



College students' perception of emojis as linguistic elements in whatsapp messages

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ABSTRACT

In today's digital era, emojis are widely used in online communication, yet their role remains debated. Whether only as decorative symbols or as linguistic elements that convey meaning and shape interpretation. This study investigates college students' perceptions, usage, and syntactic patterns of emojis in WhatsApp messages. Using a descriptive qualitative method with questionnaires, interviews, and digital material from college students in fourth-semester of English Education students at Universitas Nias, the study finds that college students view emojis as meaningful linguistic elements rather than mere decorations. Emojis are used to supplement, replace, or reverse textual meaning, and syntactic analysis identifies four patterns of emojis with sentence: post-text, co-text, pre-text, and pro-text, demonstrating their influence on sentence structure and interpretation. The results contribute to understanding emojis as part of linguistic and digital discourse and highlight their relevance to digital literacy and language education.

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INTRODUCTION

In the digital era, the evolution of communication technology has significantly transformed how individuals interact each other. Previously, communication was conducted through direct meetings and face-to-face conversations. However, with the development of digital communication technology, interactions can now take place without physical presence, utilizing online platforms. As Amelia and Balqis (2023) explained that the digital technologies have enabled rapid, bilateral, and interactive communication, making users active participants in the process. These innovations have significantly enhanced the speed and efficiency of communication across different media. Over the years, communication media have evolved from traditional letters, telegrams, and telephones to internet-based platforms or social media that facilitate real-time interactions, such as Youtube, Telegram, Facebook, WeChat, Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp.

Among these platforms, Addeo et al. (2023) stated that WhatsApp is considered as one of the top global social media platforms, along with YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. This is because WhatsApp offers a fast, user-friendly, and cost-effective way to

communicate, making it widely used for both personal and professional purposes. Nowadays, WhatsApp as a popular media platform can be used by everyone included college students in higher education. As Lee et al. (2023) stated that WhatsApp has become a widely used communication tool among university students and is increasingly utilized to support academic performance in higher education. WhatsApp become as an important media in higher education by facilitating the sharing of learning materials, coordinating group assignments, conducting discussions, and maintaining communication between lecturers and college students outside the classroom.

With all the features WhatsApp offers, emojis are one of the most popular and expressive way for people to show emotions and add meaning to their messages visually. As Dirgayasa (2022) mentioned that the word “emoji” comes from Japanese, where “e” means “picture” and “moji” means “character.” So basically, emojis are “picture characters.” Dirgayasa also explains that emojis are digital icons used in online chats to express feelings, ideas, and messages visually. This makes sense because plain text can sometimes feel cold or confusing, and emojis help fill in the emotional gaps. They turn emotions into easy-to-understand pictures, making conversations more natural and fun. For example, a simple smiling face 😊 can show friendliness or happiness, while a thumbs up 👍 quickly conveys approval or agreement without needing extra words.

Moreover, despite their usefulness in enriching digital communication, emojis are not always interpreted in the same way by everyone. While they generally enhance message clarity, misuse or placement in ambiguous contexts can lead to misinterpretation. For instance, an emoji intended as a joke may be perceived as sarcasm or disrespect, depending on the recipient’s cultural background, personal experiences, or emotional state. As Udoudom et al. (2024) explained that differences in emoji interpretation can result in confusion or miscommunication and, in some cases, even heighten interpersonal tensions. Therefore, although emojis serve as powerful tools for emotional expression and relational bonding, their use requires careful consideration of context, audience, and communication goals to avoid unintended misunderstandings.

This complexity in how emojis are interpreted naturally leads to a broader discussion about their role in digital communication, particularly whether they can be considered as part of language. The presence of emojis in online conversations has sparked considerable debate among scholars regarding their status as linguistic elements. Some experts argued that emojis function in a way similar to language because they help convey emotions, clarify intent, and add nuance to written messages. Telaumbanua et al. (2024), for example, suggest that emojis act as linguistic symbols that can complement or even replace words to create more expressive and effective communication. They are seen as carrying semantic meaning, contributing to sentence structure, and playing a pragmatic role in interaction, much like verbal and non-verbal cues in face-to-face conversations. In addition, Storment (2024) highlights that emojis can also play a syntactic role in digital messages, as their position can influence the meaning and shape the sentence structure. This indicates that emojis are not only pragmatic or semantic devices, but also participate in shaping how sentences are formed and understood in digital communication.

In the other side, not all scholars agree with this view. Some experts believe that emojis should be seen more as visual images than as linguistic signs. Maier (2023), for instance, compares emojis to photos or drawings and argues that their primary function is decorative or illustrative rather than linguistic. From this perspective, emojis are similar to illustrations in books or comics, where images support the narrative but do not directly contribute to the construction of meaning in the same way language does. This ongoing debate reflects the complexity of emojis in digital communication and raises important questions for future research, especially regarding how emojis function, how they shape the way we communicate, and whether they truly belong within the domain of language.

Understanding these contrasting views about the linguistic status of emojis becomes even more relevant when we consider how they are used by specific groups of users. One such group is

college students, who are among the most active participants in digital communication. Lu & Wu (2022) stated that college students represent the most active emoji users, as they frequently use emojis to enhance emotional expression, clarify intentions, and build social connections in online interactions. This trend is also evident among college students in the English Education Study Program at Universitas Nias, where the use of emojis has become an integral part of their daily digital communication practices, particularly on messaging platforms such as WhatsApp. In practice, college students often employ emojis to strengthen solidarity in group chats, express humor or irony, and show respect in formal interactions, with one of the most frequently observed practices being the use of the folded hands emoji (🙏) when communicating with lecturers. Moreover, WhatsApp plays a particularly central role among Nias students because many of them rely on it as their primary medium of academic and social communication. This makes their emoji usage patterns uniquely meaningful to study compared to other student groups. As the language learner, their active engagement with emojis not only reflects broader global patterns but also provides a rich context for examining how emojis function as linguistic elements within their academic and social communication.

Despite the increasing number of studies on emoji usage in digital communication, research focusing on how emojis function specifically as linguistic elements within WhatsApp messages in smaller or culturally unique regions such as Nias remains limited. Previous studies have tended to explore emotional expression or general communication functions but have not examined how students interpret emojis linguistically nor how emojis operate syntactically within authentic message structures. This creates a clear knowledge gap that this research seeks to address. Furthermore, this study differs from earlier research by combining students' perceptions with a syntactic analysis of actual WhatsApp messages, offering a more context-specific and comprehensive examination of emoji usage that has not been explored in previous studies.

This study focuses on the understanding of emojis as linguistic elements in WhatsApp messages among fourth-semester college students of the English Education Study Program at Universitas Nias. It specifically aims to explore their perceptions, examine how emojis are used, and analyze the syntactic patterns of emoji usage in structuring sentences within WhatsApp messages.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design, which emphasizes understanding meaning and context through non-numerical data (Tuckerman et al., 2020). This approach enables an in-depth exploration of college students' perceptions and use of emojis in digital communication. The research involves 37 college students in fourth-semester from the English Education Study Program at Universitas Nias, providing a focused representation of participants familiar with digital interaction. The data were collected from June and July 2025, during an active academic semester, which ensured that participants were routinely engaged in WhatsApp-based academic communication. This design enabled the researcher to analyze how emojis were perceived, used, and syntactically structured within WhatsApp messages. Although the sample size is relatively small, it is considered adequate for qualitative inquiry because the study aims to capture depth rather than generalize to all student populations. Since the entire population of fourth-semester students was included, the study used a total sampling approach, ensuring full coverage of the target group and eliminating sampling bias. The participants shared similar characteristics, including an age range of 19-21 years, a common academic background as English Education students, frequent participation in WhatsApp-based coursework interactions, and daily engagement in digital communication, making them suitable for examining the linguistic and functional aspects of emoji perception and use.

In this study, questionnaires, interviews and digital materials were used to collect data on the perception and use of emojis as linguistic elements in WhatsApp messages. The questionnaires consisted of three types based on question format and function, all distributed via Google Forms. The first questionnaire was distributed to 37 college students in fourth-semester to explore their perceptions of emojis through closed-ended questions (Yes/No format) aimed at determining whether emojis are viewed as decorative symbols or meaningful linguistic components. The second questionnaire, also distributed to the same group of college students, examined their actual emoji usage through open-ended questions in which participants responded to 30 different WhatsApp messages by indicating how they would naturally use emojis in each context. The third questionnaire was distributed to one lecturer, selected because this lecturer regularly communicates with the college students through WhatsApp and teaches courses in the same semester, making their observations directly relevant to the study. This lecturer questionnaire contained statements measured using a five-point Likert scale (Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, and Always), allowing the researcher to capture the lecturer's assessment of students' emoji use in academic communication. The lecturer's responses served as an external validation point, enabling comparison between college students' self-reported emoji use and the lecturer's perception of their actual digital behavior. This structured sequence of instruments offered comprehensive insights into how emojis function as linguistic elements.

This study used online chat interviews via WhatsApp to gain deeper insights beyond questionnaire data. As noted by Gunawan et al. (2022), online chatting interview is a practical and valid method for qualitative research, especially when traditional interviews are limited or when participants are more comfortable communicating through text. This method was chosen for its relevance to the study's focus on emojis, which are best represented in written digital communication. Using structured interview by use open-ended questions, the interviews explored participants' perceptions and linguistic use of emojis in WhatsApp messages. Interviews were conducted one-on-one to allow participants to express personal perspectives without group influence, and each participant attended one interview session lasting approximately 15–20 minutes. Additionally, digital materials, including Google Form responses, WhatsApp chat transcripts, and selected message screenshots, were used to provide authentic evidence of emoji use in real contexts. As Cresswell and Cresswell (2018) emphasize, digital or visual data can serve as valuable sources of qualitative information. To maintain privacy and confidentiality, all screenshots and chat transcripts were anonymized by removing names, profile photos, phone numbers, and any identifiable elements before analysis. Collected ethically with anonymized information, these materials enriched the analysis and strengthened the study's validity by offering comprehensive insights into how emojis function as linguistic elements in digital discourse.

The data were analyzed using a qualitative descriptive approach based on Mezmir's (2020) framework, which consist of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Relevant information from questionnaires, interviews, and digital materials was categorized, organized, and interpreted to reveal how emojis function as linguistic elements in WhatsApp communication. The coding process for all qualitative data was conducted manually without software assistance, following repeated reading and thematic grouping to ensure accuracy and depth.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

What were the perceptions of college students in fourth-semester of the English Education Study Program at Universitas regarding emojis as linguistic elements in WhatsApp messages?

Based on both questionnaire responses and follow-up interviews, college students had a clear and positive perception of emojis as linguistic elements in WhatsApp messages. They saw emojis not merely as decorative symbols but as meaningful components of digital communication, reflecting their awareness of emojis as integral to online interactions and highlighting the nuanced

ways in which they interpret and use them. The following section describes college students' perceptions of emojis as linguistic elements in WhatsApp messages:

One of the main perceptions is that emojis are essential tools for expressing emotions and attitudes that are often difficult to convey through plain text. In the absence of non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and gestures, college students see emojis as a bridge that helps them express sadness, excitement, politeness, humor, or sarcasm more effectively. This perception emerged consistently from both questionnaire responses and interview data, where many participants explained that certain emojis are intentionally chosen to make their messages sound friendlier or more respectful. For instance, emojis such as 😊 or 🙏 are frequently added to soften requests, express gratitude, or make feedback feel more supportive. The use of these examples reflects their understanding of emojis as a means of expressing emotion or attitude, as well as maintaining politeness in conversations, ensuring their messages remain respectful while avoiding the risk of sounding rude or impolite.

The second is that college students perceive emojis as helping to clarify the tone and intention of a message, a function they consider crucial in preventing misunderstandings. They are aware that short or ambiguous messages can easily be misinterpreted without visual tone indicators. Many college students shared that inserting emojis, especially those associated with emotion (e.g., 😊, 😔), helps the recipient interpret whether the message is meant as a joke, an apology, or a serious remark. This reflects not only their understanding of the pragmatic role of emojis in managing interpersonal communication but also their recognition of emojis as a way to reinforce social bonds between users. Participants explained that using familiar or "inside joke" emojis within a friend group strengthens group identity and makes interactions feel more personal and connected. In this way, the strategic placement of emojis serves a dual purpose: guiding the recipient toward the intended meaning while simultaneously maintaining and enhancing positive interpersonal relationships in digital spaces.

The third perception shows that college students are attentive to the placement of emojis within a message, recognizing its significant role in shaping nuance and interpretation. Among the three common positions (end, beginning, and middle), placing emojis at the end of a sentence was the most preferred. Students explained that this position feels natural, much like adding a facial expression after speaking, and often serves to reinforce or soften the emotional tone. For instance, adding 😊 or 🙏 at the end of a request can make it sound more polite and friendly, while 😊 at the end of a humorous remark signals shared amusement. Questionnaire data confirmed this trend, with a majority of respondents indicating that end placement is their default choice because it maintains message clarity while still conveying emotion.

Placing emojis at the beginning of a message, although less common, was recognized as an effective way to establish the tone or intention before the text is read. Interviewees mentioned that starting with 😊 can immediately signal humor, 😔 can prepare the reader for a playful or ironic remark, and 😡 can indicate frustration or urgency. College students noted that this strategy helps guide the recipient's interpretation from the outset, reducing the risk of misreading the tone. However, they also emphasized that overusing this position might make messages feel informal or overly casual, so it is often reserved for personal rather than formal communication.

In contrast, inserting emojis in the middle of a sentence was reported as the least common practice. College students indicated that this placement is relatively uncommon, as it can disrupt the flow of a message and make it harder to read. They explained that it is usually done playfully in casual conversations with close friends, where shared understanding allows for such creative expressions, but it is rarely used in serious discussions where clarity is prioritized. When this placement is used, it typically serves to replace specific words, illustrate an idea visually, or emphasize key points. Examples from both questionnaire responses and interviews included expressions such as "Oupps 😊 I forgot to submit the task" or "that's crazy 😊 I can't believe it" to

inject humor, 🍀 to highlight something impressive (“Her design is 🍀 amazing”), and ❤️ to express strong appreciation (“I really ❤️ this idea”). While this mid-sentence placement is the least preferred position, it is still valued in certain contexts for its ability to emphasize meaning and make conversations more engaging.

These findings, particularly regarding emoji usage patterns within sentences, reveal that college students are intentional in their emoji placement, considering not only the emotional tone they wish to convey but also how the position of an emoji influences message clarity, interpretation, and appropriateness for the given context. This reflects a nuanced understanding of emojis as both expressive and strategic tools in digital communication.

The fourth perception highlights that college students understand emoji meanings as contextual and flexible rather than fixed. They pointed out that the same emoji could convey different messages depending on who they were chatting with, the topic being discussed, and the emotional tone of the conversation. For example, 😞 is often used to express genuine sadness when reacting to bad news from a classmate, but in another situation—such as responding to a funny TikTok video or a joke in a group chat—it signals uncontrollable laughter. Similarly, 😏 can be used sarcastically when talking about a disappointing grade or playfully when teasing a close friend.

College students also provided examples of using emojis for their literal meaning to represent specific objects or activities common in their daily lives. For instance, 🍜 when planning to eat noodles after class, 🏠 when talking about going home for the weekend, or 🎂 when discussing birthday celebrations. At the same time, they recognized that these literal meanings could shift depending on the chat context. The 🍜 emoji, for example, might literally mean “noodles” in one conversation but be used humorously in another to refer to being hungry during a boring class.

This adaptability reflects students’ awareness that meaning is not embedded solely in the emoji itself but negotiated through the interaction and shared understanding between participants. As one student explained, “With my close friends, they get the real meaning instantly, but with others, they might read it differently.” Such awareness aligns with the pragmatic perspective that meaning in communication is shaped by context, relationship, and situational cues. It also shows how students strategically adjust their emoji use to maintain rapport, convey emotional nuance, and ensure their intended message is understood.

Furthermore, college students perceive emojis as a tool for linguistic efficiency, allowing them to replace words, phrases, or even entire sentences while preserving meaning and emotional nuance. For example, an emoji can substitute a word, such as using 😄 to convey “funny,” or 🌟 to replace the word “star” in a sentence like “Look at that 🌟 in the sky tonight.” It can also replace a phrase, like sending ☀️ to indicate “sunny weather” or “a bright day.” In some cases, a single emoji can represent a complete sentence—for instance, instead of writing “I completely agree with your point,” a student might simply send 👍. These examples illustrate how emojis condense complex meanings into a single, instantly recognizable symbol while maintaining the interpersonal warmth and social connection that text alone might fail to convey. For college students, this practice is not merely about saving time; it is also about enhancing the expressiveness and tone of their messages, ensuring that the recipient understands both the literal meaning and the intended emotional nuance. Such usage reflects their awareness of emojis as an integral component of modern written language—functional, expressive, and culturally embedded in everyday WhatsApp communication.

In addition, college students also indicated that the use of emojis varies depending on the level of formality in a conversation. They reported freely using emojis in informal settings, such as chatting with friends or classmates, where emojis help express emotions, humor, and social bonding naturally. In contrast, they are more cautious or even avoid using emojis when communicating with lecturers or in academic contexts, reflecting an awareness of professional and social expectations. This careful adjustment demonstrates their understanding of sociolinguistic

norms: emoji use is not purely a matter of personal preference but must align with the perceived standards of politeness, appropriateness, and professionalism in formal interactions. Such behavior illustrates that students are capable of strategically navigating digital communication, adapting their emoji use to suit the social context and maintain both relational harmony and clarity in message interpretation.

Based on these perceptions, college students recognize emojis as linguistically meaningful, emotionally expressive, and socially adaptive tools in digital communication, particularly within WhatsApp interactions. They demonstrate an awareness that emojis not only shape the meaning of messages but also influence how those messages are interpreted, depending on placement, context, and intended tone. Taken together, these insights highlight the students' ability to integrate emojis into their everyday WhatsApp-based language practices in ways that are both creative and contextually appropriate.

How did college students in fourth-semester of English Education Study Program at Universitas Nias use emojis as linguistic elements in WhatsApp messages?

In WhatsApp communication, college students use emojis not merely for decoration but as part of their linguistic expression. Emojis are purposefully applied to convey meaning, clarify intent, and express emotion. Their usage reflects college students' awareness of how visual symbols can complement or shape language in informal digital interactions. This discussion explores the main ways college students use emojis as linguistic elements, focusing on three key functions.

a. Supplementing

One of the most common ways students use emojis is by supplementing their written messages to reinforce tone, clarify intent, or express emotion. In this usage, emojis act as supportive elements that enhance the overall meaning of a message without replacing any words. College students often apply this strategy when the text alone may seem too neutral, ambiguous, or lacking emotional clarity.

For example, after writing a sentence like *"I'm so tired of doing assignments"*, a student might add 😞 or 😫 to express frustration or exhaustion more clearly. Similarly, emojis such as 🙏 are frequently used after expressions of thanks (*"Thanks for the help 🙏"*), while 🎉 or 🎊 often appear after messages celebrating achievements (*"We passed the presentation! 🎉"*). These additions help the receiver better understand the speaker's emotional tone and intent, especially in the absence of nonverbal cues.

College students reported that supplementing emojis helps make their communication more expressive, polite, or friendly. This strategy is typically used in peer conversations or group chats, where maintaining a positive and engaging tone is important. The emotional cues provided by emojis also help reduce misunderstandings and make messages feel more personal and relatable.

b. Replacing

The second way college students use emojis as linguistic elements is through replacing, where an emoji takes the place of a specific word or phrase within a message. This function is referred to as *replacing* because the emoji assumes a lexical role, functioning as a substitute for a written expression, typically a noun, verb, or adjective that is easily understood through shared context. In doing so, the emoji becomes a direct part of the sentence's meaning and grammatical construction.

College students frequently use this strategy in informal peer communication, valuing its brevity, creativity, and visual appeal. Common examples include using ❤️ to replace the word "love" in *"I ❤️ this movie"*, 🍕 for "pizza" in *"Let's order 🍕 tonight"*, or 😴 for "sleepy" in *"Feeling 😴 all day."* These emojis are not mere visual accents but serve as meaningful linguistic units that carry clear, shared interpretations.

Moreover, college students also reported that emojis can function as complete standalone messages, particularly when the context is clear. For example, responding to a friend's message about exam results with only 🎉 or 😞 conveys celebration or disappointment without requiring any accompanying text. In such cases, the emoji is used independently, yet the receiver understands the full meaning due to the conversational context. This illustrates how emojis can replace entire verbal expressions, especially in emotionally charged or highly contextual interactions.

Although college students are comfortable using emoji replacements among friends, they recognize that this strategy is typically avoided in formal or academic communication, particularly when interacting with lecturers. Replacing text with emojis in formal contexts may appear too casual or vague, and therefore college students adjust their usage based on the level of formality and audience.

In essence, the *replacing* usage shows college students' awareness of how emojis can serve not only as part of written language but also as independent expressions, reflecting linguistic creativity and adaptability in informal digital communication.

c. Reversing

The third and most nuanced way college students use emojis is through reversing, where an emoji is intentionally used to express a meaning that contrasts with or even opposes the literal content of the accompanying text. In this function, emojis serve as pragmatic markers that signaling sarcasm, irony, or playful criticism, thereby altering how the written message is meant to be understood. Unlike supplementing or replacing, this usage does not aim to clarify meaning, but rather adds a layer of contrast and complexity, relying heavily on shared context and the recipient's ability to recognize the irony.

For instance, a college student might write *"Wow, I totally enjoyed waking up at 6 AM for class 😞"*, where the crying emoji (😞), typically associated with sadness or frustration, is paired with a seemingly positive statement. The mismatch between the cheerful text and the negative emoji leads the reader to interpret the message as sarcastic or ironic. Another example is *"Yay, another quiz tomorrow! 😞"*, where the distressed emoji (😞), used after a sentence that appears excited, signals clear annoyance or mock celebration. In both cases, the emoji reverses the perceived tone of the text, indicating that the surface meaning should not be taken literally.

This usage reflects students' pragmatic awareness, their ability to communicate indirect meanings, critique, or humor through emoji-text interplay. The emoji becomes a crucial cue for how the message should be interpreted, especially in digital communication where tone and facial expressions are absent. Without the emoji, such statements might be misread as genuine, leading to confusion.

College students explained that this strategy is commonly used in conversations with close peers, where shared understanding and informal tone allow for more playful expression. However, they also acknowledged that reversing is rarely used in formal settings, such as when communicating with lecturers, due to the higher risk of misinterpretation or appearing disrespectful.

In conclusion, the reversing usage illustrates how college students creatively use emojis not to support but to challenge or invert textual meaning. By intentionally creating dissonance between message and symbol, students convey sarcasm, critique, or emotional contradiction, showing a sophisticated and adaptive use of language in digital discourse.

How were the syntactic patterns of the use of emojis with sentences in WhatsApp messages by college students in fourth-semester of the English Education Study Program at Universitas Nias?

The analysis of the syntactic patterns of emojis in WhatsApp messages was carried out by considering the key features of emoji placement and structure within sentences. The collected data

revealed insights into how frequently emojis appeared in different sentence positions and provided examples of how college students integrated emojis into sentence structures. Based on these observations, four patterns of syntactic analysis concerning the placement and use of emojis within message sentences were identified:

a. Post-text emoji

Post-text emojis are placed at the end of a sentence, functioning as extra-sentential markers that comment on or modify the overall meaning of the utterance rather than forming part of the grammatical clause. This aligns with Storum's (2024) notion of post-text positioning, in which emojis operate similarly to intonational gestures or prosodic cues in spoken language, signaling emotional tone and communicative intent. The findings show that college students frequently used post-text emojis to clarify or reinforce the mood of their messages, for example: (a) *The lecturer explained the lesson clearly 😊*, (b) *I forgot my book 😬*, and (c) *I appreciate your help 🙏*. These examples illustrate how emojis at the sentence-final position enhance expressiveness by signaling friendliness, embarrassment, or gratitude without altering syntactic integrity. Syntactic analysis further supports this, showing that post-text emojis occupy a peripheral position attached to the sentence boundary, functioning as pragmatic cues that guide interpretation and emotional resonance. In digital communication, such placement helps maintain clarity while enriching interpersonal meaning, bridging the gap between written and spoken modes of expression.

b. Co-text Emoji

Co-text emojis are placed directly beside a specific word or phrase within a sentence, functioning as local modifiers that emphasize, illustrate, or clarify the meaning of that lexical item. Unlike post-text emojis, which comment on the entire utterance, co-text emojis attach to individual words and work within the clause to enhance meaning. Storum (2024) explains that such emojis resemble gestures accompanying single words in spoken communication, enriching expression without altering sentence structure. Data from this study show that college students often use co-text emojis immediately after certain words to make their meaning clearer or more expressive, as in: (a) *The movie was so funny 😄*, (b) *I am so sleepy 😴 right now*, and (c) *I love coffee ☕ in the morning*. In each case, the emoji appears directly after *funny*, *sleepy*, or *coffee*, visually reinforcing the meaning of those words.

These examples illustrate that co-text emojis integrate seamlessly within the clause, remaining part of the same syntactic constituent such as an adjectival phrase (*funny 😄*, *sleepy 😴*) or a noun phrase (*coffee ☕*), while leaving the sentence grammatically complete even without the emoji. Their primary role is to create a multimodal unit that visually amplifies meaning, similar to emphatic or illustrative gestures in spoken discourse. This use adds immediacy and expressiveness to digital messages, allowing written communication to convey both literal and affective nuances.

However, the boundary between co-text and post-text emojis can sometimes blur when the relevant word occurs at the end of an utterance. For instance, in *The movie was funny 😄*, the emoji reiterates the meaning of *funny*, functioning as co-text, whereas in *I forgot my book 😬*, it adds an emotional stance of embarrassment beyond the lexical meaning, marking it as post-text. Thus, the distinction lies not merely in position but in whether the emoji reinforces a specific word or extends the overall tone of the sentence.

c. Pre-text Emoji

Storum (2024) categorized the syntactic placement of emojis into three major patterns: post-text emojis (appearing after the utterance), co-text emojis (directly attached to a specific word or constituent), and pro-text emojis (syntactically projected into the sentence as a constituent). However, the data from this study revealed another recurrent pattern not explicitly discussed in previous literature, namely the frequent use of emojis at the beginning of a sentence. In this position, emojis appear before the written utterance and primarily function as framing devices or discourse markers. Rather than replacing or reinforcing a word, they set the emotional tone of the message in advance.

Since this syntactic position is the mirror image of post-text emojis but occurs before the utterance, the present study adopts the term *pre-text emojis*. In this sense, pre-text emojis function as extra-sentential elements that set the tone or frame the interpretation of the message before the reader encounters the textual component. They serve as an initial cue that guides how the following words should be understood, shaping the emotional or pragmatic orientation of the entire utterance.

Examples of pre-text emojis include (a) 😊 *I'm late*, (b) 🙌 *You did a great job*, and (c) 🎉 *We celebrate your birthday*. In each example, the emoji positioned before the sentence establishes an immediate emotional context such as embarrassment, praise, or festivity before any words are read. Positioned outside the core syntactic structure, pre-text emojis do not act as grammatical components such as arguments or modifiers but instead operate at the discourse level to guide interpretation. The syntactic analysis consistently shows that these emojis precede rather than integrate into the noun or verb phrase, leaving the clause grammatically intact while enriching its pragmatic meaning. Functioning much like paralinguistic or prosodic cues in spoken language, pre-text emojis enable writers to foreground emotional tone and interpersonal intent from the very beginning of an utterance, making digital communication more expressive and contextually nuanced.

d. Pro-text emoji

Pro-text emojis are those that are syntactically projected into the sentence, functioning as lexical items that occupy grammatical slots such as nouns, verbs, or adjectives. Unlike pre-text, co-text, or post-text emojis, which generally operate as extra-sentential or supplementary elements, pro-text emojis are directly integrated into the structure of the clause. This observation aligns with Storment (2024) account that emojis can be treated as projected elements when they serve as arguments or predicates.

In the data, college students provided several examples of emojis replacing words in their WhatsApp messages: (a) *I want ☕* → ☕ replaces the word *coffee*; (b) *He looks 😊 in class* → 😊 replaces *sleepy*; (c) *I ♥ your outfit* → ♥ replaces *love*. These examples illustrate how emojis can be fully integrated into the syntactic structure of a sentence by functioning as grammatical constituents. In example (a), ☕ directly replaces the noun *coffee* as the object of the verb *want*; in (b), 😊 operates as a predicative adjective within the complement of *looks*; and in (c), ♥ functions as the main verb, occupying the predicate position in place of *love*.

Together, these examples demonstrate the distinctive nature of pro-text emojis as fully integrated grammatical elements. Unlike pre-text, co-text, or post-text emojis, which primarily serve pragmatic or discourse functions, pro-text emojis directly fill syntactic roles within the clause, functioning as nouns (☕), adjectives (😊), or verbs (♥). Syntactic analysis confirms that these symbols do not stand outside the sentence structure but instead project into positions typically occupied by lexical words. In each case, the clause remains grammatically complete, with the emoji supplying the required argument or predicate. What makes this usage distinctive is its combination of linguistic efficiency and iconic immediacy: emojis act as compact pictorial signs that convey referential meaning while also expressing affective or stylistic nuance. In this sense, pro-text emojis represent the highest level of syntactic integration in digital discourse, showing that emojis are not merely decorative or supplementary but can function as true lexical substitutes within formal sentence structures.

Limitation and Implication of the Research

The findings of this study should be interpreted with caution due to several limitations. Since the participants were limited to fourth-semester students in the English Education Study Program at Universitas Nias, the results cannot be fully generalized to students from other study programs, universities, or age groups. Differences in academic backgrounds, levels of digital literacy, communication norms, and learning environments may influence how individuals use

and interpret emojis in online interaction. Furthermore, the exclusive focus on WhatsApp as the communication platform restricts the contextual scope of the findings, as different platforms have distinct interaction cultures, degrees of formality, and multimodal features. These limitations highlight the need for future research involving participants from varied academic programs, age groups, and institutions, as well as studies conducted across multiple digital platforms.

Despite these limitations, the study offers meaningful theoretical implications for digital communication and multimodal linguistics. The identification of emoji functions, including supplementing, replacing, and reversing, reinforces the understanding that emojis operate as intentional semiotic resources that contribute to meaning-making rather than as simple decorative symbols. This supports multimodal and pragmatic perspectives that emphasize the interplay between verbal and visual cues in constructing meaning. The syntactic positions occupied by emojis in students' messages also indicate that they can fulfill discourse-level roles comparable to prosody, gesture, or lexical elements. These patterns enrich theoretical discussions related to digital pragmatics, discourse analysis, and sociolinguistic variation, particularly in the context of online communication within educational settings.

In addition to these theoretical contributions, the study provides practical implications for language learning, digital communication, and media literacy. For language learners, understanding the pragmatic functions of emojis can enhance their ability to convey tone, manage interpersonal relationships, and avoid miscommunication in digital writing. Lecturers can incorporate discussions or activities related to emoji use into instructional practices to help students develop more effective and context-sensitive communication strategies. From a media literacy perspective, the findings highlight the importance of critically evaluating how emojis influence meaning, interaction dynamics, and online discourse. This awareness can help both students and educators engage more thoughtfully and responsibly in multimodal digital communication.

CONCLUSION

This study explored college students' perceptions and use of emojis as linguistic elements in WhatsApp communication. The findings show that college students view emojis as meaningful components of digital language that contribute to clarity, tone, and interpretation, reflecting their awareness of syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, and semiotic aspects. College students also use emojis strategically through supplementing, replacing, and reversing functions depending on context, audience, and communicative intent, demonstrating their linguistic creativity in digital interaction. The syntactic analysis further reveals identifiable patterns, including post-text, co-text, pre-text, and pro-text emojis, indicating that emojis are systematically integrated rather than used randomly. Additionally, college students show sociolinguistic awareness by adjusting their emoji use in formal and informal settings. Overall, the study concludes that emojis serve important expressive and functional roles in shaping meaning within contemporary digital discourse, especially among college students who treat them as integral elements of everyday communication.

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