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From Emoticons to Emotions: Investigating the Communicative Impact of Emojis and GIFs

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***Abstract*—In recent decades, the rapid growth of computer-mediated communication has created new ways to express emotions, including using simple keyboard symbols like emoticons. This research examined how communicative intention through emojis and GIFs would affect perceptions of communicative efficiency and politeness among users of online communication. The SEM results highlight that emojis and GIFs both serve as powerful non-verbal indicators and significantly augment digital discourse's tone and intelligibility. This work empirically supports the argument that emojis and GIFs act as pragmatic markers that not only increase communicative efficiency but are also critical in determining perceptions of politeness in online interaction. The results add to a new field of digital sociolinguistics and highlight the crucial role that multimodal semiotics plays in determining online communicative practice. As digital communication develops further, these visual components are likely to take an even more pivotal position in ensuring civility, relationship management, and facilitating mutual understanding across virtual landscapes.**

***Index Terms*—emojis, GIFs, social media, digital, communication**

I. Introduction

The emergence and rapid spread of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in the last few decades have enabled new ways of expressing emotions, including the use of traditional keyboard-based symbols such as emoticons (d for a smile), the use of asterisks (joy), acronyms (e.g., LOL), and typographical emphasis, such as the use of uppercase and bold (Sasamoto, 2023). Other ways of expressing emotions include visual presentations through digital pictograms or graphic images, such as emojis, stickers, or GIFs. With their increasing prevalence, there is a rich body of work on the meaning of emojis (Sasamoto, 2023). Emojis are generally considered to be a substitute for facial expressions, gestures, and other nonverbal cues (Tandyonomanu, 2018). Scholars often focus on the semantic properties or encoded meanings of emojis, their paralinguistic function, and pragmatic functions such as communication of speech act information and visual rhetoric (Otajonova, 2025; Aporbo, 2022; Ali-Chand & Naidu, 2024). Other aspects of emojis that have attracted scholarly attention include their emotional and linguistic functions and attributes (Bai et al., 2019; Ferrari, 2023; Setyawan & Musthafa, 2024), factors that influence users' preferences, such as individual characteristics, cultural background, or system platform. Emojis are often considered to fill a gap and provide non-verbal cues in CMC, where more traditional non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions or gestures, are not available. As a result, scholars (Cavalheiro et al., 2024) consider that emojis play an auxiliary role and promote interpersonal communication. In contrast, GIFs and reaction GIFs in particular have attracted less scholarly attention, and, to the best of the author's knowledge, there is little work from the perspective of pragmatics on reaction GIFs (Westbrook, 2023). However, scholars in media studies have discussed their function in communicating emotions as well as demonstrating cultural knowledge (Miltner & Highfield, 2017; Bay, 2022; Bautsch, 2023). Miltner and Highfield (2017) argue that by singling out and thus emphasising a particular scene, reaction gifs can "act as a proxy for, or expression of, emotion and/or affect. This research thus examines how emojis and GIFs function as pragmatic markers in conveying politeness in social media interactions.

II. Review of Literature

As Bai et al. (2019) show, emojis have attracted huge scholarly attention in many disciplines, including linguistics, marketing, computing, behavioural science, and communication studies. It is generally considered that emojis work in a similar manner to non-verbal cues such as facial expressions and gestures in face-to-face communication and that they convey emotions. As they allow the inclusion in computer-mediated communication of what is often conveyed via non-verbal cues in face-to-face communication, scholars such as Elder (2018) and Du Plessis (2020) argued that the use of emojis promotes interaction and interpersonal relationships.

In linguistics, scholars are often concerned with the semantics and pragmatics of emoji: the types of emotions emoji can signal and the emotional tone emoji can add to communication. According to Danesi (2019), who provides a comprehensive overview of the linguistic analysis of emojis, emojis have two important functions: a phatic function and an emotive function. They function to "add emotional tone and to emphasise certain phatic aspects of communication". In particular, Sasamoto (2023) analyses the semantics of emoji in the framework of Goffman's notion of framing, which is defined as the presentation of concepts from a particular perspective so that they can be 'framed' through the form

used. In this view, emojis convey a frame of mind, or perspective, within which the message is interpreted. Albert (2020) also argues that emojis are fundamentally metaphorical pictures, where "separate domains of meaning are blended to produce new forms of meaning that amalgamate the various referential domains into one image", and each emoji is "a manifestation of a Conceptual Metaphor in visual form". According to Cunha et al. (2020), 'blending' is the fundamental aspect of emoji semantics and is assumed to be universal. The researchers demonstrated this using a range of examples, including facial emojis, logograms, and a snake emoji. For Deda (2013), pragmatics is about communicative competence, which is concerned with how to use language. A researcher has analysed 323 texts in terms of pragmatic functions and argued that the most important pragmatic functions of emojis are to add tone and to inject a positive mood (Danesi, 2019). Udoudom et al. (2024) argue that the use of emojis enables the communicator to minimise potential misunderstanding and threat. For example, a smiley emoji could soften a message that is potentially conflictive. Another basic pragmatic function of emoji, according to Danesi (2019), is salutation, or the opening and ending of messages. The researcher also shows how emojis can be used as punctuation or as visual discourse particles that "reinforce the various emotional states or moods". While Danesi's (2019) work, which represents a dominant approach to emoji meaning, provides a rich description of emoji functions, it is not entirely clear how recipients process emoji used independently of, or in conjunction with, other verbal and non-verbal input. It is obvious that emojis indeed have some metaphorical function in that they represent some thoughts from a different domain, and that the communicator can use emojis for salutation or punctuation. However, the question is, "how would a recipient choose one interpretation over another, and how would the recipient process or interpret emoji independently or in conjunction with other verbal and non-verbal input?". Another aspect arising from Danesi's work that needs further discussion is the semantics and pragmatics of emojis. For Ifantidou (2014), the role of pragmatics is limited to communicative competence, or 'how to use language', which appears to mean discourse management or interpersonal functions. However, as widely acknowledged in relevance theory, pragmatics goes far beyond interpersonal functions. What has been considered a strictly semantic matter, for example, the recovery of explicit (or linguistically encoded) meaning, has been shown to involve inference and therefore is a matter of pragmatics.

In relation to emojis, interpreting metaphor necessarily involves inference and hence is a matter of pragmatics. In contrast, semantics is a matter of coding. Metaphor is not coded; in a similar way, an emoji of a face with rolling eyes does not encode the attitude of condescension. An emoji of a face with fingers across its chin as if stroking it does not encode the act of consideration. Of course, these emojis trigger the recovery of these interpretations, but such processes necessarily involve inference and hence are a matter of pragmatics. If it is a matter of pragmatics, then we must explain how the use of emoji guides the recipient to recover the intended interpretation. This is particularly important, as understanding emojis' role in the communication and interpretation process will enable us to provide an explanatory account of the role of emojis alongside other communicative tools (Sasamoto, 2023).

This research thus examines how emojis and GIFs function as pragmatic markers in conveying politeness in social media interactions. To explore this, the following section outlines the methodology and analytical framework adopted for the study.

III. Methodology

The purpose of the present research is to examine how emojis and GIFs act as pragmatic markers in expressing politeness in social media discourse. In order to pursue this goal, the study makes use of a quantitative research approach, utilizing Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) as the major analytical tool. This research method enables careful investigation of how emoji and GIF use is correlated with users' perception of politeness in computer-mediated communication. Data were gathered using a prepared, closed-ended questionnaire given to 350 English language learners for the purpose of recording the frequency, context, and perceived utility of emojis and GIFs used to convey politeness. Descriptive analysis was first used to condense response patterns, after which SEM was utilized to determine the hypothesized relationships between the variables. The questionnaire was used as the primary data collection instrument, and responses were critically examined and classified to suit the research objectives. This method guarantees a strong and thorough comprehension of the role visual digital factors play in pragmatic politeness in digital communication.

IV. Results and Interpretation

Based on the model illustrated in Figure 1, it is hypothesized that emojis and GIFs have a measurable impact on perceived communicative effectiveness.

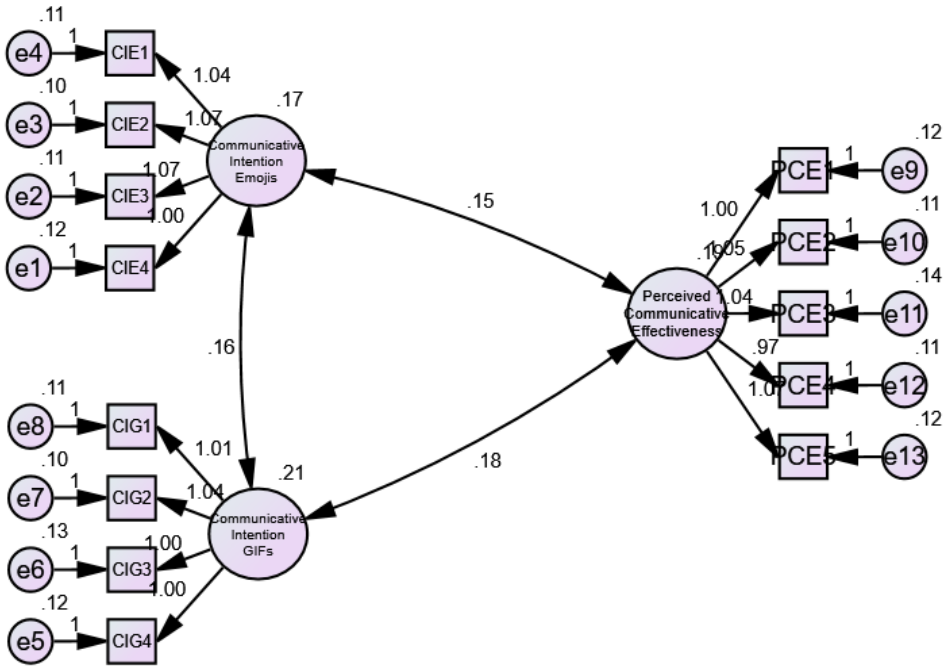

Figure 1. SEM Path Analysis

Figure 1 illustrates the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) path diagram, which demonstrates the relationships among three latent constructs: Communicative Intention via Emojis (CIE), Communicative Intention via GIFs (CIG), and Perceived Communicative Effectiveness (PCE). Both CIE and CIG are tapped with four observed indicators each (CIE1–CIE4 and CIG1–CIG4, respectively), having high standardized loadings from 1.00 to 1.07 for emojis and from 1.00 to 1.01 for GIFs, representing good item reliability. PCE is also assessed using four indicators (PCE1–PCE4) having loadings of 0.97 to 1.05, supporting a strong measurement model. The structural paths show that both emojis and GIFs have significant and positive effects on perceived communicative effectiveness, with CIE having a path coefficient of 0.15 and CIG a slightly greater coefficient of 0.18. This indicates that both forms of expression contribute to increased perceived effectiveness in communication, but that GIFs have a marginally stronger effect. Moreover, the diagram illustrates a mutual relationship between CIE and CIG, with path coefficients of 0.16 and 0.21, respectively, showing a significant correlation between the two communication tools. These results point to a synergistic application of emojis and GIFs in online communication, where their joint use leads to more effective and expressive communication. The errors of measurement for all indicators range within an acceptable level (0.10–0.14), continuing to establish the model's reliability.

TABLE 1
STANDARDIZED REGRESSION WEIGHTS

			Estimate
CIE4	<---	Communicative_Intention_Emojis	.759
CIE3	<---	Communicative_Intention_Emojis	.789
CIE2	<---	Communicative_Intention_Emojis	.810
CIE1	<---	Communicative_Intention_Emojis	.782
CIG4	<---	Communicative_Intention_GIFs	.794
CIG3	<---	Communicative_Intention_GIFs	.789
CIG2	<---	Communicative_Intention_GIFs	.829
CIG1	<---	Communicative_Intention_GIFs	.810
PCE1	<---	Perceived_Communicative_Effectiveness	.789
PCE2	<---	Perceived_Communicative_Effectiveness	.809
PCE3	<---	Perceived_Communicative_Effectiveness	.773
PCE4	<---	Perceived_Communicative_Effectiveness	.793
PCE5	<---	Perceived_Communicative_Effectiveness	.802

TABLE 2
REGRESSION WEIGHTS

			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
CIE4	<---	Communicative_Intention_Emojis	1.000			
CIE3	<---	Communicative_Intention_Emojis	1.066	.071	14.935	***
CIE2	<---	Communicative_Intention_Emojis	1.069	.070	15.374	***
CIE1	<---	Communicative_Intention_Emojis	1.044	.071	14.799	***
CIG4	<---	Communicative_Intention_GIFs	1.000			
CIG3	<---	Communicative_Intention_GIFs	.997	.062	16.027	***
CIG2	<---	Communicative_Intention_GIFs	1.038	.061	17.057	***
CIG1	<---	Communicative_Intention_GIFs	1.007	.061	16.570	***
PCE1	<---	Perceived_Communicative_Effectiveness	1.000			
PCE2	<---	Perceived_Communicative_Effectiveness	1.049	.063	16.528	***
PCE3	<---	Perceived_Communicative_Effectiveness	1.040	.067	15.592	***
PCE4	<---	Perceived_Communicative_Effectiveness	.975	.061	16.109	***
PCE5	<---	Perceived_Communicative_Effectiveness	1.067	.065	16.336	***

TABLE 3
MODEL FIT INDICES

	Model
(GFI)	0.965
(AGFI)	0.745
(RMR)	0.007

The results from the structural equation modeling analysis are summarized in Tables 1, 2, and 3, offering insight into the strength and significance of the observed variables in relation to their corresponding latent constructs. Table 1 presents the standardized regression weights, which confirm the reliability and internal consistency of the measurement model. The construct *Communicative Intention via Emojis* is effectively measured by four indicators (CIE1 to CIE4), with standardized loadings ranging from 0.759 (CIE4) to 0.810 (CIE2), indicating strong contributions of each item to the latent factor. In the same way, the construct Communicative Intention through GIFs is measured by four indicators (CIG1 to CIG4), with loadings of between 0.789 and 0.829, again showing high consistency and validity. The outcome measure Perceived Communicative Effectiveness (PCE) is captured by five indicators (PCE1 to PCE5), with standardized estimates of between 0.773 and 0.809, again supporting the high quality of the measurement structure.

Table 2 gives unstandardized regression weights and their standard errors (S.E.), critical ratios (C.R.), and p-values. All estimates are statistically significant ($p < .001$), as denoted by "***", and their critical ratios exceed the threshold of 1.96, affirming the significance of each indicator's relationship with its latent construct. For example, the regression weight for CIE3 is 1.066 with a C.R. of 14.935, while CIG2 shows a regression weight of 1.038 with a C.R. of 17.057, indicating strong and meaningful relationships within the model.

Table 3 presents the overall model fit indices. Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) is 0.965, indicating a perfect fit between the hypothesized model and actual data. But the Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI) is marginally lower at 0.745, which, though still within acceptable limits, can hint at slight scope for correction in model complexity or sample adequacy. The Root Mean Square Residual (RMR) is extremely low at 0.007, which means there is very little difference between predicted and observed values. Cumulatively, these indices verify that the model has an acceptable to great fit, lending support to its use in explaining relationships between emojis, GIFs, and perceived communicative effectiveness.

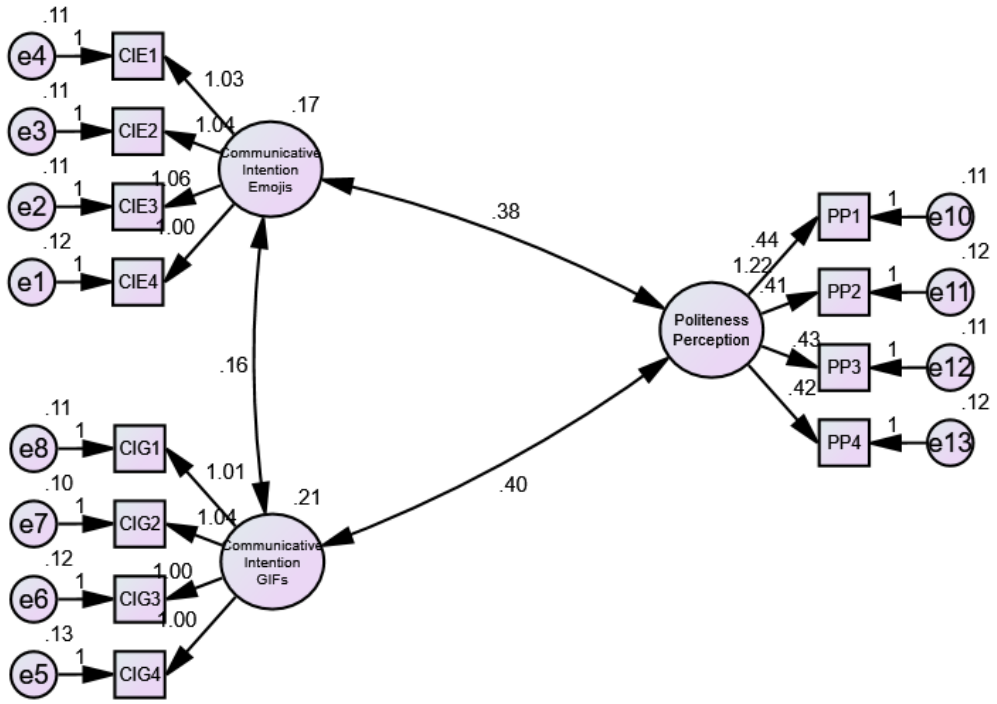

Figure 2. SEM Path Analysis

Figure 2 shows the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) path diagram investigating the effect of Communicative Intention through Emojis (CIE) and Communicative Intention through GIFs (CIG) on Politeness Perception (PP). Latent variable CIE is operationalized using four observed indicators (CIE1–CIE4) with strong standardized loadings from 1.00 to 1.06, which confirms high internal consistency. Likewise, CIG is operationalized using four indicators (CIG1–CIG4) with loadings of 1.00 to 1.04. Both measures evidence positive interrelation, with a correlation coefficient of 0.16, to the effect that users who commonly use emojis for intent expression also commonly use GIFs likewise. The structural paths reveal that both types of communicative intention play significant roles in politeness perceptions, with path coefficients of 0.38 for CIE and 0.40 for CIG. These results indicate that GIFs could have a slightly stronger effect on politeness perception, though both have a significant effect. The outcome variable, Politeness Perception (PP), is measured by four indicators (PP1–PP4) with high loadings of 1.22 to 0.42, further establishing the strong measurement model. The error variances of all observed variables are still within acceptable boundaries (from 0.10 to 0.13), which indicates a good model fit. In sum, the diagram proves that the strategic application of emojis and GIFs strongly increases the perceived politeness of computer-mediated communication.

TABLE 4
STANDARDIZED REGRESSION WEIGHTS

			Estimate
CIE4	<---	Communicative_Intention_Emojis	.766
CIE3	<---	Communicative_Intention_Emojis	.794
CIE2	<---	Communicative_Intention_Emojis	.797
CIE1	<---	Communicative_Intention_Emojis	.783
CIG4	<---	Communicative_Intention_GIFs	.793
CIG3	<---	Communicative_Intention_GIFs	.794
CIG2	<---	Communicative_Intention_GIFs	.828
CIG1	<---	Communicative_Intention_GIFs	.808
PP1	<---	Politeness_Perception	.824
PP2	<---	Politeness_Perception	.790
PP3	<---	Politeness_Perception	.815
PP4	S<---	Politeness_Perception	.800

TABLE 5
REGRESSION WEIGHTS

			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
CIE4	<---	Communicative_Intention_Emojis	1.000			
CIE3	<---	Communicative_Intention_Emojis	1.062	070	15.253	***
CIE2	<---	Communicative_Intention_Emojis	1.043	.068	15.337	***
CIE1	<---	Communicative_Intention_Emojis	1.035	.069	15.029	***
CIG4	<---	Communicative_Intention_GIFs	1.000			
CIG3	<---	Communicative_Intention_GIFs	1.004	.063	15.995	***
CIG2	<---	Communicative_Intention_GIFs	1.038	.062	16.845	***
CIG1	<---	Communicative_Intention_GIFs	1.005	.062	16.333	***
PP1	<---	Politeness_Perception	.436			
PP2	<---	Politeness_Perception	.409			
PP3	<---	Politeness_Perception	.432			
PP4	<---	Politeness_Perception	.422			

TABLE 6
MODEL FIT INDICES

	Model
(GFI)	0.966
(AGFI)	0.745
(RMR)	0.007

Tables 4 to 6 display the output of the structural equation modeling (SEM) test, showing measurement reliability, regression coefficients, and model fit associated with the measures of Communicative Intention through emojis and GIFs, and Politeness Perception. As evident from Table 4, the standardized regression weights of the construct Communicative Intention through Emojis (CIE1 to CIE4) are between 0.766 and 0.797, indicating strong and consistent relationships between the latent factor and its indicators. Likewise, the standardized loadings of Communicative Intention through GIFs (CIG1 to CIG4) are between 0.793 and 0.828, showing strong measurement validity. The construct Politeness Perception is also adequately represented by four indicators (PP1 to PP4), with loadings ranging from 0.790 to 0.824, further establishing the consistency of the model's structure.

Table 5 describes the unstandardized regression weights, standard errors (S.E.), critical ratios (C.R.), and significance values (P). All emoji- and GIF-based communicative intention indicators are statistically significant ($p < .001$), with critical ratios considerably higher than the recommended threshold of 1.96. For example, CIE3 boasts an estimate of 1.062 with a C.R. of 15.253, while CIG2 shows a strong estimate of 1.038 and a C.R. of 16.845, substantiating the significant contribution of these variables. Though regression weights for indicators of politeness perception (PP1 to PP4) are without standard error and p-value here in this table, their value indicates a moderate to strong direct relationship with the hidden structure.

Finally, the overall fitness of the model, as set forth in Table 6, is considered good. The Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) = 0.966, indicating that there exists a very strong fit between theoretical and observed data. The Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI), while less than the foregoing at 0.745, nonetheless remains well within an appropriate range for the adequacy of a model in social science investigations where complex modeling is anticipated. The Root Mean Square Residual (RMR) is low at 0.007, indicating minimal residual differences between the actual and predicted covariance matrices. These indices establish that the model is statistically robust and appropriate for interpreting how communicative strategies using emojis and GIFs affect perceptions of politeness.

V. DISCUSSION

The current research sought to investigate how communicative intentions in the form of emojis and GIFs affect users' perceived communicative effectiveness and politeness during online social interaction. Based on the SEM analysis, the findings validate that emojis and GIFs are strong non-verbal cues that positively enhance the quality and tone of digital communication. The findings show definitive evidence that both Communicative Intention through Emojis (CIE) and Communicative Intention through GIFs (CIG) can strongly predict Perceived Communicative Effectiveness (PCE). The path coefficients of 0.15 for emojis and 0.18 for GIFs highlight that while both channels increase the communicative efficacy of online interactions, GIFs seem to hold a slightly stronger sway. The finding is in line with previous research indicating that visual symbols, such as emojis, are often discussed as semiotic tools for meaning-making, providing emotional tone to messages. Emojis are usually talked about as semiotics for meaning-making, providing emotional tone to messages. Reaction GIFs informally convey emotions and attitudes (Sasamoto, 2023). Animated GIFs are gaining popularity in text-based communication. Similar to other modes of nonverbal communication, animated GIFs are prone to open interpretation (Jiang et al., 2017). The complementarity of CIE and CIG, as their interrelation testifies, also demonstrates the manner in which digital tools for communication are not separate but tend to coexist in complementarity to achieve maximum expression in textual spaces (Hung & Higgins, 2016). Strong item reliability and internal consistency among all observed variables are validated through high standardized loadings. These values indicate that the measures employed to operationalize communicative intentions via both emojis and GIFs were suitably designed and consistent with their underlying dimensions, thus confirming the strength of the measurement model. With

online communication becoming more and more image-oriented, these results underscore the new digital literacy paradigm and the relevance of multimodal semiotics (Stockl et al., 2020).

The research also investigated how these communication devices affect politeness perceptions, a key component of pragmatics in online communication (Noor et al., 2025). The second SEM model validates substantial structural paths between communicative intention and perceived politeness, with slightly higher coefficients for GIFs than emojis. This implies that users both read them as signs of interpersonal sensitivity and social tact, and GIFs may provide more specificity in the conveyance of affective states or social norms. Other research has determined that users choose emojis and GIFs not only to convey emotions but also to indicate attentiveness, empathy, or nuanced social signals (Zhou, 2023). Thus, these observations strengthen the perception that these factors function as pragmatic markers—non-verbal signals incorporated in the message to counteract face-threatening acts and maintain politeness (Micle & Mudure-Iacob, 2024).

Additionally, the model fit indices also show statistical confirmation of the validity and usability of the model. While AGFI values were slightly below, they are within tolerable limits, particularly given the exploratory nature and moderate sample size. Minimal residual differences also indicate that the hypothesized model offers a reasonable approximation of the observed data, further justifying its usability in social science research applications (West et al., 2012).

These findings have theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, they add to the increasing body of literature on multimodal pragmatics and digital discourse. By measuring the communicative effect of emojis and GIFs, the research deepens our knowledge of how non-verbal digital features enhance linguistic interaction and promote interpersonal alignment (Saggese, 2023). In practice, this has implications for digital platform designers, educators, and communication strategists who want to maximize user engagement or create guidelines for digital etiquette. It is also interesting that the consistent error variances across observed indicators give confidence in measurement precision. This consistency guarantees that the observed relationships are not biased by measurement noise, further supporting the reliability of the interpretations made.

Even with these encouraging findings, certain limitations have to be realized. The investigation was based on self-perceptions of effectiveness and politeness, which may have been affected by personal communication style or cultural attitudes. In addition, the analysis did not take into consideration contextual variation—platform-specific norms (e.g., Twitter versus WhatsApp)—that can mediate interpretations of emojis and GIFs. Future studies have to include qualitative methods or context-sensitive designs that can pick up on the varied social meanings invested in these semiotic resources.

VI. Conclusion and Research Implications

This research examined how communicative intention through emojis and GIFs would affect perceptions of communicative efficiency and politeness among users of online communication. The SEM results highlight that emojis and GIFs both serve as powerful non-verbal indicators and significantly augment digital discourse's tone and intelligibility. While both channels of expression were also found to positively predict communicative effectiveness, GIFs were found to exert a marginally stronger effect, solidifying their increasing status in informal, affect-based interactions. The complementarity between emojis and GIFs thus also underlines how these visual resources coexist to enhance text-based communication, providing a wider semiotic palette for expression. The research identified that both GIFs and emojis contribute to the construction of politeness perceptions, serving as pragmatic markers for maintaining interpersonal harmony. High factor loadings and satisfactory model fit indices confirm the strength of the constructs and lend credibility to the reliability of the model. The findings are theoretically significant to multimodal communication theory and practically significant to digital media design and etiquette education. However, the findings are truncated by their dependence on self-report data and the lack of platform-specific analysis.

This work empirically supports the argument that emojis and GIFs act as pragmatic markers that not only increase communicative efficiency but are also critical in determining perceptions of politeness in online interaction. The results add to a new field of digital sociolinguistics and highlight the crucial role that multimodal semiotics plays in determining online communicative practice. As digital communication develops further, these visual components are likely to take an even more pivotal position in ensuring civility, relationship management, and facilitating mutual understanding across virtual landscapes.

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