



What's Behind the Tears? Investigating the Role of Crying Emojis in WhatsApp Chats among College Students

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The research employed a qualitative descriptive methodology to investigate the utilization of WhatsApp, a mobile messaging and calling application. WhatsApp offers various features, including text messaging, image sharing, audio files, and more. To enhance the robustness of the findings, the researcher utilized a sample drawn from social media platforms, recognizing them as sources of substantial evidence regarding communication channels and message conveyance. Additionally, the study drew upon relevant literature from scholarly journals exploring the role of emojis in communication and their efficacy in expressing emotions. The research focused specifically on students from a university, particularly those enrolled in the English department at Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatra Utara (UMSU). The sample size comprised ten students who participated in the study.

Keywords: communication channels, emojis, mobile messaging, university students, whatsapp

INTRODUCTION

Communication is essential in every aspect of life, even being one of the most important things in human life as a social being. Communication conveys intent and purpose to others, even to many. Communication and information were essential to the progress of human civilization from prehistoric to modern times. This evolution will continue into the foreseeable future, advancing current information and communication technologies. Today, so many communication media are developing in society; one media that many people use to communicate is the Internet. Internet utilization is used to access social media through WhatsApp applications.

WhatsApp is a messenger application with various functions, like text messages, images, audio files, video files, and links to web addresses (Bouhnik & Deshen, 2014). WhatsApp is also one of Indonesia's most-used social media; in 2018, WhatsApp users were recorded to reach 124 million and continue to increase from previous years. Online communication allows for a difference in meaning or perception between the two parties. One Japanese scientist (Shigeta Kurita, 1990) created emojis for the first time to reduce misunderstandings when conveying messages. The emoji form also has the same shape but has a different meaning.

One of the phenomena popular among teenagers in the use of emoji today is the use of the crying emoji, which is interpreted as an emoji with many meanings. They express almost every feeling they feel by using one emoji, namely the emoji that shows the expression of crying. Using the crying emoji does not mean that the user is sad or just crying. However, there are many possibilities. They can express their happiness, sadness, and fear by using this crying emoji. When they feel sad, they also use the same emoji. Therefore, to find out the context of the crying emoji used, the reader or recipient of this

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message must read the entire message sent by the sender to find out the meaning of the use of the crying emoji accompanied by the text message.

The crying emoji, commonly called a yellow face with an open mouth wailing and streams of heavy tears flowing from closed eyes, is often used today. This emoji expresses feeling hurt and angry with something meaningful and painful or symbolizes sadness and grief. However, these emojis have become popular because their original meaning has begun to shift. Semiotics is the study of symbols and signs (Chaniago, 2019). Semiotics is the study of signs that contain meaning and must be relevant according to the needs of society. Semiotics is the science that studies the meaning of a sign (Prasetya, 2019). The science of semiotics aims to know the meaning contained within a sign by interpreting the meaning, and then known communicators construct the message. The marker and the bookmark are a single unit, like the two sides of a currency. The marker and the bookmark appear to be separate embodiments, but both exist only as sign components. According to Saussure, signs have two embodiments: signifier (signifier) and signified (signifier) and signified (signifier) and signified (signifier/signifier/signifier/sign/thought of reference).

According to Saussure, signs are an inseparable combination of a concept and a sound image. The relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary. There is no definite logical relationship between the two, which simultaneously makes the text or sign exciting and problematic. Saussure's thought also strongly influenced the social and cultural sciences in general. Eventually, it inspired a conception of thought called structuralism. From various research perspectives on crying emojis, explained at the beginning of this paper, this research focuses on emojis from Ferdinand de Saussure's perspective about semiotics. This research aims to analyze the use of crying emojis in conversations among university students via WhatsApp social media.

Language Style

Language is a fundamental aspect of human existence, serving as a medium for expressing emotions, ideas, feelings, and thoughts through various forms, such as sounds, gestures, and signals that follow discernible patterns (Sapriyani, 2013). According to Ducrot and Todorov (1993), language style encompasses the selection among alternative linguistic expressions, allowing individuals to convey the same information through varied expressions tailored to different situations and contexts.

The choice of language style holds significant importance in interpersonal communication, as it influences interactions based on the selection of words employed by specific groups in different settings and conditions (Para et al., 2023). In contemporary communication, emojis have emerged as a prevalent language style, enabling individuals to convey emotions and messages effectively. Emojis offer specific meanings that enhance the essence of a conversation, especially when words alone may be insufficient to express the intended message. Consequently, emojis have become integral components of language style, facilitating nuanced expression and communication.

Recent trends indicate a growing reliance on emojis among teenagers, who employ these symbols for diverse purposes and meanings. Teenagers often utilize specific emoji expressions to convey messages, with emojis often imbuing messages with meanings beyond their literal interpretations. Notably, the crying emoji has emerged as a popular means of communication among teenagers, underscoring its significance as a stylistic element in contemporary communication practices.

What is Emoji?

This study delves into semiotics, focusing on the sign as a fundamental concept. According to Saussure's semiotic approach, signs in language, including visual communication, comprise two interconnected elements: the signifier and the signified. Saussure viewed language as a system of signs, wherein signs serve as subjects and objects within systems of signification, containing both the signifier (the form that signifies) and the signified (the concept signified). The emergence of emoticons in online communication represents a noteworthy phenomenon in recent years. Historically, Shigetaka Kurita introduced emojis in Japan in the late 1990s. Before emojis, emoticons served as the sole non-verbal cues, providing basic facial expressions to users to aid in textual communication.

Emojis are increasingly prevalent in online communication and are utilized diversely across various domains, including marketing, law, healthcare, and more (Bai et al., 2019). Defined by the Oxford Dictionary as small digital images or pictorial symbols representing things, feelings, or

concepts, emojis extend beyond facial expressions to encompass a wide range of concepts, ideas, and emotions. Emoticons, on the other hand, consist of digital icons or sequences of keyboard symbols representing facial expressions used to convey the writer's emotions or clarify intent in digital messages (Chairunnisa & A.S., 2017).

Specific messaging applications provide emojis as graphic symbols or ideograms embodying facial expressions, emotions, ideas, and various objects, such as vehicles, weather, buildings, food, and more (Baktiar et al., 2022). Emojis are rich in emotional significance and serve as vital mediums for online interaction and emotional communication (Bai et al., 2019).

The introduction of skin color options for emojis in 2015 aimed to enhance their resemblance to humans and promote diversity representation. Despite the provision of various skin color options, users sometimes engage in acts of racism and ethnocentrism, deeming certain skin color representations inappropriate (Rakhman, 2020). Emojis can be part of messaging, enhancing communication, and facilitating interactive communication. Moreover, emojis symbolize the sender's earnestness in expressing feelings or genuine sentiments, aiding recipients in understanding the sender's intended message (Siregar, 2021).

In addition to conveying emotions, emojis are utilized to convey semantic meanings in communication, serving as non-verbal cues to aid in comprehending message meanings (Na'aman et al., 2017). There is an ongoing discourse on whether emojis could evolve into an independent language, attracting attention from computing researchers due to their diverse semantic interpretations and the challenge of disambiguating emoji meanings (Bai et al., 2019; Jibril & Abdullah, 2013; Walther & D'Addario, 2001).

Online Conversation

WhatsApp, a social media platform for instant messaging, is widely utilized for communication purposes, particularly message transmission. Due to its user-friendly interface and accessibility, it is popular with various age groups, from youth to the elderly. Emojis integrated into the WhatsApp application facilitate interaction, enabling users to express feelings and emotions directly, eliminating face-to-face communication. As defined by Keith Davis, communication is the exchange of information and understanding between individuals. It plays an integral role in human life as social beings, wherein senders strive to convey messages to receivers, who, in turn, endeavor to comprehend the conveyed messages (Daulay & Berutu, 2023).

Most messenger applications, including WhatsApp, offer emoji and emoticon features. Initially, emoticons comprised simple symbols like “:)” to denote happiness and “:(” for sadness. However, with technological advancements, emojis and emoticons have evolved into visually appealing figures such as “😊,” available in various colors and shapes. Despite their differing appearances, emojis and emoticons effectively convey various emotions. Emojis enhance communication by adding emotional or contextual nuances to messages, making them more appealing to recipients (Cramer et al., 2016). They also aid users in adjusting the tone of their messages and managing interpersonal relationships (Bai et al., 2019). However, due to their visual nature and variations across platforms, emojis may introduce emotional or semantic ambiguity into communication contexts (Bai et al., 2019).

METHOD

This research employed a qualitative descriptive research method to strengthen its findings. According to Creswell (2012), qualitative research serves as a means to explore and understand the meaning individuals or groups assign to social human problems. Such research often involves in-depth interviews, focus groups, or observations to collect detailed and contextual data. It is commonly utilized to investigate complex phenomena or gain insights into people's experiences and perspectives. The outcomes of qualitative methods are descriptive, facilitating the extraction of inferences from the gathered data. Social media served as a crucial source of robust evidence in this research, highlighting the role of communication channels in message conveyance.

This study pertains to semiotics, which Ferdinand De Saussure extensively discussed. According to De Saussure (1857-1913), semiotics, or the study of signs, revolves around the relationship between signifier and signified, based on conventions known as signification. The semiotics of significance examines the relationships among sign elements within a system governed

by specific rules or conventions. Social consensus is essential for assigning meaning to signs, as Saussure identifies signs as comprising sounds and images, signifiers or markers, and the corresponding concepts, signified.

Additionally, the researchers consulted various journals examining emojis' use in communication and their efficacy in conveying messages through emoticons. This study focuses on university students, particularly those enrolled in the English department at UMSU. The research sample comprised ten students, contributing to the investigation's depth and breadth.

Research Design

This research employs content analysis as its research design. According to Krippendorff (2018), content analysis is a research technique used to make replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful materials) regarding their content. Content analysis encompasses written materials (text) and images, sounds, and symbols as long as they convey meaning about specific phenomena. Given the diverse meanings of text, they must be situated in a specific context for further inference and analysis by the researcher (Kolbe & Burnett, 1991). Content analysis involves an in-depth examination of written or printed information, enabling researchers to understand the overall meaning of the subject under investigation. The researchers opted for content analysis because: 1) The data source for this research is images. 2) The problem being analyzed concerns the content. 3) this research aims to describe communication content and discern its meaning from the data. According to Krippendorff, as cited in Bengtsson (2016), four main stages have been identified: decontextualization, recontextualization, categorization, and compilation.

In step 1, decontextualization, the researcher must familiarize themselves with the data and read through the transcribed text to obtain a sense of the whole and discern "what is going on?" before breaking it down into smaller meaning units once the meaning units have been identified. Step 2, recontextualization, involves checking whether all aspects of the content concerning the research aim have been covered. Step 3, categorization, entails identifying themes and categories. These themes and categories should be internally and externally heterogeneous, meaning no data should fall between two groups or fit into more than one group. Step 4, compilation, involves drawing realistic conclusions, conducting member checks, consulting colleagues, and conducting an inquiry audit.

Technique of Data Collection

This research technique involves carefully analyzing and recording the meanings of emojis, which entails recording the meaning of emojis used in conversations. Documentation techniques were employed in this research, collecting qualitative data by reviewing or analyzing documents used as data, whether in the form of text or photos. The data collection process begins with capturing screenshots of students' chats on the WhatsApp application. Each emoji in the chat is then analyzed using Krippendorff's content analysis technique, which involves the following steps:

1. **Decontextualization:** The researcher collects student chats and transcribes the data into written form to extract the meaning of emojis.
2. **Recontextualization:** After obtaining the general meaning of emojis, the researcher verifies whether the interpreted meanings align with the actual meanings of the emojis by examining the contents of the students' chats.
3. **Categorization:** Following verification, the researcher categorizes emojis based on whether they align with the chat's purpose.
4. **Compilation:** In this step, the researcher determines the actual meanings of the emojis in each student's chat, identifies any hidden meanings in the emojis, and assesses whether students use the appropriate emojis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This research reveals the significant role of emojis in interpersonal communication. Drawing from the richness theory, WhatsApp meets several criteria crucial for effective communication: 1) The ability of the communication channel to convey message signals such as facial expression, body movement, and vocal inflection; 2) Direct feedback provided by message receivers in response to each chat; 3) A

variety of language features including symbols and foreign languages; and 4) The capacity of the communication channel to convey personality traits such as personal emotion (Daft & Lengel, 1984).

Emojis used in WhatsApp serve to describe and emphasize various feelings and emotions. They enhance the intended meaning of the message, eliciting emotional responses from recipients. Emojis can significantly impact message delivery by adding depth to emotions (Ip, 2002). Additionally, they facilitate the expression of thoughts and feelings through digital media by employing universally recognized facial expressions (Mesquita et al., 1997). Emojis are a popular way to express emotions in digital communication. However, to use them effectively, it is essential to consider their context within the message. Emojis are intended to enhance the emotional resonance of the message and accurately convey the sender's emotions. Therefore, using the appropriate emojis at the right time and in the proper context can significantly improve the effectiveness of the message. It is also essential to use emojis sparingly, as this can dilute their impact and detract from the overall message (Stark & Crawford, 2015).

Emojis, icons depicting facial emotions, are commonly employed in text messages to convey the sender's emotions and personality traits in interpersonal communication (Dunlap et al., 2016). The use of emojis by message senders can evoke strong emotional responses from recipients, aiding in their understanding of the message's intended meaning (Luminet et al., 2000).

Discussion

The study delves into the prevalent use of emojis, particularly the crying emoji, in contemporary communication via WhatsApp. Despite the plethora of emojis available for conveying feelings and emotions, the crying emoji stands out as a phenomenon, especially among teenagers. This particular emoji, depicting a crying expression, encapsulates many emotions, leading to its multifaceted interpretation. Users utilize the crying emoji to express various sentiments, ranging from happiness to sadness and even fear. Consequently, the mere presence of the crying emoji does not necessarily indicate sadness or tears. Instead, its interpretation hinges on the context in which it is used. To decipher the intended meaning behind the crying emoji, recipients must analyze the entirety of the accompanying message, as it provides crucial context for understanding the nuanced expression conveyed by the emoji.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

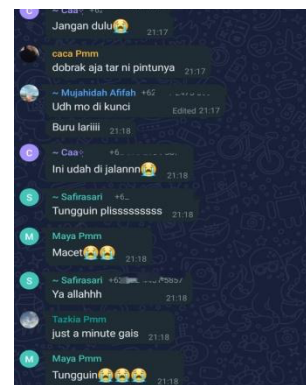


Figure 4

The study's findings, depicted in Figures 1 through 4, shed light on participants' diverse interpretations and usage of the crying emoji. In Figure 1, four participants employed the crying emoji not to signify sadness but to express amusement at something humorous. This result demonstrates that the crying emoji transcends its conventional association with sadness.

Moving to Figure 2, two participants utilized the crying emoji to convey amusement in response to perplexing jokes, deviating from its traditional connotation.

Figure 3 reveals two participants expressing confusion through the crying emoji, indicating a departure from its typical usage. These participants combined expressions of confusion and laughter,

reflected in their use of the crying emoji.

Finally, in Figure 4, participants employed the crying emoji to convey panic and fear, showcasing its versatility in expressing various emotions. This observation underscores the multifaceted nature of the crying emoji, which participants utilized to communicate distress about being locked outside a gate. Overall, the study highlights the nuanced and varied interpretations of the crying emoji, illustrating its capacity to convey a spectrum of emotions beyond mere sadness.

The study's analysis reveals that participants frequently utilized the crying emoji during their communications on WhatsApp. Traditionally associated with expressing sadness, the crying emoji took on a broader significance in this research. Rather than solely conveying sorrow, participants employed the crying emoji to articulate a wide range of emotions, including happiness, sadness, panic, and fear. This finding suggests that the crying emoji is a versatile tool for emotive expression in digital communication.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the conventional interpretation of the crying emoji, characterized by a yellow face emitting streams of tears from closed eyes, traditionally conveys intense feelings of hurt, anger, sadness, or grief. However, the evolving usage of this emoji has witnessed a shift in its original connotation. Drawing from Saussure's semiotic framework, which underscores the interplay between signifier and signified, it is evident that the interpretation of symbols varies between individuals in any given conversation. This study has elucidated the nuanced meanings associated with emojis, particularly the crying emoticon, within the context of WhatsApp communication. It is evident that the crying emoji now encompasses multiple interpretations, including expressions of sadness, laughter, panic, or anger. Consequently, the utilization of crying emojis in WhatsApp exchanges is contingent upon the situational context and the intended emotional expression.

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