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تم رفع هذه الرسالة بواسطة /صفاء محمود عبد الشافي

بقسم التوثيق الإلكتروني بمركز الشبكات وتكنولوجيا المعلومات دون

أدنى مسئولية عن محتوى هذه الرسالة.

ملاحظات: لا يوجد

جامعة عين شمس
AIN SHAMS UNIVERSITY
since 1992
مركز الشبكات وتكنولوجيا المعلومات



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The Role of Emojis as a Language in Marketing in the 21st Century: A Multimodal Study

A thesis submitted in Linguistics

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To the Department of English Language and Literature,
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In Partial fulfillment of the requirements
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2021-2022

Abstract

This research aims to analyze emojis in TV commercials from a multimodal perspective. It mainly focuses on examining how emojis are represented in the multimodal context of TV in two different cultures, the Egyptian and American. The study seeks to address the following research questions: How do verbal and visual modes of communication interchange and integrate in representing emojis in Arabic and English TV commercials?, what are the communicative functions of emojis in the TV commercial context?, and how do viewers perceive emojis in TV commercials?. For this purpose, this study analyzes the selected TV commercials from a productive and perceptual angle. On one hand, the qualitative analysis is conducted through applying the multimodal critical discourse analysis of Machin and Mayr (2012) and the visual grammar of Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) for verbal and visual analysis, and emojis are analyzed as visual semiotic mode using Peircean triadic model (1955), denotation and connotation, and rhetorical devices. On the other hand, the researcher examines how emojis are perceived by the viewers with the help of questionnaire and focus group. In addition, the results show that emojis are used as cognitive devices when they are integrated in the multimodal context such as verbo-pictorial metaphors and visual metonymies that are the most recurrent. Also, the visual nature of emoji highlights its element of creativity; it can be used in different contexts. Finally, the successive exaggerated use of emojis is not preferable, as it leads to distraction and being unable to construe their meanings. Thus, it should be simple and clearly depicted through other modes of communication when used in the TV context.

Keywords: Emojis, TV Commercials, Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, Triadic Semiotic Model, Rhetorical Devices, Visual Grammar, Questionnaire, Focus Group

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, all praise and thanks to Allah for giving me the strength to overcome all the difficulties that I have been through and providing me with patience to complete this thesis.

This thesis becomes a reality with the kind support and help of my supervisors. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor Prof. Hesham Hasan for his constructive advice and encouraging words. It has been a great honor to be under his supervision. I am also indebted to Prof. Nagwa Younis, the ideal mentor, for her academic guidance and unceasing support. She has generously allocated much of her valuable time in the extended discussions and valuable suggestions. Thanks should also go to my former co- supervisor, Associate Prof. Marwa Essam El-din, for her support in organizing my thesis and giving insightful comments. I am also thankful to Dr. Hoda Mounir for helping and encouraging me to finish my thesis.

My deepest appreciation goes to the members of my examination committee; Prof. Ali Ezzat and Associate Prof. Mohamed Tohamy for the effort exerted to carefully read my thesis, assessing it, and attending my viva.

I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to my family and a special thanks to my mother who endured this long journey with me, keeps me in her prayers, and she always offers support and love.

Finally, I would also like to thank my friends and colleagues who help and support me to accomplish my goal.

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Chapter One

1.1 Introduction

This thesis tackles a multimodal analysis of emojis in eight TV commercials of two different cultures: the Egyptian and the American culture. This chapter presents the context of the study, the problem of the study, the rationale of the study, the research questions, the objectives of the study, the significance of the study, and organization of chapters.

1.2 Context of the Study

Emoji takes its point of departure from manga, the Japanese comics, which have a distinct style of the visual representation of abstract thoughts and emotions. Emoji is like other visual arguments such as caricatures and cartoons which amalgamate both the verbal and visual expressions to evoke different feelings and responses from the audience. Besides, Danesi (2017) states that it is an informal means of communication “their main use is to keep interactions friendly and cheerful. They are thus used mainly in informal written texts exchanged among social peers such as friends, colleagues, and family members. They are not used in formal texts such as essays, treatises, scientific papers, and so on” (p.20). Moreover, emojis are used in social media platforms and text messages by digital users to compensate for the lack of non-verbal cues, which only exist in face-to-face interaction, to clarify their intentions, express their emotions, and help to deliver the intended message concisely.

Quite recently, a considerable attention has been paid to emojis in the traditional media, namely TV. In a world that is increasingly dependent upon technology, advertisers utilize the well-recognized iconic visual symbols, the emojis, in their TV commercials to keep updated with the most recent trends, establish more intimate relationship with their customers, make the advertised content unique and engaging, and contributes to a contemporary meaning-making experience in the traditional TV landscape “Consumers want two things from advertising: entertainment and information. Advertising

must be entertaining to grab our attention. Informationally, advertising must be relevant. If it isn't, we won't even notice it because we naturally screen out unnecessary content" (Einstein, 2017, p.21).

Emojis are not only used in advertisements, but also used in TV talk shows such as the Egyptian social talk show Maa'kom which is presented by Mona Elshazly on CBC channel. She hosts celebrities, football players, and distinguished figures in various fields. There is a spot entitled the challenge of the emoji game where the guests try to guess the name of a film or a song as they read the emoji character from the right to the left. The emojis used are culturally dependent and only the guests who are familiar with the name of the film could decode its meaning.



Figure (1): Emojis representing the Egyptian Film “صعيدي في الجامعة الامريكية”. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZOfrFce7E>

Moreover, the American talk show The Late Late Show with James Corden is presented by James Corden. He was an actor in the Emoji Movie, he played the role of Hi-five emoji. In the show, he moves around studio spaces with a mobile microphone and examines the audience's knowledge of emoji. The news story which is written in emoji appears on the screen and the audience try to guess the heading of the news by reading the emoji characters from the left to the right. Thus, emojis are used as a novel strategy in the TV landscape for audience engagement and play a playfulness role in the creation of fun puzzles.



Figure (2): Emojis representing the headline of a news article. A doctor left a cell phone in a woman's abdomen after performing a C-section. Retrieved from

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Td8g0oK_oX8

1.3 Problem of the Study:

The major problem of this study lies in the limited number of TV commercials which use emojis. Moreover, the few works are conducted in the analysis of emojis from a semiotic or a multimodal perspective.

1.4 Rationale of the Study:

The main rationale of choosing this idea is apparent in the researcher's desire to analyze emojis in TV commercials due to the fact that when emojis are analyzed in isolation or amalgamated with texts, it still leads to instances of misinterpretation. Besides, emojis have no identifiable lexicon and their meanings are defined by their users; it is culturally specific and context-specific. Thus, it is of paramount significance to analyze emojis from a multimodal context of TV which mainly focuses on encoding meaning through exploring various modes of communication, e.g., language, images, gaze, gesture, etc. "Emoji are understood to serve a variety of semantic, pragmatic, and grammatical roles, but they most appear in tandem with text, where their meaning can be decoded via their place in a clause, and the overall context of the message" (Parkwell, 2019, p.2). "But emoji alone are 'unreadable'. They need to be used together with established modes of expression in order to avoid misunderstanding" (Freedman, 2020, p.45). Cook (2001) points out that the language of

advertisement is part of the whole process of meaning-making. That is to say, the advertisement is analyzed along with other paralinguistic features as facial expressions, gestures, and vocalization, pictures, and music “An ad is not a tangible or stable entity; it is the dynamic synthesis of many components and comes into being through them” (p.6)



Figure (3): The interaction of elements in the ad. Adapted from Cook, G. (2001). *The Discourse of Advertising*. 2nd Ed., P.6, London: Routledge.

The researcher chooses to analyze emojis in TV commercials since most emoji researchers tend to limit emoji analysis to digital discourse from a monomodal mode of communication which is text. However, this study describes and explains emoji representation by advertisers in TV commercials, how they create meaning and employ emojis in their advertised messages.

The researcher analyzes the selected TV commercials from a productive and perceptual angle. On the one hand, the qualitative analysis is conducted through applying the multimodal critical discourse analysis of Machin and Mayr (2012) and the visual grammar of Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) for verbal and visual analysis, Peircean semiotic model (1955), denotation and connotation, and rhetorical devices are used to analyze emoji as a visual semiotic mode. On the other hand, the researcher examines how emojis are perceived by the viewers with the help of questionnaire and focus group.

1.5 Research Questions:


The present study aims at answering the following questions:

- 1- How do verbal and visual modes of communication interchange and integrate to clarify the intended meaning of emojis in Arabic and English TV commercials?
- 2- What are the communicative functions of emojis in the TV commercial context?
- 3- How do viewers perceive emojis in TV commercials?

1.6 The Objectives of the Study:

The present study has three main objectives. The first objective is to investigate how verbal and visual communicative modes represent emojis in TV commercials. The second objective is to reveal the communicative functions of emojis within a multimodal mode of communication and the third objective is to examine the perception of emojis by the TV viewers.

1.7 The Significance of the Study

“In 2015, a truly remarkable event occurred. The emoji known as ‘Face with Tears of Joy’  was chosen by the Oxford Dictionary as the ‘word of the year’. Not only was it not a word- it was a pictogram- but it was chosen by one of the most prestigious dictionaries in the world” (Danesi, 2017, preface). People of different languages and cultures are frequently using emojis in their online interaction and their usage is not only limited to the millennial generation who grew up in the digital world, but it extends to everyone such as celebrities, musicians, politicians, and advertisers in every digital platform. Thus, it is the world’s global form of communication. However, emojis could potentially lead to confusion and miscommunication among digital users which need to have an established conversation style to derive meaning. Thus, this study is concerned with providing more profound understanding of emojis.

1.8 Organization of Chapters

This study is organized as follows: **Chapter One** is the introduction which covers the context of the study, the problem of the study, the rationale of the study, the research questions, the objectives of the study, the significance of the study, and the organization of chapters. **Chapter Two** discusses the non-verbal cues which were used before the invention of emojis, traces the history of emojis, their function, their usage in different domains such as advertising and literature, emoji as a language, and ends with the previous studies. **Chapter Three** discusses the theoretical framework of this study and the methodology used for the analysis. **Chapter Four** presents the detailed multimodal analysis of emojis in the Egyptian TV commercials. **Chapter Five** focuses on the multimodal analysis of emojis in the American TV commercials. **Chapter Six** includes two sections; the first section discusses the questionnaire with its results and the second section details the procedures for conducting the focus group and the results reached. Finally, **Chapter Seven** answers the research questions proposed in the current study, provides a summary of the significant results of the research findings and recommendations for further research.