintain interpersonal harmony, ensure clarity, and adapt to the contextual demands of virtual communication. This model offers a robust lens for examining how digital communication technologies continue to shape sociopragmatic dynamics in professional settings.

3.4 The Data Analysis and Discussion

The data presented in the table reflects the sociopragmatic use of emojis in various professional contexts, specifically virtual team meetings across sectors and meeting types. By applying relevant linguistic theories, including Speech Act Theory, Conversation Analysis, Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework, and institutional vs. casual conversation dynamics.

Table (2): Platform-Wise Frequency Distribution of Emoji Use in Virtual Team Meetings

Category	Meetings (No.)	Emoji Use (%)	Common Emojis	Sample Extracts	Linguistic Function
Sector					
Technology	15	75%	👍, 😊	"Looks good to me 👍"	Agreement, Politeness
Education	10	60%	🙏, ✔️	"We can discuss this later 🙏"	Politeness, Softening Criticism
Healthcare	8	65%	❤️, 💬	"That's a great suggestion 💬"	Emotion, Solidarity
Finance	7	55%	✔️, 👍	"We'll finalize it by tomorrow ✔️"	Task Acknowledgment, Agreement
Meeting Type					
Routine Check-ins	12	70%	👍, 😊	"Let's move on 💡"	Transition, Acknowledgment
Brainstorming Sessions	10	85%	💡, 🤔	"This might be a good idea 🤔"	Idea Expression, Encouragement
Project Updates	18	80%	✅, 🎯	"We've met all our goals ✅"	Task Confirmation, Success
Feedback Meetings	5	50%	👏, 😊	"Great work on the report 👏"	Positive Feedback, Politeness
Meeting Formality					
Formal Meetings	10	40%	✔️, 😐	"Please confirm by EOD ✔️"	Formality, Task Confirmation
Informal Meetings	15	85%	😊, ❤️, 🤣	"Ha-ha, that's hilarious 🤣"	Humor, Social Bonding

We can analyze the pragmatic function of emojis and their contribution to digital discourse.

1. Speech Acts and Emoji Use

According to Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), communicative actions such as requests, apologies, and thanks are commonly observed in both face-to-face and digital communication. Emojis serve as an extension of these acts in virtual meetings, fulfilling several speech acts functions:

Requests: Emojis like 🙏 (Prayer Hands) are often used in requests to soften the imposition, making the request more polite and mitigating potential face-threatening acts (FTAs). For example, in education sector meetings, "We can discuss this later 🙏" indicates a polite request to delay discussion while maintaining the addressee's positive face.

Thanks, and Acknowledgments: Emojis like 👏 (Clapping Hands) and ❤️ (Heart) function as non-verbal expressions of thanks or positive acknowledgment, often used to offer positive feedback and to build solidarity within teams. In the healthcare sector, "That's a great suggestion 💬" paired with the heart emoji demonstrates appreciation and emotional support.

Apologies: Although direct apologies were less prominent in the data, emojis that mitigate face-threatening acts, such as 😳 (Neutral Face), indicate the speaker's intent to maintain formal politeness and avoid confrontation, particularly in more formal or institutional settings, such as finance meetings.

2. Conversation Analysis (CA)

Incorporating Schegloff's (2007) analysis of interactional sequences, emojis are essential in completing adjacency pairs within virtual meetings. These pairs involve two utterances linked by interactional expectations, such as question-answer or request-acknowledgment.

Routine Check-ins: For instance, in "Let's move on 💡," the emoji completes the adjacency pair by confirming a task transition, ensuring smooth flow in the sequence.

Brainstorming Sessions: In brainstorming contexts, emojis like 💡 (Light Bulb) or 🤔 (Thinking Face) act as implicit responses within conversation sequences, encouraging further discussion or signaling receptiveness to new ideas.

3. Politeness and Face-Work (Brown & Levinson, 1987)

In virtual team meetings, emoji use helps manage face-threatening acts (FTAs) and maintain politeness strategies. According to Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, emojis fulfill the dual roles of:

Positive Politeness: Emojis like 😊 (Smiling Face) or 👏 (Clapping Hands) are used to promote solidarity and mutual respect, particularly in informal meetings. The data shows an 85% emoji use rate in informal meetings, with emojis often signaling camaraderie and humor (e.g., "Haha, that's hilarious 🤣").

Negative Politeness: In more formal meetings (40% emoji use), participants are more restrained, using emojis like ✔️ (Checkmark) and 😳 (Neutral Face) to avoid imposing too much on the listener while keeping the interaction task-focused and formal. For instance, "Please confirm by EOD ✔️" uses the checkmark to reduce any potential face threat while maintaining politeness.

The frequency and type of emoji use differ based on social distance, power relations, and level of imposition. In finance sector meetings, where the social hierarchy tends to be more

formalized, emoji use is more restrained (55%), as politeness strategies are oriented towards task completion rather than emotional expression.

4. Institutional vs. Casual Conversation

Drawing from Heritage (2005), the distinction between institutional and casual conversations also manifests in emoji usage. In institutional conversations (e.g., finance and formal meetings), where goal-oriented communication is prioritized, emoji use is minimal and predominantly task-oriented, such as ✔ (Check) or ✅ (Tick), used for task acknowledgment. However, in casual conversations, particularly brainstorming or informal meetings, emojis like 🤣 (Laughing Face) and 😊 (Smiling Face) are prevalent, indicating greater social interaction and rapport-building.

5. Sociopragmatic Instruction and Testing (Roever, Fraser, and Elder, 2014)

Emojis also play a role in sociopragmatic instruction, as they help learners understand the subtleties of pragmatic communication in digital contexts. Using emojis in feedback or test items allows instructors and learners to test how individuals adjust politeness strategies in different settings, such as formal vs. informal contexts, and how they maintain face while performing speech acts.

For instance, a test item may require participants to give feedback in a virtual meeting, using emojis appropriately to either soften criticism or convey agreement. Feedback from participants, as evidenced by studies like Roever, Fraser, and Elder (2014), could validate the pragmatic appropriateness of emoji use in different conversational contexts.

6. Differential Validity Evidence and Feedback (Weir, 2005)

In examining the differential validity evidence, emojis function as pragmatic markers, providing insights into the effectiveness of sociopragmatic strategies across various contexts. Through the analysis of feedback from test-takers or meeting participants, researchers can gather evidence of how effectively emojis manage face, convey politeness, and enhance communication efficiency.

To sum up, this sociopragmatic model demonstrates the significant role of emojis as pragmatic tools in virtual team meetings. They function as speech act markers, complete adjacency pairs in conversation, and facilitate politeness strategies—especially in contexts where non-verbal communication is otherwise limited. Future research might focus on the impact of cultural and social factors on emoji use in professional settings, as well as how evolving digital communication norms continue to shape the pragmatics of online interaction.

4. Results and Discussion

The paper highlights some specific findings from the sociopragmatic analysis of 50 virtual team meetings concerning how the emoji serves as a non-verbal clue across the technology, education, health care, and finance industries. This is during different meeting types, such as brainstorming and routine check-in meetings, and two types of meeting formalities: formal and informal. This section focuses on major findings of the study and their interpretation in the light of politeness theory, speech act theory, and conversational analysis, including the institutional vs. casual conversation distinction. Emoji use varied widely across sector, type of meeting, and degree of formality, but overall averaged 65% across all meetings in support of the hypothesis that, indeed, emojis are used in an attempt to supplement or replace non-verbal communication no longer available in virtual environments. i. Variation among Sectors: Technology Sector:

Emojis were most frequently used in the technology sector, where 75% of the meetings involved extensive emoji use, particularly for task acknowledgment and politeness. Common emojis in this

sector included 👍 (Thumbs Up) and 😊 (Smiling Face), with extracts like "Looks good to me 👍," reflecting a high degree of informal rapport and quick task confirmation.
This sector's heavy reliance on fast-paced decision-making and efficiency likely drives the frequent use of emojis as markers of agreement and positive politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987).
Healthcare Sector:

Emoji usage in the healthcare sector was slightly lower (65%) but focused on expressing empathy and solidarity. The ❤️ (Heart) emoji and 💬 (Speech Balloon) were commonly used to build emotional connections among team members, such as in the example: "That's a great suggestion 💬." This aligns with the face-saving strategies outlined by Goffman (1959), where emojis help mitigate the impact of sensitive discussions.
This finding suggests that the nature of healthcare work, which often deals with emotionally charged content, encourages a greater emphasis on positive politeness and face-maintenance. in the meeting Type Differences
Brainstorming Sessions:

Brainstorming sessions exhibited the highest rate of emoji usage at 85%, with emojis like 💡 (Light Bulb) and 🤔 (Thinking Face) frequently employed. These emojis were used to encourage idea generation and express openness to suggestions, e.g., "This might be a good idea 🤔."
Emojis in this context perform the dual role of softening criticism and facilitating collaboration, which corresponds to the cooperative principle proposed by Grice (1975), where emojis help maintain the maxim of relevance by signaling agreement or encouraging the flow of ideas.
Feedback Meetings:

In contrast, feedback meetings demonstrated lower emoji usage (50%), with a focus on maintaining professionalism while offering positive feedback. For example, 👏 (Clapping Hands) and 😊 (Smiling Face) were used sparingly to soften the tone of critical feedback, as seen in "Great work on the report 👏."
The reduced use of emojis in feedback meetings aligns with Brown and Levinson's (1987) concept of negative politeness, where minimizing emoji use reflects an attempt to avoid overstepping boundaries and threatening the interlocutor's negative face. in the formality and Emoji Use
Formal Meetings:

In formal meetings, emoji use was significantly lower (40%) compared to informal settings. Emojis like ✔️ (Check) and 😐 (Neutral Face) were typically used to confirm tasks or manage the meeting's flow, as in "Please confirm by EOD ✔️." This reflects a more task-oriented use of emojis, adhering to formal communicative norms where excessive emoji use may be perceived as unprofessional.
The restrained use of emojis in these contexts aligns with Heritage's (2005) distinction between institutional conversation, where the primary goal is efficiency and task completion rather than social bonding.
Informal Meetings:

Conversely, informal meetings had an 85% emoji use rate, with participants frequently using emojis to express humor and camaraderie. Emojis like 😊 (Smiling Face), ❤️ (Heart), and 🤣 (Laughing Face) were prevalent, with examples such as "Ha-ha, that's hilarious 🤣." In this

context, emojis serve as important tools for positive politeness and social bonding (Brown & Levinson, 1987).
This highlights the fluidity of discourse in informal settings, where emojis help to build rapport and reduce the social distance between participants, enhancing overall group cohesion.

Based on the data, emojis in virtual meetings perform a variety of pragmatic functions depending on the context:

Task Management: In more formal meetings, emojis like ✔️ (Check) or ✅ (Tick) are used for task acknowledgment and task confirmation, ensuring clarity and adherence to meeting agendas.
Emotion and Solidarity: In sectors such as healthcare and in informal meetings, emojis like ❤️ (Heart) and 😊 (Smiling Face) serve to mitigate face-threatening acts and foster a sense of solidarity and mutual support.
Politeness and Face-Work: Emojis are also critical in managing politeness strategies, as they help soften directives or mitigate criticism. For instance, 🙏 (Prayer Hands) is often used to request or acknowledge tasks in a more polite manner, while 👍 (Thumbs Up) and 👏 (Clapping Hands) offer non-verbal positive feedback without overstepping professional boundaries.

The findings of this study indicate that the use of emojis in virtual team meetings is heavily influenced by context, including factors such as the industry, the formality of the meeting, and the interactional objectives of the participants. Emojis serve an essential function in bridging the non-verbal communication gap inherent in digital platforms, functioning as indicators of politeness, agreement, and emotional support. "Emojis can either reinforce sincerity or mitigate harshness in professional exchanges, showcasing their dual pragmatic function." This dual role underscores their value in enhancing the nuanced expression required for effective digital communication. Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) is particularly useful for understanding how emojis function as requests, thanks, or acknowledgments, while Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory explains their role in face-work and maintaining social harmony.
Conversation Analysis (Schegloff, 2007) further highlights the use of emojis in maintaining the sequence of interactions, with emojis often acting as adjacency pairs, particularly in task-oriented meetings where emojis like 👍 (Thumbs Up) signal agreement or task completion.
The data reveal that emojis in virtual team meetings serve multiple pragmatic functions, from managing tasks to fostering social connections. The variation in emoji use across different sectors, meeting types, and levels of formality demonstrates the flexibility of emoji use in adapting to various professional contexts. This study provides a sociopragmatic understanding of how emojis enhance digital communication, particularly in environments where face-to-face interactions are limited.

5. Conclusion

This paper has examined the sociopragmatic role of emojis as non-verbal cues within virtual teams across various sectors, meeting formats, and degrees of formality. The results demonstrate that emojis perform essential communicative functions, including signaling politeness, providing emotional support, managing tasks, and softening criticism. The findings affirm that the use of emojis is context-dependent and pragmatically beneficial in virtual communication. "The dual function of emojis—acting as both standalone symbols and enhancers of textual meaning—demonstrates their versatility in professional communication." Emojis bridge the gap left by the absence of face-to-face interactions, effectively capturing non-verbal cues crucial for maintaining polite and efficient communication.

This study sought to test several key hypotheses regarding the use of emojis in virtual team meetings. Based on the sociopragmatic analysis, the results have provided clear answers to the hypotheses, demonstrating how emoji use reflects the dynamics of digital professional communication.

Hypothesis 1: Emoji Use Varies Significantly Across Different Sectors and Meeting Types
The data confirmed that emoji usage is sector-specific, with significant differences in how emojis are employed across industries. For instance, in technology and education, where team collaboration and rapid feedback are essential, emojis were used frequently (75% and 60% respectively). On the other hand, finance and healthcare sectors exhibited more cautious emoji use (55% and 65%), where formality and clarity often take precedence over emotional expressiveness. This supports the hypothesis that the professional field and the nature of work influence how frequently and in what context emojis are used.

Moreover, meeting types also influenced emoji use. Brainstorming sessions and informal check-ins showed higher rates of emoji use (85% and 70%, respectively) compared to feedback or formal project update meetings (50% and 40%). This suggests that the function and purpose of the meeting directly impact the sociopragmatic choices made by participants, validating this hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2: Emojis Perform Specific Linguistic Functions in Virtual Team Meetings
The hypothesis that emojis perform distinct linguistic functions—such as agreement, softening criticism, and expressing emotions—was confirmed through the data analysis. Emojis like 👍 (Thumbs Up) and ✅ (Check Mark) were frequently used to signal task completion and agreement during discussions, especially in formal meetings or when confirming tasks. In more informal or emotionally charged settings, emojis like 😊 (Smiling Face) and ❤️ (Heart) functioned as markers of politeness and solidarity.

The use of emojis also showed clear links to politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987), particularly in softening directives or criticism. For instance, 🙏 (Prayer Hands) was used to mitigate requests, while 🎯 (Target) and 👏 (Clapping Hands) expressed encouragement or positive feedback in less formal settings. This confirms that emojis not only perform non-verbal functions but also act as linguistic tools to manage social interactions effectively.

Hypothesis 3: Formality Affects Emoji Use in Virtual Communication
The third hypothesis, which posited that formality influences the frequency and type of emoji use, was also supported by the findings. In formal meetings, emojis were used sparingly (40%) and were generally limited to task-focused icons like ✔️ (Check) or 😐 (Neutral Face). Participants tended to avoid emojis that might be perceived as overly casual or inappropriate in formal business contexts. In contrast, informal meetings featured higher emoji usage (85%), with a greater variety of emotionally expressive emojis like 🤣 (Laughing Face) and ❤️ (Heart), used to build rapport and maintain social cohesion. Overall, the data strongly supports the hypothesis 4 that cultural differences significantly influence the frequency, type, and interpretation of emojis in virtual team meetings, and these differences reflect the distinct pragmatic functions of emojis based on the communicative norms of different linguistic communities. As virtual meetings become more prevalent in globalized work environments, understanding these cultural nuances becomes crucial for enhancing communication and collaboration in diverse teams.

These results align with the idea that more formal environments place restrictions on the use of

informal communicative tools like emojis, reflecting the sociopragmatic need to maintain professionalism and adhere to contextual norms. The study's findings confirmed all three hypotheses. Emoji use is not arbitrary but is influenced by the sector, type of meeting, and the level of formality. Emojis perform essential linguistic and social functions, helping participants navigate the complexities of virtual communication by filling the gap left by non-verbal cues. These findings offer valuable insights into the evolving nature of digital communication in professional settings.

Indeed, this corresponds to our hypothesis, as emoji usage really varies highly with sector, formality, and meeting type. Technology and informal meetings reported the highest level of emoji usage for task acknowledgement and social bonding.
In formal meetings and sectors, like financial ones, their usage is not that wide because the type of communication is task-oriented. Indeed, it confirms that emojis are flexible tools that professionals adapt to different contexts for digital communication to flow smoothly and clearly to meet both task-focused and relationship-building objectives.

5.1 Future directions and pedagogical implications

These results point to several avenues for further investigation. On the one hand, one would want to make sure that research into emoji use in virtual meetings moves hand in glove with the continuing normalization of homeworking in professional contexts. Cross-cultural variation in the use of emojis in virtual meetings can be taken forward in the contexts of whether certain cultures rely more on emojis for the realization of politeness or mitigation of FTA.

Furthermore, it might enable the analysis of gender dynamics and the power of relations that could explain the use of emoji in professional discourse.
These findings underline the pedagogical need to place digital communicative skills within professional curricula; while virtuality is turning out to be a trend in communication, professionals must acquire not only technical skills but also socio-pragmatic competencies online. Indeed, knowing when and how to deploy emojis will help the user to manage the level of complexity at work, the politeness, and maintain good professional relationships.

5.2 The Significance of the Intersection Among Digital Communication, Politeness, and Professionalism

It is within this context that this paper discusses the increasingly pressing meeting of digital communication, politeness, and professionalism in today's workplace. With the rise of continued home working and virtual interaction, attention needs to fall on how non-verbal signals-emoji-play their role in bringing politeness and professionalism into virtual space. Emoji design certainly supports not only effective task-oriented communication but also one of the most important features: social cohesion and minimizing misunderstandings in professional settings that are typical of diversity. These interact in a way that signals the greater movement taking place within the context of communicative standards, where non-verbal methods are gaining momentum in workplace communication. The flexibility of the emoji makes them capable of fitting into whatever kind of communicative demand reaches them-from expressing empathetic attitude in health facilities to clarity of tasks in the more formal corporate settings. In this respect, it underlines the greater, sociopragmatic relevance of emojis as a means through which to cope with the complexities at work in modern, digital communication.

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دراسة اجتماعية تداولية للرموز التعبيرية كاشارت غير لفظية في المعاني الافتراضية

الخلاصة:

تتناول الدراسة السوسيوبراجماتية استخدام الرموز التعبيرية بوصفها إشارات غير لفظية في الاجتماعات الافتراضية للفرق، إذ تحلل وظائفها اللغوية والبراجماتية عبر المجالات المهنية، وأنواع الاجتماعات، ومستويات الرسمية. تركز الدراسة على كيفية مساهمة الرموز التعبيرية في إنشاء المعنى في بيئات العمل عن بُعد باستخدام منصات مثل Zoom و Microsoft Teams و Slack. وتعتمد على مجموعة بيانات مؤلَّفة من 50 اجتماعًا افتراضيًا من قطاعات التكنولوجيا والتعليم والصحة والمالية، مع موافقة مسبقة من المشاركين. يتيح هذا العيّنات المتنوعة استكشاف استخدام الرموز التعبيرية في ثقافات تنظيمية وممارسات تواصل مختلفة.

تصنّف الدراسة الاجتماعات إلى أربعة أنواع: الاجتماعات الروتينية، وجلسات العصف الذهني، وتحديثات المشاريع، واجتماعات التغذية الراجعة. ويتيح هذا التصنيف تحليلًا دقيقًا لتأثير نوع الاجتماع على استخدام الرموز التعبيرية. تسلط الدراسة الضوء على تأثير مستوى الرسمية على معدل استخدام الرموز التعبيرية وأغراضها وطبيعتها في التفاعلات المهنية.

تستند الدراسة إلى نظرية أفعال الكلام (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1975) ونظرية اللباقة (Brown & Levinson, 1987)، إذ تؤكد أن الرموز التعبيرية تؤدي وظائف لغوية تتجاوز كونها مجرد زينة. من خلال التركيز على دورها السوسيوبراجماتي في الحفاظ على الاتصال العلائقي والوظيفي، توفر الدراسة إطارًا لفهم كيفية تعزيز الإشارات غير اللفظية الرقمية للتواصل في البيئات الافتراضية المتطورة..

الكلمات المفتاحية: استخدام الرموز التعبيرية ، اجتماعات الفريق الافتراضية ، الإشارات غير اللفظية ، التواصل الرقمي ، الخطاب المهني