

Value Determinism and Personal Communication Practice in the Algerian Digital Context -A Semiotic Analysis of Selected Emojis

الحتمية القيمية وممارسة الاتصال الشخصي في السياق الرقمي الجزائري
تحليل سيميولوجي لعينة من الرموز التعبيرية - الإيموجي -

Dr/ Asma CHEURFA

أسماء شرفة

University of Badji Mokhtar – Annaba

asma.cheurfa@univ-annaba.dz

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Abstract:

This study explores the intersection of value determinism theory and personal communication practices in the Algerian digital context. Using Roland Barthes' semiotic model of denotation and connotation, it analyzes a selected set of emojis frequently used in personal interactions on Social media. The findings reveal that emojis convey implicit cultural and moral values—both positive and negative—that shape interpersonal communication. Symbols such as the red heart and folded hands express values like love, gratitude, and humility, while others like the angry face and pile of poo reflect aggression, disrespect, and symbolic tension. The study confirms that even everyday digital symbols are embedded with meanings that align-or conflict-with the core assumptions of value determinism, offering insight into how digital communication reflects and influences societal value systems.

Key words: Value Determinism; Personal Communication; Semiotic Analysis; Emojis

الملخص:

تستكشف هذه الدراسة التقاطع بين نظرية الحتمية القيمية وممارسات الاتصال الشخصي في السياق الرقمي الجزائري. وباعتماد على نموذج رولان بارث السيميولوجي في التحليل الدلالي والضمني، قامت بتحليل مجموعة مختارة بطريقة قصدية من الرموز التعبيرية (الإيموجي) الشائعة الاستخدام في التفاعلات الشخصية عبر وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي. وقد كشفت النتائج أن هذه الرموز تنقل قيماً ثقافية وأخلاقية ضمنية، سواء إيجابية أو سلبية، تسهم في تشكيل الاتصال بين الأفراد. فمثلاً، تعبر رموز مثل القلب الأحمر واليدين المطويتين عن قيم المحبة والامتنان والتواضع، في حين تعكس رموز مثل الوجه الغاضب وكومة البراز دلالات سلبية ترتبط بالغضب وقلة الاحترام والتوتر الرمزي. وتؤكد الدراسة أن الرموز الرقمية اليومية تحمل معاني تنسجم أو تتعارض مع الفرضيات الجوهرية لنظرية الحتمية القيمية، مما يوفر فهماً أعمق لكيفية تجسيد الاتصال الرقمي لمنظومة القيم الاجتماعية وتأثيره عليها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الحتمية القيمية؛ الاتصال الشخصي؛ التحليل السيميولوجي؛ الإيموجي.

Introduction:

The relationship between media, communication, and audiences has occupied the attention of communication scholars since the 1930s. Their focus has been on the effects of media content on audiences, providing a scientific and theoretical legacy for interpreting how media influences audiences across generations. These interpretations have ranged from theories of strong effects to selective and then moderate effects.

A shared limitation among these theories is that they often describe media and communication phenomena as observable structures rather than as meaningful constructs embedded in cultural contexts. They lack clear intellectual or philosophical dimensions, mainly due to the absence of a fundamental reference framework. As a result, and in light of this absence in Western media theories, Arab research has split into two major currents. The first adopts Western theories, using their tools and methodologies for knowledge production, often overlooking their incompatibility with the unique characteristics of Arab-Islamic societies. The second current seeks to "Islamicize" media theory, rejecting Western frameworks without offering alternative methodologies.

Within this context, a new line of thought has emerged—the Theory of Value Determinism—which posits "value" as the central variable in interpreting communication phenomena. This theory challenges the neglect of value in most Western studies, where value is seen as central to understanding societal perspectives and phenomena.

The Theory of Value Determinism offers a conceptual framework that explains communication through the lens of social conditions and emphasizes value as the key interpretative lens. All media phenomena are understood in terms of their proximity to or deviation from value, while other variables (social, economic, political, historical) are considered secondary. This distinguishes value determinism from other forms like technological determinism (e.g., McLuhan's idea that "the medium is the message") by asserting instead that "the message is value," as proposed by Azzi Abdul Rahman.

According to Abdul Rahman Azii, value transcends the material and is deeply rooted in religious meaning, as illustrated by Qur'anic references: "This is the right religion" (Surah Yusuf, Ayah 40), and "In it are valuable scriptures" (Surah Al-Bayyina, Ayah 3). From a media perspective, he argues that media influence cannot be assessed without referencing value: the more a media message aligns with core values, the more positive its influence; conversely, deviation from values results in negative influence.

The theory is built around binary oppositions (positive vs. negative), emphasizing that moral judgment is derived from contrasting poles. The absence

of values leads to ambiguity in ethical discernment, weakening the audience's ability to distinguish right from wrong.

Value determinism thus employs normative tools to evaluate media phenomena as desirable or undesirable. It considers how media either reinforces or erodes the social value system. Media, although a potential driver of positive change, can also become a source of fragmentation and cultural distortion if its elements contradict or lack value.

In the digital era, technological developments have reshaped communication structures, impacting social behavior, identity, lifestyles, and learning patterns. These transformations have fostered the creation of a virtual society that mirrors real life while developing its own values and norms. One of the most dynamic expressions of this change is personal communication via social media, which is constantly evolving due to the unique characteristics of the digital environment-such as audience autonomy, credibility verification, user participation in content creation, and varied semiotic expressions.

Studying the influence of digital media on personal communication from a value-based perspective requires examining the relationship between the embedded values in digital content and how these values impact communication practices. A strong alignment between the values of the communicator and the media content typically leads to positive influence, while dissonance can result in value erosion and cultural disintegration.

This research paper aims to explore how social media content influences personal communication practices through the framework of the Theory of Value Determinism. It addresses whether the content transmitted via social networks is desirable or undesirable, from a normative lens grounded in religion, culture, and identity.

To apply this framework, the paper includes a semiotic analysis of a sample of commonly used emojis in Algerian digital communication. Emojis function as symbolic visual signs that convey culturally embedded meanings and emotional nuances. Using Roland Barthes' semiotic model (denotation and connotation), the study analyzes how emojis can reflect or contradict value systems, thus acting as vehicles for value transmission-even in informal personal exchanges.

Accordingly, the study raises the following general research question:

How does the Theory of Value Determinism explain the expression and transmission of values through personal communication practices on social media, particularly through the symbolic use of emojis?

And three sub-questions:

1. What types of values are embedded in the emojis used in personal communication?

2. What are the semiological meanings conveyed by emojis according to Roland Barthes' analytical model?
3. Does the value embedded in emojis during personal communication align with the core principles of the Theory of Value Determinism?

1. Study Concepts:

1.1. Value: In the Theory of Value Determinism in media, value refers to elevation, meaning what transcends in significance. Value is moral, and individuals strive to practically embody it whenever their actions (behaviors) and intellect rise to a higher status. In language, value means the name of the type of action, as in 'he stood', meaning to stand upright¹.

1.2. Personal Communication: Personal communication refers to direct or face-to-face interaction where we can utilize our five senses. This type of communication allows for interaction between two or more individuals on a shared topic, resulting in friendships and intimate relationships among people. Face-to-face communication provides an immediate and direct opportunity to recognize the impact of the message, allowing the communicator to adjust and direct their message to make it more effective or persuasive².

1.3. Influence: Influence is what the media message evokes in the recipient. The more the recipient responds to the message, the greater the influence. Influence is the result of the real interaction between the characteristics of the media messages and the characteristics of the recipients³.

1.4. Modern Communication Media: Modern communication media refers to web pages that facilitate active interaction among members participating in existing social networks on the internet. These platforms aim to provide various means of engagement that foster interaction among members. This can include instant messaging, video, chatting, file sharing, discussion groups, email, and blogs⁴.

In this study, social media networks refer to those platforms where personal communication takes place between individuals and groups of friends, allowing for the easy exchange of symbols, information, and files in both image and audio formats.

1.5. Semiological Analysis (Semiotics): Semiological analysis is the study of signs, symbols, and how meaning is constructed and communicated. Roland Barthes' semiotic approach identifies two levels of meaning:

- **Denotation** – the literal, explicit meaning of a sign.

- **Connotation** – the cultural, emotional, or ideological meanings associated with the sign in specific contexts.

This method is used to interpret how meaning is embedded in media, texts, and visual symbols, and how these reflect broader cultural values⁵.

1.6. Emoji: Emojis are digital pictograms used in online communication to visually represent emotions, actions, objects, or ideas. They function as part of a new visual language and serve to enhance or clarify textual messages. In semiotic terms, emojis are seen as signs that convey not only affective content but also social and cultural meanings based on their use in different contexts.

Marcel Danesi considers emojis to be semiotic tools that form a new symbolic system in digital communication, reflecting shared values and communicative norms⁶.

2. Key Approaches of the Theory of Value Determinism

2.1 Naming the Theory: When Professor Abdul Rahman Aziz initially announced the theory as a new explanation of the communicative phenomenon, he named it the Theory of Theoretical Value Determinism. Later, Dr. Nasser Bouali added a new term, calling it Media Value Determinism, and then researcher Hind Azouz suggested a third name, Value Determinism, which eventually led to the consensus of calling it the Theory of Value Determinism. Professor Nasser Bouali reviewed these different names, justified them, and explained the connections among them, situating the theory within the field of communication theories.

After reviewing the history of its naming, he pointed out that Professor Aziz's name leans toward what should ideally be, while his own title aimed to clarify the theory's connection to media. He later explained that the theory could be named according to communication theories, for instance, as Value Determinism in Media based on influence, or as Value-Based Media akin to liberal media. It could also be named after the model, as in the Abdul Rahman Aziz Model, which encompasses both the Lasswell and McLuhan models, adding to them the social system and civilizational dimension⁷.

2.2 The Intellectual Framework of the Theory of Value Determinism: The intellectual framework of this theory integrates four main components: Arab and Islamic heritage, the epistemology of communication and media, contemporary Western philosophical and social thought in the twentieth century represented by the following social schools: structuralism, phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and critical hermeneutics, as well as value-based media

thought through certain explorations into the civilizational thinking of Malek Bennabi⁸.

The Theory of Value Determinism is not only concerned with guiding media and communicative behavior; it also serves as a foundational principle for social behavior, as it addresses the issue of rectifying value distortions within recipients' actions, turning them into effective agents within the cultural and civilizational field. Value does not succumb to distortions of reality and transcends the boundaries of time and geography, remaining independent of situational variables and adopting universal human dimensions⁹.

2.3 Key Principles of the Theory of Value Determinism: In one of his studies, Professor Nasser Bouali presented what he called the 'Key Principles of the Theory of Value Determinism,' which are as follows:

- **Primacy of the Theory as a Whole Over Its Parts:** Bouali considers the theory as a comprehensive entity composed of the studies and research of Dr. Abdul Rahman Aziz, which cannot be fully understood without a familiarity with various studies by Aziz. These studies stem from the problem of understanding and interpreting the communicative and media phenomenon from a value-based and civilizational perspective.
- **Primacy of Relationship Over Individual Parts or Specific Values:** This aspect of the theory becomes clearer when examining the relationship governing Dr. Abdul Rahman Aziz's research. This approach delves deeply into the inner structures and generates profound meanings within the theory. Here, value functions as the structural link that binds the thinker's research, forming the core and nucleus of the theory.
- **Contextual Perspective of the Theory:** This involves understanding the theory within a broad context that requires the presence of social, cultural, civilizational, and historical factors.

2.4 Principles of Value Determinism:

- Communication should originate from and reflect the cultural and civilizational dimensions to which the society belongs.
- Communication should involve conscious participation by the receiving audience, rather than being one-sided and authoritarian.
- Communication should be integrative, encompassing audiovisual, written, and personal oral communication, with an emphasis on written communication as a foundational element of civilization.

- Communication should consistently carry cultural and spiritual values that motivate individuals and society toward elevation and growth¹⁰.

3. Personal Communication:

3.1 Elements of Personal Communication: Personal communication consists of three essential components and takes place within the social environment that surrounds and influences it, remaining closely tied to various social contexts.

- **Individuals:** (Senders and receivers) who hold attitudes, beliefs, values, perceptions, and self-evaluations.
- **Means of Communication:** Both verbal and non-verbal.
- **Environment:** This includes all institutions and social settings, along with the culture that influences personal communication dynamics¹¹.

3.2 Characteristics of Personal Communication: Personal communication is one of the most impactful and persuasive types of communication for the following reasons:

- Personal communication is bidirectional, functioning as an interactive process that allows participants to exchange or share roles as sender and receiver, achieving the intended communication goal.
- Responses in personal communication are immediate and direct, enabling the sender to evaluate the communication and gauge its effectiveness.
- It provides participants the opportunity to define their shared objectives and refine or adjust their messages by adding, removing, or discovering new, valuable information¹².
- Flexibility is a hallmark of personal communication, as the feedback loop is highly significant. Feedback plays a critical role, informing the sender that their message has been interpreted and facilitating harmony between sender and receiver, giving the sender the chance to modify their message, thereby increasing the effectiveness of this communication mode in achieving a high level of persuasion.
- Personal communication is more effective in countering opposition or aversion toward a new idea on the part of the receiver, unlike impersonal or mass sources, which are easier for people to avoid or ignore.
- Personal communication relies on the participant's awareness and their assessment of issues involved.

- With advances in modern communication technologies, visual communication through these means can now closely mimic personal communication¹³.

3.3 The Ability of Personal Communication to Change Attitudes and Behaviors: There is no doubt that changing attitudes and behaviors is of utmost importance, and personal communication plays a significant role in this area. Wilbur Schramm, the father of direct, person-to-person communication, emphasizes that even in the most advanced countries, personal communication holds precedence over mass media. This is because decision-making often requires fundamental changes in the attitudes, beliefs, and social norms held by individuals.

In certain cases, the language used in personal communication between two parties reflects their intentions, conveying impressions of the individual's emotions and ability to handle the situation. Some experiments suggest that in-person communication has a stronger impact on social interaction than other forms of communication. Similarly, some scholars believe that personal communication influences individuals not only through what is said but also through personal influence, especially when the source of guidance is as important as the message itself¹⁴.

4. The Effects of Social Media on the Practice of Personal Communication from a Value-Driven Determinism Perspective:

In his book, *Studies in Communication Theory Towards a Distinctive Media Thought* (2003), Azzi Abdel Rahman addresses the impact that media can have on the recipient when its content aligns with certain value principles. He classifies these impacts as positive or negative, depending on their proximity to or distance from these values. In this humble analysis, we aim to examine the effects of social media - as an active environment for practicing personal communication - from the same perspective¹⁵.

4.1 The Positive Effects of Social Media on Personal Communication from the Perspective of Value Determinism:

- Media contributes to enhancing the values of the audience and solidifying their prior positions, as the concept of reinforcement plays a crucial role in understanding the effects of media on the audience. Modern communication tools also play an important role in reinforcing the audience's values, especially if the communicative environment in which the audience engages in the reception process is saturated with the cultural and civilizational values to which

they belong. This, in turn, strengthens social relationships in virtual reality. The reinforcement or neutralization of values is at the core of the process of influence and response according to the value determinism theory, which serves as a basis for assessing the various effects and implications resulting from the interaction of the message, the medium, and the audience. Social media, in general, has transformed the vastness and enormity of the world into a small village where opinions, files, and information can be exchanged with the mere press of a button.

- Media allows individuals to experience multiple imaginary worlds and transports the audience across time and space, enriching and elevating the human experience beyond its current state. Communication tools enable individuals to enter various symbolic and imaginary realms, allowing the audience to escape the burdens of reality and find solace within this symbolic and imaginary framework. Social media networks offer the audience even more; the diversity of content, individualized usage, and browsing freedom, combined with the assurance of privacy, create a personal virtual world where they can express an independent identity and achieve social compensation, helping them overcome shyness and feelings of isolation. Additionally, these networks contribute to engagement in the global community.

- Modern communication tools provide the audience with a sense of harmony and strengthen their social connections, as media fosters a feeling of belonging to a community defined by shared traits such as values, culture, language, and history, thus supporting and enhancing social mobility. Social media networks have achieved a sense of social belonging through the feature of friendship groups that individuals can create or join according to their interests, specialties, or inclinations. In this way, they find themselves belonging to interactive groups that fulfill their need for belonging.

- Modern communication tools enhance awareness of the outside world and expand the social sphere, contributing to the internal connection among community members and generating interest in external events. The content provided by modern communication tools serves as a refuge for individuals during times of crisis and tension. The diverse information and ease of access offered by social media networks aid in crisis management and contribute to social cohesion and solidarity. The management of the COVID-19 health crisis

through these means has made the audience more informed and better equipped to handle this situation.

- Social media networks encourage the audience to critically engage with reality by employing speculation, hinting, and using indirect expressions when direct criticism is not permitted. These imaginative approaches help the audience vent their frustrations. Dialogue and discussion platforms provided by modern communication tools offer an opportunity for expression through the sharing of ideas, especially when conducted within groups that share similar concerns. Free expression aids in alleviating anxiety, tension, and frustration.

- Social media networks contribute to enabling the audience to view themselves and their community from an external perspective. Communication tools provide an additional experience that may not be available locally, allowing individuals to transition from one culture to another simply by browsing applications, search engines, and social networks, as well as discussion platforms. The cultural and civilizational openness afforded by modern communication tools transcends the boundaries of time and geography, opening up opportunities for the audience to continuously engage in diverse cultural and social experiences.

- Social media networks contribute to the audience's self-critique and transformation, fostering self-awareness and their relationship with others. The symbolic experiences presented by these media prompt the audience to adjust their opinions, positions, and behaviors based on what they perceive as valuable phenomena and events. This process includes temporarily living in a symbolic world before returning to the self once again.

- Media plays a significant role in expanding the audience's access to culture and disseminating knowledge across a wide spectrum of society. The culture experienced in reality broadens when it is transferred to communication tools.

4.2 Negative Effects of Modern Communication Tools from the Perspective of Value Determinism¹⁶:

- Media is considered a symbolic text tightly linked to political and commercial entities, thus it is almost devoid of value capital despite the widespread presence of religious discourse. When a separation occurs between the media sphere and the value sphere, this division pushes the media towards paths that diverge from truth and ethics.

- Media works to justify the status quo and uproot values from their contexts in a manner that reinforces and entrenches narrow interests, preventing individuals from achieving their moral and material selfhood. This imaginary system imposes a set of incentives and prohibitions that hinder personal development and the realization of individual identity, while also obstructing the possibility of changing the situation.

- Communication tools confine individuals and society within a framework of unidimensionality, uniformity, and consumerism. Media reinforces values of conformity and promotes materialism by directly advertising goods and services or indirectly through the lifestyles depicted in films and television series. This results in a type of individual who plays a passive role in society, adhering to prevailing expectations without actively participating in changing the existing social structure.

- Media drives the audience to the brink of self-destruction, manifested in resorting to an imaginary system based on illusions that distanced them from reality and is not associated with any subordinate or non-essential imagination. This destruction is not necessarily material; in many cases, it is psychological.

- Media works to neutralize and exclude values, particularly in entertainment content, which does not adhere to a value system but instead adopts the principle of what can be marketed to a wide audience. When we consider that audience desires and tastes are often products of what communication tools present, the process of excluding values in content becomes circular. Communication tools showcase what the audience wants, and this audience becomes connected to the media that fulfill and satisfy their desires. This has led to the proliferation of content related to violence, sex, and other themes.

- Media works to popularize culture through simplification and distortion in order to attract a wide audience, which affects the audience by creating either false or genuine needs. Media is influenced by commercial factors aimed at appealing to and satisfying the audience, regardless of the nature of the content, which often caters to immediate desires and instincts.

- Media and communication tools narrow the social environment, distancing individuals from one another. Consequently, these tools drive a community rich in lived culture and social relationships toward impoverishment in these areas, pushing the audience into social isolation and reducing cultural connections.

- Media contributes to diminishing local issues while expanding global concerns by encouraging the audience to focus on external events at the expense of matters related to their lived reality. This prevents individuals from critically reflecting on and changing themselves and leads to neglect in addressing their own circumstances. Media distracts the audience from paying attention to their immediate reality and attempting to reform or change it, diverting their attention to secondary issues at the expense of what is happening in their surroundings.

- Media and communication tools weaken the fabric of social communication and promote social disintegration, as the time the audience spends with these tools comes at the expense of genuine, direct social interaction. This results in the social isolation of the audience and relieves them of their social responsibilities toward others.

- Media encourages the audience to adopt the roles of cinematic stars and characters created by advertising. The audience observes and participates in the experiences of others, using them as models for their own behavior. The influence stems from the role model if their qualities are valuable or otherwise.

- Media blends the symbolic with the real; the content of the medium does not represent reality but rather expresses it. Negative effects occur when these two aspects are intertwined, causing the symbolic to be perceived as reality by the audience.

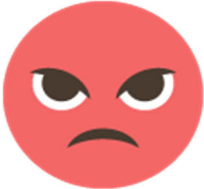
- Media weakens sensitivity toward cultural taboos, as some content undermines values and, over time, diminishes the level of emotional response or resistance that accompanies such content. Some researchers argue that the verbal expression of violence is the beginning of violence itself. Moreover, the repetition of messages leads to a weakening of sensitivity, making it difficult for the audience to critique or question the message.

- Media contributes to the audience's addiction to its content, as the intensity of this connection often comes at the expense of social responsibilities, resulting in reduced direct social interaction and weakened social ties. Most field studies on the use of social media networks have shown that users spend enormous amounts of time in front of computers, delving into the depths of these networks. In fact, individuals may spend more time on these networks than they do with their family members. Additionally, the continuous addiction to these networks makes it difficult for users to detach from them, even for short periods, distracting them from duties and rights that may be more important in their lives.

Furthermore, individuals on social networks often form virtual friendships and communication groups, leading to a kind of disconnection between reality and the virtual world. This creates feelings of depression, anxiety, and psychological crises, especially when attachment to these networks and the relationships they contain becomes intense¹⁷.

- Media focuses on the sense of sight, as this sense plays a fundamental role in receiving the content of its messages. With the dominance of visual media, the eye submits and becomes confined to the requirements of the medium, which weakens the process of critical thinking. Value was historically associated with the spoken word, which involves effort to elevate to the highest possible meanings, whereas images tend to embody and narrow meaning.

5- Semiotic Analysis of Emojis in Personal Communication on Social Media (Based on Roland Barthes' Model):

Emoji	Denotation	Connotation	Value Type
	Red heart	Expresses love, appreciation, gratitude; in Algerian context, often directed to family, friends, or respected figures. Symbolizes emotional warmth and social connection.	Positive
	Face laughing with tears	Used in humorous or sarcastic contexts; may reflect joy or ridicule depending on tone and situation. Can reduce social tension or express irony.	Mixed
	Two hands pressed together	Represents prayer, respect, or gratitude; in Algerian culture often used in spiritual or thankful expressions. Sign of humility and positive regard.	Positive
	Angry red face	Conveys anger, frustration, or rejection. May imply dominance or emotional overflow in conflictual exchanges.	Negative

	Crying face	Expresses sadness or empathy. Indicates emotional vulnerability or solidarity in difficult situations.	Context-dependent (positive or negative)
	Pile of poo (smiling)	Symbol of insult or strong mockery; perceived as offensive or disrespectful in Algerian culture. Reflects contempt or devaluation.	Negative

To explore the relationship between value determinism and personal digital communication, this study conducted a semiotic analysis of six commonly used emojis within Algerian social media interactions. Drawing on Roland Barthes' two-level model of denotation and connotation, the analysis revealed that emojis are not merely decorative or expressive tools but carriers of implicit cultural and moral values. For instance, (red heart) and (folded hands) conveyed positive values such as affection, gratitude, and spiritual humility. In contrast, (angry face) and (pile of poo) expressed negative connotations tied to aggression, disrespect, and symbolic violence. Interestingly, (laughing face) and (crying face) showed context-dependent meanings, oscillating between emotional relief and social tension. These findings support the premise of value determinism theory, which posits that communication technologies transmit embedded values- positive or negative- through everyday digital practices.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that personal digital communication through emojis is far from being a neutral or purely expressive practice. By applying the Theory of Value Determinism and Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, it becomes evident that emojis act as cultural signs that convey implicit value-laden messages. The distinction between positive and negative values, as reflected in commonly used emojis, affirms the role of digital tools as agents of moral and cultural influence. These findings highlight the importance of integrating value-based theoretical models when analyzing everyday digital communication practices, especially in culturally specific contexts such as Algeria. Future studies may expand this approach to explore broader digital behaviors and their alignment with societal and ethical values.

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