

Emoticons and Digital Emotions: Effects on Trust, Social Interaction, Emotional Expression, and Emotional Clarity Among Generation Z Students

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ABSTRACT

Emoticons have become central to digital communication among Generation Z (Gen Z) university students, serving as visual cues that convey emotional tone and relational intent in text-based interaction. This study examines the effects of emoticon usage on online trust, social interaction, and relationship quality, perceived social support, emotional expression, and emotional clarity among Malaysian Generation Z students. A quantitative design was employed, with survey data collected from 155 respondents and analyzed using regression analysis. The results indicate that emoticon usage has significant positive effects on online trust ($\beta = 0.259$, $p < 0.001$), social interaction and relationship quality ($\beta = 0.268$, $p < 0.001$), perceived social support ($\beta = 0.218$, $p < 0.001$), emotional expression ($\beta = 0.249$, $p < 0.001$), and emotional clarity ($\beta = 0.616$, $p < 0.001$). In addition, emotional clarity is positively associated with online trust ($\beta = 0.508$, $p < 0.001$), social interaction and relationship quality ($\beta = 0.595$, $p < 0.001$), perceived social support ($\beta = 0.631$, $p < 0.001$), and emotional expression ($\beta = 0.664$, $p < 0.001$). These findings suggest that emoticons and emotional clarity contribute to emotionally coherent and relationally meaningful digital communication. The study provides practical insights for fostering emotionally responsive interaction in educational and social digital contexts among Gen Z users.

Keywords: Digital Communication; Emotional Clarity; Emoticon Usage; Online Trust; Social Interaction

INTRODUCTION

In today's digitally connected world, communication among Generation Z (Gen Z) university students has undergone a profound transformation. Raised in an environment saturated with digital technologies, Gen Z students are fluent in the language of social media, mobile applications, and online platforms (Kee et al., 2023a). Text-based communication now dominates academic, social, and professional exchanges, where emoticons, visual symbols representing emotions, have emerged as essential tools for enhancing communication effectiveness. In these contexts, emoticons are not merely decorative add-ons but integral elements that convey tone, express emotion, and foster clarity in the absence of vocal inflections or facial expressions. Unlike traditional face-to-face interaction, digital communication often lacks the non-verbal cues critical for interpreting meaning and intent (Yiming & Manansala, 2024). Emoticons, along with emojis, hashtags, and abbreviations, serve as digital surrogates for these non-verbal elements, enriching the emotional texture of messages and fostering deeper interpersonal engagement (Boutet et al., 2021; Fischer & Herbert, 2021). As symbolic and visual cues, emoticons shape perceptions of emotional intensity, trustworthiness, and relationship quality, especially among young users who routinely navigate these digital landscapes (Kee et al., 2023b; Was & Hamrick, 2021).

For Gen Z, emoticons are powerful tools for managing emotions, establishing trust, and enhancing social bonds. Whether softening criticism with a smiley face or reinforcing empathy with a heart symbol, these digital icons subtly yet powerfully influence how messages are interpreted and responded to. Prior research suggests that positive emoticons can improve trust in online interactions, while negative emoticons may have limited or context-dependent effects, depending on users' inherent trust disposition (Aseeri & Interrante, 2021). This reveals the complex interplay between emoticon usage and individual traits in affecting digital relationship dynamics. Understanding how emoticons influence emotional clarity, the ability to express and interpret emotions accurately, is particularly relevant in today's digital communication climate. Emotional clarity is critical not only for managing digital relationships but also for psychological well-being, as shown in related work on cyberbullying and emotional distress among youth (Anwar et al., 2020; Kee et al., 2024a). When effectively used, emoticons help reduce ambiguity, strengthen perceptions of social support, and foster more emotionally intelligent digital communication environments (Erle, 2022; Zahra et al., 2020).

Against the backdrop of increasingly digitalized communication among Gen Z university students, this study aims to examine how emoticon usage contributes to emotional clarity and, in turn, shapes online trust, social interaction, and relationship quality, perceived social support, and emotional expression in digital communication contexts. By empirically linking emoticons to both emotional and relational outcomes, the study addresses an important gap in existing literature that has often treated emoticons as peripheral or stylistic elements rather than substantive communicative tools. The significance of this research lies in its focus on emotional clarity as a central psychological mechanism through which emoticons influence digital interactions, offering a more nuanced understanding of how visual cues function in text-based communication. The study's novelty stems from its integrated model that simultaneously examines emoticon usage, emotional clarity, and multiple interpersonal outcomes within a single analytical framework, specifically among Gen Z university students who are deeply embedded in digital environments. By doing so, this research contributes theoretically by extending digital communication and emotional processing literature, and practically by providing insights for educators, platform designers, and policymakers seeking to foster emotionally effective and socially supportive online communication environments in higher education and beyond.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Emoticon Usage in Digital Communication

Emoticons represent a form of visual symbolism designed to supplement written language by conveying affective meaning in digitally mediated communication. Their growing prominence reflects broader changes in communication practices, particularly among Gen Z, who have been socialized within technology-rich environments where text-based interaction dominates daily life (Koch et al., 2022). In such settings, emoticons function as expressive resources that help users navigate emotional nuance and interpersonal intent in the absence of physical co-presence.

A defining challenge of digital communication is the lack of conventional nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions, gestures, and vocal modulation, which traditionally support emotional interpretation and relational understanding. This limitation increases the risk of ambiguity and misalignment between message intent and interpretation. Emoticons partially address this gap by offering symbolic cues that signal emotional tone and relational orientation, thereby supporting interpretive accuracy in text-based exchanges (Ercan, 2021). Prior research indicates that visual affective markers can reduce uncertainty and support smoother interaction in online contexts (Kee et al., 2024b).

Beyond their technical function as expressive symbols, emoticons contribute to the broader social and psychological dynamics of digital interaction. Online communication relies heavily on perceived emotional presence and responsiveness, particularly when interactions occur repeatedly or carry relational significance (Tajvidi et al., 2021). Visual cues embedded in text-based messages help sustain engagement, signal attentiveness, and maintain interpersonal continuity, which are central to the development of meaningful online exchanges (Zhang et al., 2022).

For university students, digital platforms serve not only as communication tools but also as spaces for relationship maintenance, emotional exchange, and social coordination. Perceptions of care, understanding, and emotional availability in these environments shape how interactions are experienced and evaluated (Huang & Zhang, 2022; Tan et al., 2022). Emoticons are frequently embedded within these interactions as part of routine communicative practice, reflecting their role in shaping the emotional texture of online discourse rather than serving as isolated stylistic elements.

In addition, emoticons are closely embedded in processes of emotional communication. Emotional expression in digital settings requires mechanisms that allow individuals to externalize affective states clearly and interpret others' emotional signals accurately (Fritsch et al., 2024). The use of visual affective cues, including emoticons, supports this process by enriching otherwise lean textual messages. Their effectiveness is closely tied to individuals' emotional awareness and interpretive capacity, which are central to emotionally coherent interaction in online environments (Zahra & Kee, 2019).

Taken together, prior literature positions emoticons as integral components of contemporary digital communication rather than peripheral embellishments. Their widespread use reflects their functional relevance in addressing the emotional and relational demands of text-based interaction. Building on this conceptual foundation, the following sections develop hypotheses that examine how emoticon usage and emotional clarity are associated with key socio-emotional outcomes in digital communication among university students.

Online Trust

Online trust constitutes a central element of effective digital communication, particularly in mediated environments where conventional interpersonal cues such as facial expressions, body language, and vocal tone are absent. In such contexts, individuals must rely on limited symbolic and textual information to evaluate the intentions and credibility of others. Online trust, therefore, reflects an individual's willingness to depend on the integrity, competence, and intentions of communication partners in virtual interactions (Jadil et al., 2022; Nursalim et al., 2025). Complementing this perspective, Khoa and Nguyen (2022) conceptualize online trust as confidence in the honesty, benevolence, and reliability of others within digitally mediated exchanges. For Gen Z university students, whose academic, social, and professional activities are deeply embedded in online platforms, online trust is essential for sustaining meaningful and ongoing relationships in digital environments.

The development of online trust is closely linked to the availability of emotional and relational cues that reduce ambiguity and support accurate interpretation. In text-based communication, the absence of nonverbal signals increases the risk of misinterpretation, which can weaken trust formation. Emoticons address this limitation by serving as visual indicators of emotional tone and communicative intent. By signaling friendliness, sincerity, or emotional engagement, emoticons help clarify messages and reduce uncertainty in digital exchanges (Ercan, 2021; Kee et al., 2024b). Their use allows communicators to convey affective meaning more explicitly, which may support perceptions of transparency and relational openness.

Among Gen Z students, emoticon usage is particularly salient, as this cohort routinely incorporates visual symbols into daily communication (Koch et al., 2022). In such contexts, emoticons function as shared symbolic cues that facilitate emotional understanding and foster a sense of interpersonal presence. When messages are accompanied by appropriate emoticons, recipients may perceive senders as more approachable and emotionally invested, which contributes to trust-building processes in online interactions.

In addition to expressive cues, individual emotional capacities also play a role in shaping online trust. Emotional clarity, defined as the ability to recognize, differentiate, and understand one's emotional states, supports accurate interpretation of emotional signals during communication. Individuals with higher emotional clarity are better equipped to interpret emotional cues embedded in digital messages, including those conveyed through emoticons, and to respond in emotionally congruent ways. This capacity reduces the likelihood of misunderstanding and promotes emotionally coherent exchanges, which are conducive to the development of trust in online settings.

Taken together, theoretical perspectives suggest that both emoticon usage and emotional clarity contribute to online trust through complementary pathways. Emoticons enhance trust by providing accessible emotional cues that clarify communicative intent, while emotional clarity supports trust by enabling individuals to interpret and respond to these cues effectively. Based on this theoretical reasoning, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Emoticon usage positively affects online trust among university students in digital communication.

H6: Emotional clarity positively affects online trust among university students in digital communication.

Social Interaction and Relationship Quality

Social interaction refers to the reciprocal exchange of communication, emotions, and responses between individuals, while relationship quality reflects the perceived depth, stability, and satisfaction within interpersonal relationships. In digital environments, effective social interaction is a fundamental condition for relationship development, as the absence of physical presence limits access to conventional relational cues such as facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice. As a result, interaction quality becomes a central determinant of relationship outcomes in online contexts (Tajvidi et al., 2021). Zhang et al. (2022) further suggest that individuals engage in social interaction not only for information exchange but also to fulfill psychological and emotional needs, positioning interaction quality as a key driver of relational continuity and satisfaction.

Within text-based digital communication, emoticons play an important role in enhancing social interaction by introducing emotional and visual elements that enrich message content. By signaling affective intent and interpersonal stance, emoticons reduce emotional ambiguity and support smoother conversational flow (Ercan, 2021). Among Gen Z university students, who routinely incorporate emoticons into daily communication, these visual symbols function as shared cues that facilitate social presence and relational engagement (Koch et al., 2022). Through such mechanisms, emoticon usage contributes to more dynamic and socially engaging interactions, which in turn support higher perceptions of relationship quality in online settings.

In addition to expressive tools, individual emotional capacities influence how social interaction unfolds in digital communication. Emotional clarity enables individuals to recognize, differentiate, and understand their emotional experiences, which supports more coherent emotional expression and interpretation during interaction. Individuals with higher emotional clarity are better positioned to respond appropriately to emotional cues, manage misunderstandings, and maintain emotionally balanced exchanges. These abilities contribute to more constructive interaction patterns and support the development of stable and satisfying relationships in online environments.

Theoretical perspectives, therefore, suggest that both emoticon usage and emotional clarity contribute independently to social interaction and relationship quality. Emoticons enhance interaction by providing accessible emotional cues that foster engagement and relational warmth, while emotional clarity supports relationship quality by enabling individuals to navigate emotional exchanges with greater awareness and consistency. Based on this theoretical reasoning, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2: Emoticon usage positively affects social interaction and relationship quality among university students in digital communication.

H7: Emotional clarity positively affects social interaction and relationship quality among university students in digital communication.

Perceived Social Support

Perceived social support refers to an individual's belief that emotional, informational, or instrumental assistance is accessible within their social network when needed (Huang & Zhang, 2022). Rather than reflecting only the actual receipt of support, perceived social support emphasizes individuals' subjective evaluations of care, understanding, and emotional availability from others. As noted by Tan et al. (2022), such perceptions play a central role in emotional well-being, stress management, and psychological resilience, particularly in environments where social interaction is mediated through digital platforms. In online communication contexts, perceived social support is shaped by the quality of emotional cues and relational signals embedded in digital interactions. The absence of physical presence and nonverbal behavior can make it challenging to communicate

empathy, encouragement, and attentiveness through text alone. Emoticons address this limitation by providing visual symbols that convey emotional presence and interpersonal concern, thereby enhancing the perceived warmth and responsiveness of digital messages (Ercan, 2021). Among Gen Z university students, who frequently rely on emoticons as part of everyday communication, these symbols function as socially shared cues that help communicate care and emotional availability (Koch et al., 2022).

Beyond expressive tools, individual emotional capacities also influence how social support is perceived in digital environments. Emotional clarity enables individuals to recognize their own emotional needs and interpret emotional signals from others more accurately. When individuals possess higher emotional clarity, they are better able to identify supportive intent, respond appropriately to emotional expressions, and convey support in ways that are emotionally congruent. These abilities contribute to interactions that feel more responsive and validating, thereby strengthening perceptions of being understood and supported.

Theoretical considerations, therefore, suggest that emoticon usage and emotional clarity each contribute to perceived social support through distinct but complementary roles. Emoticons enhance perceived support by making emotional intent visible in text-based communication, while emotional clarity supports supportive interaction by enabling accurate interpretation and expression of emotional cues. Based on this reasoning, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3: Emoticon usage positively affects perceived social support among university students in digital communication.

H8: Emotional clarity positively affects perceived social support among university students in digital communication.

Emotional Expression

Emotional expression refers to the outward communication of emotional states through verbal and nonverbal behaviors, allowing individuals to convey affective experiences to others (Fritsch et al., 2024). In digital communication, where face-to-face interaction is replaced by text-based exchanges, expressing emotions poses distinct challenges. The absence of physical cues such as facial expressions, gestures, and vocal tone can limit the depth and clarity of emotional communication. Within this context, emoticons have emerged as a widely accepted medium for conveying emotions that may be difficult to articulate through words alone.

Emoticons support emotional expression by providing visual representations of affective states, enabling individuals to externalize emotions, communicate intensity, and signal emotional intent more clearly. By enriching text with symbolic emotional cues, emoticons help reduce ambiguity and enhance interpersonal understanding in digital interactions (Ercan, 2021). Among Gen Z university students, emoticons are embedded in everyday communication practices and function as shared emotional symbols that facilitate expressive communication across digital platforms (Koch et al., 2022). Their use allows individuals to convey nuanced emotional meaning in a manner that is efficient, accessible, and socially recognizable.

In addition to expressive tools, emotional expression in digital environments is influenced by individual emotional capacities. Emotional clarity, defined as the ability to recognize, differentiate, and understand one's emotional experiences, plays an important role in shaping how emotions are communicated. Individuals with higher emotional clarity are better equipped to identify what they are feeling and to translate these feelings into coherent, expressive forms. In digital communication, this capacity supports the

selection of appropriate emoticons and the articulation of emotional meaning in ways that align with internal emotional states.

When emotional clarity is high, emotional expression becomes more precise and less prone to misinterpretation. Emotionally clear individuals are more likely to communicate emotions consistently and to anticipate how their emotional signals may be perceived by others. This contributes to emotionally coherent interactions, reducing the risk of misunderstanding and supporting more effective emotional exchange. From a theoretical perspective, emoticon usage and emotional clarity therefore represent complementary influences on emotional expression: emoticons provide the symbolic means for expression, while emotional clarity supports accurate and meaningful use of these symbols. Based on this theoretical reasoning, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4: Emoticon usage positively affects emotional expression in digital interactions among university students.

H9: Emotional clarity positively affects emotional expression in digital interactions among university students.

Emotional Clarity

Emotional clarity refers to an individual's capacity to accurately identify, differentiate, and understand their own emotional states (Pugach et al., 2025). This ability represents a fundamental aspect of emotional functioning, as it supports emotional regulation, psychological well-being, and effective interpersonal communication. Individuals with higher emotional clarity are generally better equipped to process emotional experiences, respond adaptively to emotional stimuli, and communicate emotions in a coherent and meaningful manner (Zahra & Kee, 2019). In contrast, lower levels of emotional clarity are associated with emotional confusion, rumination, and heightened negative affect, which may disrupt communication processes and hinder social functioning (Hernandez et al., 2024).

Emotional clarity is particularly salient in digital communication environments, where the absence of direct nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, gestures, and vocal tone can complicate emotional interpretation. In text-based interaction, individuals must rely on limited symbolic and linguistic cues to make sense of emotional content. When emotional clarity is high, individuals are more capable of recognizing their own emotional responses and interpreting the emotional signals conveyed by others through textual and visual elements, including emoticons. This capacity supports more precise emotional expression and more accurate understanding of emotional intent in online exchanges.

In digital contexts, emotional clarity contributes to emotionally coherent interaction by reducing the likelihood of misinterpretation and inappropriate emotional responses. Individuals who clearly understand their emotional states are better positioned to select communication strategies that align with their affective experiences, which supports consistency and transparency in interaction. This, in turn, facilitates smoother interpersonal exchanges and more constructive communication outcomes in online environments.

Emoticon usage is theorized to be positively associated with emotional clarity, as repeated engagement with visual emotional symbols may encourage greater attention to emotional distinctions and affective meaning in communication. By providing explicit representations of emotional states, emoticons may support individuals' awareness and understanding of emotions during digital interaction. Rather than functioning as an intervening process, emotional clarity is conceptualized in this study as an emotional capacity that is associated with communicative practices and contributes directly to

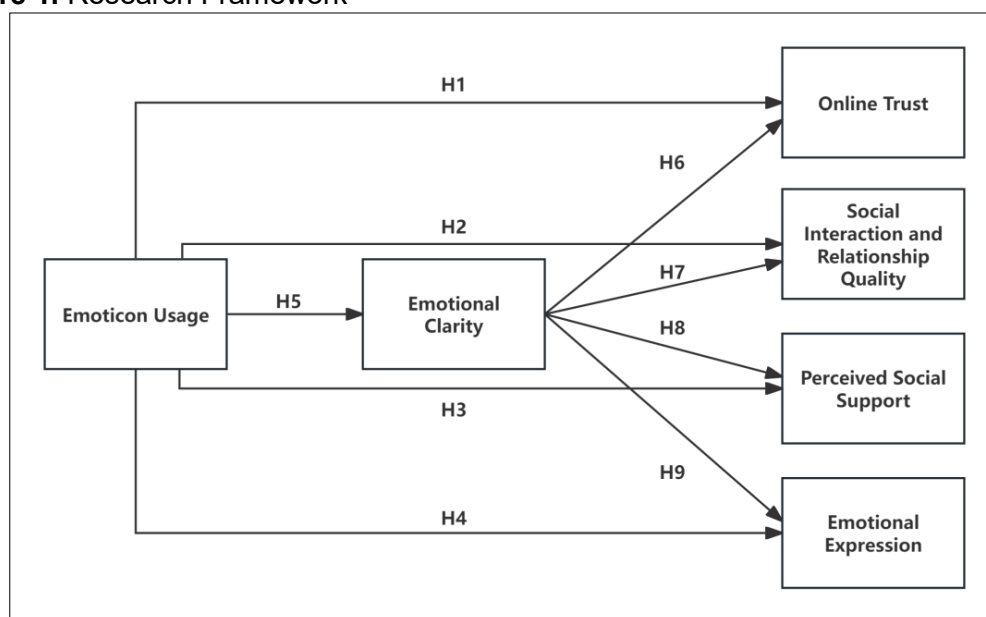
relational and emotional outcomes. Based on this theoretical reasoning, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5: Emoticon usage positively affects emotional clarity among university students in digital communication.

Conceptual Framework

The study framework model is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Research Framework



RESEARCH METHOD

Sample and Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed to 155 Malaysian university students, yielding a response rate of 100 percent. Respondents were randomly sampled from universities across Malaysia to ensure adequate representation of the undergraduate population. This sampling approach supports the generalizability of the findings within the context of Malaysian higher education institutions.

Data were collected using a Google-based online questionnaire. A detailed explanation and an introductory statement were provided on the first page of the questionnaire, clearly outlining the objectives of the research and assuring respondents of complete anonymity and confidentiality of their individual responses. This approach was intended to encourage honest participation and reduce response bias.

In accordance with ethical research principles, the identity of all respondents was strictly protected to ensure anonymity throughout the research process. In addition, all collected data were handled confidentially and were not shared with any third party without the explicit consent of the respondents (Stommel & Rijk, 2021). These ethical safeguards helped to maintain the integrity, credibility, and trustworthiness of the research. Furthermore, compliance with the Data Protection Act was strictly observed, guiding the study to be conducted in a systematic and responsible manner while minimizing potential research bias. Through these procedures, the overall research design and implementation were structured to generate reliable and valid outcomes aligned with the proposed research objectives.

Measures

An eight-part questionnaire was administered to measure the variables examined in this study, as well as to ensure that the majority of respondents belonged to Gen Z, thereby strengthening the relevance and rigor of the data. To measure the significance of all study variables, all questionnaire items, except those related to personal demographic information, were assessed using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, to strongly agree (Mazurek et al., 2021). This scaling method facilitated the quantitative assessment of respondents' perceptions and attitudes toward the constructs under investigation.

Following data collection, an appropriate data analysis method was selected to statistically interpret the collected responses. Quantitative data analysis was employed to examine relationships among the study variables. This analytical approach enabled the assessment of correlations between emoticon usage and emotional clarity, as well as other related constructs. IBM SPSS software was utilized to perform statistical analyses, including regression analysis, ANOVA, R-square analysis, Pearson correlation, and hypothesis testing. Through the application of these quantitative tests, significant relationships and effects among the variables were identified, particularly regarding the impact of emoticon usage on emotional clarity among Gen Z university students (Habes et al., 2021).

Primary data collection was adopted to clearly define the research problem and to formulate and test the proposed research hypotheses (Mazhar et al., 2021). Closed-ended survey questions were designed based on the individual variables, namely emoticon usage, emotional clarity, online trust, social interaction and relationship quality, perceived social support, and emotional expression.

For emoticon usage (H1 to H5), a total of five items were included: "I frequently use emoticons in my digital communication," "Emoticons help me express emotions more clearly," "I use emoticons to add warmth or friendliness to my messages," "I use different types of emoticons depending on who I'm talking to," and "Emoticons make my messages feel more personal."

For online trust (H1 and H6), three items were used: "Emoticons make me feel more connected to the person I am communicating with," "I am more likely to trust someone who uses emoticons when chatting," and "Emoticons help me feel that the other person is being genuine."

For social interaction and relationship quality (H2 and H7), four items were included: "Emoticons improve my communication with friends online," "Emoticons strengthen my relationships in digital communication," "I feel closer to people who use emoticons in conversations," and "Emoticons help reduce misunderstandings during online chats."

For perceived social support (H3 and H8), three items were used: "I feel supported when someone uses emoticons to comfort me," "Emoticons show emotional concern in digital interactions," and "Emoticons help me feel understood and cared for online."

For emotional expression (H4 and H9), three items were included: "I can express how I feel more easily with emoticons," "Emoticons help express feelings I find hard to put into words," and "Using emoticons helps reduce misinterpretation of my emotions."

Finally, emotional clarity (H6 to H9) was measured using three items: "Emoticons help clarify my emotional tone in messages," "I am better at recognizing others' emotions

when emoticons are used,” and “Emoticons help me communicate my feelings more accurately.”

RESULTS

Table 1. Profiles of Respondents (N= 155)

Items		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	118	76.1
	Male	37	23.9
Age	17-19	20	12.9
	20-22	115	74.2
	23-25	16	10.3
	26-28	4	2.6
Level of Education	Bachelor's Degree	134	86.5
	Diploma	13	8.4
	Master's Degree	5	3.2
	PhD	3	1.9
University	UTM	79	51.0
	UTeM	24	15.5
	USM	20	12.9
	UPSI	7	5.1
	USIM	6	3.9
	MAIWP	4	2.6
	UPM	2	1.2
	UM	1	0.6
	UNITEN	1	0.6
	UNIMAS	1	0.6
	UMT	1	0.6
	UKM	1	0.6
	UITM Shah Alam	1	0.6
	UITM	1	0.6
	Politeknik Sultan Haji Ahmad Shah	1	0.6
	PMS	1	0.6
	MSU College	1	0.6
	UITM Puncak Alam	1	0.6
	IPG MIZAN	1	0.6
	IKM	1	0.6
Race	Malay	93	60
	Chinese	58	37.4
	India	3	1.9
	Kenyah	1	0.6
Student's Type	Local	133	85.8
	International	22	14.2

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

Table 1 indicates that, in terms of gender, the majority of respondents were female, accounting for 118 participants (76.1%), while males comprised 37 respondents (23.9%). Regarding age distribution, most respondents were concentrated in the 20–22 age group, representing 115 students (74.2%), followed by those aged 17–19 with 20 respondents (12.9%). Smaller proportions were observed among respondents aged 23–25 (16 students; 10.3%) and 26–28 (4 students; 2.6%). In terms of educational attainment, the vast majority of respondents were pursuing a bachelor's degree, totaling 134 students

(86.5%). This was followed by diploma holders with 13 respondents (8.4%), master's degree students with 5 respondents (3.2%), and PhD students with 3 respondents (1.9%).

With respect to university distribution, approximately half of the respondents were from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), accounting for 79 students (51.0%), while the remaining respondents were dispersed across various other universities, each contributing relatively small proportions. In terms of ethnicity, the majority of respondents were Malay, comprising 93 students (60.0%), followed by Chinese respondents with 58 students (37.4%), while Indian and Kenyan respondents represented much smaller proportions at 3 students (1.9%) and 1 student (0.6%), respectively. Regarding student type, most respondents were local students, totaling 133 individuals (85.8%), whereas international students accounted for 22 respondents (14.2%). Overall, the respondent profile was predominantly Gen Z females, undergraduate students, and local students, with the majority being Malay and enrolled at UTM.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics, Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha, and Zero-order Correlations for All Study Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Emoticon Usage	0.829					
2 Emotional Clarity	0.616**	0.836				
3 Online Trust	0.572**	0.667**	0.747			
4 Social Interaction & Relationship Quality	0.635**	0.760**	0.717**	0.822		
5 Perceived Social Support	0.606**	0.765**	0.606**	0.750**	0.809	
6 Emotional Expression	0.658**	0.817**	0.654**	0.751**	0.704**	0.838
Number of Items	5	3	4	3	3	3
Mean	21.6968	12.9677	12.6452	17.2710	12.9097	12.9677
Standard Deviation	3.21396	2.07151	2.05364	2.72628	2.09024	2.07151

Note: N=155; *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001. The diagonal entries represent Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha coefficients, and zero-order correlations for all study variables based on responses from 155 participants. The results indicate that emoticon usage recorded the highest mean score ($M = 21.6968$), suggesting a high frequency of emoticon use among respondents, while online trust reported the lowest mean score ($M = 12.6452$). The reliability analysis demonstrates acceptable to strong internal consistency across all constructs, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.747 to 0.838. These values exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating that all measurement scales used in the study are reliable.

The findings suggest that emoticon usage, emotional clarity, online trust, social interaction and relationship quality, perceived social support, and emotional expression are closely associated constructs in the context of digital communication among Gen Z university students. The zero-order correlation results reveal positive and statistically significant relationships among all variables, indicating that emoticon-related behaviors contribute meaningfully to emotional communication and relationship development in online environments. Given that Gen Z students have grown up with smartphones, social media platforms, and digital messaging applications, emoticons function as an important communication tool that helps convey emotional cues and approximate face-to-face interactions.

Specifically, the correlation analysis shows that emoticon usage is moderately and positively correlated with emotional clarity ($r = 0.616$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that increased use of emoticons is associated with clearer emotional expression in digital messages. Furthermore, emotional clarity exhibits a very strong positive correlation with emotional expression ($r = 0.817$, $p < 0.01$), highlighting the role of emoticons in enhancing individuals' ability to express emotions accurately. These findings suggest that effective and appropriate use of emoticons can help reduce emotional ambiguity and misinterpretation in online communication, particularly when users possess a clear understanding of the meanings conveyed by different emoticons.

Table 3. Regression Analysis

		Emotional Clarity	Online Trust	Social Interaction & Relationship Quality	Perceived Social Support	Emotional Expression
1	Emoticon Usage	0.616***	0.259***	0.268***	0.218***	0.249***
2	Emotional Clarity		0.508***	0.595***	0.631***	0.664***
R ²		0.379	0.487	0.623	0.609	0.706

Note: N=155; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

The regression results in Table 3 confirm that all nine hypotheses are supported by statistically significant relationships among emoticon usage, emotional clarity, and digital communication outcomes. Emoticon usage shows a strong positive association with emotional clarity (H5; $\beta = 0.616$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the use of emoticons contributes to clearer recognition and interpretation of emotions in digital interactions.

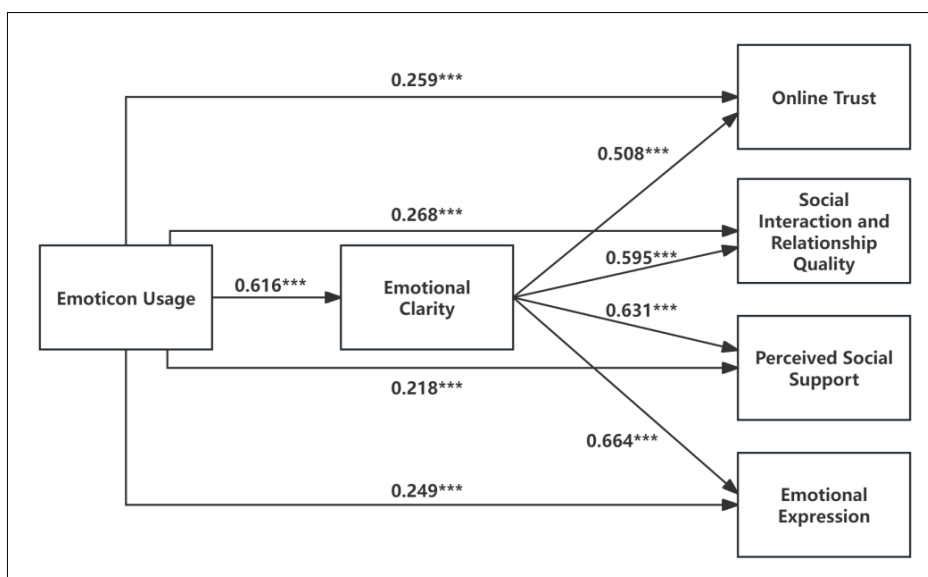
In addition, emoticon usage demonstrates significant positive effects on online trust (H1; $\beta = 0.259$, $p < 0.001$), social interaction and relationship quality (H2; $\beta = 0.268$, $p < 0.001$), perceived social support (H3; $\beta = 0.218$, $p < 0.001$), and emotional expression (H4; $\beta = 0.249$, $p < 0.001$). These results suggest that emoticons function as communicative cues that assist individuals in conveying affective meaning, fostering interpersonal engagement, and supporting relational development in online environments.

Emotional clarity also exhibits consistent positive effects across all examined outcomes. Specifically, emotional clarity positively influences online trust (H6; $\beta = 0.508$, $p < 0.001$), social interaction and relationship quality (H7; $\beta = 0.595$, $p < 0.001$), perceived social support (H8; $\beta = 0.631$, $p < 0.001$), and emotional expression (H9; $\beta = 0.664$, $p < 0.001$). The magnitude of these coefficients indicates that individuals with greater emotional clarity tend to engage more effectively in digital communication by forming trusting relationships, maintaining meaningful interactions, perceiving supportive exchanges, and expressing emotions more clearly.

Taken together, the findings indicate that emoticon usage and emotional clarity independently contribute to positive digital communication outcomes. Emoticon usage supports these outcomes through symbolic and expressive cues, while emotional clarity contributes through improved emotional understanding and regulation. The results align with the proposed direct-effect framework and provide empirical support for the role of emotional processes in shaping digital interaction among university students.

The summarized output of the hypothesized model is provided in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Hypothesized Model



DISCUSSION

The Role of Emoticon Usage in Digital Communication Outcomes (H1–H5)

The present findings indicate that emoticon usage is positively associated with multiple dimensions of digital communication, including online trust (H1), social interaction and relationship quality (H2), perceived social support (H3), emotional expression (H4), and emotional clarity (H5). Collectively, these results reinforce the view that emoticons function as more than stylistic additions to text-based messages. Instead, they operate as communicative resources that shape emotional interpretation, relational evaluation, and expressive capacity in digitally mediated environments.

The positive association between emoticon usage and online trust (H1) is consistent with prior research emphasizing the importance of emotional cues in trust formation under conditions of reduced social presence. Digital communication lacks the nonverbal signals, such as facial expressions and vocal tone, that typically support judgments of sincerity and credibility (Ercan, 2021). Emoticons appear to compensate for this absence by signaling affective intent, thereby reducing ambiguity and perceived communicative risk. This finding aligns with Kee et al. (2024b), who argued that visual emotional cues enhance transparency and foster confidence in online interactions. For Gen Z students, who frequently rely on digital platforms for relational exchange, emoticons may thus function as trust-supporting markers that stabilize interpersonal expectations in virtual communication.

Similarly, the significant relationship between emoticon usage and social interaction and relationship quality (H2) supports earlier conceptualizations of online interaction as a process shaped by emotional engagement rather than information exchange alone. Tajvidi et al. (2021) emphasized that sustained social interaction in online environments depends on perceived responsiveness and emotional resonance. By embedding emotional nuance into text, emoticons appear to encourage conversational reciprocity and relational continuity. This observation also echoes Zhang et al. (2022), who noted that individuals seek emotional connection through social interaction to satisfy relational needs. Emoticons may therefore facilitate relationship development by making interactions feel more socially present, attentive, and emotionally grounded.

The positive association between emoticon usage and perceived social support (H3) further illustrates the relational significance of emotive symbols in digital communication.

Perceived social support is shaped not only by the availability of assistance but also by signals of empathy, care, and emotional availability (Huang & Zhang, 2022; Tan et al., 2022). In text-based exchanges, emoticons may serve as visible indicators of emotional concern and encouragement, reinforcing the impression that support is present even in the absence of physical interaction. This finding suggests that emoticons contribute to supportive communication by enhancing emotional visibility and reinforcing perceptions of being understood and valued.

In line with expectations, emoticon usage is also positively related to emotional expression (H4). Emotional expression in digital contexts often requires alternative channels to convey affective states that cannot be fully articulated through words alone (Fritsch et al., 2024). Emoticons provide a readily accessible means for externalizing emotions, signaling intensity, and clarifying emotional tone. Their frequent use may encourage individuals to articulate emotions more openly, thereby enriching communicative exchanges and reducing emotional opacity. This finding supports the notion that emoticons help compensate for the expressive limitations of text-based communication by enabling more nuanced emotional disclosure.

Notably, emoticon usage demonstrates a strong positive association with emotional clarity (H5), indicating that engagement with emotive symbols is linked not only to outward expression but also to internal emotional awareness. Emotional clarity involves the ability to identify, differentiate, and understand one's emotional states (Pugach et al., 2025). As individuals repeatedly interpret and deploy emoticons to represent emotions, they may become more attentive to emotional distinctions and more reflective about their own affective experiences. This finding is consistent with Koch et al. (2022), who suggested that frequent emoticon use is associated with heightened emotional awareness among younger users. In this sense, emoticons may function as cognitive–emotional reference points that support emotional understanding alongside expressive behavior.

The Influence of Emotional Clarity on Digital Communication Outcomes (H6–H9)

Beyond the role of emoticon usage, emotional clarity emerges as a central psychological factor associated with all examined dimensions of digital communication, including online trust (H6), social interaction and relationship quality (H7), perceived social support (H8), and emotional expression (H9). These findings underscore the importance of internal emotional understanding in shaping how individuals interpret messages, regulate responses, and engage relationally in text-based environments. In digital contexts characterized by limited nonverbal feedback, emotional clarity appears to support communicative coherence and interpersonal stability.

The particularly strong association between emotional clarity and emotional expression (H9) indicates that emotional understanding serves as a prerequisite for effective emotional communication. Individuals who can accurately identify and differentiate their emotional states are better positioned to express those emotions in a way that is meaningful and interpretable to others. This finding aligns with Fritsch et al. (2024), who conceptualized emotional expression as the outward articulation of internal emotional states, and with Pugach et al. (2025), who emphasized emotional clarity as a key component of emotional regulation and psychological functioning. When emotional awareness is high, emotional expression becomes more deliberate, consistent, and aligned with internal experience, thereby reducing communicative ambiguity in digital interaction.

Emotional clarity also demonstrates a significant positive relationship with online trust (H6). Trust in digital communication relies heavily on perceived consistency, authenticity,

and emotional congruence, particularly in the absence of face-to-face cues (Jadil et al., 2022; Khoa & Nguyen, 2022). Individuals with higher emotional clarity may communicate in ways that are more emotionally stable and predictable, which can reduce uncertainty and enhance perceptions of reliability. This supports the notion that trust formation in online environments is not solely dependent on external cues but is also influenced by communicators' internal emotional organization and expressive alignment.

The positive association between emotional clarity and social interaction and relationship quality (H7) further highlights the interpersonal value of emotional understanding. Effective digital interaction requires sensitivity to emotional cues, the ability to respond appropriately, and the capacity to manage misunderstandings constructively (Tajvidi et al., 2021). Individuals with greater emotional clarity may be better equipped to interpret emotional signals embedded in text or visual symbols, engage empathically, and maintain balanced interaction patterns. These qualities contribute to relational continuity and satisfaction, supporting higher perceived relationship quality in online contexts (Zhang et al., 2022).

Similarly, the relationship between emotional clarity and perceived social support (H8) suggests that emotional awareness influences how individuals experience and interpret supportive communication. Perceived social support depends not only on the presence of supportive behaviors but also on the individual's ability to recognize and internalize expressions of care and concern (Huang & Zhang, 2022; Tan et al., 2022). Emotionally clear individuals may be more attuned to subtle supportive cues in digital messages and more capable of interpreting emotional intent accurately. As a result, they are more likely to perceive digital interactions as emotionally responsive and validating.

Integrated Interpretation of Direct Effects

Taken together, the findings support a direct-effects framework in which emoticon usage and emotional clarity independently contribute to positive digital communication outcomes. Emoticon usage enhances communication by providing accessible emotional cues that support expression, relational engagement, and emotional awareness. Emotional clarity, in turn, contributes by enabling individuals to interpret and convey emotions more accurately, fostering trust, meaningful interaction, and perceptions of support.

Importantly, emotional clarity is treated in this study as an explanatory variable rather than an intervening mechanism. While emoticon usage is associated with emotional clarity, both constructs demonstrate independent relationships with key communication outcomes. This distinction ensures consistency between the theoretical framework, analytical approach, and empirical results.

Overall, the findings suggest that effective digital communication among university students is shaped by both expressive tools and emotional understanding. Emoticons facilitate emotional signaling in text-based environments, while emotional clarity supports the interpretation and expression of emotions that sustain interpersonal connections. These results contribute to a clearer understanding of how emotional processes and symbolic cues jointly influence communication quality in contemporary digital interactions.

CONCLUSION

This study investigates the influence of emoticon usage on multiple dimensions of digital communication among Gen Z university students, a cohort immersed in digitally mediated interaction where nonverbal cues are largely absent. The findings provide

consistent evidence that emoticon usage is positively associated with online trust, social interaction, and relationship quality, perceived social support, emotional expression, and emotional clarity. Collectively, these results confirm the central role of emoticons in shaping both emotional and relational aspects of digital communication.

The results indicate that emoticon usage contributes meaningfully to digital interaction by enhancing emotional expressiveness and relational engagement. In particular, the strong association between emoticon usage and emotional expression highlights the function of emoticons as effective tools for conveying affective states in text-based communication. By enriching otherwise limited textual exchanges, emoticons allow users to express emotions with greater clarity and emotional resonance, supporting more authentic and interpretable interaction.

Beyond expressive outcomes, emoticon usage is also positively related to online trust, social interaction, relationship quality, and perceived social support. These associations suggest that emoticons operate as functional communicative cues rather than decorative additions. By signaling emotional intent and interpersonal warmth, emoticons help reduce ambiguity, support empathy, and facilitate rapport in online environments where misunderstandings are more likely due to the absence of conventional nonverbal signals.

In addition, emotional clarity emerges as a consistently significant factor across all examined communication outcomes. Higher levels of emotional clarity are associated with clearer emotional expression, stronger relational engagement, greater perceived social support, and increased trust in digital interactions. These findings suggest that individuals who are more capable of recognizing and understanding their emotional experiences tend to communicate more coherently and effectively in online contexts. Although emotional clarity is not conceptualized as an intervening mechanism in this study, its stable associations across outcomes underscore its importance as an individual emotional capacity that supports constructive digital communication.

Overall, this study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that emoticons play an integral role in contemporary digital communication, particularly among Gen Z users. Emoticons function as modern substitutes for nonverbal cues, supporting emotionally meaningful and relationally coherent interaction in text-based environments. Practically, the findings offer implications for digital platform designers, educators, and practitioners seeking to foster emotionally aware and socially supportive online communication. Encouraging appropriate emoticon use alongside the development of emotional clarity may help promote more effective and emotionally attuned digital interaction among young adults.

Finally, the study's focus on Malaysian Gen Z university students suggests avenues for future research. Subsequent studies may examine broader age groups, cultural contexts, and communication platforms, as well as explore how different emoticon types and usage patterns influence digital communication outcomes. Such extensions would further enrich understanding of the role of symbolic emotional cues in diverse digital environments.

LIMITATION

This study is subject to several limitations. First, the sample is restricted to Gen Z university students in Malaysia, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other age groups, cultural contexts, or professional populations. Second, the use of self-reported survey data may introduce common method bias and rely on participants' self-perceptions of emoticon usage and emotional clarity. Third, the cross-sectional quantitative design does not capture dynamic or contextual influences, such as

psychological traits or platform-specific factors, that may shape digital communication behaviors. Future research could address these limitations by employing mixed-method or longitudinal designs and by examining more diverse samples to enhance generalizability and theoretical depth.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

No potential conflicts of interest have been disclosed by the authors in relation to the research, writing, or publication of this article.

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