

# The Pragmatic Functions of Emojis in University-Related Facebook Group-Posts: A Gender-Based Study

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**Abstract**—The present paper aims to study emojis used by male and female Jordanian university students in university-related Facebook group-posts. More specifically, it aims to reveal the pragmatic functions of emojis used by these students and to see whether they differ based on gender. The sample consists of 100 university-related Facebook group-posts collected from a Facebook group for Jordanian university students. The Facebook group is called Ask Petra University. The researcher collected 100 posts (50 posts by males and 50 posts by females). The data were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The framework that this paper refers to is Yus's (2014) taxonomy of pragmatic functions of emoticons. The study revealed that the most frequently used emojis by both males and females are the face with tears of joy 😊, the broken heart 💔 and the red heart ❤️. Some of them were used for the same pragmatic function by both genders. However, the broken heart had different pragmatic functions. The study concludes with some future recommendations and pedagogical implication.

**Index Terms**—emojis, Facebook, gender, Jordanian, pragmatic functions

## I. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, people tend to use emojis/emoticons in their online communication as a way to clarify or add meaning to their utterances. Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines 'emoji'<sup>1</sup> as

any of various small images, symbols, or icons used in text fields in electronic communication (as in text messages, e-mail, and social media) to express the emotional attitude of the writer, convey information succinctly, communicate a message playfully without using words, etc.

In the last few decades, the wide usage of emojis in online interactions has drawn the attention of several scholars (e.g. Walther & D'Addario, 2001; Dresner & Herring, 2010). Scholars have shown interest in studying emojis due to their emotional expressiveness that mirrors non-verbal cues in discourse (Rezabek & Cochenour, 1998; Crystal, 2006). Plus, they are used in a variety of contexts as in casual texting, brand advertising and social media reactions (Romig, 2015; Alshboul & Rababah, 2021; Etman & Elkareh, 2021).

The use of emojis in online conversations and interactions has become the highlight of recent pragmatic studies. These studies are focusing on the various functions these emojis serve during online interactions taking into consideration the culture factor and how it affects their usage. For instance, Al Rashdi (2015) studied the forms and functions of emojis in WhatsApp groups by Omanis. The data were collected from two WhatsApp groups where one group had only male participants, while the other had only female participants. The study revealed different pragmatic functions for emojis by Omanis, such as emotion indicators, attitude indicators, responding to thanks, greetings and compliments. Furthermore, Gibson et al. (2018) studied the communicative functions of face-covering hand emoji in Mandarin chat groups. The data were collected from an exclusive chatting group dedicated for private Chinese company staff. This emoji was selected specifically in this study since it is frequently used in Chinese online conversations. The analysis revealed that this emoji is mainly used as a mitigating device. It mitigates criticism and disapproval. Similarly, Li and Yang's (2018) corpus-based study investigated the pragmatic functions of emojis in Chinese conversations. The researchers also investigated the most frequently used emojis by Chinese. The study presented seven different pragmatic functions of emojis, such as signaling emotions and attitudes, humor and irony. According to this study, the most frequently used emojis by Chinese are the thumbs-up emoji, the rose emoji and the traditional Chinese greeting emoji.

Emojis have also been looked at as a conversational aid that could help intensify verbal language. Sampietro (2019) investigated the use of emojis for rapport management in Spanish WhatsApp groups. The researcher gathered the data from a corpus for Spanish WhatsApp chats. The findings suggested that emojis are mainly used by Spanish for greeting, thanks and goodbyes. Moreover, they are also used as adjacency pairs for birthday and Christmas wishes. In addition, Cohn et al. (2019) studied the grammar of emojis used by a culturally-diverse group. There were two experiments in the study. In the first experiment, the participants were asked to communicate online using only emojis. In the second

<sup>1</sup> Definition of the word 'emoji' is retrieved from Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/emoji>

experiment, they were asked to substitute at least one emoji with a word. The findings from the first experiment revealed that emoji-only utterances were very simple in structure and resemble formulaic expressions. The second experiment revealed that participants often substituted emojis with nouns and adjectives than other parts of speech. Another study by Inderasari et al. (2023) investigated the pragmatic functions of emojis used by Indonesian undergraduate students with their lecturer through online learning communication. After data collection and observation, the findings revealed that the students used multiple emojis to serve pragmatic functions, such as showing joyfulness, showing happiness, apologizing and showing gratitude.

More recent studies also investigated the pragmatic functions of emojis in an Arabic context. For example, Hamdan (2022) examined the pragmatic functions of the most commonly used emojis by Jordanian Facebook users. He found that the most frequently used ones were the Face with Tears of Joy, the Red Heart, the Slightly Smiling Face, the Face Blowing a Kiss, and the Winking Face. He also found that those emojis were employed for different illocutionary forces, such as expressive acts, directive acts and declarative acts. He concluded that these emojis go beyond their semantics as context and culture play significant roles to alter their literal meaning. Moreover, Al-Harbi and Mahzari (2023) used mixed methods to identify the pragmatic functions of emojis used in Arabic tweets. They also studied gender differences to see whether the emojis were used for similar or different purposes. Studying 421 Arabic tweets by Arab males and females, their study revealed that the most frequently used emojis in the tweets were Loudly Crying Face, Face with Tears of Joy, Red Heart, Smiling Face with Heart-Eyes, Broken Heart and others. They were used for multiple pragmatics functions, such as action and reaction, decoration, softening and tone modification. Regarding gender, they found that females used and repeated emojis more than males. Also, Loudly Crying Face was used more often by tweets posted by females, while Face with Tears of Joy was mostly used by male Arab tweeters.

Previous literature on emojis has concluded that they can be used for multiple functions depending on the user's cultural background, gender or even both. Yet, few studies have taken into consideration the age factor and how it could impact the use of emojis in online interactions. The present paper attempts to contribute to previous research on emojis as a communicative device by studying the pragmatic functions of emojis among Jordanian university students in university-related Facebook group-posts. Emojis are playing an important role in our conversations nowadays, especially among young adults. Emojis can help boosting the illocutionary force for the speaker. Therefore, studying them can be considered as important as studying linguistic/verbal features.

## II. AIM OF THE STUDY

The present paper aims to study emojis used by male and female Jordanian university students in university-related Facebook group-posts. More specifically, it aims to reveal the pragmatic functions of emojis used by these students and to see whether they differ based on gender. The paper answers two research questions:

1. What are the most frequently used emojis by Jordanian university students in university-related Facebook group-posts? Are there any differences according to gender?
2. What are the pragmatic functions of these emojis? Do they differ according to gender?

## III. METHODOLOGY

### A. Sample and Data Collection

The sample consists of 100 university-related Facebook group-posts collected from a Facebook group for Jordanian undergraduate university students. The Facebook group is called *Ask Petra University*. This Facebook group is dedicated for University of Petra undergraduate students whom their posts are related to their university life, such as asking about books, classes, lectures and professors. They also post university-related events, jokes and random inquiries. The researcher collected the most recent<sup>2</sup> 100 posts (50 posts by males and 50 posts by females). Posts that do not have any emojis are excluded. In addition, the researcher collected posts that include utterance + emoji/s. The posts collected for the present study were posted between October 28 and November 9, 2022.

### B. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The quantitative analysis answers the first research question on the most frequently used emojis and to see whether there are differences between males and females. However, the qualitative analysis provides examples from the data to study the pragmatic functions of these emojis and to find gender differences if one emoji, for example, is used frequently by both genders but used for a different pragmatic function. The framework that this paper refers to is Yus's (2014) taxonomy. Yus (2014, p. 526) revised his previous taxonomy (Yus, 2011) by presenting a new descriptive variable and sentimental gradation, and proposed an eight-function taxonomy:

1. To signal the propositional attitude that underlies the utterance and which would be difficult to identify without the aid of the emoticon
2. To communicate a higher intensity of a propositional attitude which has already been coded verbally
3. To strengthen/mitigate the illocutionary force of a speech act
4. To contradict the explicit content of the utterance by means of joking

<sup>2</sup> By the time the data were collected for the purpose of the study

5. To contradict the explicit content of the utterance by means of irony
6. To add a feeling or emotion towards the propositional content of the utterance (affective attitude towards the utterance)
7. To add a feeling or emotion towards the communicative act (feeling or emotion in parallel to the communicative act)
8. To communicate the intensity of a feeling or emotion that has already been coded verbally.

Names of emojis in the Results and Discussion section are adopted from [www.emojipedia.org](http://www.emojipedia.org) for convenience purposes.

#### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first part of this section provides a quantitative analysis in order to answer the first research question ‘*what are the most frequently used emojis by Jordanian university students in university-related Facebook group-posts? are there any differences according to gender?*’ Table 1 below shows the frequencies and percentages of the emojis used by Jordanian university students in university-related Facebook group-posts.

TABLE 1  
FREQUENCIES AND PERCENTAGES OF EMOJIS USED BY JORDANIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Emoji	Frequency	Percentage
Face with Tears of Joy 🤩	75	40.7
Broken Heart 💔	16	8.7
Red Heart ❤️	16	8.7
Slightly Smiling Face 😊	13	7.1
Cherry Blossom 🌸	12	6.5
Smiling Face with Heart-Eyes 😍	9	4.9
Unamused Face 😏	7	3.8
Grinning Face with Sweat 😄	7	3.8
Moon 🌑	6	3.3
Waving Hand 🙋	6	3.3
Beaming Face with Smiling-Eyes 😁	6	3.3
Loudly Crying Face 😭	6	3.3
Smiling Face with Sunglasses 😎	3	1.6
Crying Face 😢	2	1.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>184</b>	<b>100%</b>

As can be seen from Table 1 above, the most frequently used emoji among Jordanian university students is the face with tears of joy 🤩 with 40.7%, compared to other emojis used in the 100 posts sampled. The red heart ❤️ and the broken heart 💔 came both in second place after the face with tears of joy with a percentage of 8.7%. The slightly smiling face 😊 was also frequently used by the Jordanian university students with 7.1%. Some emojis were rarely used in the sample, such as the smiling face with sunglasses 😎 and the crying face 😢. This supports Hamdan’s (2022) results where he found that some of the most frequently used emojis by Jordanian Facebook users were the Face with Tears of Joy, the Red Heart, and the Slightly Smiling Face. This also conforms with Al-Harbi and Mahzari’s (2023) study which revealed that some of the most frequently used emojis in the Arabic tweets by males and females were face with Tears of Joy, red Heart, and broken Heart. This implies that Jordanians and Arabs in general tend to be expressive in their online communication by adding emojis to intensify laughter and emotions.

Table 2 below shows the frequencies and percentages of the emojis used by male Jordanian university students in university-related Facebook group-posts. Moreover, Table 3 shows the frequencies and percentages of the emojis used by female Jordanian university students in university-related Facebook group-posts.

TABLE 2  
FREQUENCIES AND PERCENTAGES OF EMOJIS USED BY MALE JORDANIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

























Emoji	Frequency	Percentage
Face with Tears of Joy 	60	59.4
Slightly Smiling Face 	9	8.9
Unamused Face 	7	6.9
Broken Heart 	6	5.9
Red Heart 	4	3.9
Grinning Face with Sweat 	4	3.9
Moon 	3	2.9
Smiling Face with Heart-Eyes 	3	2.9
Crying Face 	2	1.9
Smiling Face with Sunglasses 	1	0.9
Waving Hand 	1	0.9
Cherry Blossom 	1	0.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>100%</b>

TABLE 3  
FREQUENCIES AND PERCENTAGES OF EMOJIS USED BY FEMALE JORDANIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Emoji	Frequency	Percentage
Face with Tears of Joy 	15	18
Red Heart 	12	14.5
Cherry Blossom 	11	13.3
Broken Heart 	10	12
Beaming Face with Smiling Eyes 	6	7.2
Loudly Crying Face 	6	7.2
Smiling Face with Heart-Eyes 	6	7.2
Waving Hand 	5	6
Slightly Smiling Face 	4	4.8
Moon 	3	3.6
Grinning Face with Sweat 	3	3.6
Smiling Face with Sunglasses 	2	2.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>100%</b>

As can be seen from Table 2 and Table 3 above, male Jordanian university students used emojis in their group-posts more than females. Male Jordanian university students used 101 emojis in their university-related Facebook group-posts while female Jordanian university students used only 83. This indicates that male Jordanian university students tend to support their utterances with emojis more in order to clarify their illocutionary force, which confirms Sampietro's (2019) findings. However, this is not in line with Al-Harbi and Mahzari (2023) who found that females used and repeated emojis more than males in Arabic tweets. Yet, it is possible that this could be justified by the fact that the sample of the study reported here is taken from university students. Therefore, this contradiction might be affected by age factor where young adult males or university students use emojis more often. Nonetheless, this study is in line with Al-Harbi and Mahzari (2023) in finding that the face with tears of joy 😄 is the most frequently used emoji by both genders but was used more by males. This may imply that the majority of posts indicate humor, jocularity and laughter. The second most frequently used emoji by males is the slightly smiling face 😊 with 8.9%. However, it is not often used by females. The third most frequently used emoji by males is the unamused face 😏, which is not used in any of the posts written by females. The broken heart 💔 is the fourth most frequently used emoji by both males and females. Although the red heart ❤️ came in fifth place by males, it is the second most frequently used emoji by females. The cherry blossom 🌸 is the third most frequently used emoji by females while it is the least used by males. This might indicate a source of femininity in the post since the majority of posts including the cherry blossom were posted by females. The beaming face with smiling eyes 😁 is the fifth most frequently used emoji by females. On the contrary, this emoji is not found in any of the sampled posts posted by males.

A conclusion can be drawn from the analysis above is that some emojis, such as face with tears of joy 😄, the broken heart 💔 and the red heart ❤️, are frequently used by both genders. Nevertheless, they can be used for different pragmatic functions based on gender. Therefore, the second part of this section provides a qualitative analysis in order to answer the second research question 'what are the pragmatic functions of these emojis? do they differ according to gender?'.  
 The first emoji to be analyzed is the face with tears of joy 😄 since it is the most frequently used by both genders. The pragmatic function of this emoji, which is used by both genders, is 'to communicate a higher intensity of a propositional attitude which has already been coded verbally'. Jokes, or humor in general, are implied in the utterance of the post. However, Jordanian university students tend to intensify the humorous aspect in the post by adding the face with tears of joy 😄 to the post. This conforms with Li and Yang's (2018) study that laughing emojis are used frequently to indicate humor. The data below are examples on this pragmatic function.

#### Example 1: (Male Post)

Original Text: 😄 أغبي اختراع شفته بحياتي هو جهاز تنشيف الايدين. تقعد ساعة حاطط ايديك وبالآخر تمسحها ببنطلونك  
 Transliteration: ayba xtiraaʕ fuʔtu bhayaati hu zihaaz tanʕiif ilʔiden tugʕud saaʕa haati ʔiidik u bil ʔaaxir timsaħha bbantʕaloonak  
 Translation: The stupidest invention I've ever seen is the hand dryer. You put your hands there for an hour then wipe them with your pants.

#### Example 2: (Female Post)


Original Text: 😂😂 يا بيبي ما اكثرهن [posts a picture of an innocent snake]  
 Transliteration: ya bay makʕarhin  
 Translation: How many of them!

The second emoji to be analyzed is the broken heart 💔 since it is in the top five used emojis by both genders. However, males and females used this emoji for different pragmatic functions. Male Jordanian university students mainly used this emoji 'to add a feeling or emotion towards the propositional content of the utterance (affective attitude towards the utterance)'. Although their posts indicate humor, the broken heart 💔 is added to the utterance to imply the feeling of sadness. The posts are related to failing exams or not doing so well in university. Thus, despite the fact that the post is humorous, the emoji 💔 implies an affective attitude towards the post. This is in line with Hamdan (2022) who concluded that these emojis go beyond their semantics as context and culture play significant roles to alter their literal meaning. Below is an example of a male post that included this emoji with the utterance.


#### Example 3: (Male Post)



Original text: 💔 لما انقل اجابات اللي قدامي و اطع الاقيه بعيبط  
 Transliteration: lamma angul izabaat illi guddami o atʕlaʕ alagiih biʕayitʕ  
 Translation: When I copy the answers from who's in front of me and leave the test and see him crying.

On the contrary, female posts included this emoji for a different pragmatic function. It is used 'to add a feeling or emotion towards the communicative act (feeling or emotion in parallel to the communicative act)'. While males used this


emoji with propositions, females used it with communicative acts. The posts are mainly asking for help on how to study one of the courses. Therefore, the broken heart  implies a sad feeling towards the communicative act as a sign for help. Below is an example of a female post that included this emoji with its communicative act.

#### Example 4: (Female Post)


Original Text:  كيف بتدرسو الوطنية  
 Transliteration: kiif btudrusu wat'aniyyeh  
 Translation: How do you study National Education?


The third emoji to be analyzed is the red heart  since it is also in the top five used emojis by both genders. It is used for the same pragmatic function by both genders, which is *to indicate solidarity when communicating a speech act*, such as **thanking** and greeting (Al Rashdi, 2015). Below are examples from both male and female posts using the red heart  with speech acts of thanking and greeting.

#### Example 5: (Male Post)



Original Text: سلام  ..... مين عنده كتاب وطنية؟  
 Transliteration: salaam miin ĩindu ktaab wat'niyyeh  
 Translation: Hello. Who has National Education book?

#### Example 6: (Female Post)


Original Text: [posts a picture of a book]  .. حد عنده هاد الكتاب؟  
 Transliteration: masa lxeer ĩad ĩindu haad lktaab  
 Translation: Good evening. Does anyone have this book?




The slightly smiling face  is the second most frequently used emoji by male Jordanian university students. It is mainly used *to contradict the explicit content of the utterance by means of irony*. Some male students posted requests for help indicating an ironic situation happened to them, as seen below. In addition, irony was used as a means of humor intensified by the emoji.

#### Example 7: (Male Post)




Original Text: ضيعت كتابي من اول يوم   كيف بقدر الاقيه؟  
 Transliteration: d'ayyaġt ktaabi min awwal yoom kiif ba?dar ala?iġh  
 Translation: I lost my book on the first day. How can I find it?

#### Example 8: (Female Post)

Original Text: [Posts picture of a keychain]  .... حد شاف مفتاح لكر عليه هاي المداية؟  
 Transliteration: masa lxeer ĩad ĩaaf muftaaġ lakar ġleh hay lmdalyeh  
 Translation: Good evening. Did anyone see a locker key with this keychain?

The cherry blossom  is the third most frequently used emoji by female Jordanian university students after the face with tears of joy  and the red heart . It is mainly used *to indicate solidarity when communicating a speech act*, such as thanking and greeting (Al Rashdi, 2015), as seen above in Example 8. Nonetheless, this emoji was used only by females which might indicate an aspect of femininity while greeting.

## V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The present paper aimed to find out the most frequently used emojis in university-related Facebook posts written by Jordanian university students. Furthermore, it aimed to reveal any gender differences in using emojis. This paper also investigated the pragmatic functions of the most frequently used emojis by Jordanian university students. The quantitative analysis revealed that the most frequently used emoji in the sample is the face with tears of joy . The pragmatic function of this emoji, which is used by both genders, is *'to communicate a higher intensity of a propositional attitude which has already been coded verbally'*. This emoji mainly accompanies posts of jokes and humor as a way to intensify the proposition. Males and females used the broken heart  for different pragmatic functions. Male Jordanian university students mainly used this emoji *'to add a feeling or emotion towards the propositional content of the utterance (affective attitude towards the utterance)'*. On the contrary, female Jordanian university students used it *'to add a feeling or emotion towards the communicative act (feeling or emotion in parallel to the communicative act)'*. Finally, the red heart  is used for the same pragmatic function by both genders, which is to indicate solidarity when communicating a speech act, such

as thanking and greeting. Regardless of gender, it has been noticed that undergraduate university students use emojis extensively in their online posts and interactions to be more expressive (Inderasari et al., 2023). This indicates the importance of these communicative devices in their lives. It would be interesting to conduct a study in the future where young adults have to make online interactions, such as posts, comments or texting, deprived from the use of emojis. Then, study perceptions of other young adults to see how much impact these emojis have on illocution.

There are some limitations in the present paper. The sample is limited to 100 posts (50 by males and 50 by females). The data were gathered from one Facebook group only. Therefore, results cannot be generalized. More data are needed in order to investigate the use of emojis by university students and the pragmatic functions they serve. Further research may study the use of emojis and their pragmatic functions by other age groups, such as teenagers and older adults. This study is also limited to emojis where there are other non-verbal devices are used nowadays in online interactions, such as stickers, animated stickers and GIFs. Further research may study how these devices are different from emojis in terms of the pragmatic functions they serve. Finally, a pedagogical implication can be drawn from the study reported here. Since young adults are used to using emojis, these devices can be integrated in the process of learning a second or a foreign language. For example, they can be used as non-verbal devices to teach lexical items, like adjectives and nouns, and formulaic expressions like idioms (cf. Cohn et al., 2019).

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