

# The Functions Of Emoticons As Markers Of Bullying In Social Media Comments

Yuvantinus Effrem Warung<sup>1</sup>, Antonius Nesi<sup>2</sup>, Felycia Chaska Adan<sup>3</sup>

{[jeffremwarung@gmail.com](mailto:jeffremwarung@gmail.com)<sup>1</sup>, [antonynesi81@gmail.com](mailto:antonynesi81@gmail.com)<sup>2</sup>, [felyciaadan@gmail.com](mailto:felyciaadan@gmail.com)<sup>3</sup>}

<sup>123</sup>Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Indonesia Universitas Katolik Indonesia Santu Paulus Ruteng  
Jl. Jend. A. Yani No. 10 Ruteng, Indonesia 86518

**Abstract.** Cyberbullying on social media has become increasingly complex alongside the evolution of digital modes of expression, including the use of emoticons as markers of a speaker's stance. This study aims to analyze the functions of emoticons as indicators of bullying in users' comments and to explain how emoticons operate pragmatically and semiotically within online bullying practices. Employing a descriptive qualitative method, the research collected data through the documentation of screenshots of comments that contained signs of bullying. Data were analyzed using a multimodal approach by integrating Peirce's semiotic framework (icon–index–symbol) to interpret the meanings, intentions, and nonverbal communicative force conveyed through emoticons.

The findings show that emoticons function as nonverbal signals that reinforce, obscure, or replace verbal insults in comments; that the selection of emoticons is strongly influenced by the utterance context and the relational dynamics between commenter and target; and that particular emoticon variations produce different psychological effects on victims, ranging from subtle humiliation to overt intimidation. These results affirm that emoticons are not merely light or playful expressions but significant pragmatic elements in the construction of digital bullying. Future studies are recommended to develop multimodal automatic-detection models that integrate text, emoticons, and interaction patterns to enhance the effectiveness of content-moderation systems on social media platforms in Indonesia.

**Keywords:** emoticons; cyberbullying; Peircean semiotics; user comments; multimodal analysis.

## 1 Introduction

Cyberbullying on social media has emerged as a global phenomenon that affects mental health, academic performance among adolescents, and victims' social engagement. Systematic studies and literature reviews indicate that incidents of online bullying have increased during periods of intensive social media use (including during and after the COVID-19 pandemic), with prevalence varying across countries, measurement methods, and age groups. Recent international systematic reviews also emphasize that social media platforms provide channels for anonymity, broad reach, and accelerated content circulation, all of which heighten the risks of cyberbullying and extend the duration of victims' exposure

[1]. Emoticons (along with emojis and stickers) have become an integral part of written communication on social media; they function as a form of digital *paralanguage* that helps signal emotions, attitudes, irony, or the sender's intentions when text alone is susceptible to misinterpretation. Numerous empirical studies and literature reviews have found that emoticons and emojis play a role in clarifying the sender's affective intentions, enhancing "social presence," and reducing ambiguity in short online messages. Their use is also associated with social motivations—such as expressing familiarity, humor, or a sarcastic tone—which are highly relevant for analyzing comment-based bullying practices [2].

Preliminary findings from several studies and forensic linguistic analyses indicate that emoticons can function as amplifiers of bullying meanings (e.g., reinforcing mockery or adding a taunting nuance), as mitigators (e.g., inserting a smiling emoticon to downplay responsibility), or even as symbols of implicit threats (e.g., weapon emojis or other aggressive symbols). Moreover, the combination of harmful textual content with specific emoticons often alters how readers interpret communicative intent—positioning emoticons as pragmatic markers that may serve as important indicators in identifying bullying. However, these patterns are highly dependent on linguistic, cultural, and platform-specific contexts, underscoring the need for systematic empirical research to formalize these relationships and develop analytical guidelines [3].

Within Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory, a sign is understood as something that represents something else in the mind of an interpreter through a triadic process consisting of the representamen, the object, and the interpretant [4]. The representamen refers to the perceptible form of the sign, the object is the entity to which the sign refers, and the interpretant is the meaning or understanding that emerges in the mind of the receiver. Peirce classifies signs into three main categories: icons, indices, and symbols. Icons are signs that bear a resemblance to the objects they represent; indices have a causal or existential connection to their objects; and symbols are based on social conventions or cultural consensus. [5] In the context of emoticons as markers of bullying within social media comments, emoticons may function as symbols, as shared conventions of digital communication shape their meanings; however, they may also operate as indices, as they often directly reflect the sender's emotional stance or harmful intentions toward a target [6]. Thus, the analysis of emoticons in bullying practices can be examined through Peirce's triadic framework to reveal how the representamen of emoticons shape negative interpretations and produce bullying meanings for recipients.

Several previous studies provide foundational support for this research; [7] examined the social motives underlying emoticon use and its impact on message interpretation; [8] offered a systematic review of emoji research demonstrating their emotional and semantic functions; [9] reviewed theoretical perspectives and empirical findings on emoticons/emoji/stickers in computer-mediated communication (CMC); and [10], along with other studies, showed that emoticons enhance perceived richness and enjoyment in online interactions. More recent research has explored the effects of emojis on social attribution and emotion interpretation. Nonetheless, there remains limited scholarship that explicitly investigates the role of emoticons as elements that mark or intensify bullying within public comment sections [11].

Although the literature on emojis/emoticons and on cyberbullying is relatively wealthy, several critical gaps remain to be explored: (a) most emoticon studies focus on affective or emotional functions, yet few systematically investigate the role of emoticons as markers or intensifiers of bullying (e.g., their use to mock, heighten sarcasm, or label targeted individuals); (b) cyberbullying research often centers on lexical text (words/phrases) and insufficiently integrates multimodal analysis (text + emoticons/emojis + other media) within user comments; and (c) there is a need for contextualized studies on specific platforms and sociocultural environments (e.g., variations in emoticon use in Indonesian-language contexts or within particular online communities). Therefore, research that focuses on the functions of emoticons as markers of bullying in user comments addresses these methodological and conceptual gaps [12].

Based on the research gaps outlined above, this study aims to describe patterns of emoticon use in user comments containing derogatory or hostile expressions. These objectives align with existing literature that emphasizes the importance of multimodal analysis and a deeper understanding of the role of digital nonverbal signals in the dynamics of online interaction [13].

The urgency of this research arises from both practical and scholarly considerations. Practically, content moderation and automated cyberbullying detection systems on social media platforms require a more nuanced understanding of multimodal elements, including emoticons, to enhance user protection. Scholarly significance emerges from the need to understand how emoticons function as markers of bullying, which can enrich Peircean semiotics and contribute methodological insights, such as the development of multimodal indicators for bullying detection. Furthermore, within the local Indonesian linguistic and cultural context, such analysis is essential given the variations in emoticon use and the dynamics of online communities that may differ from cross-cultural findings. Consequently, this study holds relevance for academics, platform practitioners, and policymakers concerned with child and youth protection in digital environments [14].

## **2 Research Method**

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach combined with multimodal analysis to examine the role of emoticons as markers of bullying in users' comments on social media. The qualitative approach was selected because it enables the researcher to explore the meanings, pragmatic functions, and contextual uses of emoticons in bullying practices in depth. This aligns with Creswell's view that qualitative methods are effective for uncovering social phenomena through the interpretation of message meaning [15]. The data sources in this study consist of two types: primary data in the form of user comments on social media platforms (such as Instagram or Facebook) that contain elements of bullying and emoticons, and secondary data in the form of journal articles discussing emoticons and cyberbullying.

The sampling technique employed in this study was purposive sampling, which involved selecting comments based on specific criteria: (1) the comment contains emoticons or emojis, (2) the comment displays indications of bullying (such as insults, sarcasm, or


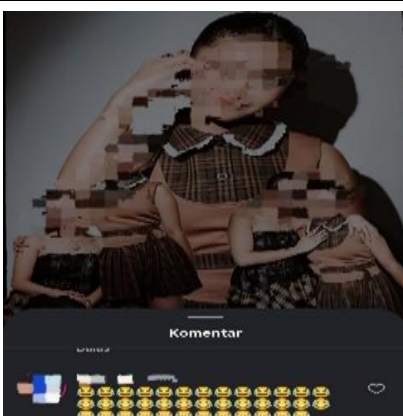
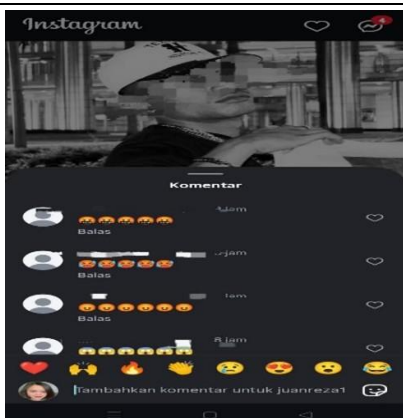
mockery), and (3) the comment is publicly accessible and ethically appropriate for analysis. This technique aligns with the explanation provided by [16], which states that purposive sampling is used when researchers require data that are genuinely relevant to the study's focus. Data collection was carried out in three stages: (1) observing and downloading comments on selected posts that contained a high density of bullying indicators; (2) documenting the emoticons used within those comments; and (3) recording the social context surrounding each comment. This data collection technique follows the qualitative content analysis approach, as recommended by [17], who emphasizes the importance of systematically coding meaning units in qualitative data. Data were analyzed using content analysis and multimodal analysis. In the initial stage, comments were categorized based on the forms of bullying they contained (e.g., mocking, degrading, or cornering the target). The emoticons were then examined for their functions using a pragmatic functional framework (e.g., emoticons as intensifiers of insults, markers of sarcasm, or triggers of conflict). The next stage involved multimodal analysis, integrating interpretations of verbal text and emoticons as a unified meaning structure, as developed in studies by [18]. These studies emphasize that emoticons can strengthen, alter, or soften the meaning of an utterance, including in negative contexts such as bullying. The validity of the study was maintained through theoretical triangulation and peer checking [19]. Through this analysis, the study produced a description of emoticon usage patterns, their pragmatic functions as markers of bullying, and a multimodal framework that can be applied in future research as well as in digital content moderation efforts in Indonesia.


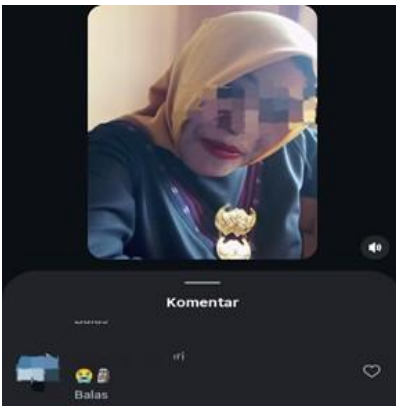

### 3 Research Findings


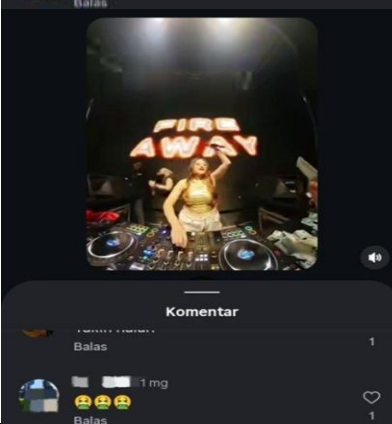
Based on the data collection and identification process, it was found that the use of emoticons is consistently bound to their contextual deployment. The following table presents several samples of bullying-related emoticons accompanied by descriptions of their usage contexts, as derived from the data sources.

Table 1. Data and Contexts of Emoticon Use in Bullying within Social Media Comments

No	Data	Context
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<p>1</p>		<p>Ola Ramlan's decision to remove her hijab sparked disapproval from some of her followers. One of them responded with a thumbs-down emoticon.</p>
<p>2</p>		<p>A well-known Indonesian dangdut singer, actress, and comedian posted a photo with her child, and one follower commented by using a large number of laughing emoticons.</p>
<p>3</p>		<p>A singer from Eastern Indonesia uploaded a photo taken abroad, and an anonymous account responded with a sequence of angry emoticons, indicating strong dislike toward the photo or the person featured in the post.</p>










4		<p>An Indonesian actress posted a photo with her child and her new partner, who is a professional Indonesian football player. Several accounts commented using vomiting emoticons, dog emoticons, and short-leg emoticons.</p>
5		<p>An Instagram user uploaded a reel conveying a positive message about a life partner. Another user commented using a crying emoticon and a Moai statue head emoticon, the intended meaning of which was ambiguous and lacked clear contextual justification.</p>
6		<p>An Instagram user posted a reel video, which received comments containing a vomiting emoticon, a pile-of-feces emoticon, and a face-with-rolling-eyes emoticon, without any clear or explicit justification.</p>









7		An Indonesian actress, who is also a DJ, previously married to a well-known comedian and a mother, uploaded a reel showing her performing as a DJ at a nightclub. The post received comments containing a vomiting emoticon and a thumbs-down emoticon; some users also posted explicitly negative remarks, such as references to HIV, without any apparent or justifiable reason for such comments.
8		An Indonesian actress, who is also a DJ, previously married to a well-known comedian and a mother, uploaded a reel showing her performing as a DJ at a nightclub. The post received comments containing a vomiting emoticon and a thumbs-down emoticon; some users also posted explicitly negative remarks, such as references to HIV, without any apparent or justifiable reason for such comments.

Based on the sample data above, the researcher classified the types of emoticons according to Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory, as presented in the table below.

Table 2. Classification of Emoticons as Markers of Bullying  
Based on Peircean Semiotic Perspective

No	Type of Emoticon	Icon (Visual Resemblance)	Index (Causal / Contextual Relation)	Symbol (Social Cultural Convention)	Interpretant (Meaning in the Reader's Mind)	Function in the Context of Bullying
1	😏	A face with a smirking expression	Subtle insinuation or ironic stance	A symbol of condescension	A belittling attitude	Conveying implicit mockery

2		A tense, smiling facial expression	Indicator of discomfort or sarcasm	A symbol of awkward mockery	A harsh insinuation toward the target; awkward yet derisive	Covert sarcasm and public embarrassment
3		An inverted facial expression	Signals a reversal of the literal meaning	A symbol of irony/sarcasm	The opposite of what is stated	Passive-aggressive mockery
4		Image of a pig	Refers to greediness or filth	A symbol of insult and dehumanization	“You are disgusting/greedy.”	Dehumanization and physical/character-based insult
5		Hand-to-forehead gesture	Spontaneous reaction to perceived stupidity or error	A symbol of disappointment	“You are embarrassing/stupid.”	Intellectual harassment
6		Face laughing with tears	Immediate reaction of laughing at something/someone	A symbol of ridicule	“This is very funny” (laughing at the target)	Collective ridicule and public shaming
7		Devil-like face	Indicator of mischievous or malicious intent	A symbol of evil or taunting	“I intentionally want to hurt you.”	Provocation and symbolic intimidation
8		Red face with an angry expression	Marker of emotional outburst	A symbol of verbal aggression	“You are annoying!”	Emotional pressure and intimidation
9		Image of a bone	Refers to something leftover or worthless	A symbol of degradation	“You are useless/empty.”	Dehumanization, identity degradation
10		Green vomiting face	Immediate reaction of disgust	A symbol of extreme rejection	“I am disgusted by you.”	Social exclusion and severe insult

11		Image of a dog	Refers to behavior perceived as low or contemptible	A symbol of insult in certain cultures	“You are like an animal.”	Direct dehumanization and humiliation
12		Crossed-out number 18	Visual marker of prohibition	A symbol of social/moral norms	“You are immoral/obscene.”	Moral stigmatization and sexual shaming
13		Moai statue-like face	Marker of stiffness or emotional flatness	A symbol of “insensitivity.”	Emotionless/awkward/strange	Character degradation and stigmatization
14		Eyes rolling upward	Reaction of annoyance or dismissal	A symbol of condescension	“This is ridiculous/you are foolish.”	Dismissive and belittling attitude
15		Image of feces	Reaction of disgust and degradation	A symbol of extreme insult	“You are disgusting/worthless.”	Extreme insult and dehumanization
16		Raised middle finger gesture	Direct sign of aggression or rejection	A universal symbol of insult	“Go away / **** you.”	Explicit symbolic verbal intimidation
17		Clown-painted face	Indicates behavior seen as ridiculous or abnormal	A symbol of labeling someone as an object of ridicule	“You are a joke.”	Labeling and degradation of dignity
18		Hand gesture with thumb pointing downward	Marker of rejection or disapproval	A symbol of negative evaluation	“You are bad,” “I disagree,” “You are unworthy/failing.”	Public disapproval, humiliation, and reinforcement of social pressure

#### 4 Discussion

Multimodal analysis is used because the data analyzed is not only in the form of verbal text, but also includes emoticons/emoji as digital nonverbal elements, in line with the argument [20] that contemporary digital communication is multimodal and needs to be analyzed as a combination of text, symbols, and visual signs.

The emoticon 😏 represents an expression imbued with sarcasm and irony, functioning as a pragmatic device in digital interactions. From a Peircean semiotic perspective, this emoji

operates as an icon by visually resembling a human facial expression, while simultaneously functioning as a symbol whose meaning is shaped by social convention. In the context of bullying, 😏 serves as an indicator of implicit mockery that undermines the victim's social position. Its inherent ambiguity allows perpetrators to maintain emotional distance while simultaneously leaving room to deny aggressive intent. [21]; [22] categorizes this usage pattern as a form of *visual sarcasm*, whereas Derks et al. (2008) emphasize its role in intensifying the affective force of messages. Thus, 😏 can be understood as an instrument of symbolic legitimation in digital bullying practices [23]; [24].

The emoticon 😏 represents an expression of tension that, in digital communication, frequently functions as a marker of implicit sarcasm. Within Peirce's semiotic framework, this emoji functions as an icon due to its visual resemblance to a human facial expression, and as an index by pointing to a social situation characterized by discomfort. In bullying practices, 😏 is employed as a passive-aggressive device to highlight perceived mistakes or weaknesses of the target. [25][26] emphasizes that emojis possess pragmatic functions as emotion indicators that are highly context-dependent. Its use reinforces the production of shame while simultaneously constructing a symbolic hierarchy between perpetrator and victim. The collectively constructed interpretant renders 😏 a layered sign that reproduces relations of dominance in digital interactions [27]; [28].

The emoticon 😏 represents a mechanism of meaning reversal commonly employed to convey irony and sarcasm in digital interactions. From a Peircean semiotic perspective, this emoji functions as a symbol through social conventions that govern its interpretation, while simultaneously operating as an icon due to its visual resemblance to a human facial expression [29] In the context of bullying, 😏 serves as a medium of implicit mockery packaged as humor, thereby producing ambiguity that complicates the victim's ability to respond demonstrate that the use of sarcastic emojis can increase the potential for online conflict [30]. Socially, this emoji contributes to the normalization of symbolic aggression and signals a shift in the function of visual signs as substitutes for intonation in face-to-face communication. The resulting interpretant is shaped by users' social and cultural contexts, rendering 😏 a strategic element in the dynamics of digital bullying [31].

The emoticon 🐷 represents the figure of a pig, which in many cultural contexts carries pejorative connotations. Within Peirce's semiotic framework, this emoji functions as an icon through its visual resemblance to the referenced object, and as a symbol through social constructions that shape its associated values and meanings. In bullying practices, 🐷 is used as an instrument of dehumanization by equating an individual with an animal. [32] notes that dehumanization leads to the degradation of dignity and the erosion of moral status. This emoji accelerates the process of negative labeling and shifts the victim's social positioning within digital interactions. Semiotic analysis reveals that the resulting interpretant frames the target as undeserving of equal treatment. Thus, 🐷 functions as an effective form of symbolic violence in the dynamics of online bullying.

The emoticon 🙄 represents a gesture that signals frustration while simultaneously conveying negative evaluation of another individual's actions. From a Peircean semiotic

perspective, this emoji functions as an icon due to its visual resemblance to human bodily movement, and as an index that points to an evaluative response to a particular situation. In the context of bullying, 🙄 is employed to construct meanings of intellectual disparagement by implying incompetence or inferiority on the part of the target. [33] demonstrates that emojis possess significant pragmatic force in digital communication. Its use reinforces the evaluative function of the message and establishes mechanisms of social control grounded in shame [34]. Semiotic interpretation shows that the interpretant associated with this sign is formed through the collective experience of bodily expression, allowing 🙄 to operate as an instrument of symbolic violence in digital bullying practices.

The emoticon 😂 represents an expression of laughter that is generally associated with entertainment; however, within the context of bullying, it functions as a device of humiliation. From a Peircean semiotic perspective, this emoji functions as an icon through its visual resemblance to human facial expressions, and as an index by evoking a strong emotional response. [35] demonstrate that emoticons have the capacity to amplify the emotional intensity of messages in online communication. The use of 😂 in aggressive comments produces collective legitimation of derogatory behavior while simultaneously reinforcing the perpetrator's power structure. The resulting interpretant frames the target as deserving of ridicule, thereby blurring the boundary between humor and aggression. Consequently, 😂 contributes to the reproduction of a culture of mockery within digital environments.

The emoticon 😈 represents a devil-like figure that is culturally associated with cunning and malicious intent. Within Peirce's semiotic framework, this emoji functions as an icon by visually resembling the represented creature and as a symbol through cultural conventions that shape its social meaning [36]. In bullying contexts, 😈 is employed as a form of symbolic intimidation that asserts the perpetrator's superiority. [37] argues that emojis possess the capacity to mediate implicit attitudes in digital communication. The interpretant that emerges is a perception of veiled threat, which in turn heightens anxiety for the targeted individual. Thus, 😈 operates as an effective instrument of intimidation in the dynamics of cyberbullying.

The emoticon 😡 represents an explicit and high-intensity expression of anger. From a Peircean semiotic perspective, this emoji functions as an icon through its visual resemblance to human facial expressions and as an index that signals a strong emotional response [38]. [39] Note that emoticons have a significant affective capacity in reinforcing perceptions of negative emotions. In the context of bullying, 😡 intensifies aggressive tone, consolidates the perpetrator's antagonistic stance, and constructs an interpretant characterized by a clear perception of hostility. Consequently, this emoji reduces message ambiguity and accentuates the intimidating character of online bullying communication.

The emoticon 🦴 represents a bone, which in many cultural contexts is frequently associated with death and a sense of valuelessness. From a Peircean semiotic perspective, this emoji functions as an icon through its visual resemblance to the referenced object, and as a symbol through the cultural construction of meaning attached to it. In the context of

bullying, 🗑️ is used as a means of social devaluation, reducing the victim to an entity perceived as “worthless.” [40] emphasize that visual signs play a crucial role in shaping ideological meaning in communication processes. The resulting interpretant is the perception that the targeted individual is undeserving of respect, rendering this emoji a subtle instrument of symbolic violence that operates within digital spaces. The emoticon 🤢 represents an intense expression of disgust. Within Peirce’s semiotic framework, this emoji functions as an icon through its visual resemblance to a human physical reaction, and as an index that signals a negative affective response. In bullying contexts, 🤢 is employed as a mechanism of stigmatization that frames the target as repulsive [41]. The interpretant that emerges is a directed sense of disgust toward a specific individual, thereby reinforcing social exclusion and deepening psychological harm. Consequently, 🤢 operates as an effective form of visual aggression in cyberbullying practices.

The emoticon 🐶 represents the figure of a dog, which in specific cultural contexts carries pejorative connotations. Within Peirce’s semiotic framework, this emoji functions as an icon due to its visual resemblance and as a symbol through socially constructed meanings attached to it. In bullying practices, 🐶 is used as a strategy of dehumanization that degrades the dignity and social status of the target [42]. The resulting interpretant is the perception of the victim’s inferiority, thereby accelerating stigmatization processes and reinforcing negative representations in digital environments.

The emoticon 🚫 represents a prohibition symbol associated with adult or restricted content. From a Peircean semiotic perspective, this emoji functions as a symbol, as its meaning is shaped by social conventions governing moral categorization. In the context of bullying, 🚫 is utilized as a tool of moral labeling that stigmatizes individuals [43]. The resulting interpretant is a perception of norm violation, which reinforces mechanisms of social control and potentially exacerbates the psychological impact on the victim. Thus, 🚫 operates as an instrument of bullying grounded in moral judgment within digital interaction.

The emoticon 🗿 represents a statue-like facial figure that is culturally associated with rigidity and emotional dullness. Within Peirce’s semiotic framework, this emoji functions as an icon due to its visual resemblance to the represented object, and as a symbol through the cultural meanings associated with it. In bullying contexts, 🗿 is used as a strategy of stereotyping that labels the target as emotionally insensitive or cognitively deficient [44]. The resulting interpretant is the perception of emotional emptiness attributed to the victim, allowing this emoji to function as an instrument of symbolic stigmatization in digital communication.

The 🙄 emoticon encodes impatience, condescension, and implicit rejection. In Peircean semiotics, it functions as an icon through its resemblance to eye-rolling and as an index of a negative affective stance toward prior discourse. In bullying contexts, it operates as a delegitimization strategy that undermines the target’s voice and weakens their discursive position [45]. The resulting interpretant is the assumption that the victim is unworthy of attention or consideration, thereby reinforcing marginalization and operating as a form of symbolic harassment in digital communication [46].

The emoticon 🍌 represents fecal matter, which is culturally associated with impurity, inappropriateness, and lack of value. Within Peirce's semiotic framework, this emoji functions as an icon due to its visual resemblance to the represented object, and as a symbol through social conventions that construct its pejorative meaning [47]. In bullying practices, 🍌 is used as an instrument of dignity degradation that produces social stigma [33]. The resulting interpretant is a response of disgust directed at a specific individual, thereby reinforcing social exclusion and functioning as a form of visual aggression in cyberbullying. The emoticon 🖕 represents an insulting gesture that is widely recognized across cultures due to its established social meaning. From a Peircean semiotic perspective, this emoji functions as an icon through its resemblance to an actual hand gesture, and as a symbol through cultural conventions that fix its offensive meaning. In bullying contexts, 🖕 is used as a form of direct aggression that asserts dominance and power relations between perpetrator and victim. [48] Classify this gesture as a taboo expression that typically produces an explicit insult. The resulting interpretant is a direct sense of humiliation, making this emoji an overt instrument of bullying in digital communication.

The emoticon 🤡 represents the figure of a clown, which in social media practices functions as a vehicle of mockery. Within Peirce's semiotic framework, this emoji operates as an icon through its visual resemblance to a clown character, and as a symbol through socially constructed meanings that associate it with foolishness or unseriousness. In bullying contexts, 🤡 is used to label the target as an object of public ridicule, thereby reducing the individual's identity to mere entertainment. [49] emphasizes that emojis possess strong evaluative functions in digital culture. The resulting interpretant is the perception that the victim is undeserving of respect, rendering 🤡 a marker of symbolic violence in online interaction.

The emoticon 🚫 represents a digitally mediated gesture of rejection. From a Peircean semiotic perspective, this emoji functions as an icon due to its resemblance to an actual hand gesture, and as a symbol through cultural conventions that standardize its meaning of disapproval. In bullying contexts, 🚫 is used as a tool of social evaluation that marks individuals as unacceptable or unapproved [50]. The resulting interpretant is a negative perception of the victim's social value, thereby reinforcing processes of exclusion and marginalization. Thus, 🚫 operates as an effective instrument of social control in the dynamics of online bullying.

## 5 Conclusion

The findings of this discussion demonstrate that emoticons can transform into instruments of digital bullying when used in unequal relational contexts. Emoticons such as 😏, 😊, 😬, 😂, and 😏 operate through mechanisms of ambiguity and implicit innuendo, allowing perpetrators to engage in symbolic aggression while maintaining the possibility of deniability. Meanwhile, emoticons such as 🍌, 🖕, 🤡, 🤡, and 🚫 operate as devices of dehumanization and negative labeling that reduce the victim's identity, transform gestures

into objects of intimidation, and accelerate the process of social stigmatization. Furthermore, explicit emoticons such as 😡, 😞, 😈, 🙌, and 🙏 display a more direct aggressive function by amplifying the intensity of negative emotions, expressing power relations, and forming interpretants in the form of perceptions of hostility, rejection, or threat. In this context, emoticons function as a social control mechanism that normalizes the exclusion, shame, and subordination of victims through seemingly lighthearted yet ideologically charged communication practices. Thus, this study confirms that emoticons are active semiotic agents in the dynamics of bullying, contributing to the symbolic reproduction of violence, the formation of social hierarchies, and the legitimization of aggression in digital culture.

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