



THE HIDDEN MEANING OF EMOJIS IN
ADVERTISING DISCOURSE: A PRAGMATIC AND
SEMANTIC ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The article analyses emojis in advertising discourse as carriers of implicit, context-dependent and culturally coded meanings. Drawing on semiotic, semantic and pragmatic theory, the study proposes a five-part functional description of emojis in Uzbek-language digital advertising: referential, illocutionary-modulating, intensifying, deictic-structural and culturally coded. It is shown that emojis rarely duplicate the verbal message; rather, they soften or strengthen directives, generate implicatures of urgency and reliability, and activate cultural frames. The polysemy of emojis, platform-dependent rendering and accessibility problems are discussed as factors of communicative risk. The results may be applied in advertising linguistics, digital pragmatics and copywriting practice.

1. Introduction

Emojis have become one of the most visible features of digital communication. Conceived as small pictographs for mobile messaging, they are now standardised in the Unicode system and used daily by a very large number of people. Advertisers on social networks and messengers use them systematically: an announcement on Telegram or Instagram rarely appears without at least one pictograph. Yet their role is usually perceived as merely decorative. This article argues that emojis in advertising discourse carry meanings that are partly hidden – implied, culturally coded and dependent on context – and that these meanings can be described with the tools of semantics and pragmatics.



Research on emoji has developed rapidly [1]. Danesi interprets emoji as the core of an emerging visual language [2], whereas Evans [3] and Gawne and McCulloch [4] emphasise that emojis behave more like gesture and intonation than like words, that is, they mainly perform pragmatic functions. Dresner and Herring [5] showed that nonverbal icons such as emoticons can signal the illocutionary force of an utterance and not only an emotion. Kralj Novak et al. [6] built an emoji sentiment ranking, demonstrating that emojis have measurable affective values, while Stark and Crawford [7] draw attention to the social conditions in which the emoji repertoire is shaped. Yus's cyberpragmatics [8] applies relevance theory [9] to internet-mediated communication. Few studies, however, systematically combine the semantic and pragmatic description of emojis in advertising, and Uzbek-language material remains largely outside this research.

The aim of the article is to describe the semantic cores and pragmatic functions of emojis in advertising discourse and to explain how their hidden meanings arise. The research questions are: (1) what semantic information do advertising emojis encode; (2) which pragmatic functions do they perform in relation to the verbal text; and (3) which factors make their interpretation unstable.

2. Methods

The analysis is qualitative and proceeds on two levels. At the semantic level, emojis were described according to their sign type – iconic (resemblance), indexical (contiguity) or symbolic (convention) [10] – and their conventional semantic core. At the pragmatic level, three frameworks were combined: Searle's classification of illocutionary acts [11] together with Dresner and Herring's notion of illocutionary force modulation by nonverbal icons [5]; Grice's theory of conversational implicature [12]; and the relevance-theoretic view that interpretation seeks the most relevant meaning in the given context [8, 9].

The material consists of model Uzbek-language advertising posts of the type typical of Telegram and Instagram (announcements of products, discounts, delivery and seasonal offers) in which emojis co-occur with verbal text. The examples are used for illustrative qualitative analysis; because emoji designs vary between platforms, the analysis is based on the Unicode names and conventional semantic cores of the emojis, not on a particular graphic rendering.

3. Results

Five functions of emojis in advertising discourse were identified. Table 1 shows representative emojis, their semantic cores and the meanings they typically imply in advertising.



Table 1. Semantic cores and implied advertising meanings of selected emojis

Emoji	Semantic core	Pragmatic function	Implied meaning in advertising
🔥	fire	Intensifier	Popularity, urgency, a 'hot' offer
💣	explosion	Intensifier	Scale of a discount or novelty
✅	check mark	Assertive reinforcement	Verification, reliability, completeness of the offer
👇	finger pointing down	Deictic marker	Directs attention to the call to action (link, price, contact)
😊	smiling face	Softener of directive	Friendliness, reduced pressure on the addressee
🙏	folded hands	Polysemous marker	Request, gratitude or respect; resolved by context
🌙	crescent moon	Cultural marker	Religious or seasonal frame (e.g. Ramadan offers)

Referential function. Emojis may replace or reinforce a noun, as in Plov 🍲 – oilaviy dasturxon ('Plov – the family table'). The pictograph denotes the dish, but at the same time it activates a frame of family, hospitality and tradition that the verbal text only names. Here the emoji is iconic at the denotative level and symbolic at the connotative one; its hidden meaning is the associated cultural scenario.

Modulation of illocutionary force. The same directive acquires different forces with and without an emoji: Buyurtma bering. ('Place an order.') sounds like a bare command, while Buyurtma bering 😊 reads as a friendly invitation. In terms of Dresner and Herring [5], the pictograph signals how the utterance is to be taken. A wink, as in Narxlar tushdi 😏 ('Prices have dropped'), adds a conspiratorial tone and implicates something like 'you will not regret it', a meaning that is never asserted.

Intensification and urgency. Emojis such as 🔥 and 💣 intensify the verbal message: Chegirma –30% 🔥🔥. Repetition of an emoji works as an iconic marker of quantity, so that two flames signal a stronger offer than one. From a Gricean viewpoint, such use exploits the maxim of quantity: the addressee infers that the offer is more exceptional than the figure alone would suggest. The effect is an implicature of scarcity or time pressure.

Deictic and structural function. Emojis such as 👇 and ➡️ replace verbal pointers (quyida, batafsil) and direct the reader's attention to the call to action, whereas ✅ and similar signs replace bullet points in lists of benefits (✅ Bepul yetkazib berish ✅ Kafolat). They organise



the message, and in a relevance-theoretic sense reduce processing effort by indicating where the key information is located [9]. At the same time, the check mark carries a subtle claim: it visually ‘confirms’ the statement next to it and thereby creates an impression of verification even when no evidence is offered, which touches the maxim of quality [12].

Cultural coding and polysemy. Some emojis depend heavily on cultural interpretation. The crescent 🌙 in an announcement of evening offers may be read simply as ‘night’ in one context, and as a marker of Ramadan in another. The emoji 🙏 may signal a request (‘please’), thanks or a religious gesture, and the correct reading is chosen only through the verbal context and the audience’s background knowledge. Such polysemy makes emojis efficient for targeting a specific community but risky when the audience is mixed.

Sequences and combinations. Emojis seldom occur alone: they form clusters whose meaning is not a simple sum of their parts. In Yangi kolleksiya keldi 😊🛒🌟 the first pictograph expresses the advertiser’s affective stance, the second names the activity of shopping, and the third adds an aura of novelty and attractiveness. Placed at the end of the sentence, the cluster functions like a prosodic contour: it does not add a new proposition but tells the addressee in what emotional key the proposition is to be received. Position is therefore pragmatically significant – emojis at the beginning of a line often act as attention-catching markers or bullets, those inside the sentence as substitutes for words, and those at the end as markers of attitude and illocutionary force.

A worked example. Consider the model post 🔥 Faqat bugun! Kiyimlarga –40% ✅ Bepul yetkazib berish 🚚 Buyurtma bering 📍 😊. The initial 🔥 attracts attention and implicates popularity. The adverb faqat bugun (‘today only’) explicitly marks the limited time, while the repeated emphasis through emojis intensifies it. The check mark makes the delivery promise look verified. The truck 🚚 is iconic and illustrates the service, and the pointing finger 📍 deictically directs the reader to the link. The final 😊 softens the directive Buyurtma bering and creates a friendly tone. The verbal text alone would present four propositions and one command; with emojis, the post additionally conveys urgency, verification, friendliness and navigation – layers of meaning that are never stated but are inferred by the addressee at low processing cost.

4. Discussion

The results support the view that emojis in advertising work mainly at the pragmatic level, as gesture-like or intonation-like signals [3, 4], although the referential and culturally coded uses show that a purely pragmatic account is incomplete. Their meaning is not decoded from a fixed dictionary but inferred, which is precisely why advertisers can use them to communicate things that are not explicitly stated. Because implicatures are cancellable, an advertiser can imply urgency, popularity or reliability through 🔥 or ✅ without formally making a claim that could be challenged. This aspect of emoji use deserves attention in discussions of advertising ethics and consumer protection.



The relation of the emoji to the verbal text can also be described in terms of redundancy and complementarity. Redundant emojis repeat what the words already say (Yetkazib berish 🚚) and mainly serve attention and visual appeal; complementary emojis add stance, force or cultural framing that the words do not contain (Narxlar tushdi 😊). Hidden meaning arises primarily in the complementary cases, and this is where the risk of misinterpretation is also the highest. A practical consequence is that the analysis of advertising texts that ignores emojis misses a part of their communicative content, in the same way as transcripts that ignore intonation miss a part of spoken meaning.

Three factors make the interpretation of advertising emojis unstable. The first is polysemy and cultural variation, discussed above. The second is platform-dependent rendering: the same Unicode character may look different on different devices and, consequently, may convey a slightly different emotional tone. The third is accessibility: assistive technologies usually read out emoji names, so that a message with many pictographs may be fragmented or confusing for visually impaired users. Moreover, the growing use of AI-assisted copywriting may lead to the automatic insertion of emojis according to statistical patterns rather than communicative intention, which raises the question of whether the hidden meanings described here will be preserved or flattened.

The study has limitations. It relies on illustrative qualitative material and does not measure audience reactions. Future research should test the proposed functional classification on a large annotated corpus of Uzbek-language advertising and verify the interpretations experimentally with respondents of different ages, languages and cultural backgrounds.

5. Conclusion

Emojis in advertising discourse are not mere decoration. They perform referential, illocutionary-modulating, intensifying, deictic-structural and culturally coded functions, and through these generate implicatures that enrich, soften or strengthen the verbal message. Their hidden meaning is a product of the interaction between a conventional semantic core, the verbal context and the cultural knowledge of the audience. Describing emojis in this way helps linguists to account for the pragmatics of digital advertising and helps practitioners to use emojis more consciously and responsibly.

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