



Exploring Gender Identity Through Facebook Emojis: A Socio-Pragmatic Study

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ABSTRACT

People use verbal and nonverbal ways to express their feelings and emotions. Using emojis in social media is one of the ways used to express feelings. This study investigates the use of emojis by Iraqi Facebook users and aims to find the similarities and differences in using emojis between males and females (henceforth: Ms and Fs). It also aims to reveal gender identity by using emojis in Facebook messenger texts. The study uses a questionnaire by Google form to ask (201) participants, in the city of Mosul/ Iraq, about the emojis they use to express different feelings and emotions. The study concludes that Iraqi Facebook users employ different emojis to express different feelings and emotions. Furthermore, there are similarities and differences among Ms and Fs in using emojis to express different feelings and the agreement on the choice among Ms is more than Fs. Finally, using emojis can reveal gender identity among Iraqi Facebook users.

استكشاف الهوية الجنسية من خلال الرموز التعبيرية للفيسبوك دراسة اجتماعية- تداولية

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الملخص

يستعمل الناس طرقاً لفظية وغير لفظية للتعبير عن مشاعرهم وانفعالاتهم. يُعد استعمال الرموز التعبيرية في الاتصالات عبر الحاسوب (CMC) إحدى طرق التعبير عن المشاعر. تحاول هذه الدراسة استكشاف استعمال الرموز التعبيرية من مستعملي فيسبوك العراقيين، وتهدف إلى إيجاد أوجه التشابه والاختلاف في استعمال الرموز التعبيرية بين الذكور والإناث. كما تهدف إلى الكشف عن الهوية الجنسية من خلال استعمال الرموز التعبيرية في رسائل فيسبوك ماسنجر. تستعمل الدراسة استبياناً من Google Form لسؤال (201) مشاركاً، في مدينة الموصل/العراق، عن الرموز التعبيرية التي يستعملونها للتعبير عن مشاعرهم وانفعالاتهم المختلفة. خلصت الدراسة إلى أن مستعملي فيسبوك العراقيين يستعملون رموزاً تعبيرية مختلفة للتعبير عن مشاعرهم وانفعالاتهم المختلفة. علاوة على ذلك، هناك أوجه تشابه واختلاف بين الذكور والإناث في استعمال الرموز التعبيرية للتعبير عن مشاعر مختلفة، والاتفاق على الخيار بين الذكور هي أكثر من الإناث. وأخيراً، يمكن أن يكشف استعمال الرموز التعبيرية عن الهوية الجنسية بين مستعملي فيسبوك العراقيين. الكلمات المفتاحية: الهوية الجنسية، الرموز التعبيرية للفيسبوك، الأفعال الكلامية، المشاعر والانفعالات.

1.1 Introduction

In normal face-to-face conversations, nonverbal clues including body language, voice tones, and facial expressions may convey emotion and assist in controlling the connection between meaning and messages. (Murphy, 2017). Computer-mediated communications (CMCs) comprise online visual communication tools known as (graphical icons), which contain images, videos, GIFs, emoticons, and emoji (Herring & Dainas, 2017). Graphical icons, like facial expressions and body language in normal conversations, enhance the otherwise entirely text-based conversation. Emoticons, emoji, and stickers are three substantial types of graphicons in mobile messages, and they can be sent easily by pressing or tapping on smartphones (Lo, 2008). Over time, graphicons have significantly altered how CMCs are displayed visually. These emoticons are employed extensively in CMCs to convey human emotions. (Ljubešić & Fišer, 2016). The emoji is probably the most common tool of digital expressions, which was sent about 2.3 trillion times in 2016 (Emoji Research Team, 2016). According to Herring (1994), women and men post to online newsgroups and lists in distinctly different ways, and they consider various types of online interactions as suitable and desirable, even if CMC is said to neutralise gender differences.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

People employ different ways to express feelings and emotions. The facial expressions and body language are used in spoken language to express the intention and the feelings of the speaker. Communication is not only restricted to speaking but also texting and sending messages are included in the process of communication. That is why the process of communication by sending messages or texting can also include ways to express feelings or expose intentions. Emojis are one of the ways to express feelings. Using nonverbal ways to express feelings is not investigated extensively among Iraqi Facebook users, that is why the study tries to fill a gap in the literature.

1.3 Aims of the Study

This study aims to investigate using emojis to express different feelings and expressions. It tries to compare the use of emojis between Ms and Fs who are of the age between (20-40). The study also aims to reveal gender identity through using emojis in Facebook messenger texts.

1.4 Research Questions

1. What are the emojis used by Iraqi Facebook users to express different feelings and emotions?
2. Are there similarities and differences between Ms and Fs in using emojis to express various feelings and emotions?
3. Do emojis reveal gender identity among Iraqi Facebook users?

1.5 Speech Acts

People Express different feelings and show emotions toward others. Searle (1979) identifies five speech acts: representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. Representatives commit the speaker to the truth of their proposition, directives encourage the hearer to take action, commissives commit the speaker to future actions, expressives express the speaker's psychological attitude towards a situation, and declarations cause immediate changes in a current state, relying on extralinguistic institutions and paradigmatic cases like declaring war.

The expressive speech act includes communicating feelings and attitudes towards something by the producer or the speaker, such as apology, praising, or applauding someone. Expressive speech acts are crucial to study because they are inextricably linked to human interaction in everyday discourse. It also relates to everyday life and serves as a mirror of real-world happenings (Widyowati, 2019).

Expressing feelings and emotions is not restricted to verbal language, but also nonverbal elements can be employed to express different feelings, such as facial

expressions, pictures, objects, colours, signs, gestures, etc (Kendon, 1995). Thus, feelings and emotions can be expressed by emojis and other nonverbal tools in communication.

1.6 Definitions of Emojis

An emoticon is not the same as an emoji. Emojis and emoticons are utilised in communication; instead of using words to convey feelings, individuals use the symbols to show those emotions. In her essay "Emoticons versus emojis," Fogarty (2014) claims that emoticons are typographic representations of faces that are made by combining keyboard characters and used to express emotions in text. The term "emoticon" was created by collecting the words "emotion" and "icon." Conversely, emojis are animated images that are incorporated with text.

The term "emoji" is taken from a Japanese word composed of the characters "picture," and moji, which means "letter." As a result, emoji may be characterised as a picture-word that can be written and utilised singularly or plurally in English (Danesi, 2017). According to Goldman (2018) emojis are pictures (pictographs) that usually appear in a colourful cartoon form and utilised in written conversation; these emojis indicate things like faces, buildings, vehicles, weather, animals, plants, food, drink, and icons that stand for emotions and feelings. Emojis are fixed pictures that may be animated.

1.7 Functions of Emojis

Emojis, as nonverbal tools, can be employed to do different functions. Emojis enable users to emphasise and improve communications in a manner that words alone cannot (Bliss-Carrol, 2016). Wall et al., (2016), state that emojis can assist explain or disambiguate communications. Emoji have been shown to serve pragmatic uses, such as indicators of illocutionary force, in addition to accurately indicating emotion.

According to Skovholt et al., (2014) emojis serve a variety of sociopragmatic functions in professional communication. They start with civility, particularly in communicative circumstances including power dynamics or hierarchical connections. Individuals adopt a variety of techniques to save their own face and avoid threatening others face, according to Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987). Thus, the emojis are used to express different feelings and emotions in addition to various sociopragmatic functions.

1.8 Gender Identity

Gender is a term used in sociolinguistics and other social sciences to describe sexual identity in relation to culture and society. The way words are used can reflect and perpetuate societal views about gender (Eckert, 1998). Gender identity refers to a person's subjective perception of themselves as either male or female, or in rare cases, neither. In society, visible characteristics like behaviour and appearance serve as manifestations of gender identification. A person's gender identification is male, for instance, if he defines himself as a man and feels most at ease using masculine language while discussing his own gender. His gender role is masculine, but, only if he exhibits traits that are normally associated with men in terms of behaviour, attire, and other aspects (Rao & Thombre, 2014). It's crucial to note that gender is a fundamental component of identity, but it's not the only one. Religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and culture are further aspects of identity (Abraham, 2021).

1.9 Previous Studies

Reviewing the literature shows many studies that are concerned with socio-pragmatic aspects of emojis as follows:

Mohammed and Mahmoud (2021) explore the pragmatic function of emojis, a widely used technique on Instagram, to address misunderstandings in textual communication. Emojis are classified using taxonomy of eight-function by Yus, which includes “attitude signal, attitude intensity enhancer, illocutionary force modifier, humour, irony, emotion signal, parallel emotion signal, and emotion

intensity enhancer”. The findings suggest that emojis are examined using this taxonomy, as they add new meanings to speech.

Alharbi and Mahzari (2023) study using emojis in Arabic tweets, focusing on the practical purposes, gender similarities, and differences. It uses a dataset of 421 tweets from early 2022, revealing that emojis are frequently used in Arabic tweets, with expressions like crying, joy, broken heart, pleading, and slightly smiling. The study identified seven pragmatic functions: “multiple functions, reaction, action, decoration, physical action, softening, and tone adjustment”. The study also found that gender affects the frequency, location, and purpose of emojis.

Al-Yasin (2024) investigates the pragmatic uses of emojis by Jordanian university students in Facebook group postings. The research involved 100 posts from the "Ask Petra University" Facebook group. The most popular emojis were the face with tears of joy, broken heart, and red heart. The study found that these emojis were used for similar purposes by Ms and Fs, but the broken heart had different practical purposes. The findings have implications for future educational strategies and recommendations.

Jameel (2025) explores the use of emojis in virtual team meetings, focusing on the linguistic and pragmatic roles across different professional domains and formalities. The research uses a dataset of 50 virtual meetings from various sectors, examining emoji usage across different organizational cultures and communication techniques. The mixed-method approach analyzes emoji usage, categorizing instances based on sociopragmatic purposes. The findings reveal that emojis serve important communicative roles, such as signaling politeness, organizing tasks, offering emotional support, and softening criticism. They are pragmatically useful in virtual communication and context-dependent.

To sum up, these studies deal with socio-pragmatic aspects of emojis. The current study is different through using a questionnaire to reveal the gender identity. Moreover, the current study investigates using emojis by Iraqi Facebook users to find the similarities and differences in using emojis between Ms and Fs.

1.10 The Methods

The study used a questionnaire in Google form to ask participants about the emojis they use to express different feelings, emotions, and intentions. The study utilised (21) emojis from Facebook Messenger as options in the questionnaire. The researcher made two links of Google Form, one for Ms and the other for Fs. The researcher sent these links to participants (relatives, and colleagues) to answer the questionnaire. The age of participants was between (20-40). The participants were educated people and they were from Mosul city in Iraq. The study received 201 responses from participants (100 Ms and 101 feFs). The questionnaire included questions whereby each question included four options to be selected by participants. The first three options included emojis given by the researcher and the last one had no specific choice and the participants could choose their own emojis (another option). The study asked participants about the emojis they use to express different feelings and emotions such as (smile, laugh, joking, anger, tiredness, shyness, and love). The questions were presented in Arabic as the participants were Arab.

1.11 Data Analysis and Findings

The study compares the responses given by participants in answering eight questions about expressing different feelings and emotions by using emojis.

1. The first question directed to participants is: (Which emoji do you use to express a smile? (اي رمز تعبيري تستخدم للتعبير عن الابتسامة ؟)

The study gave three choices of emojis with giving another choice with no emoji by which the participant can choose their own emoji.

The responses to express the smile show that Fs gave (32.7%) to the first choice, (26.7%) to the second choice , (29.7%) to the third choice and they chose another emoji to express the smile with the rate (10.9%)



Figure (1) The responses of Fs to the first question

The responses to express the smile show that Ms gave **(64%)** to the first choice, **(20%)** to the second choice, **(14%)** to the third choice and they chose another emoji to express the smile with the rate **(2%)**.

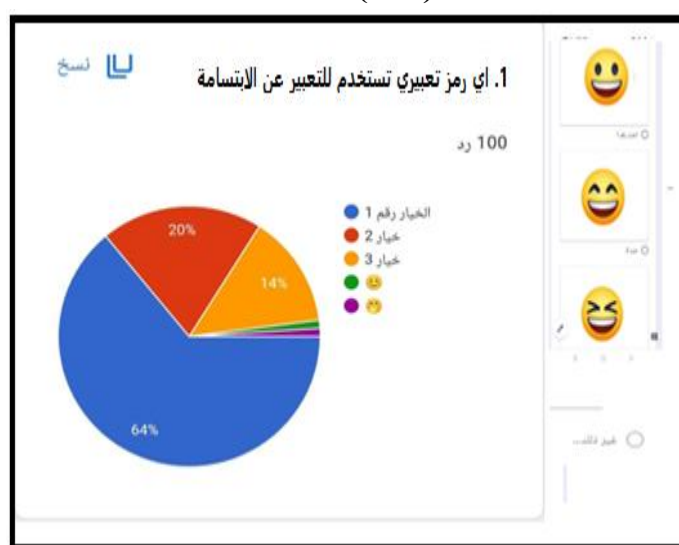


Figure (2) The responses of Ms to the first question

The similarities: both (Fs and Ms) chose the first emoji as the most frequent one in expressing the smile.

The differences: the majority of Ms chose the first emoji to express smile, while Fs chose three emojis relatively with similar rate. In addition, Ms chose another choice with rate the **(2%)**, while Fs chose another choice with rate the **(10.9%)**.

2. The second question directed to participants is: (Which emoji do you use to express laugh ?) (أي رمز تعبيرى تستخدم للتعبير عن الضحك ؟)

The study gave three choices of emojis with giving another choice with no emoji by which the participant can choose their own emoji.

The responses to express laugh show that Fs gave **(25.7%)** to the first choice, **(54.4%)** to the second choice, **(12.9%)** to the third choice and they chose another emoji to express the laugh with the rate **(7%)**.

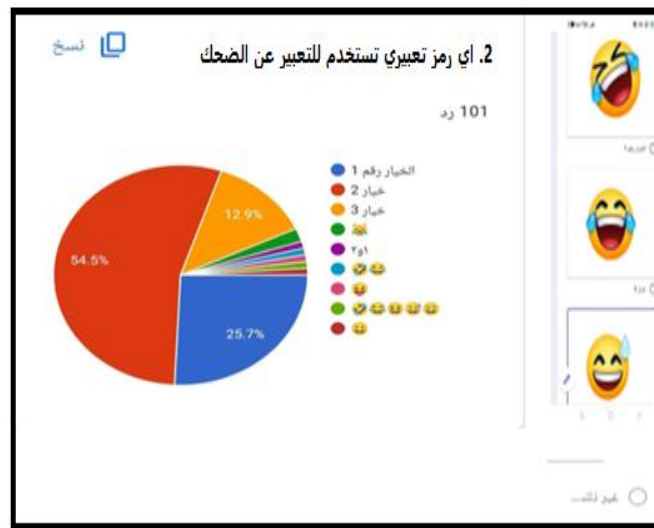


Figure (3) The responses of Fs to the second question

The responses to express laugh show that Ms gave **(26%)** to the first choice , **(70%)** to the second choice , **(4%)** to the third choice and no other emoji were given to express laugh .

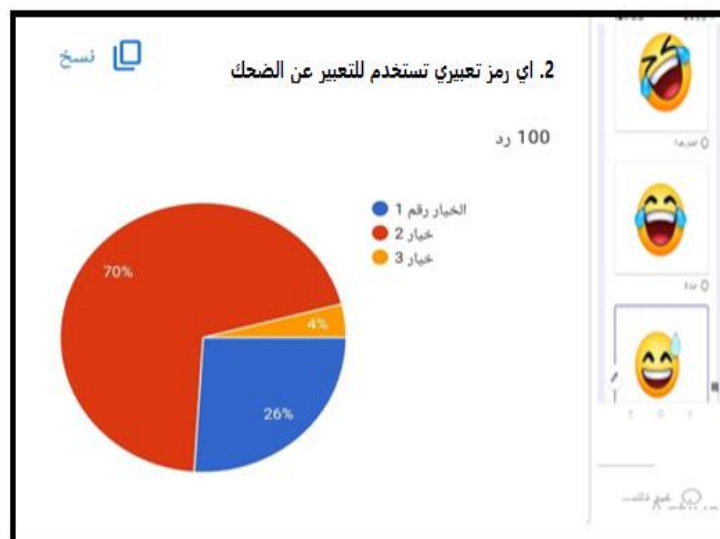


Figure (4) The responses of Ms to the second question

The similarities: both (Fs and Ms) chose the second emoji as the most frequent one in expressing laugh.

The differences: Ms did not choose other choices to express laugh, while Fs chose another emoji to express laugh with the rate **(7%)**.

3. The third question directed to participants is: (Which emoji do you use to express joking?) (اي رمز تعبيري تستخدم للتعبير عن المزاح ؟)

The study gave three choices of emojis with giving another choice with no emoji by which the participant can choose their own emoji.

The responses to express joking show that Fs gave **(14.9%)** to the first choice , **(50.5%)** to the second choice, **(28.7%)** to the third choice and they chose another emoji to express the laugh with the rate **(5.9%)**.

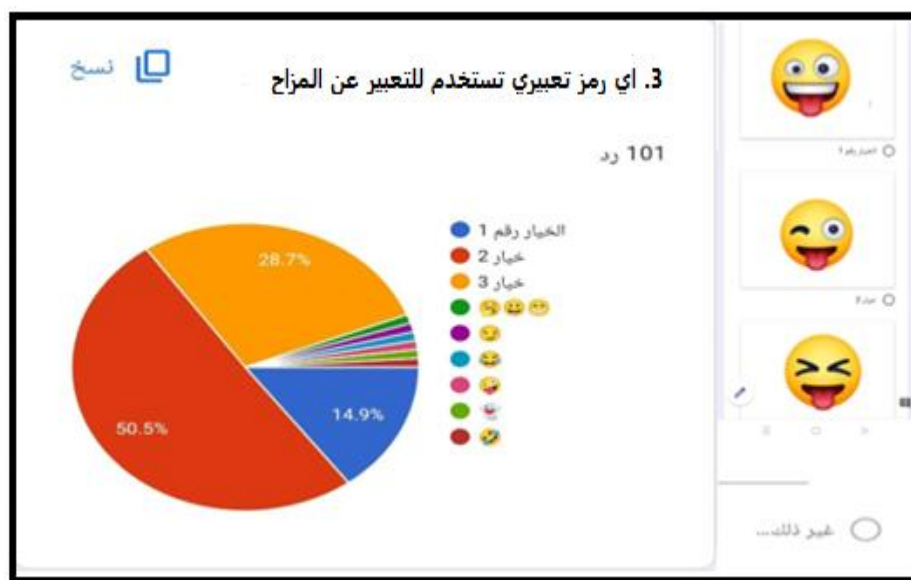


Figure (5) The responses of Fs to the third question

The responses to express joking show that Ms gave **(27%)** to the first choice, **(64%)** to the second choice , **(7%)** to the third choice and they chose another emoji to express joking with the rate **(2%)**.

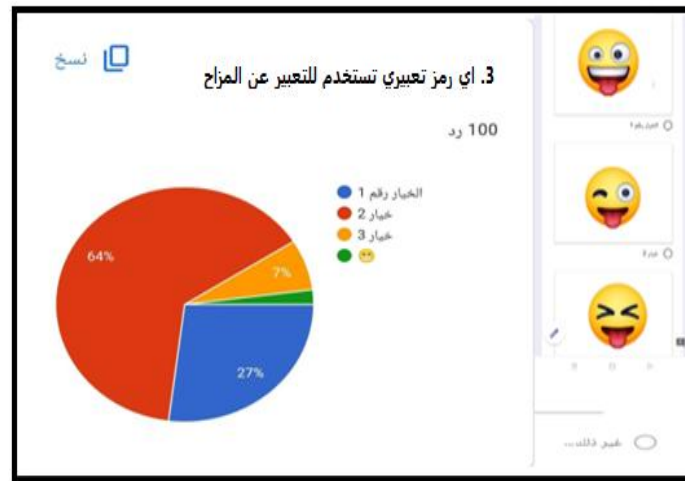


Figure (6) The responses of Ms to the third question

The similarities: both (Fs and Ms) chose the second emoji as the most frequent one in expressing joking.

The differences: Ms choose other choices to express laugh with the rate (2%), while Fs chose another emoji to express laugh with the rate (5.9%).

4. The fourth question directed to participants is: (Which emoji do you use to express anger? (اي رمز تعبيري تستخدم للتعبير عن الغضب؟)

The study gave three choices of emojis with giving another choice with no emoji by which the participant can choose their own emoji.

The responses to express anger show that Fs gave (51.5%) to the first choice, (11.9%) to the second choice , (32.7%) to the third choice and they chose another emoji to express anger with the rate (3.9%).

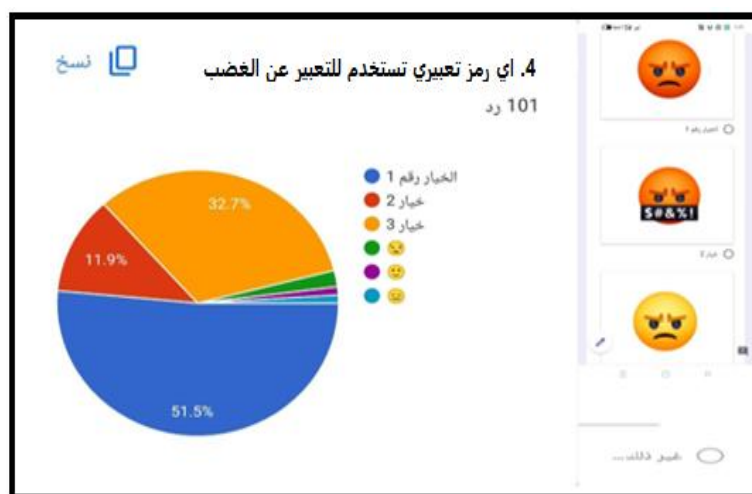


Figure (7) The responses of Fs to the fourth question

The responses to express anger show that Ms gave (69%) to the first choice , (12%) to the second choice , (19%) to the third choice and no other emoji were given to express anger.



Figure (8) The responses of Ms to the fourth question

The similarities: both (Fs and Ms) chose the first emoji as the most frequent one in expressing anger.

The differences: Ms did not choose other choices to express anger, while Fs chose another emoji to express laugh with the rate (3.9%).

5. The fifth question directed to participants is: (Which emoji do you use to express love? (اي رمز تعبري تستخدم للتعبير عن الحب ؟)

The study gave three choices of emojis with giving another choice with no emoji by which the participant can choose their own emoji.

The responses to express love show that Fs gave (28.7%) to the first choice, (22.8%) to the second choice , (36.6%) to the third choice and they chose another emoji to express love with the rate (11.9%).

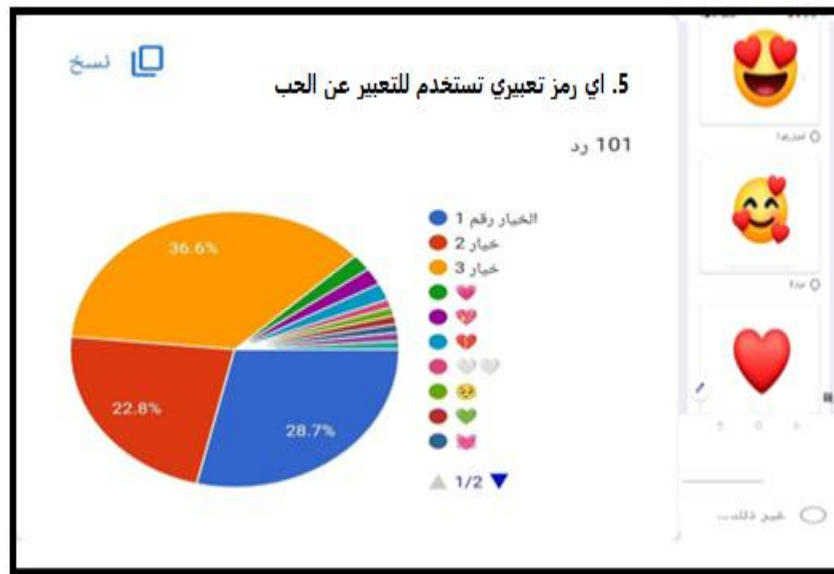


Figure (9) The responses of Fs to the fifth question

The responses to express love show that Ms gave (16%) to the first choice , (13%) to the second choice , (68%) to the third choice and they chose another emoji to express love with the rate (3%).

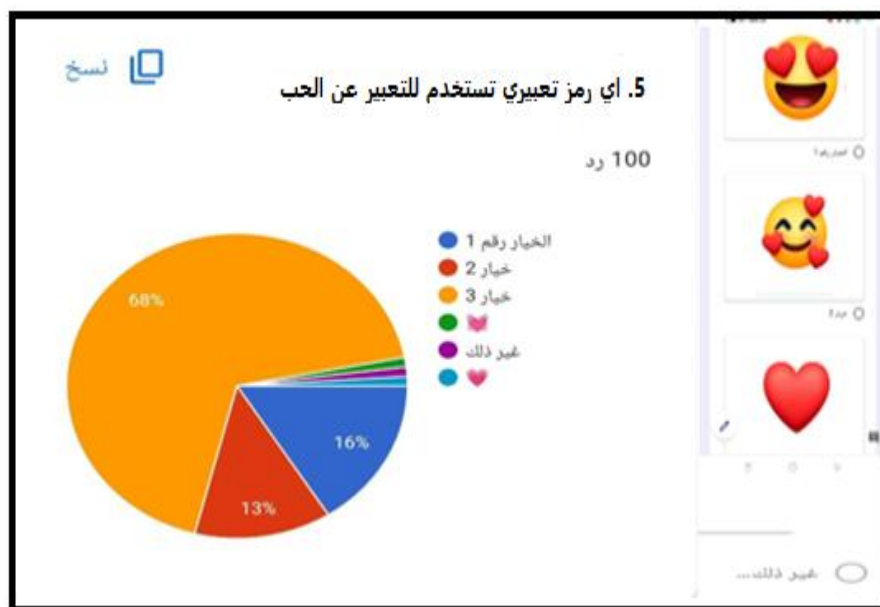


Figure (10) The responses of Ms to the fifth question

The similarities: both (Fs and Ms) chose the third emoji as the most frequent one in expressing love.

The differences: Fs choose other choices to express love with the rate (11%), while Ms chose another emoji to express love with the rate (3%).

6. The sixth question directed to participants is : (Which emoji do you use to express tiredness ?) (اي رمز تعبيري تستخدم للتعبير عن التعب ؟)

The study gave three choices of emojis with giving another choice with no emoji by which the participant can choose their own emoji.

The responses to express tiredness show that Fs gave (23.8%) to the first choice , (43.6%) to the second choice , (28.7%) to the third choice and they chose another emoji to express anger with the rate (3.9%).

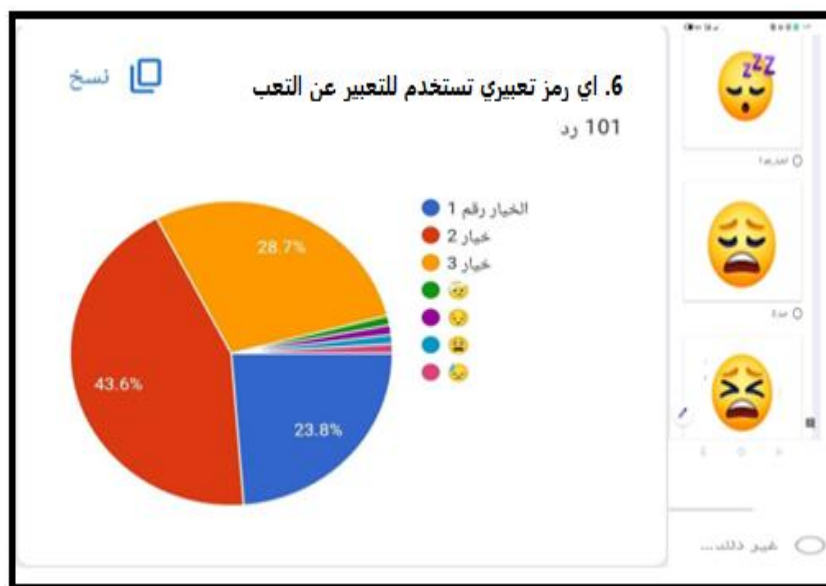


Figure (11) The responces of Fs to the sixth question

The responses to express tiredness show that Ms gave (18%) to the first choice , (62%) to the second choice , (20%) to the third choice and no another emoji were given to express tiredness.

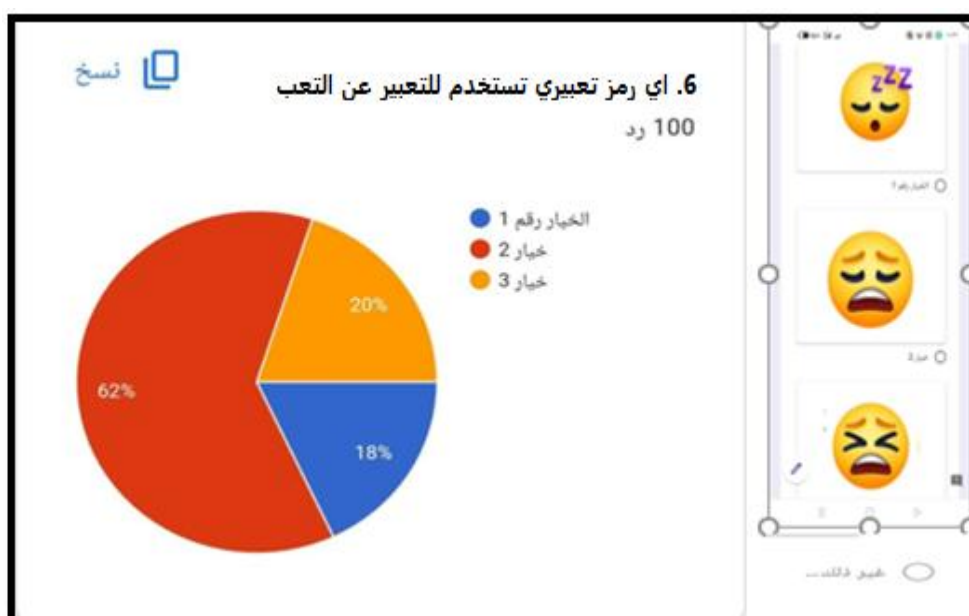


Figure (12) The responces of Ms to the sixth question

The similarities: both (Fs and Ms) chose the second emoji as the most frequent one in expressing tiredness.

The differences: Ms did not choose other choices to express laugh, while Fs chose another emoji to express tiredness with the rate **(3.9%)**.

7. The seventh question directed to participants is: (Which emoji do you use to express shyness? (اي رمز تعبيرى تستخدم للتعبير عن الخجل ؟)

The study gave three choices with giving another choice by which the participant can choose their own emoji.

The responses to express tiredness show that Fs gave **(59.4%)** to the first choice , **(16.8%)** to the second choice , **(15.8%)** to the third choice and they chose another emoji to express shyness with the rate **(8%)**.

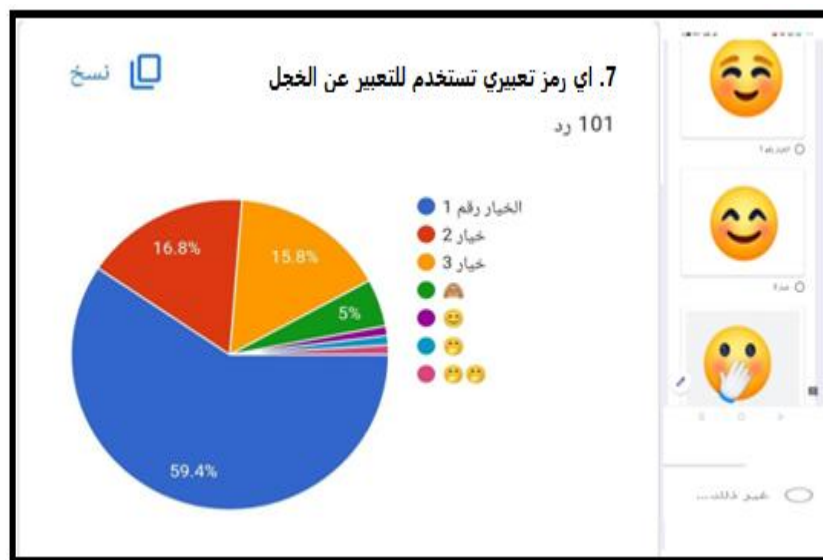


Figure (13) The responses of Fs to the seventh question

The responses to express tiredness show that Ms gave **(52%)** to the first choice , **(41%)** to the second choice , **(5.9%)** to the third choice they chose another emoji to express tiredness with the rate **(3%)**.

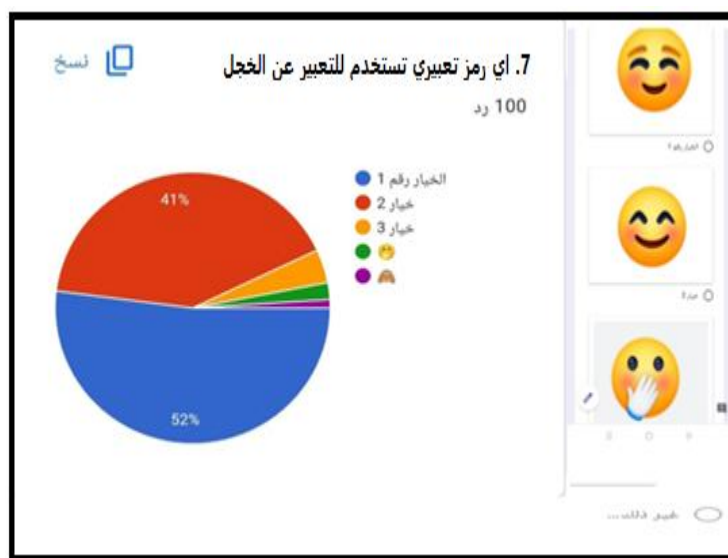


Figure (14) The responses of Ms to the seventh question

The similarities: both (Fs and Ms) chose the second emoji as the most frequent one in expressing tiredness.

The differences: Fs choose other choices to express love with the rate (8%), while Ms chose another emoji to express tiredness with the rate (3%).

1.12 Discussion of Findings

The study has come up with the findings shown in the table below:

Table (1) The findings of the study

The questions	Gender	1 st choice	2 nd choice	3 rd choice	4 th choice
Q1 Which emoji do you use to express a smile?	Fs	32.7%	26.7%	29.7%	10.9%
	Ms	64%	20%	14%	2%
Q2 Which emoji do you use to express laugh?	Fs	25.7%	54.4%	12.9%	7%
	Ms	26%	70%	4%	-
Q3 Which emoji do you use to express joking?	Fs	14.9%	50.0%	28.7%	5.9%
	Ms	27%	64%	7%	2%
Q4 Which emoji do you use to express anger?	Fs	51.5%	11.9%	32.7%	3.9%
	Ms	69%	12%	19%	-
	Fs	28.7%	22.8%	36.6%	11.9%

The questions	Gender	1 st choice	2 nd choice	3 rd choice	4 th choice
Q5 Which emoji do you use to express love?	Ms	16%	13%	68%	3%
Q6 Which emoji do you use to express tiredness?	Fs	23.8%	43.6%	28.7%	3.9%
	Ms	18%	62%	20%	-
Q7 Which emoji do you use to express shyness?	Fs	59.4%	16.8%	15.8%	8%
	Ms	52%	41%	5.9%	3%

As shown in the table above, Iraqi Facebook users employ various emojis to express different feelings and emotions. This indicates that Iraqi Facebook users employ these emojis to compensate the facial expressions and body language in expressing different feelings and emotions. The study also finds similarities between Ms and Fs, whereby both chose the same emojis as the most frequent choice in each question but with different rates, for example, in the first question, both Ms and Fs chose the first choice as the most frequent one (32.7%, 64%). In addition, the study finds differences, in which Fs choose their own emojis (another choice) more than Ms, who mostly restricted themselves to the given choices (emojis), for example, Ms did not choose another choice in three questions (2, 4, 6). Moreover, the majority of Ms strongly agree to choose relatively the same emojis with high percentages in each question, whereas Fs did not strongly agree to choose the same emojis, i.e., they agree to choose the same emojis with low percentages. For example, in question five, Fs agree to choose the third choice with a low percentage (36.6%), while Ms agree to choose the third choice with a high percentage (68%). According to these similarities and differences, Fs' identity is realised by using different and various emojis to express feelings and emotions. In contrast, Ms' identity is realised by using specific emojis to express feelings and emotions. This indicates that gender differences are not restricted

only to verbal or spoken language but also include nonverbal ones. Additionally, these findings align with other studies in the literature. Women are more emotional and tend to use more expressive and emotional words than men (Goldshmidt & Weller, 2000); (Kring & Gordon, 1998).

1.13 Conclusions

The study concludes the following:

1. Various emojis are employed by Iraqi Facebook users to express different feelings and emotions.
2. There are similarities and differences between Ms and Fs in using emojis to express different feelings and emotions.
3. Using emojis can reveal gender identity among Iraqi Facebook users.

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