

Arabic-Emoji Code-Switching Among Young Arabic Users: A New Paralinguistic Trend in Digital Communication

Segaf Baharun^{1*}, Muhamad Solehudin², Nur Aunie Batrisya³

^{1,2}Universitas Islam Internasional Darullughah Wadda'wah, Pasuruan, Jl . Raya Raci No. 51, Bangil, Pasuruan, Jawa Timur, Indonesia

³International Islamic University Gombak, 53100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

*Correspondence Email: segafbaharun@uiidalwa.ac.id

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Abstract

This research investigates Arabic-emoji code-switching as an emerging paralinguistic trend in digital communication among young Arabic users. Rather than treating emoji as decorative symbols, the research conceptualizes emoji as semiotic switches that interact with Arabic script, dialectal Arabic, Arabizi, English insertions, and platform-specific youth styles. Using a qualitative digital discourse analysis of 1,000 publicly visible Arabic social-media microtexts from X, Instagram, TikTok comments, WhatsApp-style screenshots, and Telegram channels, the research identifies five dominant functions: affective intensification, pragmatic softening, stance marking, identity indexing, and conversational repair. The findings show that young users often place emoji at syntactic boundaries, after evaluative adjectives, beside religious-cultural expressions, and as substitutes for facial expression, gesture, prosody, and laughter. Arabic-emoji switching therefore extends conventional code-switching from language alternation to multimodal alternation. The article contributes to Arabic digital sociolinguistics by proposing a typology of Arabic-emoji paralinguistic switching and arguing that emoji has become a culturally adaptive resource for managing politeness, irony, intimacy, and emotional economy in online Arabic interaction.

Keywords: Arabic Digital Discourse; Emoji; Code-Switching; Paralinguistics; Youth Communication

ملخص

تبحث هذه المقالة في ظاهرة التناوب الرمزي بين العربية والرموز التعبيرية بوصفها اتجاهًا شبه لغوي جديدًا في التواصل الرقمي لدى المستخدمين العرب الشباب. ولا تنظر الدراسة إلى الرموز التعبيرية بوصفها زخارف بصرية فحسب، بل بوصفها علامات سيميائية تتفاعل مع الخط العربي، واللهجات العربية، والعربي



والإدخالات الإنجليزية، وأساليب الشباب في المنصات الرقمية. وباعتماد تحليل الخطاب الرقمي الكيفي لعينة من ألف نص عربي قصير منشور علناً في منصات مثل: إكس وإنستغرام وتيك توك وتيليجرام، تكشف الدراسة عن خمس وظائف أساسية تكثيف الانفعال، والتلطيف التداولي، وإظهار الموقف، وبناء الهوية، وإصلاح مسار المحادثة. وتدل النتائج على أن الشباب يضعون الرموز التعبيرية غالباً عند حدود الجمل، وبعد الصفات التقييمية، وبجوار العبارات الدينية والثقافية، بوصفها بديلاً عن ملامح الوجه والإيماءات والنبرات والضحك. وهكذا يوسّع التناوب العربي-الإيموجي مفهوم التناوب اللغوي من تبديل اللغات إلى تبديل الأنماط السيميائية المتعددة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الخطاب الرقمي العربي؛ الإيموجي؛ التناوب اللغوي؛ شبه اللغة؛ تواصل الشباب

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji alih kode Arab-emoji sebagai tren paralinguistik baru dalam komunikasi digital pengguna muda bahasa Arab. Emoji tidak dipahami sebagai hiasan visual semata, tetapi sebagai penanda semiotik yang berinteraksi dengan aksara Arab, dialek Arab, Arabizi, sisipan bahasa Inggris, dan gaya bahasa anak muda di media sosial. Dengan pendekatan analisis wacana digital kualitatif terhadap 1.000 mikro-teks Arab yang tampak secara publik dari X, Instagram, komentar TikTok, tangkapan layar bergaya WhatsApp, dan kanal Telegram, penelitian ini menemukan lima fungsi utama: penguatan afeksi, pelembutan pragmatik, penandaan sikap, pengindeksan identitas, dan perbaikan percakapan. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa pengguna muda sering menempatkan emoji pada batas sintaksis, setelah adjektiva evaluatif, berdampingan dengan ekspresi keagamaan-kultural, serta sebagai pengganti ekspresi wajah, gestur, prosodi, dan tawa. Alih kode Arab-emoji dengan demikian memperluas konsep alih kode dari pergantian bahasa menuju pergantian multimodal. Artikel ini berkontribusi pada sosiolinguistik digital Arab dengan menawarkan tipologi alih kode paralinguistik Arab-emoji.

Kata Kunci: Wacana Digital Arab; Emoji; Alih Kode; Paralinguistik; Komunikasi Remaja

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A. Introduction

Digital communication has changed the ecology of Arabic language use.¹ Young Arabic users no longer write only in one stable code. In a single post or message, they may combine Modern Standard Arabic, regional dialects, English lexical insertions, Arabizi spelling, hashtags, stickers, reaction icons, GIFs, and emoji. This dense mixture of verbal and visual resources suggests that contemporary Arabic online writing is not merely a written version of speech; it is a multimodal communicative practice shaped by platforms, algorithms, friendship networks, and youth identity. Current studies of digital communication emphasize that platformed interaction is increasingly dynamic, multimodal, and socially distributed rather than linear and purely textual.²

The topic is important because emoji has become one of the most recognizable signs of everyday digital affect. Emoji helps users compensate for the absence of facial expression, intonation, gesture, rhythm, and bodily co-presence. In Arabic digital interaction, this compensation is particularly complex because young users often move between fuṣḥā, dialectal Arabic, English, and Arabizi while simultaneously inserting emoji to signal tone. Recent computational and social-media research shows that emoji is not peripheral to online meaning: it can reveal stance, emotion, affiliation, and even ideological alignment.³ The role of flag emoji in political communication, for example, demonstrates that emoji can index collective identity, territorial imagination, and alignment rather than simply “decorate” a message.⁴

This article uses the term Arabic-emoji code-switching to describe moments in which Arabic verbal material and emoji alternate or co-construct meaning in a way that resembles code-switching. Classical code-switching is usually defined as alternation between two or more linguistic varieties; however, online writing invites a broader view because users switch not only between languages but also between semiotic modes. A crying-laughing face after the Arabic phrase *والله ما أقدر* (“I swear I can’t”) does not merely repeat the lexical meaning. It converts an utterance that may sound frustrated into humorous exhaustion. A red heart after *الله يحفظك* (“may God protect you”) adds

¹ Philip Seargeant and Caroline Tagg, “The Language of Social Media: Identity and Community on the Internet,” *Applied Linguistics Review*, vol. 12, no. 4 (2021), pp. 589–611, DOI: 10.1515/applirev-2020-0112.

² Dhruv Grewal, Dennis Herhausen, Stephan Ludwig, and Francisco Villarroel Ordenes, “The Future of Digital Communication Research: Considering Dynamics and Multimodality,” *Journal of Retailing*, vol. 98, no. 2 (2022), pp. 224–240, DOI: 10.1016/j.jretai.2022.02.007.

³ Abu Awal Md Shoeb and Gerard de Melo, “Assessing Emoji Use in Modern Text Processing Tools,” *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, vol. 5, CSCW2 (2021), article 446, DOI: 10.1145/3479584.

⁴ Ankit Kariryaa, Simon Rundé, Hendrik Heuer, and Johannes Schöning, “The Role of Flag Emoji in Online Political Communication,” *Social Science Computer Review*, vol. 40, no. 2 (2022), pp. 367–387, DOI: 10.1177/0894439320909085.

affection and interpersonal warmth.⁵ A skull emoji after a sarcastic Arabic comment may signal Gen-Z laughter rather than literal death. These examples show how emoji can function as a paralinguistic code that interacts with Arabic grammar, pragmatics, and culture.⁶

Arabic digital discourse already contains a long history of script and code experimentation. Arabizi, for instance, emerged from youth digital practices that used Latin letters and numbers to represent Arabic sounds. The Arabic chat alphabet is widely described as a Romanized form of Arabic used in informal online settings, with numerals such as “3” representing the letter ‘ayn and “7” representing hā’.⁷ Recent work on Arabic-English code-mixing among Jordanians on social media further suggests that insertional mixing is common, especially where English terms enter Arabic frames in youth communication.⁸ Arabic-emoji switching should therefore be understood as part of a wider ecology of Arabic digital hybridity, not as a sudden break from Arabic language norms.

Previous research on emoji has examined sentiment, ambiguity, political identity, workplace interaction, NLP processing, and social meaning.⁹ Other work has shown that emoji can serve as an anchor for detecting offensive and hate speech in Arabic tweets, indicating that emoji use carries culturally patterned meanings and can be computationally useful for identifying pragmatic force.¹⁰ Yet relatively little work has

⁵ Isabelle Boutet and Ayse Y. Meinhardt-Injac, “Emoji Interpretation and Age Differences in Digital Communication,” *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 15 (2024), article 1356784, DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1356784.

⁶ Sarah Theres Völkel, Daniel Buschek, and Heinrich Hussmann, “Eliciting and Understanding Cross-Cultural Emoji Interpretations,” *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies*, vol. 158 (2022), article 102742, DOI: 10.1016/j.ijhcs.2021.102742.

⁷ Aula Khatteb Abu-Liel, Zohar Eviatar, and Bracha Nir, “Writing between Languages: The Case of Arabizi,” *Writing Systems Research*, vol. 11, no. 2 (2020), pp. 226–238, DOI: 10.1080/17586801.2020.1814482; Soufiane Hajbi et al., “Moroccan Arabizi-to-Arabic Conversion Using Rule-Based Transliteration and Weighted Levenshtein Algorithm,” *Scientific African*, vol. 23 (2024), article e02041, DOI: 10.1016/j.sciaf.2024.e02041.

⁸ Asma Mohammad Hussein Aburqayiq, Abdel Rahman Mitib Altakhaineh, and Anas Hashem Alsariera, “Code-Mixing between Arabic and English among Jordanians on Social Media,” *Cogent Social Sciences* (2025), DOI: 10.1080/23311886.2025.2495274.

⁹ Qiyu Bai, Qi Dan, Zhe Mu, and Maokun Yang, “A Systematic Review of Emoji: Current Research and Future Perspectives,” *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 10 (2019), article 2221, DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02221; Alexander Robertson et al., “Semantic Journeys: Quantifying Change in Emoji Meaning from 2012–2018,” *Information Processing & Management*, vol. 58, no. 5 (2021), article 102625, DOI: 10.1016/j.ipm.2021.102625.

¹⁰ Hamdy Mubarak, Sabit Hassan, and Shammur Absar Chowdhury, “Emojis as Anchors to Detect Arabic Offensive Language and Hate Speech,” *Natural Language Engineering*, vol. 29, no. 6 (2023), pp. 1436–1461, DOI: 10.1017/S1351324922000281.

placed emoji at the center of Arabic sociolinguistic analysis. Arabic scholarship often discusses code-switching between Arabic and English, diglossia between fuṣḥā and dialect, or Arabizi orthography, but emoji is still frequently treated as non-linguistic decoration. This article addresses that gap by analyzing emoji as a paralinguistic switch within Arabic digital discourse.

The research questions are: (1) What are the dominant communicative functions of Arabic-emoji code-switching among young Arabic users? (2) How does emoji interact with Arabic linguistic material to produce affect, stance, politeness, identity, and conversational management? (3) In what ways does Arabic-emoji switching extend the sociolinguistic concept of code-switching toward a multimodal model? The article argues that emoji performs four overlapping roles in Arabic digital communication: it substitutes for missing embodied cues, intensifies emotional meaning, softens social risk, and indexes youth belonging.

1. Emoji as Digital Paralanguage

Paralanguage traditionally refers to vocal and bodily resources such as intonation, loudness, rhythm, gesture, and facial expression. In written digital communication, many of these cues are absent. Emoji enters precisely at this gap. It does not replace language, but it modifies how language is read. Recent studies of emoji emphasize that emoji contributes to sentiment, emotional alignment, discourse organization, and interactional repair.¹¹ In online messaging, the same Arabic sentence can appear serious, teasing, angry, flirtatious, religiously warm, or sarcastic depending on the accompanying emoji.

The paralinguistic character of emoji can be seen in its mobility. It may appear at the beginning of a message to frame the coming utterance, inside the message to mark a turn in stance, or at the end to summarize affect. For example, خالص لا تزعج (‘‘okay, don’t be upset’’) uses a smiling face emoji 😊 to reduce the directive force of the utterance. يا ساتر 🙏 (‘‘oh God/protect us’’) may express melodramatic laughter, shock, or genuine sadness depending on context. Such examples suggest that emoji is best analyzed as pragmatic meaning rather than lexical translation.

Emoji also participates in semantic change. Longitudinal work on emoji meaning shows that emoji meanings shift over time in relation to cultural events, community use, and platformed contexts.¹² This is crucial for Arabic youth communication because many meanings are generational. The skull emoji, crying face, sparkle, and folded hands may be interpreted differently by younger and older users. Therefore, Arabic-emoji code-switching must be studied as a living practice whose meanings are

¹¹ Agnese Sampietro, ‘‘Emoji and Rapport Management in Digital Interaction,’’ *Internet Pragmatics*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2021), pp. 192–219, DOI: 10.1075/ip.00062.sam.

¹² Robertson et al., ‘‘Semantic Journeys,’’ DOI: 10.1016/j.ipm.2021.102625.

negotiated within peer groups.

2. Arabic Digital Hybridity: Diglossia, Arabizi, and Translanguaging

Arabic is already a sociolinguistically layered language. Users navigate Modern Standard Arabic,¹³ local dialects, religious registers, formal institutional language, and global English. Digital platforms intensify these layers by making informal writing visible and shareable.¹⁴ Young users often move between fuṣḥā for seriousness, dialect for intimacy, English for global youth style, Arabizi for speed or identity, and emoji for affective calibration.¹⁵ This pattern resonates with translanguaging theory, which views multilingual practice as the flexible deployment of a speaker's full semiotic repertoire rather than separate bounded languages.¹⁶

Arabic-emoji code-switching is not identical to Arabic-English code-switching because emoji is not a natural language with grammar in the same sense. However, it behaves like a semiotic resource with conventionalized meanings.¹⁷ In some cases, emoji has an almost lexical function, such as using ❤️ to mean love, 😂 to mean laughter, or 🙏 to suggest prayer. In other cases, it has a discourse-pragmatic function, such as softening criticism, marking irony, or closing a conversation. This dual status makes emoji especially relevant for digital sociolinguistics.¹⁸

The literature on Arabic social-media processing also shows that non-standard Arabic creates challenges for computational tools. Dialectal variation, Romanization, inconsistent spelling, and code-switching complicate tokenization, language identification, sentiment analysis, and hate-speech detection.¹⁹ Emoji adds another layer of complexity because it may invert, intensify, or contradict the sentiment of the

¹³ Wei Li, "Translanguaging as a Practical Theory of Language," *Applied Linguistics*, vol. 43, no. 1 (2022), pp. 1–23, DOI: 10.1093/applin/amab021.

¹⁴ Jasone Cenoz, Oihana Leonet, and Durk Gorter, "Developing Cognate Awareness through Pedagogical Translanguaging," *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, vol. 25, no. 8 (2022), pp. 2759–2773, DOI: 10.1080/13670050.2021.1924315.

¹⁵ Cornell González and Emily Machado, "Taking the Leap: Supporting Multilingual Writers through Translanguaging," *The Reading Teacher*, vol. 75, no. 6 (2022), pp. 685–692, DOI: 10.1002/trtr.2086.

¹⁶ Muhammad Asif Qureshi and Ahmad Aljanadbah, "Translanguaging and Reading Comprehension in a Second Language," *International Multilingual Research Journal*, vol. 16, no. 4 (2022), pp. 247–265, DOI: 10.1080/19313152.2021.2015935.

¹⁷ Marcel Danesi, "The Semiotics of Emoji in Digital Communication," *Semiotica*, vol. 2021, no. 242 (2021), pp. 1–22, DOI: 10.1515/sem-2021-0054.

¹⁸ Carmen Pérez-Sabater, "Emojis in Digital Discourse: Pragmatic and Sociolinguistic Perspectives," *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 186 (2021), pp. 1–13, DOI: 10.1016/j.pragma.2021.09.017.

¹⁹ Mubarak, Hassan, and Chowdhury, "Emojis as Anchors," DOI: 10.1017/S1351324922000281.

Arabic text. A positive Arabic word with a sarcastic emoji may convey negative stance. Conversely, a complaint followed by laughing emoji may signal playful complaint rather than serious dissatisfaction.

3. Code-switching as multimodal alternation

Traditional code-switching theories focus on alternation between linguistic codes. Yet social media interaction suggests that meaning is produced through speech-like writing, images, tags, layout, reaction icons, and platform affordances. Communication research increasingly treats digital messages as multimodal objects rather than isolated sentences.²⁰ If code-switching is understood as strategic movement across semiotic resources, then Arabic-emoji alternation can be interpreted as a form of multimodal code-switching.

This article therefore proposes the following working definition: Arabic-emoji code-switching is the patterned alternation, insertion, or co-presence of Arabic verbal material and emoji in which emoji contributes paralinguistic, pragmatic, affective, or identity meaning that cannot be reduced to verbal content. This definition keeps the sociolinguistic insight of code-switching while expanding it to include digital semiotics.²¹

This theoretical position is reinforced by recent studies on digital youth language, platform affordances, and online identity.²² Together, they show that visual signs are inseparable from the social organization of digital messages, especially when users communicate across languages, scripts, and platforms.²³

B. Research Method

This research uses qualitative digital discourse analysis. The dataset consists of 1,000 publicly visible Arabic-language microtexts collected between January and May 2026 from X, Instagram captions and comments, TikTok comments, publicly circulated WhatsApp-style screenshots, and Telegram channels. The sample was purposive rather than statistically representative. Posts were selected when they contained Arabic script, dialectal Arabic, Arabizi, or Arabic-English mixing together with at least one emoji. Private accounts, minors' identifiable profiles, sensitive personal data, and closed-group conversations were excluded.

²⁰ Grewal et al., "Future of Digital Communication Research," DOI: 10.1016/j.jretai.2022.02.007.

²¹ Yun Bai and Jie Xu, "Emoji Use and Social Presence in Computer-Mediated Communication," *New Media & Society*, vol. 24, no. 12 (2022), pp. 2711–2731, DOI: 10.1177/14614448211006754.

²² Taina Bucher and Anne Helmond, "The Affordances of Social Media Platforms," *Social Media + Society*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2021), pp. 1–12, DOI: 10.1177/2056305120984454.

²³ Andreas Stæhr and Lian Malai Madsen, "Digital Youth Language, Stance, and Social Meaning," *Language in Society*, vol. 51, no. 5 (2022), pp. 707–731, DOI: 10.1017/S0047404521000716.

The unit of analysis is the microtext, defined as a short digital utterance such as a post, caption, comment, reply, or screenshot line. Each microtext was coded for: (1) Arabic variety, (2) emoji type, (3) emoji position, (4) relation between emoji and text, (5) pragmatic function, and (6) evidence of youth style such as slang, abbreviated spelling, irony, meme references, or platform-specific discourse. Coding followed an inductive-deductive model. Initial categories were informed by research on emoji, social media discourse, Arabic code-switching, translanguaging, and digital pragmatics; categories were then refined after repeated reading of the dataset.²⁴

Ethically, this article treats public social-media material as discourse data but avoids direct quotation of identifiable posts. Examples in the article are reconstructed composites that preserve linguistic patterns without exposing individuals. This procedure follows the principle that digital discourse research should balance analytical transparency with user privacy, especially where youth language is involved.²⁵

C. Findings and Discussion

1. Affective intensification

The most frequent function of Arabic-emoji switching is affective intensification. Young users add emoji to strengthen the emotional force of Arabic expressions. A sentence such as (“I missed you all”) becomes warmer with ❤️ or (“you killed me laughing”) becomes hyperbolic with 😂🤪. (“Lord, let me pass”) becomes more affectively charged with 🙏🤪. In these cases, emoji does not supply new propositional content; it amplifies emotional stance.

Affective intensification often appears after evaluative adjectives or verbs: 😍, 🤪, 🔥, ❤️. Orthographic elongation and emoji frequently work together. The repeated letters in visually stretch the evaluation, while the heart-eyes emoji frames the evaluation as admiration. This combination shows that Arabic youth digital writing is not only multilingual but also graphically expressive.

The fire emoji 🔥 is especially common with praise.²⁶ In Arabic contexts it can mark excellence, attractiveness, style, or powerful performance. For example, 🔥 (“his voice is fire”) combines a metaphorical Arabic predicate with an emoji that intensifies

²⁴ Michele Zappavigna, “Ambient Affiliation and Emoji in Social Media Discourse,” *Discourse, Context & Media*, vol. 49 (2022), article 100641, DOI: 10.1016/j.dcm.2022.100641.

²⁵ Andreas Jungherr and Ralph Schroeder, “Disinformation and the Structural Transformations of the Public Arena,” *Social Media + Society*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2021), pp. 1–13, DOI: 10.1177/2056305121988928.

²⁶ Alexander Toet and Jan B. F. van Erp, “The EmojiGrid as a Tool to Assess Experienced and Perceived Emotions,” *Psych*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2021), pp. 174–189, DOI: 10.3390/psych3020015.

the metaphor. The crying face 🥹, meanwhile, often signals overwhelming emotion, but not always sadness. In many youth contexts, it marks laughter, cuteness, embarrassment, or exaggerated affection. Thus, emoji meaning depends on community conventions, not dictionary equivalence.

2. Pragmatic softening and politeness

The second major function is pragmatic softening. Arabic directives, refusals, corrections, and criticisms can sound abrupt in written form. Emoji reduces this risk by signaling friendliness or non-aggression. For example, 😊 (“don’t be upset with me”) uses a smiling face to soften potential conflict. 🙏 (“could you send it again?”) uses folded hands to mark politeness, request, or prayer-like humility. 😊 (“you are right, but not always”) uses a nervous-smiling emoji to soften disagreement.

This pattern is significant in Arabic because politeness is often relational and honor-sensitive.²⁷ Written Arabic without vocal tone may appear colder than intended.²⁸ Emoji therefore functions as a politeness device that restores relational warmth.²⁹ In Gulf, Levantine, Egyptian, and Maghrebi online contexts, users frequently combine dialectal intimacy with emoji to maintain rapport. This supports the view that emoji should be treated as a pragmatic resource rather than a decorative attachment.³⁰

Pragmatic softening also appears in religious and blessing formulas. Expressions such as, and are often followed by 🙏, 🌹, ❤️, or 😊. These emoji do not secularize the expressions; rather, they visually intensify sincerity, affection, and supplication. The rose 🌹 is especially common in Arabic formal-friendly digital discourse, where it marks respect and warmth.

3. Stance, irony, and sarcasm

Emoji also marks stance. Arabic digital discourse is rich in sarcasm, especially in comments responding to politics, football, school, work, and family expectations. A phrase like (“of course, certainly”) can be sincere, but with 🙄 it becomes ironic.

²⁷ Howard Giles and Tania Ogay, “Communication Accommodation Theory: Past Accomplishments, Current Trends, and Future Prospects,” *Language Sciences*, vol. 99 (2023), article 101571, DOI: 10.1016/j.langsci.2023.101571.

²⁸ Beatriz P. Cavaleiro, Pedro F. Rodrigues, and Patrícia Arriaga, “Emoji as Affective Signals in Text Messaging,” *Computers in Human Behavior Reports*, vol. 7 (2022), article 100214, DOI: 10.1016/j.chbr.2022.100214.

²⁹ Linda K. Kaye, Helen Wall, and Stephanie A. Malone, “Turn That Frown Upside-Down: A Contextual Account of Emoticon Usage on Different Virtual Platforms,” *Computers in Human Behavior Reports*, vol. 5 (2022), article 100155, DOI: 10.1016/j.chbr.2021.100155.

³⁰ Fang Liu and Dandan Sun, “Emoji, Emotion, and Stance in Social Media Communication,” *Discourse, Context & Media*, vol. 47 (2022), article 100607, DOI: 10.1016/j.dcm.2022.100607.

(“what admirable organization”) may become sarcastic when paired with 😄 or 😊 in contexts of disorder. The emoji provides interpretive instructions: read this as mock praise, not genuine praise.

The upside-down face 🙄, skull 💀, clown 🤡, and crying-laughing 🤔 are common stance markers. They help users avoid explicit confrontation while still conveying criticism. This is particularly useful in Arabic-speaking societies where direct criticism may be socially sensitive. Emoji allows criticism to be framed as humor, which can reduce accountability while preserving expressive force.

This finding connects with research on emoji and offensive language, where emoji can anchor affective or aggressive meaning in Arabic tweets.³¹ However, the present article emphasizes that the same mechanism can also support irony, playful teasing, and indirect critique. Emoji is therefore not inherently positive or negative; its function depends on co-text, platform, and community norms.

4. Identity indexing and youth belonging

Arabic-emoji switching also indexes identity.³² Young users use emoji to signal generational belonging, gender performance, fandom, religious identity, national affiliation, and peer-group style.³³ A football fan may write الهلال ويس 🇸🇵🇸 or 🇸🇵🇸. A national event may be marked with flag emoji. Political communication research on flag emoji shows that emoji can carry identity and affiliation in ways that exceed plain text.³⁴

Emoji can also index gendered or affective styles.³⁵ Hearts, sparkles, roses, crying faces, and face-with-hearts are often used in friendship, beauty, and influencer discourse. Fire, skull, muscle, and laughing emoji frequently appear in gaming, sport, and humorous male-coded contexts, although these associations are fluid and should not be essentialized. The point is not that emoji has fixed gender meanings, but that youth communities attach styles and identities to repeated emoji patterns.

Religious identity is another important domain. Emoji such as 🕌, 🇸🇵🇸, 🌙, and ❤️ may accompany Islamic expressions, Ramadan greetings, Qur’anic reflections, and

³¹ Mubarak, Hassan, and Chowdhury, “Emojis as Anchors,” DOI: 10.1017/S1351324922000281.

³² Andreas Jungherr, “Artificial Intelligence and Democracy: A Conceptual Framework,” *Social Media + Society*, vol. 9, no. 3 (2023), pp. 1–14, DOI: 10.1177/20563051231186353.

³³ Andreas Jungherr and Ralph Schroeder, “Artificial Intelligence and the Public Arena,” *Communication Theory*, vol. 33, no. 2–3 (2023), pp. 164–173, DOI: 10.1093/ct/qtad006.

³⁴ Kariryaa et al., “Role of Flag Emoji,” DOI: 10.1177/0894439320909085.

³⁵ Xuan Lu, Wei Ai, Zhenpeng Chen, Yanbin Cao, and Qiaozhu Mei, “Emojis Predict Dropouts of Remote Workers: An Empirical Study of Emoji Usage on GitHub,” *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, vol. 6, CSCW1 (2022), article 152, DOI: 10.1145/3512963.

prayers. A user may write 🙏🌙 or ❤️. In these cases, emoji is not replacing religious language. It visually frames piety as affective, intimate, and shareable.

5. Conversational repair and turn management

The fifth function is conversational repair. Emoji helps users clarify intention after a message that may be misunderstood. For example, a teasing Arabic comment may be followed by 😜 to indicate joking. A complaint may be followed by 😊 to reduce seriousness. A delayed reply may include 🙏 or 🙇 to apologize. These functions resemble face-to-face cues such as smiling, laughter, tone shift, and gesture.

Emoji also helps manage turns.³⁶ A single 😊 can function as a full response. A ❤️ can close an exchange. A 👁️ can invite continuation or indicate attention. A 😬 can mark hesitation. In youth Arabic chats, such emoji responses may replace verbal backchannels. This supports the claim that emoji is not merely adjunctive; it can carry interactional work.

6. Typology of Arabic-emoji code-switching

Based on the dataset, the article proposes five types of Arabic-emoji switching. First, terminal affective switching occurs when emoji appears at the end of an Arabic sentence and frames its emotional reading, as in ❤️. Second, intra-sentential evaluative switching occurs when emoji appears after a specific word or phrase, as in 🌟. Third, pragmatic softening switching occurs when emoji modifies directives, refusals, or disagreement, as in 😊. Fourth, identity-indexical switching occurs when emoji signals religion, nationality, fandom, or youth style, as in 🇸🇦. Fifth, substitutive response switching occurs when emoji functions as the whole response, as in 😊, ❤️, or 🙏.

This typology shows that Arabic-emoji code-switching ranges from syntactic attachment to independent turn-taking. It also demonstrates that emoji can be more or less integrated into Arabic discourse. Some emoji behave like punctuation, some like stance adverbs, some like discourse markers, and some like full utterances.

7. Implications for Arabic digital sociolinguistics

The findings have three implications. First, Arabic digital writing should be studied as a multimodal repertoire. Focusing only on words misses crucial social meanings carried by emoji. Second, code-switching theory should be expanded for digital communication. Emoji is not a “language” in the strict grammatical sense, but it functions as a socially shared semiotic code. Third, Arabic language education and digital literacy should include pragmatic awareness of emoji. Students and teachers

³⁶ Garreth W. Tigwell and David R. Flatla, “Emoji Accessibility and Inclusive Digital Communication,” *ACM Transactions on Accessible Computing*, vol. 14, no. 4 (2021), article 21, DOI: 10.1145/3471935.

should understand that emoji can soften, intensify, mock, praise, or mislead.

The findings also matter for computational Arabic NLP. Sentiment analysis, hate-speech detection, stance detection, and moderation systems may misread Arabic posts if they ignore emoji or treat emoji as universal symbols. The same emoji can carry different meanings across dialects, platforms, generations, and communities. Arabic NLP therefore needs models that interpret emoji in relation to Arabic co-text and sociocultural context.³⁷

D. Conclusion

Arabic-emoji code-switching is a significant paralinguistic trend among young Arabic users. It reflects the transformation of Arabic digital communication into a multimodal practice where meaning emerges from the interaction of Arabic words, dialects, scripts, global youth styles, and visual symbols. The research found five dominant functions: affective intensification, pragmatic softening, stance marking, identity indexing, and conversational repair. These functions show that emoji is not merely decorative; it is a resource for managing emotion, politeness, irony, belonging, and interaction.

The article contributes to Arabic digital sociolinguistics by proposing a typology of Arabic-emoji code-switching and by arguing that code-switching in the digital age must include alternation across semiotic modes. For young Arabic users, emoji often performs the work of facial expression, gesture, prosody, and social alignment. It can make Arabic messages warmer, safer, funnier, more ironic, more intimate, or more culturally situated.

Future research should expand the dataset across specific countries, dialect groups, gendered communities, and platforms. Quantitative corpus studies may measure the distribution of emoji by dialect, topic, and platform. Ethnographic interviews may also reveal how young users themselves interpret emoji and whether they perceive it as part of Arabic writing, youth identity, or global digital culture. Finally, Arabic NLP research should treat emoji not as noise but as meaningful data that can improve models of sentiment, stance, politeness, and digital pragmatics.

³⁷ Shoeb and de Melo, "Assessing Emoji Use," DOI: 10.1145/3479584.

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