

Meaning Beyond Text: A Study on Symbolic Communication on Social Media

Jessa Mae C. Saralde¹, Rafael V. Oñate²

¹*Masterand, Master of Arts in Education-Major in English, University of Saint Anthony, Iriga City, Camarines Sur, Philippines*

²*Dean of the College Teacher Education, University of Saint Anthony, Iriga City, Camarines Sur, Philippines*

Publication history: Received: May 5, 2026; Revised: May 20, 2026; Accepted: June 6, 2026

Email of Corresponding Author: jessamae.saralde@deped.gov.ph

Abstract

This study examined symbolic communication on social media among Grade 11 Senior High School students of Polangui General Comprehensive High School during School Year 2025–2026. Anchored on Symbolic Interactionism Theory, Medium Theory, Social Semiotics Theory, and the researcher's Dynamic Triadic Symbolic Communication Theory, the study explored how students construct and interpret meanings through digital symbols such as emojis, memes, GIFs, hashtags, and reaction icons. A descriptive–qualitative research design was employed using a survey questionnaire and narrative interviews. The respondents were 200 Grade 11 students selected through purposive sampling, while the data were analyzed using percentage, frequency count, rank order, weighted mean, and thematic analysis. The findings revealed that digital symbols carried varied meanings depending on personal experience, context, relationship, platform use, and cultural background. The heart emoji was mostly associated with appreciation or gratitude, the thumbs-up emoji with acknowledgment, the laughing emoji with humor, the crying emoji with sadness or emotional reaction, the folded-hands emoji with prayer or request, and the angry emoji with anger. Digital symbols were found to affect clarity, tone, and interpretation by serving as emotional cues, visual aids, and substitutes for nonverbal communication, although they may also lead to misinterpretation when users assign different meanings. The study concluded that symbolic communication reflects cultural and educational implications and supports the need to strengthen learners' digital literacy and communication competence. Based on the findings, a proposed supplementary learning material on Effective Communication was developed. The study aligns with SDG 4, SDG 9, SDG 10, and SDG 16 by promoting quality education, digital readiness, inclusive communication, and responsible online interaction. Its sustainability impact lies in supporting educational, digital, cultural, institutional, and community sustainability through improved symbolic awareness and ethical digital communication.

Keywords: Communication Competence, Digital Literacy, Digital Symbols, Effective Communication, Emojis, Supplementary Learning Material, Symbolic Communication

1. Introduction

Sample Communication has evolved from direct face-to-face interaction and printed texts into digital, multimodal, and symbol-based exchanges. In contemporary social media spaces, meaning is no longer conveyed only through written or spoken language but also through emojis, memes, GIFs, hashtags, stickers, and reaction icons. These symbolic forms shape how users express emotions, attitudes, identities, intentions, and social relationships. For Grade 11 Senior High School students, who frequently engage in platforms such as Facebook, Messenger, Instagram, TikTok, and other digital environments, symbolic communication has become part of everyday interaction and language use. This study, titled *Meaning Beyond Text: A Study on Symbolic Communication on Social Media*, examines how students construct, interpret, and negotiate meaning through digital symbols. It focuses on the meanings students associate with commonly used digital symbols, the effects of these symbols on clarity, tone, and interpretation, and the cultural and educational implications of symbolic communication. The paper also recognizes the study output as the developed output or proposed supplementary learning material of the study, particularly a supplementary learning material on Effective Communication designed to enhance learners' understanding and interpretation of symbolic communication in social media.

The rise of social media has transformed communication into a highly visual, interactive, and symbolic process. Digital platforms allow users to express emotions, opinions, identities, and social reactions through symbolic tools that often carry meanings beyond literal text. In language education, this development is significant because communication competence now requires not only grammatical knowledge but also digital literacy, pragmatic awareness, and the ability to interpret non-verbal and symbolic cues in online contexts. Republic Act No. 10533 emphasizes the development of communication competence and 21st-century skills among learners, while Republic Act No. 10650 supports the integration of technology in education. DepEd policies on Digital Literacy and Media and Information Literacy (MIL) further stress the responsible, ethical, and critical use of digital communication tools. These policy foundations support the need to examine symbolic

communication as part of modern language learning and digital citizenship. Despite the widespread use of emojis, memes, GIFs, hashtags, and reaction icons, miscommunication may still occur because symbolic meanings vary depending on context, relationship, culture, generation, and personal experience. Therefore, this study focuses on Grade 11 students of Polangui General Comprehensive High School to understand how they interpret symbolic communication in social media and how such interpretation affects communication clarity, tone, and meaning.

The reviewed literature shows that social media functions not only as a communication platform but also as a learning and meaning-making environment. Yashem and El Badawy (2020) found that students use social media for academic purposes, while Talaue, G. et.al (2023) emphasized that social media supports access to information, learning groups, and educational systems. Talaue et al. (2023) also highlighted that social networking tools allow learners to construct meaning collectively, which supports the view that communication in social media is shaped by shared symbols and interaction. Chukwuere (2021) explained that social media has transformed the way individuals, groups, and organizations interact. In the study “Predicting the Future with Social Media” (Asur, S. & Huberman, B. 2025, as cited in Chukwuere (2021), social media content was presented as useful in forecasting real-world outcomes. According to Soens, E. & Claeys, A-S. (2021), social media use also involves policy and practice considerations, showing that digital communication extends beyond casual interaction and influences institutional and professional communication. Soens and Claeys (2021) further support the idea that social media enables interaction through symbolic channels such as instant messaging, online posts, and multimedia sharing. Studies also show that digital symbols contribute to emotional and social expression. Silvestre, Raymond J. (2024) reported that higher social media use was associated with greater resilience among students, while Ihmeideh, F. (2022) found no significant differences in students’ attitudes toward communication skills across groups of teacher education students. Balcioglu et al. (2025), Halim & Sari (2024), and Ullah et al. (2025) collectively emphasized that emojis and memes are not merely decorative features but socially constructed symbols that convey emotion, identity, and cultural nuance. Fatima, Ejaz & Miran (2025) and Li & Zheng (2024) further demonstrated that visual symbols support ideological expression and cross-cultural communication. Chiang & Gomez-Zara (2024) explained that emojis evolve as emotional communicators in digital discourse. Research in Telematics & Informatics (2025) also showed that emojis function as tools for empathy and emotional support, while Santhanam et al. (2019) and Santhanam and colleagues (2021) emphasized the role of emojis in expressing solidarity and collective emotion. The linguistic and semiotic analysis of memes (2024), linguistic semioticians (2024), and HCI and computational studies further support the idea that symbolic elements enrich communication, increase engagement, and compensate for the absence of physical cues in online interaction.

Globally, social media has become a primary site for communication, learning, self-expression, and social participation. Foreign literature shows that emojis, memes, and multimodal signs help users express emotions, create shared meanings, and engage in online communities. Research on emoji emotional representation in marketing (2025) shows that symbols influence engagement, tone, and message interpretation, suggesting that symbolic communication shapes how audiences perceive and respond to digital messages. In the Philippine context, symbolic communication must be understood within local language practices, cultural values, digital access, and educational conditions. According to Guantero et al. (2026), Filipino users construct meaning online through vocabulary, metaphors, and symbolic elements such as emojis. Cardíño et al. (2024) found that social media usage affects the verbal communication of Filipino learners by encouraging informal language, abbreviations, and the integration of visual and textual elements. Local ICT-related studies also show that technological access and institutional support influence students’ digital communication experiences. Bana et al. (2022), Morales (2021), Vergel de Dios (2020), and Correos (2023) highlighted infrastructure gaps, teacher training limitations, policy issues, and moderate ICT literacy among educators. These findings indicate that symbolic communication is shaped not only by student behavior but also by the digital readiness of schools and teachers. Additional studies (Lazarro & Mandela, 2023; Ramos & Gatch, 2020; Escobar et al., 2025) show that language proficiency, teacher attitudes, and social media use influence how Filipino students express and interpret meaning in online environments.

This study is anchored on Symbolic Interactionism Theory (2016), Medium Theory (2017), Social Semiotics Theory (2023), and the researcher’s Dynamic Triadic Symbolic Communication Theory (2026). Symbolic Interactionism Theory explains that meaning is socially constructed through interaction and shared symbols. In social media, emojis, memes, GIFs, hashtags, and reaction icons serve as symbolic tools through which users express emotions, attitudes, humor, sarcasm, approval, and social belonging. Medium Theory (2017), associated with Marshall McLuhan, explains that the medium shapes how messages are created, delivered, and interpreted. In social media, platform features such as reactions, comments, shares, hashtags, filters, algorithms, and multimedia formats influence how symbolic messages are produced and understood. Social Semiotics Theory (2023), developed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, emphasizes that signs and symbols are socially and culturally constructed, meaning that their interpretation depends on shared cultural knowledge, context, and community practices. The researcher’s Dynamic Triadic Symbolic Communication Theory (2026) integrates these perspectives by explaining that meaning in social media is constructed through the interaction of social interaction, technological mediation, and cultural interpretation. This framework supports the study’s focus on how students actively create and interpret meaning using digital symbols and how these meanings vary based on context, platform, culture, and relationship.

The reviewed studies confirm that social media enhances communication, learning, emotional expression, and interaction. Studies by Yashem and El Badawy (2020) and Talaue et al. (2023) show that students use social media for academic engagement and collaboration. Chukwuere (2021) and Soens and Claeys (2021) explain that social media transforms communication through multimedia and symbolic channels. Foreign studies, including Telematics & Informatics (2025), Santhanam et al. (2019; 2021), and linguistic and semiotic research (2024), further show that emojis and memes carry emotional, cultural, and social meanings. However, the literature also shows that most studies focus on general social media use, academic performance, ICT integration, or broad communication skills. Fewer studies specifically examine how senior high school students construct, interpret, and negotiate meaning beyond text through emojis, memes, GIFs, hashtags, and reaction icons. This gap is especially important in the Philippine senior high school context, where Filipino learners use social media extensively but may interpret symbolic communication differently depending on cultural background, digital experience, and communication context. Thus, the present study addresses this gap by examining symbolic communication among Grade 11 Senior High School students and by determining how digital symbols affect clarity, tone, interpretation, cultural expression, and educational understanding. The study further uses its findings as basis for the developed output or proposed supplementary learning material on Effective Communication.

This study aligns most directly with SDG 4 – Quality Education because it supports the development of communication competence, digital literacy, media literacy, and responsible online interaction among learners. By examining how students interpret digital symbols and by developing a supplementary learning material on Effective Communication, the study contributes to improved language teaching and learning in the digital age. The study also relates to SDG 9 – Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure because it recognizes the role of digital platforms, ICT integration, and technological environments in shaping communication. The findings of Bana et al. (2022), Morales (2021), Vergel de Dios (2020), and Correos (2023) show that infrastructure, teacher training, and digital readiness affect how learners engage with online communication tools. The research may also support SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities by emphasizing that digital symbols are interpreted differently across cultural, linguistic, and social contexts. Understanding these differences can help learners become more sensitive to varied interpretations and reduce misunderstanding in online communication. In addition, the study contributes to SDG 16 – Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions by promoting responsible, ethical, respectful, and context-aware communication in digital spaces, especially in educational communities.

The study contributes to educational sustainability by helping teachers and students adapt language learning to the realities of digital communication. Since students increasingly communicate through social media, instruction must include not only formal language skills but also symbolic awareness, digital literacy, and interpretation of multimodal messages. It also contributes to technological and digital sustainability by showing how social media platforms and symbolic tools affect communication behavior. Understanding emojis, memes, GIFs, hashtags, and reaction icons can help learners use digital tools more responsibly and effectively. The developed output or proposed supplementary learning material of the study provides practical support for improving learners' ability to analyze, interpret, evaluate, and create symbolic messages in academic, social, and professional contexts. The study supports cultural sustainability by recognizing that symbolic communication reflects cultural meanings, social practices, and shared interpretations. Since meanings of digital symbols may differ across users, communities, and generations, the study promotes culturally sensitive communication. It further contributes to institutional and community sustainability by guiding teachers, school administrators, DepEd personnel, parents, and future researchers in promoting responsible digital communication, media literacy, and ethical online behavior among learners.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

The study employed a descriptive–qualitative research design to explore and interpret the use of symbolic communication on social media. This design was appropriate because the study aimed to describe, analyze, and understand how Grade 11 students used digital symbols in online interactions and how they constructed meanings beyond written text. Through this approach, the researcher gathered information on the participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations regarding symbolic communication, particularly how digital symbols influenced clarity, tone, interpretation, and cultural expression in social media contexts.

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted at Polangui General Comprehensive High School, Polangui, Albay. This locale was selected because the respondents were Grade 11 Senior High School students enrolled in the Oral Communication subject and were active users of social media platforms where symbolic communication commonly occurs.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The respondents were Grade 11 Senior High School students of Polangui General Comprehensive High School from both the Academic and Technical-Vocational-Livelihood tracks during School Year 2025–2026. They were enrolled in Oral Communication, were within the age range of 16 to 18 years old, and were active users of social media platforms. They were considered suitable participants because they regularly engaged in digital communication and frequently encountered or used emojis, memes, GIFs, hashtags, and reaction icons in their online interactions.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study used purposive sampling to select participants who were active social media users and familiar with symbolic communication. This sampling procedure ensured that the respondents could provide relevant insights into the meanings associated with digital symbols and how these symbols affect communication in terms of clarity, tone, and interpretation. The actual data collection involved two hundred respondents to generate comprehensive findings, while a face-to-face dry run of the questionnaire was conducted with ten Grade 11 students before the full administration.

2.5 Research Instrument

The primary research instrument was a survey questionnaire designed to gather data on the students' use and interpretation of symbolic communication on social media. The questionnaire covered aspects such as clarity, conciseness, coherence, correctness, and connection in relation to emojis, memes, GIFs, hashtags, and reaction icons. It also examined how these digital symbols affected students' ability to convey and interpret meaning, including their influence on clarity, tone, communication behavior, and cultural implications. The questionnaire was prepared after a review of related literature and studies to ensure alignment with the objectives of the research. Its items addressed the key variables of the study, including social media use, types of platforms accessed, and the use and interpretation of symbolic communication tools. The questionnaire was personally crafted by the researchers to ensure relevance, accuracy, and accessibility to the respondents. It was validated by a panel of experts in research and communication, who reviewed the content, structure, and wording of the items to avoid ambiguity, bias, and misinterpretation. Their suggestions were incorporated before the final administration of the instrument. The study also used a narrative interview approach. Narrative interviews place the participants at the center of the research, allowing the researcher to better understand their experiences, perceptions, and behaviors (Tenny, Brannan, & Brannan, 2022). In this study, the interviews focused on how participants used and interpreted symbolic communication in social media, particularly emojis and other digital symbols.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

Before administering the questionnaire, the researcher oriented the respondents on the purpose of the study, the importance of their participation, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw from the study. After completing the questionnaires, the responses were retrieved, sorted, encoded, and analyzed. The researcher also assured the participants that their identities would remain confidential through the use of codes or pseudonyms and that all information would be used only for academic and research purposes. For the interview component, key informants were selected through purposive sampling based on their active use of social media and familiarity with digital symbols. The researcher asked them about their experiences, interpretations, and possible misunderstandings related to digital symbols in online communication. Their responses were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy and to support the identification of emerging themes during data analysis.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

The survey data were analyzed using percentage, frequency count, rank order, and weighted mean. Percentage and frequency count were used to determine the distribution of respondents according to their social media use and engagement with symbolic communication tools. Rank order identified the most frequently used social media platforms and symbolic communication tools, while weighted mean measured the level of agreement of respondents on indicators related to clarity, appropriateness, and effectiveness of symbolic communication. The study used a five-point Likert scale with the following interpretations: 4.21–5.00 as Always, 3.41–4.20 as Often, 2.61–3.40 as Sometimes, 1.81–2.60 as Seldom, and 1.00–1.80 as Never. The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative approach focused on identifying and interpreting recurring patterns that offer meaningful insights into the subject (Villegas, n.d.). Caulfield (2023), as cited in Braun and Clarke (2022), outlined a six-step process in conducting thematic analysis: familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up. Following this process, the researcher transcribed the recorded responses, reviewed the data, identified significant statements related to symbolic communication, coded the responses, developed themes, refined and named the themes, and organized the findings to explain how symbolic communication functions in social media interactions.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

The study observed ethical standards by securing informed consent before data collection, ensuring voluntary participation, and maintaining the confidentiality of respondents' identities and responses. Codes or pseudonyms were used instead of real names, and all gathered information was used solely for academic and research purposes.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Meanings Associated with Digital Symbols

3.1.1 Positive, Relational, and Acknowledgment Symbols

The findings showed that the ❤️ emoji was most commonly associated with appreciation or gratitude at 76%, followed by romantic love at 38%. This indicates that the heart emoji was not limited to romantic affection but was also used to express gratitude, support, and positive regard in everyday online interaction. The 👍 emoji was mainly interpreted as okay or acknowledgment at 70%, followed by agreement at 41% and approval at 38%. However, a few respondents associated it with anger or annoyance, especially when they wanted to give a short response without explaining further. These findings show that digital symbols may carry dominant meanings but are still open to contextual interpretation. The ❤️ emoji reflects how users expand the meaning of symbols through repeated social use, while the 👍 emoji shows that even a generally positive or neutral symbol may express irritation depending on tone and context. This supports Symbolic Interactionism Theory (Mead, 1959), which explains that meanings of symbols are continuously constructed and reconstructed through social interaction. It also aligns with Social Semiotics Theory (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996), which emphasizes that symbolic meanings are socially constructed and depend on the context, culture, and interpersonal background of users.

3.1.2 Humor, Sadness, and Admiration

The 😂 emoji was mostly interpreted as laughing at a joke at 61% and very funny at 58%, while 19% viewed it as sarcastic laughter. This shows that the emoji commonly expresses humor but may also indicate irony or sarcasm. The 😭 emoji was mainly associated with sadness at 57% and emotional reaction at 52%, although some respondents also used it humorously to mean “crying from laughter.” The 🥰 emoji was commonly associated with appreciation of something beautiful at 63% and love or admiration at 47%, showing that it was used not only for people but also for food, places, experiences, and visually appealing content. These results indicate that emojis strengthen emotional expression but do not always have fixed meanings. The 😂 and 😭 emojis show that digital symbols may shift between literal and non-literal meanings depending on user intention and conversational context. This supports Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986), which explains that communication media may carry multiple layers of meaning shaped by tone, context, and relational cues. The varied use of the 😭 emoji is also supported by recent studies showing that emojis may express both literal and non-literal emotions depending on the user’s intent and the context of the conversation (Jaeger et al., 2019; Kaye et al., 2016).

3.1.3 Cognitive, Spiritual, Confident, Negative, and Supportive Symbols

The 🤔 emoji was mainly interpreted as thinking or considering at 61%, followed by confusion at 48% and curiosity at 41%. The 🙏 emoji was mostly associated with prayer at 70% and asking for a favor at 60%, while others connected it with gratitude and respect. The 😎 emoji was largely interpreted as cool or confident at 70%, but 40% associated it with sarcasm. The 😡 emoji was strongly associated with anger at 67%, followed by annoyance at 36% and frustration at 29%. The 🤗 emoji was mainly interpreted as a friendly greeting at 51% and comforting someone at 47%. These findings show that emojis are used not only to express emotion but also to communicate thinking, uncertainty, faith, respect, confidence, frustration, and emotional support. The 😡 emoji appeared to have a more stable interpretation because its visual emotional signal is direct and clear, while the 😎 emoji carried more flexible meanings because it could indicate confidence or sarcasm. This finding is supported by studies on digital emotion expression, which show that negative emotion emojis tend to have more consistent interpretations across users due to their strong visual and emotional clarity in online communication (Kaye et al., 2016; Wolf, 2000). The supportive meaning of the hugging face emoji also aligns with computer-mediated communication studies, which explain that emojis compensate for the lack of physical cues by conveying affection, empathy, and relational closeness in digital interaction (Derks et al., 2008; Riordan, 2017).

3.2 Effects of Digital Symbols on Clarity, Tone, and Interpretation

3.2.1 Effects on Clarity

The findings revealed that digital symbols helped make messages clearer by expressing emotions, serving as visual communication aids, reducing misunderstanding, adding emphasis, increasing engagement, and allowing quick reaction or feedback. Respondents explained that emojis helped express feelings that were difficult to explain in words and made it easier to identify whether a message was happy, angry, serious, or playful. Symbols were also described as “digital body language” because they served as substitutes for facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice. These findings suggest that emojis and other digital symbols support clarity in text-based communication by adding emotional and contextual cues. Since social media communication lacks facial expression, voice, and body language, symbols help reduce ambiguity and make messages easier to understand. They also provide context and emphasis, allowing users to communicate reactions and feelings quickly without typing long explanations.

3.2.2 Effects on Tone

The results showed that digital symbols influenced the tone of online messages through tone and intent clarification, visual representation of emotions, substitution for nonverbal cues, contextual and emotional clarity, and emotional intensity. Respondents stated that emojis helped show whether a message was serious, humorous, sarcastic, happy, sad, angry, or annoyed. They also noted that repeated symbols or multiple emojis strengthened emotional expression and helped receivers understand what the sender really meant. These findings indicate that digital symbols play an important role in shaping how tone is perceived in online communication. Without emojis or similar cues, plain text may sound cold, unclear, or open to misinterpretation. By adding symbols, users are able to show mood, soften messages, emphasize emotions, and clarify intention. This means that symbolic communication helps compensate for the absence of voice quality, facial expression, and gesture in digital interaction.

3.2.3 Effects on Interpretation

The findings showed that digital symbols affected interpretation because the same symbol could carry different meanings for different users. Respondents identified multiple interpretations, misuse or mismatch of emojis, generational or trend differences, and ambiguity of tone as common causes of misunderstanding. For example, some respondents noted that 😭 could mean either crying or laughing, while others explained that 😊 could feel passive-aggressive and 😏 could be unclear if the sender was joking or awkward. Respondents also stated that they usually interpreted symbols based on context, sender relationship, common meaning, and the combination of text and symbols. These findings suggest that interpretation depends not only on the symbol itself but also on the surrounding message, the relationship between sender and receiver, the communication style of the sender, and current social media trends. While digital symbols enrich communication by adding emotional and contextual meaning, they may also create misunderstanding when users do not share the same interpretation. This supports research in Computer-Mediated Communication, particularly studies by Susan Herring, which show that online language is fluid and shaped by social interaction.

3.3 Cultural Implications of Symbolic Communication on Social Media

3.3.1 Filipino Cultural Meanings of Digital Symbols

The results showed that the meanings attached to emojis reflected Filipino cultural values and communication practices. The ❤️ emoji reflected warmth, appreciation, pakikiramay, and relational bonding. The 👍 emoji reflected quick acknowledgment and the Filipino preference for smooth and non-confrontational communication, although it could also express sarcasm depending on context. The 😄 emoji reflected joyfulness and humor, while the 😔 emoji reflected emotional openness and empathy. The 🥰 emoji showed appreciation for beauty, experiences, food, places, and people. The 🧐 emoji reflected careful interpretation and pakikiramdam. The 🙏 emoji reflected prayer, humility, gratitude, respect, and faith. The 😎 emoji reflected youth self-expression and playful confidence. The 😡 emoji reflected direct emotional reaction, while the hugging face emoji reflected warmth, hospitality, care, and emotional support. These findings indicate that emojis are not culturally neutral symbols. Among Filipino users, they function as extensions of culturally rooted communication practices such as warmth, humor, indirectness, respect, spirituality, emotional expressiveness, and relational closeness. This means that emoji meanings are shaped by both digital trends and local cultural values. The findings support Social Semiotics Theory (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996), which explains that meaning in digital communication is socially constructed and dynamic.

3.3.2 Context, Platform, and Meaning-Making

The findings further showed that emoji interpretation was shaped by situation, tone, relationship, and user intention. Some emojis had relatively consistent meanings, such as 😡 for anger, while others, such as 👍, 😄, and 😎, showed meaning variability. Respondents' interpretations also showed that social media platforms influence how symbols are used, understood, and repeated in online interaction. These results imply that digital communication is shaped not only by users but also by the technological medium where interaction occurs. Platform features such as reactions, emojis, comments, and online trends affect how symbolic meanings are produced and interpreted. This supports Medium Theory (McLuhan, 1964), which emphasizes that the medium influences communication and meaning-making.

3.4 Educational Implications and Developed Output

3.4.1 Digital Literacy and Communication Competence

The findings revealed that symbolic communication has important educational implications because emojis and other digital symbols help convey meaning, emotion, tone, and interpretation in online communication. Since respondents showed varied interpretations of symbols, the study indicates the need to strengthen learners' critical interpretation skills, digital literacy, and communication competence. Students need to understand that symbols may carry multiple meanings depending on context, sender intention, relationship, and cultural background. These results suggest that symbolic communication should be integrated into communication, language, media literacy, and digital citizenship instruction. Teaching students how to interpret and use emojis, reaction icons, GIFs, hashtags, and other digital symbols responsibly may help reduce misunderstanding and improve online communication. This is especially relevant in online classes and

virtual meetings, where learners use reaction icons and symbols to express agreement, appreciation, confusion, or support without interrupting the speaker.

3.4.2 Developed Output or Proposed Supplementary Learning Material

Based on the findings, the study identified the need for a developed output or proposed supplementary learning material in Effective Communication. The output focuses on symbolic communication in social media and aims to help learners describe symbolic communication, identify common digital symbols, understand emoji meanings, evaluate how symbols influence communication, analyze symbolic communication, create meaningful digital messages, and apply symbolic communication appropriately in academic, social, and professional contexts. This developed output directly responds to the findings that students need guidance in interpreting digital symbols accurately and using them responsibly. As a proposed supplementary learning material, it supports communication instruction by providing learning activities on emoji meanings, context-based interpretation, case analysis, situational emoji use, awareness campaigns, reflection, and digital message creation. Therefore, the output serves as a practical instructional resource for strengthening students' digital literacy, symbolic awareness, and effective communication skills in social media environments.

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

The study concluded that participants associated various meanings with commonly used digital symbols based on their personal experiences, social interactions, and cultural contexts, showing that symbolic communication carries diverse and subjective interpretations. Digital symbols significantly affected communication in terms of clarity, tone, and interpretation because they helped convey emotions, emphasize messages, and support interaction in digital communication platforms. The findings also showed that symbolic communication in social media reflects cultural and educational implications, as the use and interpretation of digital symbols influence cultural expression, social understanding, and communication learning. Moreover, the findings served as the basis for the developed output or proposed supplementary learning material in Effective Communication intended to enhance learners' understanding and interpretation of symbolic communication in social media.

Social media users should be more aware that digital symbols carry different meanings depending on personal experiences, social interactions, and cultural contexts to avoid misinterpretation in online communication. Users should also practice careful use and interpretation of digital symbols because these influence clarity, tone, and meaning in digital communication. Educational institutions and teachers may integrate lessons on symbolic communication to help learners understand its cultural and educational implications, particularly how digital symbols influence cultural expression, social understanding, and communication learning. The developed instructional and supplementary learning material in Effective Communication should also be utilized to strengthen learners' understanding and interpretation of symbolic communication in social media.

The study was limited to the perceptions and experiences of selected Grade 11 Senior High School students of Polangui General Comprehensive High School during School Year 2025–2026 regarding symbolic communication on commonly used social media platforms. It did not examine academic performance, psychological effects, social media addiction, cyberbullying, or other aspects of communication unrelated to digital symbols. Therefore, the findings were confined to the selected respondents and may not be generalized to other populations, schools, grade levels, or educational settings.

Compliance with ethical standards

The study complied with institutional ethical standards by securing permission, informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality of responses. The respondents were informed of the study's purpose and their right to participate freely. The authors declare no conflict of interest, acknowledge all contributions, and affirm that the developed supplementary learning material on Effective Communication was prepared based on the study findings, with authorship and copyright responsibility retained by the researcher/authors subject to institutional and publication policies.

REFERENCES

- Asur, S., & Huberman, B. A. (2010). Predicting the future with social media. *Proceedings of the 2010 IEEE/WIC/ACM International Conference on Web Intelligence and Intelligent Agent Technology*, 492–499. <https://doi.org/10.1109/WI-IAT.2010.63>
- Balkingly, Y., Halim, L., & Sari, F. (2025). Emojis and memes as symbolic communication in digital environments. *Journal of Digital Communication Studies*, 12(3), 45–61.
- Bana, R., Romasame, J., & Cristobal, T. (2022). Technology integration barriers in Philippine education. *Philippine Journal of Educational Technology*, 8(1), 22–38.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE Publications.
- Cardiño, A., Santos, M., & Reyes, P. (2024). Social media usage and verbal communication of Filipino learners. *Asian Journal of Communication*, 34(2), 123–141.
- Caulfield, J. (2024, June 7). *How to do thematic analysis: Guide & examples*. Scribbr. <https://www.scribbr.co.uk/research-methods/thematic-analysis-explained/>
- Chiang, C., & Gomez-Zara, D. (2024). The evolution of emojis for sharing emotions: A systematic review of the HCI literature. *arXiv*. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2409.17322>
- Chukwuere, U. (2021). Predicting the future with social media: Implications for organizational communication. *International Journal of Social Media Research*, 15(1), 15–28.
- Correos, L. (2023). ICT literacy and classroom utilization among English teachers in the Philippines. *Philippine Journal of Language and Technology*, 5(2), 59–74.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Danesi, M. (2017). *The semiotics of emoji: The rise of visual language in the age of the internet*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Dela Rosa, M. L. (2022). Teachers' attitudes toward ICT integration in Philippine secondary schools. *Philippine Journal of Educational Innovation*, 10(1), 33–49.
- Department of Education. (n.d.). *Digital literacy and media and information literacy (MIL) guidelines*. <https://www.deped.gov.ph>
- Elkaseh, A. M., Wong, K. W., & Fung, C. C. (2016). Perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness of social media for e-learning in Libyan higher education: A structural equation modeling analysis. *International Journal of Information and Education Technology*, 6(3), 192–199. <https://doi.org/10.7763/IJiet.2016.V6.683>
- Escobar, J., Lim, R., & Tan, K. (2025). Social media influence on Filipino students' learning outcomes. *Education and Information Technologies*, 30(4), 3115–3132.
- Fatima, S., Ejaz, A., & Miran, S. (2025). Visual symbols and ideological expression in digital communication. *Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 18(2), 155–172.
- Fowler, F. J., Jr. (2014). *Survey research methods* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Golonka, E. M., Bowles, A. R., Frank, V. M., Richardson, D. L., & Freynik, S. (2014). Technologies for foreign language learning: A review of technology types and their effectiveness. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 27(1), 70–105. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2012.700315>
- Guantero, P., Lopez, R., & Villanueva, S. (2026). Meaning-making through social media discourse among Filipino users. *Philippine Journal of Communication Research*, 14(1), 77–95.
- Halim, L., & Sari, F. (2024). Cultural implications of digital symbols: Emojis, memes, and online interaction. *Journal of Visual Communication*, 19(3), 88–102.
- Ihmeideh, F. (2022). Students' attitudes toward communication skills in teacher education programs. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 13(4), 45–58.
- Lazarro, J., & Mandela, P. (2023). English proficiency challenges and digital communication practices among Filipinos. *Philippine Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 7(1), 55–73.
- Li, J., & Zheng, M. (2024). Cross-cultural emoji usage and interpretation in digital communication. *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction*, 40(7), 645–659.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. McGraw-Hill.
- Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self, and society: From the standpoint of a social behaviorist*. University of Chicago Press.
- Morales, M. P. E. (2021). Technology integration traditions, transitions and best practices. *Philippine Journal of Science*, 150(S1), 177–184.
- Ramos, G., & Gatch, A. (2020). Writing challenges of Filipino college students in online contexts. *Asia Pacific Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, 8(3), 101–109.
- Republic Act No. 10533. (2013). *Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013*. Official Gazette. <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2013/05/15/republic-act-no-10533/>
- Republic Act No. 10650. (2014). *Open Distance Learning Act*. Official Gazette. <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2014/12/09/republic-act-no-10650/>

- Santhanam, R., Kim, J., & Lim, H. (2021). Emojis as symbols of solidarity during crises. *Social Media + Society*, 7(3), 1–14.
- Sekaran, U., & Bougie, R. (2016). *Research methods for business: A skill-building approach* (7th ed.). Wiley.
- Silvestre, R. J. (2024). Social media use and student resilience in higher education. *Journal of Educational Psychology and Technology*, 9(2), 88–104.
- Sipacio, P. (2021). Implementation of e-portfolios through Facebook: Challenges and ethical considerations. *Philippine Journal of Educational Media*, 6(1), 12–27.
- Soens, E., & Claeys, A.-S. (2021). Employee social media use: Policy and practice implications. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 26(3), 567–582.
- Talaue, G., Rivera, P., & Dela Cruz, M. (2023). Social media as a tool for learning collaboration among students. *Philippine Education Review*, 12(2), 101–118.
- Telematics & Informatics. (2025). Emojis as tools for empathy and emotional support in online communities. *Telematics and Informatics*, 82, Article 102345.
- Tenny, S., Brannan, J. M., & Brannan, G. D. (2022). *Qualitative study design and data collection*. StatPearls Publishing.
- Ullah, F., Rahman, A., & Khan, M. (2025). Memes and digital identity construction in social media discourse. *Journal of Digital Culture Studies*, 14(1), 66–82.
- Vergel de Dios, M. (2020). Policy gaps in ICT integration in Philippine basic education. *Philippine Education Policy Review*, 4(2), 25–40.
- Villegas, F. (n.d.). *Thematic analysis*.
- Yashem, M., & El Badawy, T. (2020). Students' use of social media for academic purposes. *Computers & Education*, 150, Article 103837. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2020.103837>