



An Interpretive Approach to Understanding How Emotions Leads to Approaches in Using Emojis among Bruneian Gen Z

Adriana Jopri¹, Syahirah Suhaili²

¹Universiti Teknologi Brunei

²Universiti Teknologi Brunei

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ABSTRACT

In digital spaces where non-verbal cues are absent, Emojis have become a prevalent tool to express emotions in online communication. While past studies focused on the role of Emojis, little has been done to explore how emotional states may influence Emoji usage. This study aimed to explore how Emojis are used, how emotions influence their usage, and the extent to which Gen Z in Brunei use Emojis to express emotions in online communication. By utilising purposive sampling to recruit its participants, the data collected were gathered from a two-part stimulated recall (SR) interview with 10 Bruneian Gen Z, focusing on their responses to the scenarios given and their interpretations of Emojis. The study was also guided by Goleman's (2001) Emotional Intelligence (EI) model and employed a hermeneutic approach to data analysis. Findings of the study revealed six major themes: (1) Perceived role of Emojis in online communication, (2) Perceived importance of Emojis in online communication and self (3) Emotions and Emojis use, (4), Emoji use according to relationship closeness, (5) Emoji use according to context, and (6) Demographic influences on Emoji use. These findings highlighted Emojis' dual roles of not only expressing but also masking emotions. Emotions were also reported to influence individuals' Emoji use with key elements of the EI model, specifically self-awareness, self-management, and social awareness, emerging as the prominent aspect of EI among individuals. Nevertheless, other factors including relationship closeness, emotional context, age, and gender, were also found to influence Emoji use. Future research could benefit from including a more culturally diverse and broader age range to further understand how cultural and demographic factors can influence Emoji use.

Corresponding Author: Syahirah Suhaili, Universiti Teknologi Brunei, Jln Tungku Link, Gadong, Brunei. E-mail: syahirah.suhaili@utb.edu.bn



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1. Introduction

In this digital age, the way people communicate continues to evolve along with the fast-evolving technology. Social media and text messaging apps such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Telegram, and others seem to have become the norm or preferred way for people to communicate today (Wong, 2023). Globally, the number of individuals using text messaging apps and social media is estimated at more than 3 billion and 5 billion respectively (Wong, 2023), further highlighting the widespread use of online communication. Nevertheless, one does not come without its drawbacks. Communicating online may also mean that it would lack the emotional expression, non-verbal cues, or tone that is present in traditional face-to-face interactions, which

may lead to misinterpretations of the text (Venter, 2019). This is where the usage of Emojis takes such significance.

Emojis have become one of the increasingly used elements of digital communication, with more than 90 percent of the online population using them (Tauch and Kanjo, 2019, as cited in Ghazanfar et al., 2022). From social media captions to text messages, they are prevalent. Emojis are symbols or pictograms that represent various things, including facial expressions, food, objects, animals, and so on (Abdallah & Abdullah, 2022). It was historically developed by Kurita Shigetaka to help add emotions or tone to a text (Kabir & Marlow, 2019). Likewise, a previous study by Chairunissa and Benedictus (2017) has also discovered that Emojis are used to strengthen the intended meaning of the message and prevent misinterpretations (as cited in Neel et al., 2023). In particular, Emojis play a significant role in conveying emotions like sarcasm and humour in online communication (Nandan, 2023). As Emojis are used to express emotions, this function makes it compelling to explore whether individuals' emotional expressions have an influence on how individuals use Emojis in online interactions.

Moreover, to understand how emotions may lead to approaches in Emojis use, this study was guided by Goleman's (2001) Emotional Intelligence (EI) model, which included self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management (Tiwari, 2023). Thus, this model offered a lens to understand how individuals' emotions and EI may affect how they use Emojis in online communication.

Despite the seemingly pervasive use of Emojis globally, there still seems to be a gap in the literature where there is a lack of studies, especially in the context of Brunei Darussalam. Although one study by Abdul Ghani (2018) does mention the usage of Emojis by Bruneians, it is only briefly mentioned and not specified to emotions among Gen Z. Moreover, since Emojis are especially popular among the younger generations, their emotional state may influence their Emoji use (Jain, 2024). Hence, this further highlights the importance of investigating the role of Emojis and whether emotions led to approaches to Emoji use among Gen Z, which this research aimed to explore.

This study stemmed from the researcher's personal interest and observation in the ever-evolving digital communication. Specifically, Emojis seem to have become an essential tool, which is apparent from their prevalent use in social media and texts (Tauch and Kanjo, 2019, as cited in Ghazanfar et al., 2022). Emojis are frequently found in Brunei's text culture and social media to clarify the intended tone or to reduce ambiguity. When receiving texts without any Emojis, the researcher often finds themselves thinking about the sender's actual intent. So, this sparked an interest and motivated the researcher to explore Emojis. Furthermore, since previous literature mainly focused on how Emojis express emotions, the researcher figured that it would be compelling to explore whether an individual's emotions led to their approaches to Emoji use. The idea of incorporating the EI model also came about as there were indications that having EI can help individuals to communicate more effectively in online interactions. Thus, this study aimed to explore whether Gen Z's emotions in Brunei leads to how they use Emojis. By using the EI model as a guide, this also offered valuable insights into the EI of Gen Z in this context. This research, hence, aims to examine how Gen Z in Brunei use Emojis in online communication, how emotions influence their Emoji usage, and the extent to which they use Emojis to express emotions.

2. Literature Review

Studies on Gen Z's usage of online Emojis are limited. Existing literature relating to Emojis and emotions in Brunei has predominantly focused on gender, code choices, and online animosity (Abdul Ghani, 2017; Daud & McLellan, 2016). However, there is a noticeable lack of research on generational usage of Emojis. This study aims to address that gap by providing a better understanding of Bruneian Gen Z's Emoji usage and its relation to emotional expression.

2.1. Defining Generation Z

To better comprehend Gen Z's role in this context, it is essential to first define Gen Z. Notably, Gen Z does not have a universally accepted definition, and previous literature has shown variations. For example, Half (2015) defined Gen Z as those born between 1990 and 1999, while White (2017) defined it as those born between 1993 and 2012 (as cited in Dolot, 2018). For the purposes of this study, UNESCO's (2024) definition will be used: individuals born between 1997 and 2010.

Gen Z differs from other generations in terms of communication style. Peredy et al. (2024) observed that Gen Z is more informal and straightforward, a tendency attributed to their frequent engagement with the internet and social media (Corporate English Solutions, 2024). In contrast, Baby Boomers, born between the mid-1940s to 1960s, prefer more formal communication (Harris, 2023). These generational differences reflect the impact of technology and the internet on communication styles.

2.2 Gen Z and Online Communication

The relationship between Gen Z and technology is especially relevant, as they are often described as individuals born in the era of technology (Albescu, 2022; Segura, 2024). The World Economic Forum (2019) has highlighted Gen Z's high usage of social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitter (as cited in Reunanen, 2024). This demonstrates how Gen Z is immersed in technological environments and uses Emojis and social media to express emotions and thoughts. Dolot (2018) similarly found that Gen Z expresses emotion and expects responses from others online. This behaviour relates closely to the concept of emotional intelligence (EI), which is important for effective communication. Thus, studying EI among Gen Z in relation to Emojis is particularly relevant.

Given the scarcity of research on Gen Z in Brunei, this study seeks to address this gap and provide insight into Gen Z's use of technology and emotion in online communication. The widespread use of social media among Gen Z (Reunanen, 2024) further underscores the importance of examining their Emoji use, particularly in light of limited research on Emojis in Brunei.

2.2 Emojis in Conveying Emotions Online

Emojis emerged as one of the most used non-verbal cues to express emotions or clarify messages (Alshenqeeti, 2016; Sadia, 2018). Emojis are symbols or pictograms that represent various emotions, foods, animals, flags, and more (Abdallah & Abdullah, 2022). According to Riorda (2017), their usage started to increase and became globalized ever since Apple introduced a standard keyboard with built-in Emojis (as cited in Bosch & Revilla, 2018), which was followed by Android several years later. Hence, having Emojis on mobile phones enables easier facilitation of Emojis in online communication. In other words, since phones are integral to most individuals worldwide, this accessibility increases the probability of Emoji usage among them.

Moreover, Emojis serve multiple purposes in digital communication, including clarifying text, cheering one's mood, text replacement, maintaining social standing, and more (Sadia, 2023). These various functions illustrate the significance of Emojis in helping to complement written text and strengthen or clarify emotions in online communication. Therefore, the growing importance of emojis highlights the significance of studying their usage, particularly in understanding how emotions influence how individuals choose to use Emojis in online communication.

Moreover, in understanding emotional expression, it is crucial to explore one's EI. Emotional intelligence (EI) refers to an individual's ability to comprehend, perceive, express, and manage not only their own emotions, but also the emotions of those around them (Harvard Business School, 2018). When an individual possesses these skills, it can be seen as valuable, as it can lead to effective communication and contribute to success in both personal and professional aspects (Dover & Amichai-Hamburger, 2023). A study by Raesissi et al. (2019) has also revealed that there is a positive correlation between EI and communication between nurses in Iran. Hence, this further underlines the significance of EI on communication.

Furthermore, this is not limited to face-to-face interactions but also applies to online communication (Dover & Amichai-Hamburger, 2023). Since verbal cues are absent in online communication, there may be challenges in interpreting the intended emotions accurately. So, EI may help individuals interpret the cues in online communication, including Emojis, where its intent can be vague and ambiguous (Chiedu, 2024).

Previous research has also indicated that strong EI skills can help individuals to interpret cues and navigate online interactions more effectively (Dover & Amichai-Hamburger, 2023; Newlane University, 2024). Volker and Manheim (2021) also support this as they found that the higher the EI an individual possesses, the more they can understand others' emotions (as cited in Audrin & Audrin, 2024). This connection between online communication and EI further illustrates the importance of EI in the interpretation and usage of Emojis.

Moreover, since Gen Z is one of the biggest social groups of online users (Reunanen, 2024), this further emphasises the need to explore Gen Z's EI when interacting online. Although a few studies have been conducted on EI in Brunei, such as those by Norfaezah (2024), her study specifically focused on lower

secondary students. So, there is still limited local research that specifically explores EI among Gen Z. Hence, this study addressed the gap by investigating how elements of Goleman's (2001) EI model may play a significant role in Gen Z's Emoji use.

2.3 Expressing Emotions in face-to-face communication

Furthermore, to understand how emotions are expressed through Emojis, it is essential to first consider how emotions are conveyed in face-to-face interactions. This is because understanding emotions is an essential aspect of communication, as it greatly helps individuals make sense of the information they retain, and in turn, affects their interpretation and choices (Dennison, 2024). Moreover, Dixon (2012) and Ortony (2022) posit that emotion is complex and lacks a generally accepted and formal definition. Nevertheless, this study will define emotions as humans' feelings (Dennison, 2024).

In face-to-face interactions, emotions through physical expression are a significant aspect of interpersonal communication. This is because these would convey our feelings to others, which would influence social interaction (Krocze & Muhlberger, 2022; Vosk et al., 1983). In other words, we typically see and interpret the emotions of others through their facial expressions or body language. For instance, when an individual is feeling low, their body posture conveys and reflects this emotion. Similarly, Abdulghafor et al. (2022) also noted that body movement can provide clues or information regarding the level or intensity of an individual's emotions. Therefore, this highlights the importance of observing individuals' physical cues, as they provide information about their emotional state during interaction.

2.4 Previous literature on the role of Emojis

In online spaces where emotional cues are absent, previous research indicates that Emojis play a role in bridging the emotional gap between physical and digital spaces. Sadia (2018) also emphasizes the ability of emojis to provide the missing emotions that can only be found in face-to-face interactions. For example, Emojis can help convey sarcasm, happiness, or sadness that would be difficult to convey in word-only text (Alshenqeeti, 2016). This highlights the importance of exploring how individuals use Emojis in relation to their emotions. Hence, this study may enable us to gain a deeper understanding of how Gen Z's emotions influence their approaches to using Emojis in online communication.

Furthermore, numerous studies have highlighted the role of Emojis in conveying emotions. For instance, Kelly's (2015) study on high school students found that most students used Emojis to convey the intended emotions of the sender. Williams (2024) also researched college students, and the results show that the majority use Emojis as a replacement to express their intended feelings (as cited in Chiedu, 2024). Hence, this further highlights the close relationship between emotions and Emojis, which reemphasizes the need to conduct this research.

Nevertheless, previous studies have also suggested that while Emojis could enhance emotional clarity, they can also create confusion and misinterpretation (Amalina & Azam, 2020; Alshenqeeti, 2016; Miller, 2018). This may be due to the multiple meanings that could be attached to a single Emoji. To illustrate, in a study by Chiedu (2024), a folded hand Emoji (🙏) is used to express gratefulness, offer prayer, or make an appeal. Similarly, the tears of joy Emoji (😂). Although on the surface, the Emoji implies a joyful and positive mood, research reveals that it is also used to convey insults, to laugh at someone, or even to criticize them (Chiedu, 2024). Additionally, Dharma et al. (2023) also pointed out that the tears of joy and crying-out-loud Emoji (😭) evoke vague meanings because often, it is interpreted as crying, but they can also stand for something humorous.

In another aspect, Emojis can also be interpreted differently according to the sender, receiver, situation, and cultural differences (Kelly & Watts, 2015). Differences in interpretation can also be due to an individual's different levels of EI, since having a higher EI might lead to a more accurate interpretation (Dover & Amichai-Hamburger, 2023; Newlane University, 2024). Moreover, Emojis have two levels of interpretation: denotative and connotative (Abdalrahman et al., 2022). Denotative is the literal meaning, while connotative is the implicit meaning (Abdalrahman et al., 2022). For example, the denotative meaning of the rose Emoji (🌹) means a rose flower. Whereas the connotative meaning of the same rose Emoji might indicate romance or the smell of a rose (Abdalrahman et al., 2022). Thus, the duality of meanings for an Emoji can illustrate the difficulty in achieving a consistent interpretation. Abdalrahman et al. (2022) have also noted that Emojis can be quite

challenging to interpret as they can describe emotions, social meanings, and more. Thus, exploring how Gen Z chooses and interprets Emojis can give insight into whether emotions can influence their Emoji use.

Although these studies highlight the significance of Emojis in conveying emotional expressions, they also show that Emojis do not have a fixed and universal meaning (Abdul Salam, 2017; Cecco, 2023; Miller, 2018). This highlights the need to be aware of various meanings of Emojis to avoid misinterpretation that could harm social relationships (Boutet et al., 2021; Cecco, 2023). Hence, this further underscores the significance of exploring whether emotions may influence how Bruneian Gen Z choose and interpret Emojis.

2.5 Contextual Factors and Emojis in Online Communication

Moreover, individuals' usage of Emojis in online communication may also depend on factors such as the level of intimacy between individuals, cultural backgrounds, and formality. As Sadia (2018) has noted, the number and meanings of Emojis depend on the context during the interaction. Numerous studies have also highlighted that the relationship between individuals influences how Emojis are used in online communication (Kelly, 2015; Kelly & Watts, 2015; Lu et al., 2016). To illustrate, Lu et al. (2016) argued that the intimacy level, language, and cultural background between those interacting can explain the differences in Emoji usage. Similarly, Saida (2018) found that 90 percent of the respondents agreed they would consider their relationship with the sender before interpreting an Emoji sent by them. Therefore, this illustrates how context and relationship dynamics can influence the usage and interpretation of Emojis by individuals.

In addition to relationship dynamics, cultural backgrounds can also influence the use and interpretation of emojis. Parkwell (2019) observes that different cultures can have different interpretations and relevance towards respective Emojis. An Emoji that is widely used in one community may not be relevant in another. For example, Chinese users tend to use happy Emojis to express sarcasm, whereas those in the United Kingdom do not (Chen et al., 2024). Similarly, Guntuku et al. (2019) also found that users from Eastern cultures tend to use multiple Emojis to convey the same idea compared to those in the West. Togans et al. (2021) also highlighted the variations in the usage of Emojis between Asians and Americans. Hence, this suggests that cultural background may influence individuals' use of emojis.

Additionally, the level of formality and age can also affect the usage and interpretation of Emojis in online communication. To illustrate, in Japan, Dharma et al. (2023) found that Gen X only uses Emojis with family and friends. On the other hand, Gen Ys use Emojis only for school-related purposes. These contrasts with Gen Z, who only use Emojis with friends and not family. The reason for this might be due to Japan's strong cultural context. Since Emojis are seen as an informal way of communicating, they are rarely used in formal situations (Dharma et al., 2023). Additionally, the variation in how these three generations use Emojis may show the influence of generational communication styles. Hence, this suggests that both cultural and generational factors can potentially influence individuals' use of emojis.

However, given that the literature on the use of Emojis and generational differences is limited, this raises questions about the extent to which the individual's generational identity plays a role. Further studies relating to generational use of Emojis could be essential in understanding Emoji use across different age ranges.

2.6 Underpinning Theory: Emotional Intelligence (EI) Model

The EI model also serves as a significant guide for this research, as it helps illustrate how an individual's emotions and awareness of them can influence their choice and interpretation of Emojis. According to Kanesan and Fauzan (2018), there are three different types of EI models: ability, trait, and mixed models. For this study, Goleman's (2001) EI ability model will be specifically applied to explore how EI may influence the usage and interpretation of Emojis among Gen Z in Brunei. Goleman's model comprises four key elements: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management (Kanesan & Fauzan, 2018). To further elaborate on each element:

2.6.1 Self-Awareness:

This involves recognising and understanding one's emotions, self-confidence, and self-evaluation (Tiwari, 2023). Individuals with strong self-awareness possess the ability to recognize and acknowledge their own feelings, values, strengths, and limitations, which may influence the way they communicate and respond to others (Tiwari, 2023). Keynan et al. (2022) have also found that individuals rely on their own emotions to identify emotions expressed in written text. Concerning the use, this may mean that this component allows

individuals to understand their emotions better and be able to reflect them to others by choosing Emojis that reflect their true intention.

2.6.2 Self-management

Moreover, self-management refers to the ability of individuals to control and regulate their emotions (Tiwari, 2023). This is also when an individual can maintain trustworthiness and can adapt to any situation (Tiwari, 2023). This means that this skill may help individuals remain calm and take responsibility for their actions, even in challenging situations (Tiwari, 2023). In this study, self-management concerns whether Gen Z users would choose to express or hold back certain emotions through their use of Emojis.

2.6.3 Social Awareness

Social awareness is the ability to perceive, understand, and empathise with others' emotions (Tiwari, 2023). In other words, an individual possessing this skill is aware and sensitive to others' emotions, which enables them to empathize with those around them (Tiwari, 2023). In the context of this study, social awareness might influence the usage and interpretation of Emojis sent by the sender.

2.6.4 Relationship management:

Lastly, relationship management would include skills such as communication, leadership, and conflict resolution (Tiwari, 2023). This element may help individuals manage their relationships with others, as it enables them to communicate respectfully and collaboratively (Tiwari, 2023). This aligns with Davaei et al. (2022), who found that possessing EI can help individuals to avoid and mitigate group conflicts in an online context (as cited in Audrin & Audrin, 2024). This illustrates how the aspect of relationship management may guide Gen Z in choosing emojis that can help prevent misunderstandings and foster peace in online communication.

A significant gap can be identified where there is limited research on EI in online communication, especially in the Bruneian context. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how an individual's emotions can impact the usage and interpretation of Emojis among Gen Z in Brunei.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Approach

This study used a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of how emotions may lead to approaches in using Emojis among Gen Z in Brunei. Particularly, this research employed the interpretive paradigm in its approach. To elaborate, an interpretive approach is based on the understanding that individuals would usually assign various interpretations and subjective meanings to their surroundings (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). Compared to a quantitative study that would only show the frequency of numbers (Busetto et al., 2020), this interpretive approach can help to further explore participants' interpretations and the meanings they attach to the Emojis (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022; Putnam & Banghart, 2017). The use of an interpretive approach was suitable as it provided more in-depth and richer insights into individuals' Emoji use.

Additionally, this research drew upon the hermeneutics approach. Hermeneutics focuses on interpreting participants' respective subjective meanings (George, 2020). For this study, hermeneutics was also used as a lens, especially in analysing the data. So, using hermeneutics would allow researchers to delve into participants' subjective emotions and understand how it may influence their use of Emojis (George, 2020). Therefore, using this approach was suitable for this study as it provided the study with richer insight.

3.2 Sampling

This study's demographics was Gen Z in Brunei. According to UNESCO (2024), Gen Z are individuals born between the years 1997 and 2010 (15-28 years old). However, this research limited its sample to individuals aged 18 to 28 years old as this helped to ensure ethical considerations and also focused on young adults who have grown up in the digital era.

The reason for choosing Gen Z is that not much research has been done on Gen Z in relation to Emojis. Hilda (2024) has found that Gen Z and millennials have a higher level of digital literacy compared to older generations. This may suggest that they would be more familiar with and more likely to spend time in a digital environment. Since studies on millennials' use of Emojis have been conducted by Bosch and Revilla (2018), this research will aim to fill the literature gap by focusing on Gen Z. Making Gen Z the samples in this study helped gain interesting insights into how the generation that revolves around technology expresses uses Emojis. Hence, making Gen Z a suitable demographic for this study.

For this study, the participants consisted of a total of 10 individuals, aged 19-28 years old. Hennink and Kaiser (2022) have claimed that having 9-17 participants as a study's sample size would be able to achieve data saturation. To further elaborate, when research achieves data saturation, it means that there would be little or no new data that can be further found (Saunders et al., 2017). This is important since it would tell the researcher when to stop collecting data. It can also save the researcher's time and resources, which can enhance the quality and credibility of the study (Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024). Therefore, having 10 participants in this research was sufficient.

For reference, a summary of the participants' demographics, including the year born and gender, is shown in Table 1:

Aliases	Year Born	Gender
Alisa	1998	Female
Bazilah	2000	Female
Rayyan	1998	Male
Ammara	2000	Female
Aniq	1998	Male
Daisy	2000	Female
Irdy	2006	Female
Sofea	1998	Female
Ishak	1998	Male
Ayden	2003	Male

Table 1. Summary of Participants' year of birth and gender

3.3 Sampling Method

Furthermore, this research used a purposive sampling method to recruit the participants. Purposive sampling is a non-probability technique where researchers intentionally select participants with specific characteristics that are needed for their study (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). In this case, this method is suitable for this study as it lets the researcher to select Bruneian Gen Z participants who use Emojis in online communication more easily and faster. Stratton (2024) has also noted that this method would be more efficient and cost-effective. This would be advantageous, especially given the limited timeframe and resources as a student to conduct this study. In addition, Campbell et al. (2020) argued that purposive sampling can enable the researcher to find participants who would match the aims and objectives of the research. Hence, this could enhance the reliability and credibility of the study.

3.4 Data Collection

For data collection, this study used stimulated recall (SR) interviews to gain an in-depth understanding of how emotions may shape Emojis usage by Bruneian Gen Z in online communication. According to Griffioen et al. (2020), SR interviews are a method where the researcher uses an object or shows a stimulus to get a reaction from the participants, including their thoughts and emotions. This researcher chose this method, which is inspired by the study concerning Emojis by Adams (2017). This is where Adams (2017) conducted focus group interviews and divided her interviews into three stages. First, she would ask her participants to scroll through their messages on their mobile phones and ask open-ended questions. Adams (2017) also showed the participants three different messages that have few, plenty, and no Emojis, respectively. The author would then ask several questions about their interpretation and emotion towards the message.

Similarly, for this study, the SR interview was divided into two different stages. The first stage was the situational prompts. In this stage, the researcher presented the participants with seven different scenarios (refer to Appendix A) that would relate to the four elements of the EI model. These scenarios were developed by the researcher by taking several ideas from Adams (2017) and also the common situation that is trending in online communication within Gen Z in Brunei, including unemployment, hate comments, and more. The situational prompts settings included messages in private, group chat, and comments on social media, specifically TikTok. The situational prompts were also designed to address the first research question: How are Emojis used as a form of online communication among Gen Z in Brunei?

Next, the researcher sent the text to participants for it to be relatable and almost mirror a real-life situation. The researcher also decided to personalize the text by changing the names to those familiar to the participants. This allowed the scenarios to feel more realistic, relatable, and encouraged genuine responses from the participants. Participants were then asked to type the text they would typically respond with in those situations. The seven scenarios were designed based on four elements of the EI model (refer to Appendix A), where it acted as a guide to explore how the participants' awareness of their emotions and surrounding context may influence their Emoji choices.

Furthermore, the second stage was the semi-structured interview. This is where the researcher asked the participants questions relating to why they chose certain Emojis for the situation and what meanings they assign to the Emojis. This stage was also guided by the scenarios that were in the first stage, and the stimulated recall came from participants' written responses in the first stage. Moreover, the semi-structured format for the second stage allowed for probing, building rapport, and avoiding bias (Busetto et al., 2020). This flexibility allowed the researcher to gain more data and deeper insight.

Additionally, the interview questions were designed to address all three research questions. The interview questions were also prepared in English. This is based on Sharbawi's (2021) study that reveals most Gen Z in Brunei are multilingual and have the proficiency to speak English (as cited in Mumin, 2023; Mumin et al., 2025). In addition, Gen Z also considered English as a part of their Bruneian identity (Sharbawi, 2023, as cited in Abidin and Sharbawi, 2023). Hence, this further underlines the suitability of using English to develop the interview questions. Slangs were also often integrated in everyday conversation for its efficiency and engaging nature (Suhaini & Mumin, 2025) as Non-native English Speakers of English often code switch or speak bilingually to be more effective speakers (Mumin, 2022).

Despite that, the language that the researcher used in the interviews was not limited to English only. The researcher interviewed in a language that each participant would be comfortable using. This includes Malay or a combination of Malay and English. Moreover, the scenario and interview questions used inclusive and generic language to avoid triggering participants' negative emotions. Before the interviews, this researcher also made sure to establish rapport with participants through casual conversations. This can make participants feel more at ease and able to answer comfortably (Horsfall et al., 2021).

The data collection took place for one month. Interviews were conducted face-to-face since this can reveal information that would only be seen in person, such as body gestures, tone, and emotions (Schober, 2018). This face-to-face approach can also contribute to a richer and comprehensive report and facilitate easier communication (Sun et al., 2020). Furthermore, with the participants' consent, the SR interview sessions were recorded with an iPad. Full transcripts were also developed following each interview. The data collected, including the recordings and transcripts, was stored on the researcher's laptop and only accessed strictly by the researcher.

3.5 Data Analysis

After data collection, this study had two types of data by the end of the session, which were the task data and protocol data. To elaborate, task data is the data that is collected in stage one during the situational prompts, whereas protocol data was collected from the semi-structured interviews (Diaz, 2022). Additionally, analysing the task data also gave insight into the choices of Emojis participants used in response to the given scenarios.

On the other hand, protocol data may provide further insights into the reasons participants choose certain Emojis and the meanings they assign to them. After developing full transcripts of the protocol data, I organized them to prepare for coding. According to Berthet et al. (2023), coding is labelling the data that has been gathered and organising it according to recurring themes or patterns. This research used thematic analysis, where the researcher can identify recurring themes or patterns (Muhammad Naeem et al., 2023), in Emoji usage and emotional expression. Furthermore, the coding focused on the participants' choice of Emojis and the meanings they give to those Emojis.

The recurring themes were then interpreted by using the hermeneutics approach to explore how participants interpret and assign meanings to Emojis. This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of individuals' subjective interpretations and meaning towards Emojis (George, 2020). The EI model will also be used as a lens to analyse how the participants' EI may have influenced their choice of Emojis and the emotional meanings they attach to the Emojis.

4. Results

During the interviews, situational prompts were used, and the researcher decided to personalize them by changing the names to those familiar to the participants. This allowed the scenarios to feel more realistic, relatable, and encouraged genuine responses from the participants. After each interview, the recordings were transcribed manually. Due to the time and resource constraints, including the limited access to NVivo software, the researcher decided to manually code the transcripts. Although it was time-consuming, but it still allowed the researcher to be familiar with the data.

Furthermore, after the coding process, about twelve initial themes were identified, including “no Emojis in professional and serious context” and “no Emojis lead to misinterpretation as mad”. Those twelve initial themes were then reviewed and cross-checked with the research questions and objectives of this study. Some themes were then combined or discarded to make sure it focused on the most relevant insights.

Ultimately, six major themes were developed and are discussed in the following section, starting with :

4.1 Theme 1: Perceived Role of Emojis in Online Communication

When asked about the role of Emojis in online communication, participants have expressed several roles of Emojis in online communication. Most of the reasons include further emphasizing the emotions, expressing emotions, avoiding misunderstanding, misinterpretation of tone, and so on.

For instance, a participant, Rayyan, expressed that:

I do believe they are important because for me the role of emojis in online communication is to emphasize further the emotions that you are feeling through texts because at times you can easily misinterpret a message...

Other than that, Emojis were also perceived to be able to soften the text and give the text more tone. For instance, Ishak noted that:

...adding emojis at the end would make the text more inviting and casual

Similarly, Aniq also noted that emojis are important:

...so people would not read in the wrong tone. So using this laughing emoji can make people read it in a straight but hilarious way.

Furthermore, participants also noted Emojis as an important tool in online communication to avoid misunderstanding and misinterpretation. One participant, Rayyan expressed that online communication through texting can get easily misinterpreted which further shows the importance of Emojis in online communication.

Similarly, another participant, Ammara also noted:

Emojis are important to express emotions. Also, important to avoid misunderstanding since we cannot see their faces.

Not only that, she also added that without Emojis in her text, people would think she is mad. So, she had to add laughing Emojis to know that she is not serious.

Similarly, Rayyan, also expressed that he was misinterpreted a lot of times when he did not use any Emojis. He added that:

I think that time I was giving an advice but it was misinterpreted and misunderstood as something of an attack just because it does not have any emoji

This further highlights the various roles of emojis in online communication that was perceived by the participants.

4.2 Theme 2: Perceived Importance of Emojis in Online Communication and Self

On Emojis' importance, it is reported that most of the participants believe that Emojis are important in online communication. Despite that, it still varies between their perceived importance for the general (online communication) and themselves. When asked to rate from a scale of 1-10 (with 10, being most important and 1 being not important at all) to see if Emojis are important for the general and themselves, most participants gave a rate of 6 and above. Interestingly, one participant showed a difference in his ratings of the importance of Emojis in general versus for himself. Ayden gave a score of 9 for Emojis' importance in general, but only a 3 when asked about Emojis' importance to him personally. This contrast may be due to Ayden acknowledging that:

Although I rarely use emojis to everyone but I still believe that Emojis are important...

```

1      Me      : How important do you think emoji is to online
2
3      Daisy   : Emoji serve as an extension to how we feel.
4
5      Without emoji, I think life would be fine
6
7      still.
8
9      Me      : On a scale of 1-10, can you rate how
10     important
11
12     emojis is to you and in general?
13
14     Daisy   : For general 4, for me also 4.

```

Figure 1. Excerpts extracted from Daisy's transcript

Contrastingly, one participant, Daisy, noted that while she agrees that the perceived role of emoji is to serve as an extension to how we feel, but she also believes that life would still be okay without Emojis as seen in lines 4 and 5 (as shown in Figure 1). Daisy's rating for the importance of Emojis is also a 4, which may show that she sees it as not important. This may have stemmed from her frequent preference for gifs and stickers compared to Emojis, although she does still use Emojis.

Moreover, despite majority of the participants agreeing that Emojis in online communication is important, notably there are also preference for usage of stickers and gifs. When participants were asked to rank whether sticker, Emojis, words and gifs could express their emotions better, most of them ranked stickers as the first. While Emojis, were mostly placed second. As one participant, Aniq noted that:

I would usually use stickers more because I would associate stickers with images. Although I also still use emojis.

4.3 Theme 3: Emotions and Emoji Use

Most participants noted that their emotions would affect the number of Emojis they use. One participant, Daisy, noted that:

When I am sad, I tend to use a lot of emojis. But when I am happy, only normal.

Similarly, Rayyan also noted that when he is happy or sincere, he uses a lot of emojis. Contrastingly, when he is mad or serious, he uses little to no Emojis at all. This is because he also believed that:

Emojis only express positive emotions only for me...

Despite that, emotions may also not necessarily influence emoji use. Previously, participants have noted that there is a correlation between their mood of being happy and sad to their number of Emojis. However, several participants also attempted to mask their feelings behind the Emojis. In scenario 1, participants have been reported to use Emojis that do not reflect how they really felt. Similarly, Rayyan also noted that when he is happy or sincere, he uses a lot of emojis. Contrastingly, when he is mad or serious, he uses little to no Emojis at all. This is because he also believed that:

Emojis only express positive emotions only for me...

```
1   Me      : What emotions did you feel during the
2
3   Ammara  : I felt a little bit sad but also happy for
4
5           her but still thinking like when would it be
6
7           turn
8   Me      : Did you also feel the need to hide your
9           true feelings?
10
11  Ammara  : Yes, because I feel like if it do not hide, I
12
13           will ruin her moment.
```

Figure 2. Excerpts extracted from Ammara's transcript

In lines 3, 4, 8, and 9 (as shown in Figure 2), Ammara expressed that while she felt quite sad, she still feels the need to hide her feelings because she is scared that showing her sadness, even a little, might ruin her friend's happy moment. Similarly, Irdy also feels the need to hide her real emotions in Scenario 1. This is evident where her responses include these Emojis: 🙄😭😭😭. When asked, she expressed that she felt happy for her friend. However, when also asked further:

1 Me : What emotions did you feel during the
 2 scenario?
 3 Irdy : I felt hurt but also happy
 4 Me : Did you also feel the need to hide or downplay
 5 your true feelings?
 6 Irdy : Yes, because later she would feel sad if I show
 7 I am sad. So I have to pretend that I am
 8 happy and do not show that I am upset.

Figure 3. Excerpts extracted from Irdy's transcript

Irdy also expressed in lines 6, 7, and 8 that she felt the need to hide her sadness from her friend. Hence, while emotions may influence Emoji usage, some individuals may also mask their emotions when choosing an emoji in text.

Moreover, the task data from Scenario 4 of the situational prompts also revealed that participants masked their emotions. When asked whether they, as an influencer in the scenario, would reply to hate comments, the majority decided not to reply. Rayyan explained:

I would not reply because I am already famous. So one comment would not change anything.

Furthermore, when asked what their response would be if they were to reply, most participants used Emojis that did not reflect their actual emotions. Although they reported not feeling angry, some noted that they feel irritated. Despite that, participants still use positive Emojis when replying. Among the Emojis used in their response were: 😊, 😄, ❤️, 😊, and 🤗.

4.4 Theme 4: Emoji Use According to Relationship Closeness

Participants share their experience with using Emojis. It is reported that the majority of participants have expressed that the relationship between individuals with whom they are texting would affect their choice and use of Emojis. One participant, Rayyan, stated:

With family and close friends, I use more emojis but with people like lecturers and coworkers where we need to be professional, I tend to use perhaps a little bit of emojis.

Similarly, another participant, Bazilah, also noted that she used different Emojis with different individuals. She stated that:

...depending on how close you are with the person and the relationship you have because sometimes not close to you, they will interpret the emoji differently.

Alisa also expressed that her friends know her better at the emotional level compared to her family members, so she tends to use Emojis with her friends compared to her family members.

On the other hand, several participants also stated that their choices of Emojis also differ. For instance, one participant, Ishak, revealed that:

I use emojis differently. With close friends, I tend to use more daring-ish emojis...

Interestingly, Irdy noted that although it is her close friend, she did not use any Emojis in Scenario 5 as she: *...wanted to wait for her reply because it is a serious thing.*

In other words, this showed how although she is close with the individual, it would still be determined based on the emotional context of the setting before determining which Emojis to use.

Similarly, another participant, Rayyan, also did not use emojis in Scenario 3. Although he is his close friend, he also expressed that:

The situation felt serious so I refrain from using any emojis or sticker.

On the other hand, one participant, Ayden, does not use emojis in the scenario since he rarely uses Emojis.

4.5 Theme 5: Emoji Use According to Context

4.5.1 Professional or serious context

Most participants noted that they do not use Emojis in professional or serious situations. Alisa expressed that she refrains from using Emojis in a professional context because she thinks that individuals should not show emotional expression:

I did not use an emoji for this scenario is because lecturer is like a leader. Someone that is professional and has authority so I would not use emoji because I believe emojis mean you are showing your emotions. So, professionalism should not show your emotions to your lecturer so that they will not misinterpret.

Moreover, several participants also noted that using Emojis can make them look like they are not being taken seriously. This theme especially emerged during the situational prompts, specifically scenario 7 (refer Appendix A). This is where nine out of ten participants did not use Emojis for the situation since it is considered a formal and serious situation by the participants.

For instance, Daisy noted that for the situation, she did not use Emojis:

I do not want to use any emojis in this scenario because if I used emojis, I think that he will not be scared of me. He would then not take me seriously...

Similarly, Ammara also expressed that:

Emojis itself is making it less serious. Because if it is serious, there should not be any emoji.

Additionally, Ammara continued that she would avoid using Emojis in formal situations.

On the other hand, while the majority did not use Emojis in scenario 2, two of the participants have noted using Emojis in scene 2 (professional context). Interestingly, their choice of using Emojis is to mask their emotions. To elaborate, both participants use ‘😬’ and ‘🙄’ respectively. When asked about their specific choice of Emojis. Rayyan, who used ‘😬’ noted that:

That emoji meant I was shocked. I also regulated my emotions before replying and I used that emoji to hide the fact that I am actually doing it. I also used that emoji to mask my panic.

On the other hand, Ammara, who used ‘🙄’ noted that she used that because she felt worried and nervous. So, she used the emoji to mask her true emotions. Hence, this may show that the role of Emojis is not only to express emotions but also to mask emotions.

4.5.2 Casual Context

While the majority agreed that Emojis should not be used in professional settings, they also believed that Emojis should only be used in casual settings or when joking. One participant expressed:

...the context is heavy and serious so not appropriate to have emoji. Emoji should be when casual

Similarly, Ammara and Ayden, respectively, also noted that:

I would usually use emojis during casual context – Ammara

I think personally emojis is only for joking – Ayden

This shows how the majority of the participants agree that Emojis are not to be taken seriously and are only used in casual settings.

Similarly, the task data from the situational prompts revealed that participants used Emojis in scenarios where they were texting with their friends. For instance, in scenario 1, these are the certain Emojis that were used: '💖', '😂', '👉', '👈', '👤', '👤'. These Emojis used by participants in this scenario also represent that they are happy for their friend.

However, interestingly, in Scenario 5, only half of the participants used Emojis with their friend, which included '😂', '👉', '👈', '😂', '👉', '👈', '😂'. These differences may have stemmed from the situation where although it is casual with a friend, but since the friend is sad or down, some of them refrain from using Emojis. For instance, Daisy expressed that:

At times like this (in sad situations), I try to be direct and want to try to be direct. I do not want them to waste their time to think like what kind of feelings I express. I would first prioritise their feelings so I want the context to be focused on them.

Hence, this shows how, although in a casual setting with friends, due to the situation, she had to refrain from using Emojis. Another interesting insight came from one participant, Ishak. In scenario 7, nine out of 10 participants reported that they would not use Emojis because they perceived the situation as serious. However, Ishak used an Emoji in his response since he viewed the scenario as casual. This contrast implies that, even when a situation is regarded as formal and serious by others, individuals may still interpret it differently. Hence, this may suggest that a situation, whether it is serious or casual, can be subjective according to individuals.

4.6 Theme 6: Demographic Influences on Emoji Use

4.6.1 Age

Furthermore, age may also influence how individuals use and choose their Emojis. The majority of the participants reported that they rarely use Emojis to their parents or those older, as they are scared of being misinterpreted. One participant, Ammara, expressed that she uses Emojis to others but not to her parents. This is because:

...my parents would usually take the literal meaning.

Similarly, Sofea noted that she would avoid using the crying Emoji '😭' to represent laughter when texting older generations or her parents. Sofea explained that:

...laughing one, for older people no because I have been asked 'why are you crying', I have been there before.

When asked, most of the participants also noted the double meanings of the crying emoji as immense happiness and also immense sadness.

Ishak has also pointed out that he does not use Emojis with older people because he rarely sees them using them other than basic smile Emojis. He also acknowledged the presence of generational differences and pointed out that using Emojis with older people might lead to misinterpretation.

Hence, this also shows that if they were to use Emojis, they tend to use Emojis that are simple and do not have double meaning, like the ‘👉’ emoji. A participant also noted that his usage of Emojis for older differs. This is where he:

...use a normal heart or smiley face emoji for older people. But with younger people, I can use various emojis.

Ayden noted that he would not use Emojis for someone older than him since he finds Emojis a joke and does not look serious. He also added that:

I find it disrespectful if I use the emojis on old people

4.6.2 Gender

From the findings, a recurring pattern has also been found regarding the usage of Emojis in terms of gender. When the researcher asked whether there are any differences regarding the usage of Emojis between different genders, the majority of the participants agreed that there are differences. Particularly, in their choice of Emojis. For instance, Ammara noted that:

Table 2. Ammara’s choice of emojis when texting different genders

Gender	Emoji choice
Female	😘 🍷 ❤️ 🍷 😘 😘
Male (excluding her partner)	😂 🍷 😘
Her partner (Male)	💫 ❤️

As shown in Table 2, for males, she tends to use Emojis that are more gender neutral. Contrastingly, her emoji choice when communicating with the same gender would involve Emojis that are more affectionate. Interestingly, there is an exception for her partner, where her partner would also receive Emojis that she gave to her female friends.

Similarly, for Bazilah, she also has different Emojis she uses for her female friends, male friends, and her partner. She noted that:

I would give boundaries. Usually, if with girls, I would always give the cute and love emojis and also my partner. But when it comes to my friends that are boys like my classmates, I would refrain myself from using sweet or heart emojis. I would usually use basic smiley face or thumbs up emojis with them.

Rayyan also noted that when texting with girls, he also just came to a realisation that he also refrains from using certain Emojis. He noted that:

I just have a thought that usually with girls, I just realise that certain emojis cannot be used. Like especially the heart emojis since it can come off wrongly or the receiver may misinterpret it.

Contrastingly, two participants, particularly Aniq and Ishak, noted that they do not see any differences in their emoji usage when messaging different genders.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to explore how emotions may lead to approaches in using Emojis in online communication among Bruneian Gen Z. It also sought to understand the significance behind the choice of Emojis, and the meanings participants assign to them. Furthermore, through a hermeneutic lens, the analysis of participants’ responses has revealed six major key themes that could each contribute to addressing this study’s research questions and aim to fill the research gaps. This chapter will present further interpretation of those findings, organised thematically.

5.1 Theme 1: Perceived Role of Emojis in Online Communication

Findings have found participants' various perceived roles of Emojis in online communication. This includes their role in emphasizing and expressing emotions, softening the tone, and helping to determine the tone of the text. This was then perceived to help avoid any misunderstandings or misinterpretations of the text, considering that emotions are absent in online communication, unlike in face-to-face interactions (Zych et al., 2017). These findings also support the earlier literature review that indicated Emojis as an important tool to bridge the emotional gap between physical and digital space and provide the missing emotions (Alshenqeeti, 2016; Sadia, 2018).

Furthermore, from the findings, one of the perceived roles of Emojis is to emphasize and express the emotions that online communication lacks. This aligns with the literature review by Kelly (2015) and Chiedu's (2024) findings on high school and college students who most used Emojis to show their intended emotions to the receiver. Another perceived role is to soften or determine the tone of the text. It is also consistent with Shigetaka's original purpose for developing Emojis, which was to add tone (Kabir & Marlow, 2019) and clarify the intent of the text (Udoudom et al., 2024). To further support, Boutet et al. (2021) found that a negative face emoji would inform the receiver that the tone of the text is also negative (as cited in Hand et al., 2022). So, these highlights that individuals perceive Emojis as a tool to express emotions and clarify the tone of the text.

Moreover, findings also reported the use of Emojis so the receiver would interpret the message correctly. This is in line with existing literature that noted Emojis as an important tool to support the emotions that are intended through text (Kelly, 2015; Williams, 2024, as cited in Chiedu, 2024). Overall, this shows that individuals view emojis as important, not only as a tool in online communication, but also to express emotions and soften or reflect the intended tone of the text. It would then help to avoid misunderstanding and misinterpretation (Boutet et al., 2021; Tang & Hew, 2019). Nonetheless, it also needs to be acknowledged that Emojis' functions are not limited to these, as they can also serve other purposes.

However, while Emojis can express emotions and clarify tone, they can also simultaneously cause confusion, especially when individuals assign different meanings to different Emojis. From the findings, participants were also found to have various interpretations for respective Emojis, such as the crying emoji (😭). This is where most participants noted that Emoji has two meanings, namely, immense happiness and sadness. Similarly, this echoes findings from Chiedu (2024), Dharma et al. (2023), and Udoudom et al. (2024)'s studies that have also found variations in their interpretation of certain Emojis. This relates to earlier literature that indicates Emojis have two levels of interpretation (Abdalrahman et al., 2022). Not only that, but there are also several other reasons for different interpretations, including cultural background, level of intimacy, and formality (Lu et al., 2016; Parkwell, 2019; Udoudom et al., 2024). Therefore, this shows that while Emojis can help to clarify expressions and tone in online communication, simultaneously, they can also lead to misinterpretation or misunderstanding, especially when the meanings assigned to Emojis are not fixed and vary.

Overall, this theme has addressed the study's Research Question 1 (RQ1) and Research Question 3 (RQ3). This is where it has shown participants perceiving Emojis' function to express emotions, soften tone, and prevent misunderstanding in online communication.

5.2 Theme 2: Perceived Importance of Emojis in Online Communication and Self

For this theme, findings have reported that most of the participants perceive Emojis as important in online communication. This perceived importance might be due to their active use of Emojis in their everyday life. From the findings of this study, nine out of ten participants frequently use Emojis. While some of them may have preferred other instances of emotional expression, such as stickers, they still use Emojis daily. This preference for stickers may be due to stickers are perceived to offer more expressive images (Yu et al., 2023). Nevertheless, participants' frequent use of Emojis may reflect how important Emojis are for them and further solidify Emojis' importance in online communication.

However, it is important to note that while one participant expressed his non-frequent usage of Emojis, this stemmed from personal preferences rather than seeing Emojis as inessential. This is evident as the participant rated the importance of emojis in online communication as 9 out of 10. This may imply that even those who rarely use Emojis do still recognise their importance. This supports the idea that Emojis' importance does not really correlate to their personal use but may show their understanding or awareness of the function of Emojis in online communication (Cavalheiro et al., 2023; Kara-Yakoubian, 2023). Hence, these further highlight that participants' responses reveal their personal interpretation and subjective views towards Emojis.

Other than that, their frequent importance and usage may also reflect the generational habits of Gen Z. With most of the participants being in high school and universities, this also echoes earlier literature Kelly et al. (2015) and Chiedu (2024), who found that younger individuals tend to use Emojis and often assumed to be easily persuaded by visual communication (Matusin, Padilla-Valdez & Mumin, 2025). This stands in contrast with Baby Boomers, who are found to rarely use Emojis (Azad et al., 2023). While Baby Boomers may still see value in Emojis, they tend to prefer traditional and written communication over visual ones like Emojis (Azad et al., 2023). These differences might be due to Baby Boomers not growing up alongside the rise of technology and social media, compared to millennials and Gen Z (Azad et al., 2023). Hence, although the perceived importance of Emojis by Baby Boomers is still unclear, their lack of Emoji usage compared to Gen Z can already reflect the differences in generational habits.

On another note, this theme helps to address RQ 1, which aims to explore how Emojis are used as a form of communication. Findings suggest that Emojis are frequently used and seen as valuable in online communication. Not only that, it also, to a certain extent, helps to answer RQ3, which aims to explore the extent to which Gen Z uses Emojis to express their emotions in which findings revealed that generational habits of Gen Z Emoji usage. Overall, findings reveal that the perceived importance does not necessarily equate to their frequent usage but may suggest a reflection of their attitude towards Emojis in online communication.

5.3 Theme 3: Emotions and Emojis Use

Findings have shown that emotions do influence participants' use of Emojis in online communication, particularly on how their emotions can affect the number of Emojis they use. For instance, participants were reported to use more Emojis when happy and fewer or no Emojis when sad. This aligns with findings by Liu (2023), who found that individuals tend to use fewer Emojis when they want to show their negative emotions and more Emojis when expressing positive emotions. Hence, this suggests that emotions do lead to approaches to Emoji use in online communication.

Other than that, participants also reflect their emotions they are feeling now through the Emojis they choose. For instance, participants choose '😄' and '😊' when they feel happy or '😞' and '😓' when they feel sad. This supports the previous interpretation and existing literature regarding the role of Emojis to express or emphasize their emotions in online communication, especially when non-verbal cues are absent (Alshenqeeti, 2016; Sadia, 2018; Williams, 2024, as cited in Chiedu, 2024).

However, not all Emoji choices reflected the participants' true emotions. Some participants have shared experiences that they masked their true emotions when choosing Emojis. For instance, in this study's situational prompts, several participants were found to use positive Emojis even though they felt sad and disappointed at that time. Findings have also found that participants did this intentionally in order not to ruin the receiver's happy moment. These findings are in line with previous studies by Himelstein (2016) and Liu (2023), who found that Emojis are also regularly used to mask individuals' true feelings. This is also consistent with Liu (2023) and Stahl (2023), who found that positive Emojis are often used to mask the sender's negative or sad emotions. Hence, this highlights an important insight into Emojis' contrasting functions of not only as a tool to express but also mask emotions in online communication.

In relation to Emotional Intelligence (EI) and EI model, this behaviour can then be interpreted through Goleman's EI model, which also guided this study. To revisit, Goleman's EI model has four different aspects, namely self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management (as cited in Tiwari, 2023). The participants' actions of intentionally masking their true emotions when selecting Emojis may reflect certain aspects of self-management and self-awareness. To define, self-management is when individuals regulate their response and decide whether to hold back or express their true intentions (Tiwari, 2023). On the other hand, self-awareness is when individuals realise their own emotions (Tiwari, 2023). So, this demonstrated participants' ability to regulate their emotions and also display the presence of EI. This is also supported by Liu (2023), who found that individuals would usually use polite and happy Emojis during negative situations to manage their emotions.

Additionally, this behaviour may also suggest the presence of self-regulation in digital space. Bylieva (2021) has noted that self-regulation is important to produce a healthy and positive environment. This was also reflected in the findings, particularly in participants' responses in Scenario 4 of the situational prompts, where most chose not to reply to hate comments on social media. Even if they did, participants would respond with positive Emojis (eg., 😊, 😄, 😊👏, ❤️). These choices have shown that individuals consciously regulate their responses and maintain their composure. Moreover, this can also relate to an element of EI, which is relationship management. This is because individuals were able to communicate respectfully to avoid conflict in online interactions (Davaei et al., 2022; Tiwari, 2023). Hence, this further illustrates the notion that emotions and EI also influence Emoji use.

Overall, while emotions do influence Emoji use among the participants, the findings also suggest that the Emojis participants choose may not always reflect their true emotional state. Instead, they may also reflect the individuals' EI and ability to self-regulate in a digital context. This theme also directly addresses Research Question 2 (RQ 2), which aims to investigate how emotions may influence Emoji usage among Gen Z in Brunei.

5.4 Theme 4: Emoji Use According to Relationship Closeness

This theme reveals that participants' use of Emojis is influenced by the closeness of their relationship with the one they are communicating. Many of the participants reported using Emojis mostly with their close friends and family, compared to strangers. This finding echoes Sadia's (2018) study, where the level of intimacy between individuals would affect their Emoji use. One participant has also noted that her friends would know her emotional level best. This explains her reason for using Emojis to her friends rather than her family. In other words, her friends, whom she believed could understand her more, might understand her intentions better when sending those Emojis. This is also consistent with Marko (2022), who noted that individuals would adapt their Emoji use depending on their relationship with the receiver. These actions may have stemmed from a fear of being misinterpreted. This is because when they text strangers or those not close with them, participants feel that they might not have the same interpretation of the Emojis (Abdallahman, 2022; Kelly & Watts, 2015). Hence, this suggests that there is a contextual factor that could also lead to approaches in using Emojis aside from emotions.

Interestingly, at the same time, in scenario 5 of the situational prompt, several participants reported that they would not use Emojis even if it is with their close friend. This may also suggest that their choices are not only influenced by the level of closeness but may also be due to the emotional context. In this case, scenario 5 is a sad context (as seen in Appendix A). So, the sadness during the situation might have overshadowed the level of closeness as participants might shift their focus on the emotions during that time. This is also supported by Liu (2023) and Rodrigues et al.'s (2017) studies, which have found that while individuals use Emojis freely with people close to them, they tend to reduce or hold back Emojis, especially when in a serious or negative emotional context, such as sadness. Therefore, this finding further emphasises that factors leading to Emoji use are not limited to emotions but can also be due to contextual factors, including the level of closeness and emotional context of the situation.

On another note, this theme, to a certain extent, answers RQ 2 as it provides valuable insights that it is not limited to only emotions that could lead to approaches in Emojis usage, but also the level of closeness and emotional context. Hence, suggesting that an individual's choice of Emojis is not only what they feel, but can also be due to how they see the relationship, and the seriousness or emotional tone of the situation. This theme also contrasts with previous themes, where Emojis are often reflected to mainly show positive emotions. In this case, however, Emoji use is restrained or excluded due to the seriousness of the context, despite a close relationship.

5.5 Theme 5: Emoji Use According to Context

5.5.1 Professional or serious context

This theme further explores contextual factors, particularly how professionalism and seriousness or casualness of the setting can lead to different approaches in Emoji use in online communication. Findings revealed that most participants refrain from using Emojis, especially in professional or serious situations, such as when communicating with teachers. In Scenario 2 of situational prompts, which involved a lecturer and student interaction, most of the participants chose not to use any Emojis. Most of them explained that including Emojis in their response could make their response seem less serious. This aligns with research by Koch et al. (2023), who found that using or even overusing Emojis can make individuals appear as unserious. While the scenario was guided to reflect their self-awareness (as seen in Appendix A), however their responses demonstrate the presence of self-management. This is because participants manage to withhold and regulate themselves by using Emojis to make themselves appear more serious (self-management) (Tiwari, 2023). Therefore, this suggests that context can also influence Emojis use and also reflects participants' awareness and ability to regulate their emotions.

Interestingly, in scenario 7 of the situational prompts, although the conversation was between classmates, the majority still perceived it as a serious situation. This is due to the context where one group member is delaying their part of the assignment. So, most refrain from using Emojis as participants believed that using Emojis can lead to them not being taken seriously. Peek (2024) also further supports this by confirming that using Emojis in a serious context can make the individual appear less competent. Hence, participants' decision to omit Emojis may further indicate context as one of the factors influencing Emoji usage.

Additionally, findings also revealed that two participants still used Emojis in Scenario 2 despite them recognising that the context was serious. However, they used Emojis not to express their emotions but to mask their negative feelings, such as panic, nervousness, and worry. This suggests that while the seriousness of a situation may influence emoji use, emotions still play a role. Specifically, through the self-regulation of their emotions (Tiwari, 2023), which led to their usage of Emojis. This may highlight the complexity of Emojis as it can be seen to have various functions, including expressing and masking emotions (Liu, 2023; Sadia, 2018). Then, this complexity of Emojis can further lead to misinterpretation (Alshenqeeti, 2016; Amalina & Azam, 2020; Miller, 2018). This is especially relevant when the receiver is unaware of the sender's emotional state and context that they may share mutually. Therefore, this underlines the importance of individuals to be aware of their audience when selecting Emojis.

5.5.2 Casual context

At the same time, while most participants avoided using Emojis in professional or serious settings, many also expressed that Emojis are more appropriate for informal and casual interactions. Additionally, participants view Emojis as playful and not serious, which they find more suitable to use with friends and family. This is also consistent with Ismail (2020) and Dharma et al. (2023), who found that individuals rarely used Emojis in formal and more in casual online interactions. Therefore, this further emphasises how context can influence individuals' usage and choices of Emojis.

Interestingly, although Scenario 7 was widely interpreted by participants as a serious situation, one participant considered it a casual setting. This may hint that individuals may subjectively interpret the

context of a conversation differently. In turn, leading to different approaches to Emojis use. Overall, the difference in participants' perceptions and Emoji use between professional and casual interactions further highlights the important role of context in influencing how Emojis are used. This theme also helps to address RQ2 and RQ3.

5.6 Theme 6: Demographic Influences on Emoji Use

This final theme will discuss how demographics such as age and gender may influence individuals' Emoji use.

Age

Findings also reported that age plays a role in participants' usage of Emojis. This is where most of them would tend to use Emojis with those of the same age as them and avoid using Emojis with older generations, including their parents. If they were to use Emojis with older individuals, they would use simpler or basic Emojis (e.g., 😊, ❤️). This may be due to older individuals tend to take the literal meaning of Emojis (Herring & Dainas, 2020) and, in turn, misinterpret those Emojis. For example, the '😂' was frequently cited as a potential source of confusion since it has various meanings. Participants often use it to represent immense laughter, and they note that older individuals may read it as literally crying. This is also consistent in Kelly and Watts (2015), who noted that while a crying laughing Emoji represents laughter, it is also used to represent sarcasm by younger individuals (as cited in Zahra & Ahmed, 2025). This may reflect the broader finding that younger individuals tend to interpret Emojis based on context or even the individual, while older generations may rely on the literal meaning of the Emoji. Hence, this can also suggest generational differences in Emoji use in online communication.

Gender

Other than age, findings also revealed that gender plays a role in influencing participants' Emoji use in online communication. Several participants noted clear differences in their Emoji choices depending on the gender of the person they were communicating with. For instance, Ammara reported using sweet Emojis (e.g., 😊, 🍷, ❤️, 😊) for her female friends but used more neutral Emojis with her male friends (e.g., 😊, 🤔). These decisions suggest that participants are conscious about their Emoji choices in gendered communication. This behaviour may have stemmed from Brunei's social and religious norms that emphasize boundaries between female and male interactions (Commisceo Global Consulting Ltd., 2022). This may also imply that individuals are aware of what is considered appropriate or inappropriate in the Bruneian context, even in digital space. Hence, aside from emotions, gender can also influence individuals' Emoji use in online communication.

Moreover, this may also reflect the wider gender communication. Previous studies have indicated that females are more likely to use expressive and affectionate Emojis (eg, ❤️, 😊, 😊), whereas males use more neutral Emojis (e.g., 🤔, 😊) (Helvira, 2024; Liu, 2024). This may explain why most female participants in this study tended to differentiate their Emojis according to gender, especially to prevent misinterpretation (Butterworth et al., 2019). Contrastingly, two male participants reported no differences in Emoji choice among genders, potentially due to males' common preference for neutral Emojis (Liu, 2024). Therefore, this further shows that gender can also influence how individuals choose and use Emojis in online communication.

Relation to Emotional Intelligence (EI) and EI Model

The participants' actions of adjusting their Emoji use according to age may have demonstrated their social awareness, which is one of the elements of Goleman's (2001) EI model (as cited in Tiwari, 2023). Social awareness is when individuals have the ability to perceive and understand others' emotional states and situations (Tiwari, 2023). Since participants deliberately chose to avoid vague Emojis and instead use simpler or basic ones when interacting with individuals, this may have also shown their awareness of the potential for misinterpretation.

Furthermore, one participant also mentioned that using Emojis with older people is disrespectful. This may reflect EI and also potential desire to maintain respectful communication, considering the Bruneian context where collectivistic and MIB values emphasize respect for elders (Dahlan, 2022; Idris, 2021). Additionally, as Islam is the official religion and all the participants were Muslim, the consideration may also align with Islamic teaching of respecting parents and elders (Amri et al., 2024; Sahari & Yahaiya, 2018). This is also relevant as Islam influences Bruneians' lives (Sahari & Yahaiya, 2018). Hence, this suggests that participants' approaches to Emoji usage are not only emotional but can also potentially be due to their awareness of their social surroundings, cultural expectations, and religious values.

Like age, participants' deliberate choice of Emojis in terms of gender may also indicate social awareness. This is because participants were aware of how the other gender might interpret their Emoji choice. Consequently, they adjust their Emoji use to avoid misunderstanding. This can then also relate to another aspect of EI, namely self-management, as participants were also able to manage their emotions while thinking about how others may respond or feel (Tiwari, 2023). Therefore, these further highlights that participants' use of Emojis is not only guided by emotions but also by their awareness of their interaction between genders.

Cultural Background

Although cultural background is not a direct emerging theme from the findings, previous literature has identified it as one of the many factors influencing Emoji use in online communication (Chen et al., 2024; Parkwell, 2019; Togans et al., 2021). For this study, participants shared similar cultural backgrounds. This means that a common cultural background may have led to similar understanding and interpretations regarding Emojis (Amalina & Azam, 2020; Guntuku et al., 2019). Hence, the absence of cultural diversity in this study may have been the reason why cultural background did not emerge as one of the factors. Future studies should include more culturally diverse participants to explore whether cultural background influences Emoji use.

Overall, this theme, including age and gender, indirectly answers RQ 2. This theme further adds to the understanding that participants' approaches in using Emojis are not limited to emotions only, but can also be due to various factors, including age and gender.

5. Conclusion

This study explored individuals' Emoji use in online communication, including their interpretations and meanings they assign to Emojis. The findings identified six major themes: 1) Perceived role of Emojis in online communication, 2) Perceived importance of Emojis in online communication, 3) Emotions and Emoji use, 4) Emoji use according to relationship closeness, 5) Emoji use according to context, and 6) Demographic influences on Emoji use.

Drawing on a hermeneutics lens to these themes, this study revealed that Emojis are perceived to serve multiple functions in online communication. They serve not only to express emotions or convey tone but also to mask emotions. This duality of Emojis' functions further highlights the complexity of Emojis. Furthermore, while emotions were shown to influence approaches to using Emojis, there were also other factors were also reported. This includes the level of relationship closeness, context, age, and gender.

Moreover, three elements of Goleman's (2001) Emotional Intelligence (EI) model frequently emerged in the findings are self-awareness, self-management, and social awareness. This may suggest that Gen Z in this study demonstrated behaviours that reflect these elements of EI. While relationship management appeared less frequent, this does not mean that it is absent. Instead, it may indicate that the element, relationship management is less evident in the scenario given to participants. Therefore, this research contributed to the growing body of literature on Emoji and the EI model as it provides interpretive insight into Bruneian Gen Z's online interactions. Future studies can consider delving into the element of

relationship management and potentially use more accurate tests or instruments to assess these elements of EI.

Despite that, this study also has its limitations. The sample was limited to ten participants, which may not fully reflect the broader Gen Z population in Brunei. Participants also came from a limited range of age groups within the Gen Z demographic of this study (1997-2010).

To address these limitations, future research could include a larger and more culturally diverse sample. Future studies can also consider a broader age distribution within the Gen Z population. This may potentially gain an understanding of how cultural background and age differences within the Gen Z population may influence approaches to using Emojis. Overall, these insights could act as a foundation for future studies regarding the relations between emotions, EI, and Emoji use.

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The Authors:

Dk Mirza Adriana Fakhrani Binti Pg Jopri (<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-0647-1211>) . Student of Master of Science in Communication, Teaching and Learning, Universiti Teknologi Brunei (UTB). Her research

interests include digital technology and culture, emotional expression and emotional intelligence in digital spaces, interpersonal communication and also generational technology practices. Email: mirza.7822@gmail.com

Dk Dr Syahirah Amanina Pg Hj Suhaili (<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4997-3519>), Lecturer at the Centre of Communication, Teaching & Learning at Universiti Teknologi Brunei (UTB). Her research interests include Classroom Interaction and Discourse, Culture, Social Identity, and Communication, Education and Communication. Email: syahirah.suhaili@utb.edu.bn