

Youth and the Evolution of Symbolic Expression: A Study

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Abstract

Symbolic communication refers to the use of signs, symbols, and gestures to convey meaning beyond literal expression. It is a fundamental aspect of human interaction, enabling individuals to share ideas, emotions, beliefs, and cultural values in both verbal and nonverbal forms. Rooted in the principles of Semiotics and Symbolic Interactionism, symbolic communication emphasizes how meaning is socially constructed and interpreted through shared systems of representation. This study explores the role of symbolic communication across interpersonal, cultural, and digital contexts. In everyday interactions, symbols such as language, facial expressions, and gestures function as tools for meaning-making, shaping perceptions and guiding behavior. Cultural symbols—such as rituals, attire, and traditions—serve to reinforce group identity and continuity, while also enabling cross-cultural understanding when interpreted appropriately. The paper also highlights how symbolic communication has evolved in the digital age, where emojis, memes, and visual media have emerged as powerful symbolic forms that transcend linguistic barriers. Furthermore, symbolic communication plays a crucial role in influencing social structures and relationships. Through symbols, individuals negotiate identity, express power dynamics, and create shared realities. However, the interpretation of symbols is often context-dependent, leading to potential miscommunication across different cultural or social groups.

Keywords: symbols, communication, non verbal, digital media, modern era

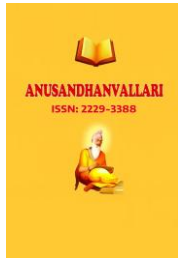
Introduction

Communication is simply the act of transferring information from one place to another. Although this is a simple definition, when we think about how we may communicate the subject becomes a lot more complex.

Communication is sending and receiving information between two or more people. The person sending the message is referred to as the sender, while the person receiving the information is called the receiver. The information conveyed can include facts, ideas, concepts, opinions, beliefs, attitudes, instructions and even emotions.

Communication (from Latin *commūnicāre*,) meaning ‘to share’ is the act of conveying intended meanings from one entity or group to another through the use of mutually understood signs and semiotic rules.

Communication is a process of exchanging information, ideas, thoughts, feelings and emotions through speech, signals, writing, or behavior. In communication process, a sender (encoder) encodes a message and then using a medium/channel sends it to the receiver (decoder) who decodes the message and after processing information, sends back appropriate feedback/reply using a medium/channel.



Types of Communication

People communicate with each other in a number of ways that depend upon the message and its context in which it is being sent. Choice of communication channel and your style of communicating also affect communication. So, there is a variety of types of communication.

Verbal Communication

Verbal communication refers to the form of communication in which message is transmitted verbally; communication is done by word of mouth and a piece of writing. Objective of every communication is to have people understand what we are trying to convey. When we talk to others, we assume that others understand what we are saying because we know what we are saying. But this is not the case. Usually people bring their own attitude, perception, emotions and thoughts about the topic and hence creates barrier in delivering the right meaning.

Verbal Communication is further divided into:

- Oral Communication
- Written Communication

Oral Communication

In oral communication, Spoken words are used. It includes face-to-face conversations, speech, telephonic conversation, video, radio, television, voice over internet. In oral communication, communication is influence by pitch, volume, speed and clarity of speaking.

Written Communication

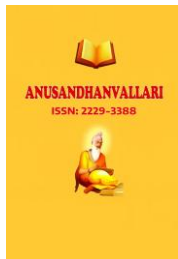
In written communication, written signs or symbols are used to communicate. A written message may be printed or hand written. In written communication message can be transmitted via email, letter, report, memo etc. Message, in written communication, is influenced by the vocabulary & grammar used, writing style, precision and clarity of the language used.

Written Communication is most common form of communication being used in business. So, it is considered core among business skills. Memos, reports, bulletins, job descriptions, employee manuals, and electronic mail are the types of written communication used for internal communication. For communicating with external environment in writing, electronic mail, Internet Web sites, letters, proposals, telegrams, faxes, postcards, contracts, advertisements, brochures, and news releases are used.

Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication is the sending or receiving of wordless messages. We can say that communication other than oral and written, such as gesture, body language, posture, tone of voice or facial expressions, is called nonverbal communication. Nonverbal communication is all about the body language of speaker.

Nonverbal communication helps receiver in interpreting the message received. Often, nonverbal signals reflect the situation more accurately than verbal messages. Sometimes nonverbal response contradicts verbal communication and hence affects the effectiveness of message.



Language uses words to represent meanings so people can communicate their thoughts to each other. Words are often spoken or written, but they can take other forms such as **symbols**. People who do not speak may use symbols as a way to express their thoughts.

A symbol is a mark, sign, or word that indicates, signifies, or is understood as representing an idea, object, or relationship. Symbols allow people to go beyond what is known or seen by creating linkages between otherwise very different concepts and experiences. All communication (and data processing) is achieved through the use of symbols. Symbols take the form of words, sounds, gestures, ideas or visual images and are used to convey other ideas and beliefs. For example, a red octagon may be a symbol for "STOP". On a map, a blue line might represent a river. Numerals are symbols for numbers. Alphabetic letters may be symbols for sounds. Personal names are symbols representing individuals. A red rose may symbolize love and compassion. The variable 'x', in a mathematical equation, may symbolize the position of a particle in space.

Symbol sets vary in important ways including: how pictorial, how guessable, how flexible, how consistent and how visually complex. It is important to choose symbols to match the needs of the individual. Selecting symbols for the communication environment is also important. Practical issues such as whether symbol software is available to produce materials, or which symbols are available for a particular AAC system, will also influence the choice.

Facial Expressions

Facial expressions are responsible for a huge proportion of nonverbal communication. Consider how much information can be conveyed with a smile or a frown. The look on a person's face is often the first thing we see, even before we hear what they have to say.

While nonverbal communication and behavior can vary dramatically between cultures, the facial expressions for happiness, sadness, anger, and fear are similar throughout the world.

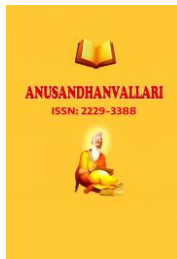
Gestures

Deliberate movements and signals are an important way to communicate meaning without words. Common gestures include waving, pointing, and using fingers to indicate numeric amounts. Other gestures are arbitrary and related to culture. In courtroom settings, lawyers have been known to utilize different nonverbal signals to attempt to sway juror opinions. An attorney might glance at his watch to suggest that the opposing lawyer's argument is tedious or might even roll his eyes at the testimony offered by a witness in an attempt to undermine his or her credibility. These nonverbal signals are seen as being so powerful and influential that some judges even place limits on what type of nonverbal behaviors are allowed in the courtroom.

Paralanguage

Paralinguistic refers to vocal communication that is separate from actual language. This includes factors such as tone of voice, loudness, inflection and pitch. Consider the powerful effect that tone of voice can have on the meaning of a sentence. When said in a strong tone of voice, listeners might interpret approval and enthusiasm. The same words said in a hesitant tone of voice might convey disapproval and a lack of interest.

Consider all the different ways simply changing your tone of voice might change the meaning of a sentence. A friend might ask you how you are doing, and you might respond with the standard "I'm fine," but how you actually say those words might reveal a tremendous amount of how you are really feeling.



A cold tone of voice might suggest that you are actually not fine, but you don't wish to discuss it. A bright, happy tone of voice will reveal that you are actually doing quite well. A somber, downcast tone would indicate that you are the opposite of fine and that perhaps your friend should inquire further.

Body Language and Posture

Posture and movement can also convey a great deal of information. Research on body language has grown significantly since the 1970's, but popular media have focused on the over-interpretation of defensive postures, arm-crossing, and leg-crossing, especially after publishing Julius Fast's book *Body Language*. While these nonverbal behaviors can indicate feelings and attitudes, research suggests that body language is far more subtle and less definitive than previously believed.

Proxemics

People often refer to their need for "personal space," which is also an important type of nonverbal communication. The amount of distance we need and the amount of space we perceive as belonging to us is influenced by a number of factors including social norms, cultural expectations, situational factors, personality characteristics, and level of familiarity. For example, the amount of personal space needed when having a casual conversation with another person usually varies between 18 inches to four feet. On the other hand, the personal distance needed when speaking to a crowd of people is around 10 to 12 feet.

Eye Gaze

The eyes play an important role in nonverbal communication and such things as looking, staring and blinking are important nonverbal behaviors. When people encounter people or things that they like, the rate of blinking increases and pupils dilate. Looking at another person can indicate a range of emotions including hostility, interest, and attraction.

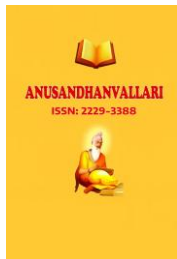
People also utilize eye gaze as a means to determine if someone is being honest. Normal, steady eye contact is often taken as a sign that a person is telling the truth and is trustworthy. Shifty eyes and an inability to maintain eye contact, on the other hand, is frequently seen as an indicator that someone is lying or being deceptive.

Haptics

Communicating through touch is another important nonverbal behavior. There has been a substantial amount of research on the importance of touch in infancy and early childhood. Harry Harlow's classic monkey study demonstrated how deprived touch and contact impedes development. Baby monkeys raised by wire mothers experienced permanent deficits in behavior and social interaction. Touch can be used to communicate affection, familiarity, sympathy, and other emotions.

Appearance

Our choice of color, clothing, hairstyles, and other factors affecting appearance are also considered a means of nonverbal communication. Research on color psychology has demonstrated that different colors can evoke different moods. Appearance can also alter physiological reactions, judgments, and interpretations. Just think of



all the subtle judgments you quickly make about someone based on his or her appearance. These first impressions are important, which is why experts suggest that job seekers dress appropriately for interviews with potential employers.

Significance Of The Study

The significance of this study is to attain more knowledge as of how communication through symbols is impactful or not. The study would lead us to know the effect of communication impacting people's lives through symbols and other aspects of it. Symbols are used widely in everyday life as a kind of visual language. Road signs, care symbols on clothing, or direction symbols at an airport are examples of how symbols can convey information quickly and effectively. Symbols can be read, regardless of the person's language or literacy skills. People with communication difficulties may benefit from using symbols to understand what other people are saying, as well as to express what they want to say.

Objectives Of The Study

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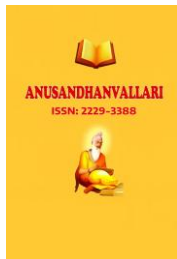
- To know whether symbols are preferred over text in communication.
- To know the usage of various symbols in communication.
- To study the significance of different symbols.
- To know if symbols convey messages better than words.
- To know as to which category (male/female) has more awareness regarding these symbols.

Hypotheses

- Symbols are often preferred as compared to text.
- Females make use of symbols in their conversation more than males.
- Youth are more inclined towards using smiley's as compared to other symbols.
- Whatsapp is the most preferred platform for using symbols.
- Males are more aware of automobile symbols as compared to females.
- Males are on forefront while recognizing political symbols.

Research Methodolgy

The case study is based on a mixed-methods approach involving both quantitative and qualitative data collection. A survey was conducted among 200 university students aged 18–25, complemented by in-depth interviews with a smaller subset of participants. The objective was to explore patterns of symbolic usage, interpretive variations, and the perceived effectiveness of digital symbols in communication. The findings indicate that symbolic communication in digital contexts is not merely supplementary to textual interaction but often functions as a primary mode of expression. Approximately 78% of respondents reported that they rely on emojis to convey emotional nuance in everyday conversations, while 65% indicated that memes serve as a powerful medium for expressing complex social or political opinions that may be difficult to articulate through conventional language.



One of the key insights emerging from the study is the contextual nature of symbolic meaning. Unlike traditional linguistic systems, where meaning is relatively stable, digital symbols are highly fluid and subject to rapid reinterpretation. For instance, the meaning of a particular emoji can vary significantly depending on factors such as cultural background, relationship between communicators, and situational context. This variability underscores the interpretive nature of symbolic communication, where meaning is co-constructed by participants rather than fixed in the symbol itself. The study also reveals that shared digital culture plays a crucial role in facilitating understanding, as individuals who are familiar with specific online trends or communities are better equipped to interpret symbolic content accurately.

Another important dimension explored in this case study is the role of symbolic communication in identity construction. Participants reported using digital symbols strategically to present themselves in specific ways, whether to appear humorous, empathetic, or socially aware. Memes, in particular, were identified as a form of participatory culture, allowing individuals to engage in collective meaning-making while simultaneously expressing personal perspectives. This aligns with the broader theoretical proposition that identity is not a fixed attribute but an ongoing performance shaped through symbolic interaction. Social media platforms provide a space where such performances are continuously enacted, evaluated, and modified based on feedback from others.

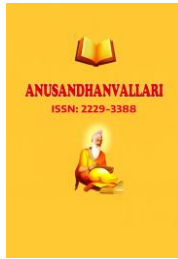
The study also examines the relationship between symbolic communication and power dynamics. While digital platforms democratize the creation and dissemination of symbols, they also reflect existing social hierarchies and cultural norms. Certain symbols gain prominence and legitimacy through widespread usage, often influenced by popular culture, media, and influential users. At the same time, marginalized groups may use symbolic communication as a means of resistance, creating alternative symbols or reinterpreting existing ones to challenge dominant narratives. This highlights the dual nature of symbolic communication as both a tool of social control and a medium of empowerment.

Despite its advantages, symbolic communication in digital contexts is not without challenges. The study identifies ambiguity as a significant issue, with participants frequently reporting misunderstandings arising from the misinterpretation of emojis or memes. Unlike face-to-face interaction, digital communication lacks many contextual cues, increasing the likelihood of miscommunication. Additionally, the rapid evolution of symbolic meanings can create generational or cultural gaps, where certain symbols are understood differently or not at all by different groups. These challenges point to the need for greater awareness of context and audience in digital communication.

Furthermore, the case study highlights the cognitive and emotional implications of symbolic communication. The use of symbols allows for more efficient communication by condensing complex ideas into easily recognizable forms, but it may also lead to oversimplification. For example, while emojis can effectively convey basic emotions, they may not capture the full complexity of human experience. Nevertheless, participants generally viewed symbolic communication as enhancing rather than diminishing the quality of interaction, particularly in maintaining social connections in digital environments.

Symbolic communication constitutes one of the most distinctive and defining features of human social existence, representing a complex system through which individuals create, interpret, and negotiate meaning within diverse social contexts. Unlike instinctual or purely biological forms of communication observed in other species, symbolic communication relies on shared conventions, cultural agreements, and cognitive processes that allow abstract representation. It enables humans to transcend immediate sensory experience and engage in sophisticated forms of interaction involving imagination, memory, and anticipation.

At its core, symbolic communication is grounded in the use of signs, symbols, gestures, language, and visual representations that carry meanings not inherently tied to their physical form but instead derived from collective



understanding. The relationship between a symbol and what it represents is arbitrary and socially constructed, allowing symbolic systems to remain flexible and adaptable across time and space.

Symbolic communication is deeply intertwined with cognition, enabling individuals to categorize experiences, form concepts, and engage in higher-order thinking. It plays a crucial role in the development of human consciousness and identity formation. Individuals understand themselves and others through symbolic interpretation, making communication a dynamic and evolving process.

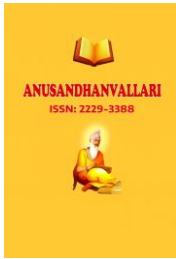
In everyday life, symbolic communication manifests through verbal and nonverbal forms. Language serves as the most elaborate system, while gestures, facial expressions, and tone add additional layers of meaning. Cultural symbols such as rituals, traditions, and attire reinforce group identity and continuity. The digital age has further transformed symbolic communication through emojis, memes, and visual media, enabling rapid and expressive interaction. However, these developments also introduce challenges such as ambiguity and misinterpretation.

Symbolic communication is also linked to power and influence. Media, politics, and advertising use symbols strategically to shape perception and behavior. At the same time, individuals actively interpret and sometimes resist dominant symbolic meanings. Ultimately, symbolic communication is central to human interaction, shaping thought, culture, identity, and social reality. Understanding its dynamics enhances effective communication and intercultural understanding in an increasingly interconnected world.

In conclusion, this case study demonstrates that symbolic communication is a dynamic and multifaceted process that plays a crucial role in contemporary digital interaction. It extends beyond the transmission of information to encompass the construction of meaning, identity, and social relationships. The findings underscore the importance of context, shared cultural knowledge, and interpretive flexibility in understanding symbolic communication. As digital technologies continue to evolve, so too will the symbolic systems that underpin human interaction, making it essential for researchers and practitioners to continuously examine how meaning is created and negotiated in an increasingly interconnected world.

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