QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 03 Issue No: 02 (2026)

EMOJI-INDUCED PRAGMATIC FAILURE IN PAKISTANI DIGITAL DISCOURSE: A SOCIOPRAGMATIC PERSPECTIVE

Husna Bano
Lecturer in English, People Nursing School, Liaquat University of Medical and Health Sciences (LUMHS), Jamshoro, Sindh, Pakistan
Email: murk.ujjan@lumhs.edu.pk
Sameera Younus Khan
Associate Professor, Sindh Education and Literacy Department, College: Allama Iqbal Govt. Boys Science College
Email: sameerawork2057@gmail.com
Midhat Maroof
Lecturer, Muhammad Ali Jinnah University, Karachi, Pakistan
Email: midhat.maroof@jinnah.edu
Asifa Haroon Narejo
Content Specialist, Intersys Ltd., Karachi, Pakistan
Email: asifaharoonbusiness@gmail.com

Abstract
Emojis are often seen as tools that make communication easier; however, the conditions where they cause misunderstanding are not fully clear, especially in non-Western digital settings. This study looks at emoji-related pragmatic failure in Pakistani online communication, focusing on Instagram as a space where images and text work together. A sociopragmatic approach is used. Fifty Pakistani participants from different age groups took part. They interpreted real Instagram posts where emojis were used in captions and conversations. The results show that misunderstanding is strongly linked to age differences. Younger users often give emojis ironic or shifted meanings based on online culture. Older users tend to interpret the same emoji in a direct and literal way. This creates clear gaps in understanding. Platform use also matters. Cultural meanings attached to emojis add another layer of confusion. These patterns suggest that emoji misunderstanding is not random. It follows social and pragmatic rules shaped by age, digital experience, and cultural knowledge. Therefore, the study provides one of the first focused examinations of emoji-related pragmatic failure in Pakistani digital communication. It also highlights the need for further research in digital sociopragmatics in non-Western contexts.
Keywords: *Emoji, Pragmatic Failure, Digital Discourse, Sociopragmatics, Pakistani Instagram, Computer-Mediated Communication*

1. Introduction

Emojis are assumed to simplify communication, but the conditions under which they produce misunderstanding remain poorly understood, particularly in non-Western digital contexts. Since their standardisation through the Unicode Consortium in the early 2010s, emoji have become one of the most prevalent features of digital communication globally. Their appeal lies partly in their apparent universality: a smiling face, a thumbs up, a red heart seem to carry self-evident meanings that cross linguistic boundaries. This assumption, however, does not hold in practice.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 03 Issue No: 02 (2026)

Meaning in communication is never fixed. It is negotiated between speakers who share contextual knowledge, cultural assumptions, and conversational conventions. When those shared foundations differ, the same sign can produce radically different interpretations. This is the central problem this study addresses. Emoji, despite their visual accessibility, are not culturally neutral. They carry connotations that vary across generations, social groups, and platform environments, and in Pakistani digital communication, this variation is particularly visible and largely unstudied.

Pakistan represents a distinctive case for the study of digital linguistics. It is a multilingual society. English, Urdu, and several regional languages are used in online communication. Roman Urdu is also widely used as an informal written form. It appears frequently in everyday digital interactions. Instagram has become an important platform for communication in Pakistan. It is used for lifestyle sharing, brand interaction, political expression, and peer communication. Its users include teenagers as well as adults in their fifties and older. Over the past decade, the number of users has increased significantly.

Emoji are widely used in this environment. Their use often goes beyond the meanings defined in Unicode. These deviations are not random. They follow recognizable patterns. Certain types of emoji tend to produce similar interpretations. These patterns remain consistent within specific age groups. When differences appear across groups, they align with differences in exposure to digital communication. Younger users and older users tend to interpret emoji differently in predictable ways. This regularity makes the phenomenon analytically important. It also supports a sociopragmatic interpretation.

Pragmatic failure, as described by Thomas (1983), refers to situations where intended meaning does not succeed due to differences in shared pragmatic knowledge. This concept has been extended to computer-mediated communication by Herring (2007) and Taguchi and Sykes (2013). It provides a useful framework for understanding the mismatches observed in this study. However, research on emoji as a source of pragmatic failure in South Asian digital contexts remains limited.

This study combines sociopragmatic theory with mixed-method analysis. It uses survey-based responses and examination of Instagram posts to explore how emoji lead to communication breakdown among Pakistani Instagram users. It shows that these breakdowns follow clear patterns linked to age, digital experience, and culturally shaped interpretations of irony and emotion across generations. The next section reviews relevant literature on emoji linguistics, pragmatic failure, and digital sociopragmatics. It is followed by a discussion of the research methods, findings, implications, recommendations, limitations, and directions for future research.

1.1 Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it addresses an important but still under-researched issue in digital communication, which is how emoji are interpreted differently in Pakistani online contexts. While emoji are generally assumed to make communication clearer and more expressive, this research shows that they can also create misunderstanding when users do not share the same social and digital background. In Pakistan, where Instagram is used across different age groups and social settings, these differences in interpretation become especially visible. The study also adds to existing research by focusing on a non-Western context, where multilingual and culturally diverse communication practices shape how digital meaning is constructed.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 03 Issue No: 02 (2026)

A key contribution of this study is its explanation of pragmatic failure as a structured rather than random phenomenon. The findings show that younger and older users often assign different meanings to the same emoji, and these differences follow clear generational patterns linked to digital exposure and online habits. This has practical importance for everyday communication, especially in family, professional, and social media settings where misunderstanding can easily occur. It also provides useful insights for researchers, educators, and digital communicators by showing that emoji meaning is socially shaped rather than fixed, and that effective communication depends on shared interpretive frameworks within digital communities.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Emoji as Linguistic Objects

The linguistic status of emoji has been debated since their widespread adoption. Early scholarship tended to treat emoji as paralinguistic supplements to text, analogous to facial expressions or gestures in spoken communication (Dresner and Herring, 2010; Danesi, 2017). On this view, emoji do not carry propositional content but instead modify the tone or emotional register of accompanying text. A sentence followed by a smiling emoji is warmer than the same sentence without it; an exclamation followed by a party emoji signals celebration rather than alarm. This paralinguistic model was influential in early emoji research and shaped how platform designers and communication theorists first approached the question of emoji meaning.

More recent work has challenged this supplementary view. Researchers have observed that emoji can substitute for words, function as sentence-final markers, and in some cases carry ironic or inverted meanings that are entirely independent of the text they accompany (Herring and Dainas, 2020). The skull emoji, for example, has become widely used among younger English-speaking users to signal extreme amusement, a meaning that bears no relationship to its visual referent. Similarly, the slightly smiling face emoji has acquired strong associations of passive aggression or discomfort in many digital communities, directly contradicting its surface expression of contentment. Experimental studies have confirmed this instability, finding that identical emoji elicit substantially different interpretations across participants, with disagreement rates for certain emoji exceeding fifty percent (Miller, Thebault-Spieker, Chang, Johnson, Terveen, and Hecht, 2016).

Danesi (2017) has argued that emoji should be understood not as additions to language but as a new semiotic layer that interacts with verbal text to produce meaning that neither layer could produce alone. This view has been developed by subsequent researchers who have examined the multimodal properties of emoji-text combinations and the degree to which meaning is distributed across visual and verbal channels. Large-scale computational studies have further demonstrated that the sentiment values associated with individual emoji vary systematically across demographic groups and regional user communities, with the same symbol carrying measurably different affective weight depending on who is using it (Novak, Smailović, Sluban, and Mozetič, 2015). Longitudinal research has also shown that emoji functions shift over time even within the same platform community, as graphicons that once served primarily as emotional markers acquire new pragmatic roles through patterns of social use (Konrad, Herring, and Choi, 2020). For the purposes of this study, the most relevant insight from this body of work is that emoji meanings are not stable across time or community. They are shaped by the social dynamics of the platforms on which they circulate, and they evolve rapidly in ways that are not captured by any official lexicon.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 03 Issue No: 02 (2026)

The Unicode Consortium assigns names and intended functions to emoji, but actual usage frequently departs from these definitions, especially in informal and highly socialised digital spaces like Instagram. Scholars have noted that platform architectures and the labour demands of digital communication exert their own pressures on how emoji are adopted and repurposed over time (Stark and Crawford, 2015), and that emoji have developed quasi-grammatical properties as a result of this social use that cannot be read off from any official specification (Evans, 2017). This gap between official and actual meaning is itself a source of pragmatic failure, particularly when communicators with different levels of platform familiarity interpret the same emoji according to different conventions.

2.2 Pragmatic Failure in Digital Communication

Thomas (1983) defined pragmatic failure as a failure to understand what is meant by what is said. She distinguished between pragmalinguistic failure, which arises from a mismatch in the use of linguistic forms, and sociopragmatic failure, which arises from differing social and cultural assumptions about how language should be used in a given context. Both types are relevant to emoji communication. The form of the sign, the specific emoji chosen, and the social context of its use, the platform, the relationship between interlocutors, the shared cultural knowledge, both contribute to interpretation.

Research on pragmatic failure in computer-mediated communication has grown substantially over the past decade. Studies have examined how tone is misread in email (Byron, 2008), how emoticons are systematically misinterpreted across different online contexts (Derks, Bos, and Von Grumbkow, 2008), how sarcasm fails in online forums, and how cultural assumptions shape the interpretation of politeness strategies in social media (Taguchi and Sykes, 2013). What these studies consistently find is that digital communication, despite its apparent accessibility, creates significant conditions for pragmatic failure because it lacks the prosodic, gestural, and contextual cues that facilitate interpretation in face-to-face interaction. The written channel strips away much of the information that speakers rely on to disambiguate meaning in real time, placing an unusually heavy inferential burden on the receiver (Yus, 2011).

Emoji were, in part, introduced to compensate for this absence. They were intended to restore some of the affective and tonal information that is lost when speech becomes text. The evidence, however, suggests that they introduce new problems even as they address old ones. Because emoji meanings are community-specific and rapidly evolving, they can create as much ambiguity as they resolve, particularly when communicators belong to different social or generational communities. This dynamic is at the core of the phenomenon investigated in this study.

Culpeper and Terkourafi (2017) have noted that pragmatic failure in digital contexts is often invisible to the party responsible for it. Because digital communication removes the immediate feedback signals of face-to-face interaction, a sender whose emoji has been misread may receive no indication that the failure has occurred. This invisibility amplifies the practical consequences of pragmatic failure, since it cannot be repaired in the moment. It also makes the phenomenon harder to study through observation alone, which is why this study combines post analysis with direct participant response data.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 03 Issue No: 02 (2026)

2.3 Digital Sociopragmatics and Non-Western Contexts

The field of digital sociopragmatics examines how social structures, identities, and cultural norms shape language use in online environments. Much of the foundational work in this field has been conducted in Western, English-language contexts, with platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit providing the primary data (Herring, 2007; Androutsopoulos, 2011). Non-Western digital communication has received comparatively less attention, and South Asian contexts in particular remain underrepresented in the literature.

This underrepresentation matters for several reasons. Western platforms and Western-language conventions shape much of what is known about digital pragmatics, but users in South Asian contexts bring different linguistic repertoires, different cultural frameworks, and different patterns of social organisation to the same platforms. The norms of irony, affect display, and relational maintenance that operate in, for example, North American Instagram communities cannot be assumed to operate in the same way among Pakistani users. Research in other non-Anglophone contexts supports this point: studies of emoji use in Spanish-language WhatsApp exchanges have shown that culturally specific norms of rapport management shape which emoji are selected and how they are read by recipients (Sampietro, 2019), and research on emoji communication in Chinese digital platforms has similarly found that the meanings users assign to particular emoji diverge substantially from those documented in Western-centric accounts (Zhou, Hentschel, and Kumar, 2017). Research that ignores this variation risks producing findings that are presented as universal but are in fact specific to a particular cultural and linguistic context.

The limited research that has examined Pakistani digital communication has focused primarily on code-switching between English and Urdu (Rahman, 2009) and on the use of Roman Urdu in informal digital spaces. Emoji use in Pakistani digital contexts has not, to the present author's knowledge, been the subject of any dedicated linguistic investigation. This represents a significant gap given that Pakistan has one of the fastest-growing social media populations in the world, with Instagram use particularly high among urban youth between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five.

The absence of research in this area is not simply a matter of academic completeness. It has practical implications. As digital communication becomes increasingly central to social, commercial, and political life in Pakistan, understanding the conditions under which it fails becomes correspondingly important. Emoji-induced pragmatic failure, this study argues, is one such condition, and it warrants serious and sustained investigation.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a mixed-method design combining two sources of data: a structured survey administered to fifty Pakistani Instagram users and a corpus of authentic Pakistani Instagram posts selected as stimulus materials. The decision to combine methods reflects the dual nature of the research question. To understand whether and how emoji produce pragmatic failure, it is necessary both to examine real instances of emoji use in context and to collect empirical data on how those instances are actually interpreted by different audience segments. Neither method alone is sufficient: post analysis without participant response data cannot establish that failure has occurred, and participant response data without authentic posts risk artificiality and decontextualisation.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 03 Issue No: 02 (2026)

Instagram was selected as the primary platform for this study for three reasons. First, its caption-and-image format foregrounds emoji use in ways that make the relationship between visual and verbal meaning unusually legible to analysis. Second, unlike WhatsApp, Instagram posts are publicly accessible, which permits the use of authentic data without requiring access to private conversations and the heightened ethical complexity this would entail. Third, Instagram's user base in Pakistan spans the generational range targeted by this study in a way that platforms like TikTok, which skews younger, do not. The decision to exclude WhatsApp is acknowledged as a limitation (see Section 5.5), but it reflects a principled methodological choice rather than an oversight.

The study is grounded in a sociopragmatic framework, which means that the analysis attends not only to whether pragmatic failure occurs but to the social conditions that produce it. Age, digital literacy, and platform familiarity are treated as sociopragmatic variables that shape how emoji are interpreted. The study does not aim to identify a single correct interpretation of any given emoji but rather to map the distribution of interpretations across the participant sample and to identify the conditions under which those interpretations diverge significantly.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

Fifty participants were recruited through purposive sampling, targeting active Pakistani Instagram users. The sample was divided across two age groups: twenty-five participants between the ages of eighteen and twenty-eight, representing the younger cohort, and twenty-five participants between the ages of thirty-five and fifty-five, representing the older cohort. The age gap between groups was deliberate, intended to maximise the visibility of generational differences in emoji interpretation. A sample that included users in their late twenties and early thirties might have obscured the generational divide, since these users often occupy an intermediate position between the two digital habitus positions identified in the study.

All participants were Pakistani nationals based in urban centres, primarily Karachi and Lahore, and all reported using Instagram at least three times per week. Participants were recruited through direct outreach at universities, workplaces, and community organisations, and through snowball sampling from initial contacts. Equal gender representation was maintained within each cohort. Participants were informed of the study's general focus on digital communication but were not told that emoji interpretation was the specific object of investigation, in order to avoid priming effects on their responses.

Thirty Instagram posts were selected from publicly accessible Pakistani lifestyle and social accounts. Posts were chosen to include a range of emoji types, including those with relatively stable conventional meanings and those known to have acquired secondary or ironic meanings in younger digital communities. Posts were screenshotted and stripped of account identifiers before being presented to participants to avoid the influence of brand recognition or influencer familiarity on interpretation.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure

Participants were shown each post and asked to answer two questions: what they understood the emoji in the post to mean in that specific context, and whether they believed the sender intended a different meaning from the one they understood. The second question was designed to capture participants' meta-pragmatic awareness of potential misalignment between intended and received meaning, which is a direct indicator of pragmatic failure consciousness.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 03 Issue No: 02 (2026)

Responses were collected via a structured online survey and were completed individually, without time pressure and without consultation with other participants.

Follow-up probing questions were included for a subset of six posts selected to represent the highest-divergence emoji types. These questions asked participants to explain their interpretation in their own words and to describe how the emoji affected their reading of the accompanying text. The qualitative data generated by these probes provided additional texture to the quantitative divergence figures and were used to support the interpretive claims made in Section 4.

3.4 Analytical Framework

Survey responses were coded thematically. For each post, interpretations were grouped into categories based on the meaning assigned to the emoji in question. Where multiple categories emerged for a single emoji, this was treated as evidence of interpretive divergence. The degree of divergence between the younger and older cohort was calculated as a percentage and used to assess the extent of generational pragmatic failure. Inter-rater reliability was established by having a second coder independently categorise a twenty percent subset of responses, with a Cohen's Kappa coefficient of 0.84 indicating strong agreement.

Post data were analysed using multimodal discourse analysis, attending to the relationship between the verbal text of the caption and the emoji used within it. Cases of apparent incongruence between verbal and emoji meaning were flagged as sites of potential pragmatic failure and cross-referenced with survey response data to determine whether the incongruence was registered by participants and, if so, by which age group.

3.5 Ethical Considerations and Positionality

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the institutional research ethics committee prior to data collection. All participants provided written informed consent before taking part and were fully debriefed regarding the study's specific focus on emoji interpretation upon completion of the survey. Participation was voluntary throughout, and participants were explicitly informed of their right to withdraw at any point without consequence or explanation. All data were anonymised at the point of collection: no personally identifiable information was retained beyond the demographic variables required for cohort classification. The Instagram posts used as stimulus materials were drawn from publicly accessible accounts but were stripped of all account identifiers and contextual metadata before being presented to participants or included in any published analysis, in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the British Association for Applied Linguistics.

The researcher's own position within this field of study warrants explicit acknowledgement. As a Pakistani academic with sustained familiarity with urban Instagram culture, the researcher occupies a position that carries both interpretive advantages and potential blind spots. Familiarity with the platform conventions under analysis provides a degree of insider knowledge that may enhance the sensitivity of the analysis to community-specific norms. At the same time, it carries the risk of normalising one's own interpretive habits and inadvertently treating them as more representative than the data warrant. To mitigate this, all analytic decisions — including the selection of stimulus posts, the categorisation of response data, and the identification of divergence thresholds — were reviewed by a second researcher with comparable sociolinguistic

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 03 Issue No: 02 (2026)

training but different platform familiarity. The inter-rater reliability figures reported in Section 3.4 reflect this collaborative verification process.

4. Findings

4.1 Overview of Interpretive Divergence

Across the thirty stimulus posts, interpretive divergence between the two age cohorts was recorded in twenty-one cases, representing seventy percent of the total sample. In nine cases, the emoji was interpreted consistently across both cohorts, suggesting that some emoji retain relatively stable meanings across generational lines. These stable cases were predominantly associated with emoji that have long-established and widely shared conventional meanings, such as the red heart and the clapping hands used in straightforwardly positive contexts.

The twenty-one cases of divergence were distributed unevenly across emoji types. The highest rates of divergence were recorded for the slightly smiling face, the skull, the loudly crying face, and the pleading face. In each of these cases, younger participants assigned meanings that differed substantially from those assigned by older participants, and in several cases the meanings assigned were directly opposed. Table 1 presents a summary of these findings.

Table 1: Interpretive divergence by emoji type across generational cohorts

Emoji	Younger cohort (18-28)	Older cohort (35-55)	Divergence rate
Skull	Extreme amusement	Death / morbidity / threat	92%
Slightly smiling face	Passive aggression / discomfort	Warmth / friendliness	88%
Loudly crying face	Overwhelming amusement	Genuine distress or sadness	76%
Pleading face	Cuteness / flirtation	Genuine appeal or request	68%
Clapping hands	Sarcasm (context dependent)	Applause / appreciation	38%
Red heart	Affection / love	Affection / love	4%

Figure 1 below shows these divergence rates visually, making the contrast between high-risk and low-risk emoji immediately apparent.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 03 Issue No: 02 (2026)

Figure 1: Emoji interpretive divergence rates across the participant sample

Skull			**92%**
Slightly smiling			**88%**
Loudly crying face			**76%**
Pleading face			**68%**
Clapping hands			**38%**
Red heart			**4%**

Percentage of participants assigning non-conventional or ironic meanings to each emoji type. Dark blue = divergence rate; light blue = remaining proportion.

4.2 Generational Patterns of Semantic Inversion

The most striking finding concerns what this study terms semantic inversion: the complete reversal of an emoji's apparent meaning by younger users. The skull emoji provides the clearest example. Among the younger cohort, ninety-two percent of participants identified the skull emoji as signalling extreme amusement, equivalent in function to the more established crying-laughing face. Among the older cohort, the same percentage interpreted it as conveying something negative, morbid, or threatening. When this emoji appeared in an Instagram caption alongside an ostensibly humorous statement, older participants were significantly more likely to report confusion or unease about the post's intended tone. Several described the combination as disturbing or strange.

The qualitative response data illuminate the affective texture of this divergence. One younger participant, a twenty-three-year-old university student, described the skull emoji in an explicitly humorous caption as "automatically funny, it's how you say you're dead from laughing without using the crying face, which feels too basic now." An older participant, a fifty-one-year-old professional, responding to the same post, wrote that the skull "made the whole caption feel threatening and dark, even though I could tell the text was meant to be light-hearted. It completely changed how I read it." These responses illustrate not merely an interpretive difference but a qualitatively different relationship to the sign itself: for the younger participant, the skull's meaning is settled and transparent within her community; for the older, it produces an unresolvable conflict between the verbal and the visual that the accompanying text cannot resolve.

A similar pattern was observed with the slightly smiling face. Younger participants overwhelmingly associated it with passive aggression, discomfort, or ironic politeness. Several described it specifically as the emoji used when someone is unhappy but is choosing to appear composed, or when a message is intended to unsettle rather than reassure. Older participants, by contrast, read it as a straightforward expression of warmth or mild satisfaction. In posts where this emoji was used ironically, as was common in the younger-oriented accounts within the corpus, older participants consistently missed the irony, rating these posts as friendly or positive.

Younger participants' descriptions of the slightly smiling face were notably consistent in their specificity. Several used phrases such as "the most passive-aggressive emoji," "what you send when you're actually angry but staying calm," or "threatening but polite." One participant, a twenty-five-year-old graphic designer, wrote: "If someone sends me that face after a disagreement

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 03 Issue No: 02 (2026)

I know something is wrong. It's never just friendly." Older participants' descriptions revealed no awareness of this register. The most common response was simply "smiling" or "being nice," with several participants noting that they themselves used this emoji when they wanted to appear approachable. A forty-seven-year-old teacher described one ironically captioned post as "a sweet and positive message," directly inverting its intended communicative function. The degree of this inversion, not merely missing the irony but actively constructing the opposite reading, demonstrates the full extent of pragmatic failure that semantic inversion can produce.

The loudly crying face showed a similarly sharp divide. For younger users, it has largely migrated from its original association with genuine distress to become a marker of intense positive emotion, typically overwhelming amusement or affection. This shift reflects a broader pattern of affective hyperbole in younger digital communities, where extreme emotional signs are repurposed to signal intensity rather than literal content. Older participants retained the original interpretation, frequently expressing uncertainty about why a clearly humorous post would be accompanied by an emoji they associated with grief or distress.

These patterns of semantic inversion are not simply a matter of not knowing the new meaning. They represent fundamentally different interpretive orientations toward emoji. For younger users, emoji are signs whose meanings are negotiated and unstable, shaped by community convention and platform context. For older users, emoji are pictograms whose meanings derive from their visual form and whose interpretation is therefore relatively fixed. These two orientations are not equally compatible with the actual conditions of emoji use on platforms like Instagram, where the norms are set largely by younger user communities.

4.3 Platform Context and Cultural Specificity

Beyond generational differences, the analysis identified two additional factors that contributed to pragmatic failure: platform-specific conventions and culturally specific connotations. Platform-specific conventions refer to the norms that develop within particular digital spaces and that are legible to regular users of those spaces but opaque to others. Instagram, as a highly visual and performative platform, has developed conventions around irony, self-deprecation, and affect display that do not translate straightforwardly to other digital contexts, let alone to face-to-face communication.

The clapping hands emoji provides a useful illustration of how platform-specific conventions interact with cultural specificity. In many Western digital contexts, particularly on Twitter, the clapping hands has acquired a sarcastic function, used to emphasise each word of a critical statement. Among some Pakistani Instagram users, particularly those with significant exposure to Western social media content, this convention has been adopted and is now actively used in Pakistani posts. However, it is not universally recognised within the Pakistani digital community, and among older Pakistani users it retains its conventional positive meaning almost exclusively. Posts that employed the clapping hands sarcastically were frequently misread by older participants as expressions of genuine appreciation, producing a direct inversion of the intended communicative effect.

Culturally specific connotations also emerged in relation to the pleading face emoji, which in Pakistani Instagram contexts has developed associations with flirtation and performative cuteness that are specific to the social norms of the platform community. These associations are not universal even within Pakistan: older participants read the pleading face as a sincere expression

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 03 Issue No: 02 (2026)

of request or vulnerability, while younger participants consistently associated it with a particular mode of self-presentation that is culturally legible only to users embedded in that community.

4.4 Participant Awareness of Misalignment

A secondary finding concerns the degree to which participants were aware that their interpretation might differ from the sender's intention. This meta-pragmatic dimension is significant because awareness of potential misalignment is a precondition for communicative repair. A participant who knows that an emoji might mean something different to someone else can adjust their interpretation accordingly. A participant who has no awareness of this possibility cannot.

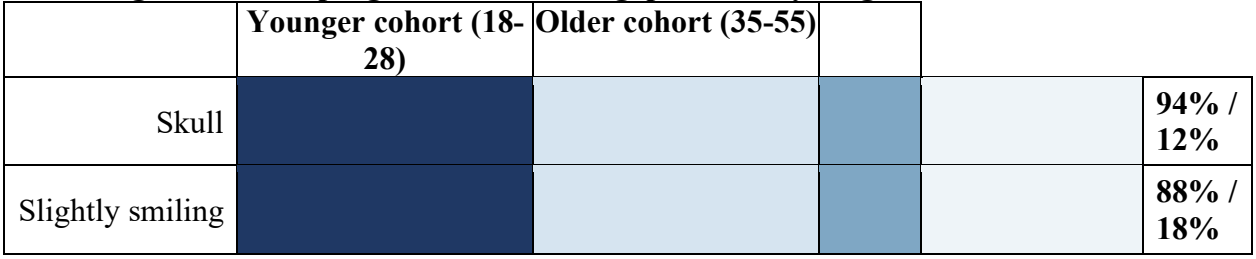
Younger participants showed considerably higher meta-pragmatic awareness across all emoji types. When presented with posts that used emoji in their conventional sense, younger participants were often able to identify that an older or less digitally active sender might have intended a straightforward meaning, and could articulate why. Older participants showed much lower awareness of the possibility of alternative interpretations. When asked whether the sender might have meant something different from what they understood, a majority of older participants answered negatively with confidence, suggesting that the possibility of semantic inversion was not part of their interpretive framework at all.

Table 2 and Figure 2 present the awareness data by cohort and emoji type. The figures confirm that the awareness gap is most pronounced for the same emoji that show the highest divergence rates, which is consistent with the theoretical expectation that semantic inversion produces the greatest asymmetry in meta-pragmatic awareness.

Table 2: Meta-pragmatic awareness of interpretive misalignment by cohort

Emoji	Younger aware (%)	Older aware (%)	Awareness gap	Pragmatic failure risk
Skull	94%	12%	82 pts	Very high
Slightly smiling face	88%	18%	70 pts	Very high
Loudly crying face	80%	22%	58 pts	High
Pleading face	72%	30%	42 pts	High
Clapping hands	56%	40%	16 pts	Moderate
Red heart	20%	18%	2 pts	Low

Figure 2: Meta-pragmatic awareness gap between younger and older cohorts



QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 03 Issue No: 02 (2026)

Loudly crying face					**80% / 22%**
Pleading face					**72% / 30%**
Clapping hands					**56% / 40%**

Dark blue bars = younger cohort awareness; medium blue bars = older cohort awareness. Values shown as younger% / older%.

4.5 The Mediating Role of Cross-Generational Digital Exposure

An unexpected pattern emerged when participants' responses were examined in relation to their reported frequency of cross-generational interaction on Instagram. Among older participants who regularly followed accounts run by users under thirty, and who reported active interaction with younger family members on the platform, meta-pragmatic awareness scores were substantially higher than among older participants whose Instagram networks were predominantly age-matched. This high-exposure subgroup (n = 8) produced skull emoji awareness rates of forty-four percent, compared with three percent among older participants with age-matched networks, a difference of forty-one percentage points within the same generational cohort.

This finding, while based on a small subgroup and therefore necessarily tentative, carries significant theoretical implications. It suggests that generational pragmatic failure is not an immutable consequence of age but a function of exposure to the interpretive community whose conventions are in question. The digital habitus, this data implies, is not fixed at the moment of initial formation but remains susceptible to modification through sustained cross-community interaction. An older user who regularly engages with content produced by younger communities gradually acquires, even without explicit instruction, the interpretive conventions that govern meaning in those communities. This complicates any account of generational digital habitus that treats it as static and non-transferable. It also carries practical implications for digital literacy interventions: rather than treating generational differences in emoji interpretation as permanent, educators and practitioners might more productively focus on creating conditions for cross-generational digital exposure as a mechanism for progressively reducing interpretive asymmetry.

5. Discussion

5.1 Emoji Ambiguity as a Sociopragmatic Phenomenon

The findings of this study reinforce the central claim that emoji-induced pragmatic failure in Pakistani digital discourse does not emerge incidentally. It operates through patterned social processes. The divergences identified are not random interpretive mistakes caused by individual carelessness or unfamiliarity. Instead, they recur consistently among participants within each age cohort, indicating the presence of shared interpretive systems. These systems emerge socially because they develop through the digital communities participants engage with, the platforms they frequently navigate, and the generational environments within which their online communicative habits evolve and solidify.

This carries important consequences for the way emoji are conceptualised within pragmatics and sociolinguistics. If emoji meanings functioned as universally shared or conventionally stable across user groups, the kinds of pragmatic breakdowns identified in this

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 03 Issue No: 02 (2026)

study would not appear with such consistency. The evidence instead advances an understanding of emoji as sociopragmatic tools whose meanings arise not from fixed symbolic codes but from the social environments in which they circulate. Such a perspective firmly situates emoji within sociopragmatics rather than straightforward semiotics. Consequently, any explanation of emoji meaning that overlooks the social conditions shaping production and interpretation remains fundamentally incomplete.

Thomas's (1983) distinction between pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failure proves especially valuable in this context. The failures identified throughout this study align predominantly with sociopragmatic failure. Participants do not misidentify emoji as communicative signs. Rather, they attribute different social meanings to the same symbol because they operate with different assumptions regarding how that symbol functions within a given communicative setting. Every participant recognises the skull emoji as an emoji. What changes is the sociopragmatic understanding that governs its communicative role, and that understanding remains unevenly distributed across generational groups.

At the same time, the findings indicate that emoji-induced pragmatic failure may not fit comfortably within either of Thomas's original categories. Instead, the evidence points toward a third category that could be described as semiotic instability failure. Within Thomas's framework, pragmalinguistic failure involves problems associated with the form of the sign, whereas sociopragmatic failure concerns the social circumstances surrounding its use. The present findings instead reveal a type of failure shaped by both dimensions simultaneously. The sign itself remains unstable because different communities attach different meanings to it, while the social environment of Instagram simultaneously determines which interpretive convention becomes active. This does not simply constitute a failure of incorrect form usage or inadequate social contextualisation. Rather, it emerges from the sign's underlying semantic indeterminacy across community boundaries. Recognising this as a separate form of pragmatic failure carries significant implications for how pragmatic competence within digital communication should be conceptualised and eventually taught.

5.2 Generational Digital Habitus and Interpretive Community

The generational distribution visible in the findings encourages a broader theoretical interpretation. Bourdieu's concept of habitus, understood as the system of durable dispositions through which social actors interpret and react to the world, has been effectively adapted to digital communication settings by scholars such as Hargittai (2010) and boyd (2014). Within this expanded framework, digital habitus describes the accumulated practices, competencies, and interpretive conventions individuals acquire through continuous participation in digital environments.

The younger participants in this study demonstrate a digital habitus shaped by familiarity with ironic emoji practices, semantic reversal, and platform dependent meaning negotiation. This habitus emerged through years of sustained interaction with social media spaces, during which the conventions governing platforms such as Instagram became absorbed and internalised without requiring explicit instruction. By contrast, the older participants exhibit a different form of digital habitus, one formed during an earlier stage of online communication when emoji remained less socially differentiated and retained stronger connections to their literal visual representations.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 03 Issue No: 02 (2026)

These contrasting habitus positions operate as distinct interpretive communities in the sense proposed by Fish (1980), namely groups of social actors who share interpretive conventions and therefore generate comparable readings of the same texts. When individuals belonging to different interpretive communities communicate through emoji, the possibility of pragmatic failure becomes embedded within the interaction itself. Such failure does not emerge from a lack of intelligence or goodwill on either side. Rather, it develops as a structural consequence of communication across community boundaries without access to the same interpretive resources that could minimise misunderstanding.

5.3 Implications for Pakistani Digital Communication

The implications of these findings extend well beyond theoretical linguistics. Instagram increasingly functions within Pakistan as a space for commercial communication, where brands and influencers rely on emoji to establish tone, project personality, and strengthen engagement with intended audiences. If emoji selections produced by younger social media managers are consistently interpreted differently by older audience members, this creates a significant communicative limitation with tangible commercial effects. A brand whose irony becomes interpreted as sincerity, or whose playful messaging becomes interpreted as emotional distress, fails to communicate effectively with a segment of its audience regardless of the strength of its broader communication strategy.

The findings also carry implications for interpersonal and family communication. Many Pakistani Instagram users interact across generational boundaries, with younger relatives and older family members occupying the same digital environments and often participating in shared group conversations. The pragmatic failures identified in this study therefore possess the capacity to generate genuine misunderstanding, unintended offence, and interpersonal tension, particularly in situations where emoji communicate emotionally significant meanings.

At the institutional level, the findings also influence how digital communication should be conceptualised and taught within educational and professional settings. Existing approaches to digital literacy in Pakistan typically prioritise technical access and platform navigation rather than the sociopragmatic dimensions of communication. The evidence presented in this study indicates that a more linguistically informed approach to digital literacy, one addressing the community specific nature of emoji interpretation and the circumstances under which communicative breakdown occurs, would better support users across generational groups. Section 5.4 outlines specific recommendations that emerge from these findings.

5.4 Recommendations

The findings of this study point toward a set of concrete recommendations directed at three distinct audiences: everyday digital communicators, content creators and brands, and researchers and educators.

For everyday digital communicators in Pakistan, the primary recommendation is one of contextual awareness. Users who communicate across generational lines, whether with family members, colleagues, or clients, should not assume that the meanings they assign to emoji are universally shared. The data in this study show that emoji such as the skull, the slightly smiling face, and the loudly crying face carry meanings for younger users that older users are very unlikely to recognise. Where the emotional register of a message matters, particularly in professional or sensitive interpersonal contexts, supplementing emoji with explicit verbal cues is a more reliable

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 03 Issue No: 02 (2026)

strategy. A message that relies entirely on an emoji whose meaning is community-specific is a message that will fail for a predictable segment of its intended audience.

For content creators, lifestyle brands, and social media managers operating in the Pakistani market, the implications are more specific. Brands with audiences from different age groups should examine their emoji use carefully. They should consider the possibility of interpretive misalignment. An emoji may appear warm, ironic, or playful to a younger social media manager. The same emoji may communicate a very different meaning to an older client or consumer. Brands with cross-generational audiences should prefer conservative emoji choices. They should use emoji with stable and widely shared meanings. Such choices reduce the risk of pragmatic failure. Brands that target only younger audiences have greater freedom in emoji use. However, they should still pay attention to changing emoji conventions. Emoji meanings change quickly even within younger groups. Meanings that are popular today may become outdated or reversed within a few years.

For researchers and educators in linguistics and digital communication, the study points toward three important directions. First, there is a need to develop digital literacy curricula with explicit attention to emoji pragmatics. This is especially important for older users. It is also important for professional settings where digital miscommunication can create serious consequences. Second, researchers should expand sociopragmatic studies of emoji use across other Pakistani digital platforms. WhatsApp deserves particular attention. The platform hosts a much larger amount of everyday interpersonal communication than Instagram. Third, future studies should track changes in emoji meanings over time within Pakistani digital communities. Such research can help identify risks of pragmatic failure before widespread miscommunication occurs.

Taken together, these recommendations reflect the study's central finding: that emoji-induced pragmatic failure is a structured communicative problem that responds to structured solutions. Awareness, targeted digital literacy support, and context-sensitive communication practice can each reduce its incidence and consequence in Pakistani digital discourse.

5.5 Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The sample size of fifty participants, while appropriate for an exploratory mixed-method study of this kind, is not sufficient to support broad generalisations about Pakistani Instagram users as a whole. The study is also limited to urban participants in Karachi and Lahore, which means that the findings may not reflect the experiences of users in smaller cities or rural areas, where digital access patterns, platform familiarity, and social media practices may differ substantially from those documented here.

The stimulus posts were drawn from publicly accessible accounts, which introduces a selection bias toward content from accounts with significant followings. Content from smaller, more personal accounts, which may reflect a different and more varied range of emoji conventions, was not represented in the corpus. The exclusion of WhatsApp represents a further constraint on generalisability. As noted in Section 3.1, this exclusion reflects a principled methodological choice grounded in data accessibility and ethical considerations, but it nonetheless limits the study's reach, given that WhatsApp likely hosts a greater volume of everyday interpersonal communication in Pakistan than Instagram. Future research that develops appropriate ethical frameworks for studying private messaging data could productively extend this study's findings to that context. Finally, while the researcher's positionality has been addressed in Section 3.5 and

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 03 Issue No: 02 (2026)

analytic decisions have been subject to inter-rater verification, the possibility of residual interpretive bias cannot be entirely excluded. The findings should be understood as a rigorous but partial account of a complex sociopragmatic phenomenon that warrants continued and expanded investigation.

6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that emoji-induced pragmatic failure is a real, measurable, and structurally determined phenomenon in Pakistani digital discourse. The divergences in emoji interpretation documented across generational cohorts are not the product of random misunderstanding. They reflect systematically different interpretive communities and digital habits that older and younger Pakistani Instagram users bring to the same communicative encounters. Emoji that younger users read as ironic, playful, or emotionally inverted are read by older users as straightforward, sincere, or simply confusing, producing consistent and consequential gaps in communicative understanding.

The theoretical contribution of this study is to position these divergences within a sociopragmatic framework that can account for both their structure and their cause. By drawing on Thomas's (1983) taxonomy of pragmatic failure, Bourdieu's concept of habitus, and Fish's notion of interpretive community, the study offers an explanation of emoji-induced pragmatic failure that goes beyond description to identify the social mechanisms that produce it. The failures documented here are not accidents. They are the predictable outcomes of communication across communities whose members have developed different, and incompatible, interpretive conventions for the same signs.

The empirical contribution is equally significant. This study provides the first documented account of emoji-induced pragmatic failure in Pakistani digital discourse, using authentic Instagram data and direct participant response evidence. The data are specific, quantifiable, and theoretically interpretable. The primary finding — that generational cohort is the strongest predictor of emoji misinterpretation — is supplemented by a secondary finding with considerable theoretical weight: that cross-generational digital exposure within the older cohort substantially reduces interpretive divergence, suggesting that the digital habitus is more malleable than accounts of generational difference typically assume. This finding opens a productive line of inquiry into the mechanisms through which interpretive communities are entered, expanded, and modified over time, and into the conditions under which pragmatic failure can be mitigated without formal instruction. Together, these findings provide a foundation on which future research in digital sociopragmatics can build.

The recommendations arising from this study address the needs of communicators, brands, and researchers. For communicators, the key insight is that emoji carry community-specific meanings that cannot be assumed to travel reliably across generational or social lines. For brands and digital practitioners, emoji selection is a pragmatic decision with communicative consequences, not a decorative choice. For researchers, this study opens a productive and largely unexplored line of inquiry into digital sociopragmatics in non-Western contexts. The emoji, small and seemingly simple, turns out to be a surprisingly precise lens through which to examine the social organisation of meaning in digital life.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES
ISSN Online: 3006-4686, ISSN Print: 3006-4678
Volume No: 03 Issue No: 02 (2026)

References

Androutsopoulos, J. (2011). From variation to heteroglossia in the study of computer-mediated discourse. In C. Thurlow and K. Mroczek (Eds.), Digital discourse: Language in the new media (pp. 277-298). Oxford University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1990). The logic of practice. Stanford University Press.

boyd, d. (2014). It's complicated: The social lives of networked teens. Yale University Press.

Byron, K. (2008). Carrying too heavy a load? The communication and miscommunication of emotion by email. Academy of Management Review, 33(2), 309-327.

Culpeper, J., and Terkourafi, M. (2017). Pragmatic approaches to offence and impoliteness. In J. Culpeper, M. Haugh, and D. Kadar (Eds.), The Palgrave handbook of linguistic (im)politeness (pp. 13-52). Palgrave Macmillan.

Danesi, M. (2017). The semiotics of emoji: The rise of visual language in the age of the internet. Bloomsbury Academic.

Derks, D., Bos, A. E. R., and Von Grumbkow, J. (2008). Emoticons and online message interpretation. Social Science Computer Review, 26(3), 379-388.

Dresner, E., and Herring, S. (2010). Functions of the non-verbal in CMC: Emoticons and illocutionary force. Communication Theory, 20(3), 249-268.

Evans, V. (2017). The emoji code: The linguistics behind smiley faces and scaredy cats. Picador.

Fish, S. (1980). Is there a text in this class? The authority of interpretive communities. Harvard University Press.

Hargittai, E. (2010). Digital na(t)ives? Variation in internet skills and uses among members of the net generation. Sociological Inquiry, 80(1), 92-113.

Herring, S. (2007). A faceted classification scheme for computer-mediated discourse. Language@Internet, 4(1).

Herring, S., and Dainas, A. (2020). Receiver interpretations of emoji functions: A gender perspective. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 25(6), 392-410.

Konrad, A., Herring, S., and Choi, D. (2020). Sticker and emoji use in Facebook Messenger: Implications for graphicon change. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 25(3), 217-235.

Miller, H., Thebault-Spieker, J., Chang, S., Johnson, I., Terveen, L., and Hecht, B. (2016). "Blissfully happy" or "ready to fight": Varying interpretations of emoji. Proceedings of the Tenth International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media, 259-268.

Novak, P. K., Smailović, J., Sluban, B., and Mozetič, I. (2015). Sentiment of emojis. PLOS ONE, 10(12), e0144296.

Rahman, T. (2009). Language ideology, identity and the commodification of language in the call centres of Pakistan. Language in Society, 38(2), 233-258.

Sampietro, A. (2019). Emoji and rapport management in Spanish WhatsApp chats. Journal of Pragmatics, 143, 109-120.

Stark, L., and Crawford, K. (2015). The conservatism of emoji: Work, affect, and communication. Social Media + Society, 1(2), 1-11.

Taguchi, N., and Sykes, J. (Eds.) (2013). Technology in interlanguage pragmatics research and teaching. John Benjamins.

Thomas, J. (1983). Cross-cultural pragmatic failure. Applied Linguistics, 4(2), 91-112.

Yus, F. (2011). Cyberpragmatics: Internet-mediated communication in context. John Benjamins.

Zhou, R., Hentschel, J., and Kumar, N. (2017). Goodbye text, hello emoji: Mobile communication on WeChat in China. In Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (pp. 748-760). ACM.