

EMOJI USAGE FOR FACILITATING EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION IN WHATSAPP COMMUNICATION AMONG ENGLISH EDUCATION STUDENTS

Nurlaila Hussain

Universitas Negeri Gorontalo
nurlailahusain@ung.ac.id

Abstract

In today's digital era, there has been a significant shift from traditional to digital communication, particularly among students and academics. This study explores how emojis facilitate emotional expression within academic WhatsApp groups among students in the English Language Education Study Program (ELESP). Given the increasing reliance on digital platforms, the need for effective communication tools, such as emojis, has become essential. This research uses a qualitative approach based on Creswell's (2017) framework, gathering data from two academic WhatsApp groups through documented screenshots. Content analysis was applied to examine how emojis convey emotions and enhance communication dynamics. The findings indicate that emojis, such as the Heart (❤️) and Crying Face (😭), allow students to express emotions, clarify intentions, and build empathy. These results suggest that emojis play a crucial role in fostering supportive peer communication and overcoming the limitations of text-based interactions. This study highlights the importance of emojis in academic communication, creating a more inclusive and emotionally connected learning environment.

Keywords: Academic groups WhatsApp, Digital Platforms, Emoji, Emotional expression.

INTRODUCTION

In today's digital era, there is a significant shift from traditional communication to digital communication, particularly among academics and students. Technology has fundamentally transformed the way individuals interact, with instant messaging applications like WhatsApp emerging as one of the primary tools facilitating communication between lecturers and students, as well as among students themselves. WhatsApp provides a platform that enables fast and efficient communication, making it easier to exchange information, engage in group discussions, and collaborate academically. The convenience of access and usability has made this application an integral part of students' daily lives, becoming a ubiquitous presence in their academic routines.

As students navigate the complexities of academic life, their reliance on digital communication has significantly increased. This shift not only reflects how students interact but also highlights the need for effective ways to express emotions and intentions, especially in educational settings. In this context, emojis have become an essential part of digital communication. These visual symbols help convey emotions and ideas, capturing nuances that can be difficult to express through text alone. This is particularly important on platforms like WhatsApp, where text limitations can often lead to misunderstandings. By incorporating emojis into their messages, students can enhance their interactions and bridge the communication gaps that exist without the verbal and nonverbal cues typically present in face-to-face conversations.

Pre-Observations of students in the English Language Education Study Program (ELESP) show that they frequently use emojis in their communications within academic WhatsApp groups to express their feelings. Interestingly, they tend to use emojis more often when chatting with peers compared to their interactions with lecturers. This trend underscores the more informal and supportive nature of peer communication, where students feel more comfortable sharing a wider range of emotions. Therefore, this research focuses on academic WhatsApp groups among students to explore how emoji usage facilitates emotional expression and fosters a sense of community, ultimately enriching their academic experience and strengthening their interpersonal connections. In academic settings, where clarity and understanding are paramount, the ability to convey emotional subtleties becomes crucial. The increasing use of emojis in student interactions signifies a shift toward more expressive communication methods. Emojis allow students to communicate feelings such as happiness (😊), frustration (😡), excitement (🎉), or sadness (😞), thereby enhancing the overall quality of their exchanges. For instance, a simple smiley face (😊) can turn a neutral statement into a warm invitation, while a sad face (😞) can indicate empathy or a shared struggle. On the other hand, an angry emoji (😡) can express dissatisfaction, and a party emoji (🎉) reflects celebration or excitement. This emotional dimension adds depth to the interaction, fostering a sense of community and understanding among students. These examples of emojis are derived from the reference by Sendari (2021), which highlights the important role emojis play in digital communication, providing visual context that can enrich or clarify the meaning of text-based messages. This capability is particularly essential in academic environments, where misunderstandings can lead to confusion and hinder collaboration.

Understanding nonverbal communication in an academic context has become increasingly urgent, especially in online learning environments where traditional cues are often absent. The Nonverbal Communication Theory proposed by Albert Mehrabian (2017) emphasizes that nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions and intonation, play a crucial role in conveying meaning. Mehrabian's work highlights that the emotional content of a message can be communicated more effectively through nonverbal means than through words alone. This insight is particularly relevant in digital communication, where tone and facial expressions are frequently lost. Emojis can thus serve as substitutes for these nonverbal expressions, allowing users to convey feelings and attitudes that words might fail to capture.

Complementing this theory, Burgoon, Manusov, and Guerrero (2021) delve into the intricacies of nonverbal communication, emphasizing how nonverbal signals can influence interpersonal dynamics and emotional exchanges. They argue that nonverbal communication encompasses a range of behaviors, including gestures, eye contact, and proximity, all of which can significantly impact the effectiveness of communication. In a digital context, where physical presence is absent, emojis can take on some of these roles, serving as visual cues that enhance understanding and emotional resonance. By using emojis, students can express their feelings in a manner that adds context to their words, making their messages more relatable and comprehensible.

Research by Dahiya et al. (2022) on online social behavior among WhatsApp users reinforces the notion that emojis enhance interpersonal interactions, allowing users to express emotions in ways that text alone may not permit. Their findings suggest that emojis facilitate emotional connections and foster a sense of belonging among users, making interactions feel more personal and engaged. This aligns with Turkle's (2017)

discussion on how technology affects our social relationships, emphasizing that while technology can sometimes create distance, it can also foster closeness when used effectively.

Furthermore, previous studies underscore the importance of emojis in academic communication. For instance, Firdiani and Kahar (2022) explored the role of emojis as nonverbal communication in lecturer-student interactions within WhatsApp academic groups. Their research highlights how emojis can help clarify intentions and emotional tones, reducing the likelihood of miscommunication. Similarly, Veytia-Bucheli et al. (2020) investigated the presence of new forms of intercultural communication in higher education, focusing on how emojis and social interactions through WhatsApp influence graduate students' experiences. Their findings reveal that emojis play a crucial role in navigating cultural differences, providing a common language that transcends textual barriers.

Moreover, Al Abdullateef (2022) examined the academic use of WhatsApp and the concept of technostress among university students. His research indicates that while WhatsApp facilitates communication, it can also contribute to stress levels due to the constant connectivity it demands. This highlights a dual-edged nature of technology; while it enhances communication, it also poses challenges that students must navigate. Understanding how emojis fit into this landscape can provide insights into how students manage their emotional well-being in digital communication environments. Finally, Tang and Hew (2018) analyzed the use of emoticons, emojis, and stickers in computer-mediated communication, focusing on their communicative functions, impact, user behavior, and motives. Their study indicates that these visual elements significantly enhance the expressiveness of digital communication, allowing users to convey emotions more effectively than through text alone. This aligns with the notion that emojis are not merely decorative but serve essential communicative functions that enrich interactions and foster understanding.

The novelty of this research lies in its focused examination of what emojis specifically function within academic WhatsApp groups, providing a detailed analysis of their role in emotional expression and interpersonal dynamics. While existing studies have explored emojis in various contexts, this study aims to provide deeper insights into their impact on academic communication, highlighting how they facilitate emotional connections, enhance clarity, and foster community among students. By focusing on the academic context, this research contributes to a better understanding of how digital communication tools can be leveraged to improve interactions and support students' emotional and social needs in educational environments.

In summary, as digital communication continues to evolve, understanding the role of emojis in enhancing interpersonal interactions becomes increasingly important. Emojis serve as vital tools that help bridge the emotional gaps often left by textual communication, allowing students to express themselves more fully and authentically. By integrating insights from various studies, this research aims to shed light on the complex interplay between digital communication, emotional expression, and academic collaboration, ultimately contributing to a richer understanding of the modern academic experience.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative approach as outlined by Creswell (2017). Data will be collected through documentation by requesting screenshots from two WhatsApp academic groups consisting of ELESP students. This method allows for a direct examination of emoji usage within these specific contexts, ensuring that the data accurately reflects interactions among students. The collected data will then be analyzed using content analysis to understand the emotional expressions conveyed through emoji usage and how emojis contribute to the overall communication dynamics among students.

By focusing on two distinct WhatsApp groups, this research aims to provide insights into which emojis facilitate emotional expression among ELESP students. This approach not only highlights the significance of emojis in digital communication but also contributes to a broader understanding of nonverbal communication in academic contexts. Through this analysis, the study seeks to reveal patterns in emotional expression that emerge from the use of emojis, ultimately enhancing our comprehension of student interactions in online learning environments.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

In today's digital era, online communication has become an integral part of daily interactions, especially among students. This study aims to address the research question, "How do emojis facilitate expression in WhatsApp-based online communication among ELESP students?" To achieve this objective, an analysis was conducted on the use of emojis in ELESP students' academic WhatsApp groups. By observing and recording the occurrence of emojis in their conversations, this study seeks to explore how emojis assist in expressing emotions and enriching communication on this platform. The findings are expected to provide deeper insights into emojis as effective communication tools within the educational context.

The results of this study indicate that the use of emojis in student WhatsApp groups enriches communication and deepens emotional expression, creating more meaningful interactions among them. In one conversation, a student (A) informed her friend, "Nia, please ask the teacher tomorrow because you didn't have a chance to present today, so you'll join another group's presentation for a grade 😊." Her friend (B) responded simply, "okay, thanks ❤️." The use of the Heart (❤️) and Smiling Face with Hearts (😊) emojis indicates appreciation and support between friends. This expression of affection shows that students support and value each other's contributions, creating a warm and close atmosphere in the academic environment.

In another conversation, students discussed the challenge of data costs for a group project. Student A said, "Leo, if we do it solo, it won't work; better to form three groups so we can get data for 200k 🤔; it's too much if we don't split it 🤔🤔🤔🤔." Student B responded, "okay, guys, I'll discuss the best way with the teacher 🙏." Here, the combination of the Crying Face (🤔) and Laughing with Tears of Joy (🤔) emojis effectively conveys frustration mixed with humor in facing challenges, while the Folded

Hands (🙏) emoji reflects a hopeful request for solutions, indicating a desire for collaboration and peer support.

In a discussion about class announcements, student A shared important information: "Assalamu alaikum friends, there will be no more offline classes; now we focus on the project until the 15th meeting 🙏." Student B's response, "thanks for the info 🙏," expresses gratitude and appreciation for the clear information provided. The use of the Folded Hands (🙏) emoji by both parties conveys respect and formality in communication while maintaining a friendly tone. This demonstrates how emojis can enrich communication by creating a polite yet approachable atmosphere.

When planning a study session, student A invited his friends by saying, "Guys, are you free Friday evening? We'll study data analysis using comparison and contrast methods. Plus, let's prepare for next week's test. Maybe Ari can help book a spot at the literacy center 👉😊." Student B responded briefly, "ok 🙏." Here, the use of the Pointing Up (👉) and Grinning Face (😊) emojis conveys enthusiasm and clarity in the plan being communicated, while the OK (🙏) emoji signifies agreement. The use of emojis in this conversation clarifies the message's intent and strengthens coordination, creating a productive atmosphere for academic preparation.

These interactions show that emojis are not merely decorative but serve as a communication tool that helps students express a range of emotions visually. In the often-high-pressure academic context, emojis provide a lighter, more informal way for students to share feelings and build emotional bonds. The presence of emojis also helps reduce ambiguity in text messages, which often occurs in digital communication, enabling students to interact more openly and honestly.

Overall, the results of this study confirm that the use of emojis in student WhatsApp groups not only helps to express emotions but also strengthens social bonds. Emojis such as Smiling Face with Hearts, Crying Face, Laughing Face, and Folded Hands are essential elements in their communication, allowing them to express support, humor, gratitude, and clarity. Through emojis, students can build more profound and empathetic communication, which is essential in their academic and social lives.

Discussion

The findings of this research highlight the significant role that emojis play in facilitating emotional expression among ELESP students within academic WhatsApp groups. The frequent use of the Crying Face with Overflowing Tears emoji (😭) indicates that students tend to share deep emotional experiences and their vulnerabilities. This aligns with Mehrabian's (2017) emphasis on the importance of nonverbal cues in conveying emotions. Emojis serve as effective substitutes for verbal communication, providing a way for students to express their vulnerabilities and create deeper connections with their peers. In an academic context that is often filled with pressure, the ability to express feelings through visual symbols becomes crucial for building social support.

The use of the Laughing Face with Tears of Joy emoji (😂) illustrates how students attempt to express humor amid the academic pressure they face, especially regarding the numerous assignments given. Although this emoji is often associated with laughter, it reflects a deep sense of frustration towards the new workload that arises. This indicates that students not only feel the pressure but also choose to confront it with a humorous and ironic attitude, which can serve as a way to cope with stress. Thus, this emoji becomes an important tool in their digital communication, allowing them to share emotional experiences more lightly and build closer connections among classmates.

Furthermore, the Laughing Face with Tears of Joy emoji (😂) emerges as a significant indicator of humor in student interactions. The use of this emoji reflects the importance of humor in reducing tension and fostering stronger social bonds. As noted by Turkle (2017), technology can shape our social relationships in new and unique ways. In academic situations that often trigger stress, using humor through emojis not only lightens communication but also enhances the sense of camaraderie among students. By sharing funny moments, students can alleviate anxiety and create a more positive atmosphere within the group, ultimately enhancing collaboration and productivity. Additionally, expressions of affection and gratitude are clearly evident through the use of the Heart emoji (❤️) and the Folded Hands emoji (🙏). These emojis not only serve as symbols of positive feelings but also create the underlying social norms of communication among students. The work of Firdiani and Kahar (2022) indicates that emojis function as nonverbal cues that strengthen social relationships. By expressing affection and support through emojis, students cultivate a more inclusive and empathetic academic environment. This suggests that interactions in WhatsApp groups are not solely focused on academic aspects but also on forming healthy emotional relationships, which are essential for supporting their mental well-being.

The importance of balancing positive and negative expressions in communication is also clearly reflected in the use of emojis such as the Sad Face (😞) and the Smiling Face with Smiling Eyes (😊). This balance mirrors the complexity of emotions experienced by students in their daily interactions. They do not only share happy moments but also acknowledge sadness or disappointment. This shows that students have a good understanding of emotional nuances and are capable of communicating them effectively through emojis. In an academic context, the ability to express a range of feelings can help create more authentic and meaningful interactions, where students support each other in facing challenges.

Overall, the findings of this research confirm that the use of emojis in online communication within WhatsApp groups among ELESF students not only functions as a tool for expressing emotions but also plays an important role in strengthening social connections. By understanding how emojis can be used to convey complex emotional nuances, we can better appreciate how students interact within their academic environment. Emojis are not just cute symbols; they are tools that enrich communication and help students build deeper connections, which are essential in the context of

education. Thus, emojis hold great potential to become an integral part of effective communication in this digital age.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this research emphasizes the significant role that emojis play in facilitating emotional expression among ELESF students in academic WhatsApp groups. The use of various emojis, such as the Crying Face with Overflowing Tears (😭) and the Laughing Face with Tears of Joy (😂), illustrates how students navigate their emotional landscapes, creating a supportive environment where vulnerability and humor can coexist. Emojis serve not only as tools for expressing complex feelings but also as essential elements that strengthen social connections and foster camaraderie among peers. By using emojis, students can communicate their innermost thoughts and feelings more effectively, bridging the gaps left by traditional verbal communication, especially in high-pressure academic contexts.

The implications of these conclusions extend to students who use emojis in their communication. Understanding how emojis facilitate emotional expression can help students create a more inclusive and empathetic learning environment. This knowledge can encourage the integration of more effective digital communication tools, promoting emotional intelligence and support among students. By fostering healthy emotional relationships and emphasizing the importance of emotional expression, students can enhance their overall learning experience, ensuring that they feel valued and connected. Thus, the use of emojis holds great potential to become an integral part of effective communication in educational contexts.

REFERENCES

- Al Abdullateef, H. (2022). *The Academic Use of WhatsApp and Technostress: Investigating the Experience of Fatigue and Coping Behaviours among University Students* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Nottingham).
- Burgoon, J. K., Manusov, V., & Guerrero, L. K. (2021). *Nonverbal communication*. Routledge.
- Creswell, J. W. (2017). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. SAGE Publications.
- Dahiya, S., Saluja, A., Singhal, P., & Johari, R. (2022). Analysis of Online Social Behavior of Whatsapp Users. *Webology*, 19(1), 229-249.
- Firdiani, A. U., & Kahar, R. (2022). Emoji as nonverbal communication among lecturer-student communication in WhatsApp social media academic group. *LSP International Journal*, 9(1), 75-92.
- Mehrabian, A. (2017). *Nonverbal communication*. Taylor & Francis. Each Other. Amerika Serikat: Basic Books.
- Tang, Y., & Hew, K. F. (2019). Emoticon, emoji, and sticker use in computer-mediated communication: A review of theories and research findings. *International journal of communication*, 13, 27.

- Tang, Y., & Hew, K. F. (2018). Emoticon, emoji, and sticker use in computer-mediated communications: Understanding its communicative function, impact, user behavior, and motive. In *New Media for Educational Change: Selected Papers from HKAECT 2018 International Conference* (pp. 191-201). Springer Singapore.
- Turkle, S. (2017). *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from*
- Veytia-Bucheli, M. G., Gómez-Galán, J., & Vergara, D. (2020). Presence of new forms of intercultural communication in higher education: Emojis and social interactions through WhatsApp among graduate students. *Education Sciences*, 10(11), 295.
- Sendari, A.A. (2021) 100 Arti Emoji WA Terbaru, Pengguna WhatsApp Wajib Tahu. <https://www.liputan6.com/hot/read/4834983/100-arti-emoji-wa-terbaru-pengguna-whatsapp-wajib-tahu?page=3>