

Interpretation Of Emoji Meaning In Gen Z Digital Communication On Whatsapp: A Pragmasemantic Study

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Abstract

The study aims to describe the forms of emoji usage, analyze the role of context in shaping meaning, and identify the distinctive characteristics of emoji use among Generation Z. This study employs a qualitative descriptive method, with data collected from nine WhatsApp conversations containing emojis. The data were gathered through documentation techniques and analyzed through data reduction, classification, and interpretation based on pragmatics theory. The findings reveal that emojis function not only as emotional expressions but also as tools to regulate tone, maintain social relationships, and enhance message clarity. The meaning of emojis is highly context-dependent, influenced by communication situations, social relationships, and users' emotional conditions. Additionally, Generation Z tends to use emojis in a creative, flexible, and expressive manner to construct meaning and manage interpersonal communication. This study highlights that emojis have become an essential component of multimodal digital communication, where meaning is dynamically constructed through the interaction between text, visual symbols, and context. Therefore, the pragmatics approach is effective in providing a comprehensive understanding of emoji meaning in contemporary digital interactions.

Keywords: emoji; digital communication; Generation Z; WhatsApp; pragmatics

INTRODUCTION

Digital communication has become an essential part of daily interaction, especially among Generation Z, who actively use instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp. The development of digital technology has changed communication patterns from face-to-face interaction into text-based communication, where emotional expressions, tone, and gestures are often absent. To overcome these limitations, users commonly employ emojis as visual symbols to express emotions, intentions, and interpersonal meanings more effectively. In WhatsApp conversations, emojis are frequently used to support written messages, strengthen emotional expressions, soften utterances, and create a more interactive communication atmosphere. Among Generation Z, emoji usage has become a common communication practice because emojis help users convey feelings and attitudes that may be difficult to express through words alone. However, the interpretation of emojis often depends on communication context, social relationships, and situational factors. Therefore, the study of emoji meaning in digital communication is important to understand how meaning is constructed and interpreted in contemporary interaction.

Semantics is a branch of linguistics that focuses on the study of meaning in language, including words, phrases, and sentences, where meaning is generally viewed as conventional and relatively stable. However, with the rapid development of digital communication, especially through platforms such as WhatsApp, language use has expanded beyond verbal text to include visual symbols like emojis. Emojis play an important role in enriching communication by expressing emotions, attitudes, and subtle nuances that are often difficult to convey through words alone (Asari et al., 2023.). As a result, the meaning of emojis is no longer fixed but tends to shift and develop, particularly among Generation Z, who are highly familiar with digital communication technologies.

In contrast to semantics, pragmatics examines meaning in relation to context, including the relationship between speakers, communicative intentions, and situational factors. Within digital interactions, the interpretation of emojis is strongly influenced by these contextual elements. A single emoji can carry different meanings depending on the context in which it is

used and the relationship between the participants in the conversation. This indicates that emoji meaning cannot be interpreted solely from its form, but must also consider contextual influences that shape how messages are understood (Yuliana Khoirun Nisa, 2025). In this sense, emojis function not only as expressive tools but also as strategies to clarify intentions, soften messages, and maintain social relationships in digital communication.

To better understand this phenomenon, a pragmatics perspective is necessary, as it integrates both semantic and pragmatic approaches in analyzing meaning. This perspective allows meaning to be examined not only from linguistic structures but also from the context of use and user interpretation. In modern communication, meaning is increasingly dynamic and multimodal, involving the interaction between text and visual elements such as emojis (Fernández Robin et al., 2017). Therefore, analyzing emoji usage requires a more comprehensive approach that considers both its literal and contextual meanings.

The widespread use of emojis in everyday communication highlights their significance as an essential element of digital language, particularly among Generation Z. Emojis are often used to complement or even replace verbal expressions, making communication more engaging and easier to understand. Generation Z tends to use emojis to express emotions, emphasize messages, and create a more relaxed and interactive communication style (Harahap et al., 2025). Furthermore, emojis are frequently used creatively to convey humor, sarcasm, or subtle emotional expressions that may not be easily expressed through text alone (Yuliana Khoirun Nisa, 2025).

Previous studies have demonstrated that emojis serve various functions in digital communication, such as expressing emotions, acting as social signals, and contributing to the construction of digital identity (Marilyn et al., 2025). In addition, emojis can substitute nonverbal cues like facial expressions and gestures, which are absent in text-based communication (Ayuningsih et al., 2025). However, most of these studies focus on semiotic, sociolinguistic, or cyber pragmatic perspectives, and there is still limited research that examines emoji meaning comprehensively through a pragmatics approach, especially in the context of WhatsApp communication among Generation Z.

Based on this gap, this study aims to explore the interpretation of emoji meaning in digital communication among Generation Z on WhatsApp using a pragmatics framework. The study focuses on identifying the forms of emoji usage, analyzing the influence of context on meaning, and examining the distinctive patterns of emoji use among Generation Z. Through this approach, the study is expected to provide a deeper understanding of emojis as dynamic and context-dependent elements in contemporary digital communication.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with a pragmatics perspective. A qualitative method is chosen because the research seeks to explore and interpret the meaning of emoji usage in digital communication in a deeper and more contextualized way. Meanwhile, the descriptive design is used to present the phenomenon of emoji use as it naturally occurs in the collected data. The pragmatics approach is applied to examine the relationship between the semantic meaning of emojis and their pragmatic use in context, allowing a more comprehensive understanding of how meaning is constructed in specific communication situations.

The data for this study consist of digital conversations taken from WhatsApp interactions among Generation Z users that include emojis. A total of nine conversation samples were selected based on their relevance to the research focus. These data represent various communication contexts, such as casual conversations among friends, academic discussions, and interactions involving emotional expression, enabling a more in-depth analysis of emoji meaning across different situations.

The primary research instrument in this study is the researcher as a human instrument. The researcher is responsible for collecting the data, organizing and categorizing it, as well as interpreting the meaning of emojis based on their contextual use. In the analysis process, interpretative skills are applied by referring to pragmatics theory to uncover the implicit meanings embedded in emoji usage.

Data were collected using a documentation technique, which involves gathering screenshots or excerpts of WhatsApp conversations containing emojis. This technique is considered appropriate since the data are in the form of written digital communication.

The data analysis process is carried out in several stages. First, data reduction is conducted by selecting and simplifying relevant data according to the research objectives. Second, data classification is performed by grouping the data based on types of emojis, their communicative functions, and the contexts in which they appear. Finally, data interpretation is conducted by analyzing emoji meanings in relation to situational context, social relationships, and emotional conditions using a pragmatics framework.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The table below presents several emojis that are frequently used in WhatsApp conversations among Generation Z users. These emojis commonly appear in everyday digital communication and function not only as visual symbols, but also as important elements that help users express emotions, strengthen meanings, soften utterances, create humor, reduce awkwardness, and maintain interpersonal relationships in online interactions. The emojis presented in the table were selected from conversation samples that reflect various communication contexts experienced by Generation Z, such as casual conversations, academic discussions, expressions of gratitude, emotional responses, and stressful situations related to daily activities. Each emoji demonstrates different pragmatic functions depending on the context of communication, the relationship between participants, and the emotional condition involved in the interaction.

Table 1. WhatsApp Conversation Data 2025

No	Emoji	Implicit Meaning	Pragmatic Function	Context	Message Context
1.		Reticence / Joking	Softening requests	Close friends	"Tapi jangan mahal-mahal ya 😊."
2.		Sincere thanks	Strengthening gratitude	Supportive relationships	"Terima kasih banyak ya sudah bantu aku 🙏."
3.		Friendliness/humor	Breaking the ice	Close friends	"Kamu tuh ada-ada aja 😊."
4.		Friendly invitation	Softening invitations	Hanging out	"Besok ikut nongkrong bareng ya 😊."
5.		Enthusiasm	Positive responses	Approval	"Wah keren banget hasilnya 😊!"

6.	😊	Friendly/warm	Strengthening relationships	Close friends	"Makasih ya sudah ingat aku 😊."
7.	☹️	Gentle/worried	Softening questions	Assignments	"Tugasnya dikumpul hari ini ya? ☹️"
8.	😫	Stressed / tired	Emotional expression	Students	"Aduh tugasnya banyak banget hari ini 😫."
9.	🤝	Solidarity humor	Reducing stress	Final year students	"Sama banget, aku juga belum selesai 🤝."

Based on the analysis of nine WhatsApp conversations involving Generation Z users, the findings reveal that emojis function as more than decorative visual symbols in digital communication. Emojis serve as pragmatic tools that help users express emotions, soften utterances, create humor, strengthen communicative intentions, and maintain interpersonal relationships in conversations. The findings also show that the meaning of emojis is strongly influenced by communication context, social relationships, and the emotional condition of the speakers. In addition, Generation Z tends to use emojis creatively and expressively as part of their daily communication style on WhatsApp. The following discussion presents each conversation data along with an analysis of emoji usage based on its contextual and pragmatic meaning within the interaction.



Figure 1. *WhatsApp Conversation Data 1 Emoji 😊 expressing sincere gratitude*

Figure 1 presents a conversation between two close friends discussing plans to hang out together. The message "tapi jangan mahal-mahal ya 😊" illustrates how the emoji 😊 (grinning face with sweat) functions as a hedging device to soften a potentially awkward request about budget limitations. From a pragmatic perspective, this emoji acts as a tone softener, allowing the speaker to express a financial concern without sounding rude or creating social discomfort. Its use reflects the cooperative principle of digital communication, where emojis supplement verbal text to ensure the intended emotional meaning is conveyed lightly and naturally.



Figure 2. *WhatsApp Conversation Data 2 Emoji 🙏 expressing sincere gratitude*

Figure 2 presents a conversation in which one participant expresses sincere gratitude after receiving help with an assignment. The message “Terima kasih banyak ya sudah bantu aku 🙏” illustrates how the emoji 🙏 (folded hands) functions to reinforce the emotional weight of gratitude that may feel insufficient when expressed through words alone. From a pragmatic perspective, this emoji acts as a sincerity amplifier, strengthening the interpersonal bond between the participants. Its use reflects the cooperative principle of digital communication, where emojis supplement verbal text to ensure the intended emotional meaning is conveyed fully and warmly.



Figure 3. *WhatsApp Conversation Data 3 Emoji 😂 used to express humor in an embarrassing situation*

Figure 3 shows a conversation where one participant shares an embarrassing incident of nearly falling while rushing to buy cilok (a street snack). The response “Kamu tuh ada-ada aja 😂” employs the emoji 😂 (face with tears of joy) as a humor marker that reduces the social embarrassment of the situation. Rather than conveying ridicule, the emoji signals friendly teasing and lightheartedness. This demonstrates the face-saving function of emojis in digital communication: they allow speakers to acknowledge an awkward situation while simultaneously creating a relaxed and supportive atmosphere. The emoji here acts as a pragmatic softener, transforming potential embarrassment into a source of shared laughter.

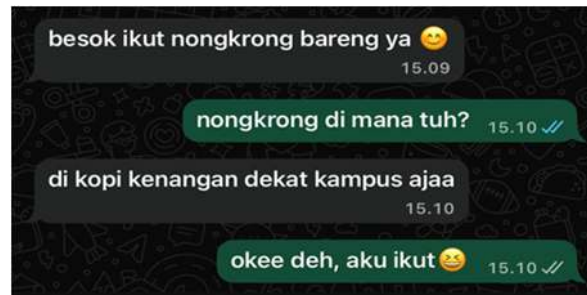


Figure 4. *WhatsApp Conversation Data 4 Emoji 😊 used to soften a social invitation*

Figure 4 illustrates a social invitation where one participant asks another to join a hangout session at Kopi Kenangan near campus. The message “Besok ikut nongkrong bareng ya 😊” uses the emoji 😊 (slightly smiling face) to give the invitation a warm and non-pressuring tone. The emoji functions as a politeness strategy, making the invitation feel casual and friendly rather than demanding. The recipient’s positive response confirms that the emoji successfully softened the illocutionary force of the request. This supports the view that emojis operate as pragmatic hedges in digital communication, particularly in informal peer interactions among Generation Z.



Figure 5. *WhatsApp Conversation Data 5 Emoji 🤩 conveying enthusiasm and positive response*

Figure 5 captures a conversation in which one participant shares that they have just finished editing a poster for an upcoming event. The response “Wahhh keren bngt hasilnya 🤩” uses the emoji 🤩 (star-struck face) to express admiration and enthusiasm. The repetition of letters in “Wahhh” and “bngt” (an abbreviation of banget, meaning “a lot”) combined with the emoji creates a compound expressive strategy that amplifies the sincerity of the compliment. From a pragmatic standpoint, the emoji functions as an expressive speech act, reinforcing positive feedback and contributing to a supportive communicative environment. Such usage reflects Generation Z’s tendency to employ emojis as intensifiers in digital praise.

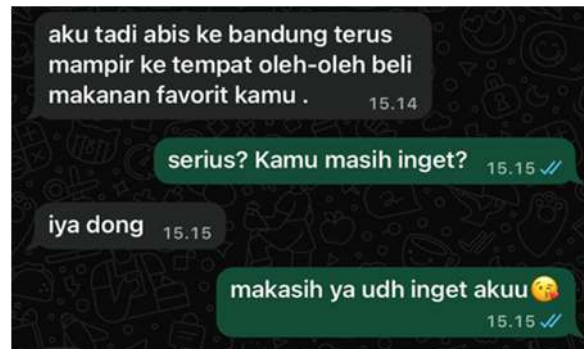


Figure 6. *WhatsApp Conversation Data 6 Emoji 🥰 strengthening closeness and expressing warmth*

Figure 6 depicts a conversation in which one participant reveals they stopped by a souvenir shop in Bandung to purchase the other's favorite food. The reply "Makasih ya udh inget akuu 🥰" uses the emoji 🥰 (face blowing a kiss) to convey warmth, affection, and appreciation within a close friendship. The extended vowel in "akuu" further emphasizes the emotional expressiveness of the message. In pragmatic terms, the emoji functions as a relational maintenance tool, reinforcing the interpersonal closeness between participants. Its meaning in this context goes beyond its literal form; rather than signifying romantic intent, it conveys a sense of being valued and remembered by a close friend.

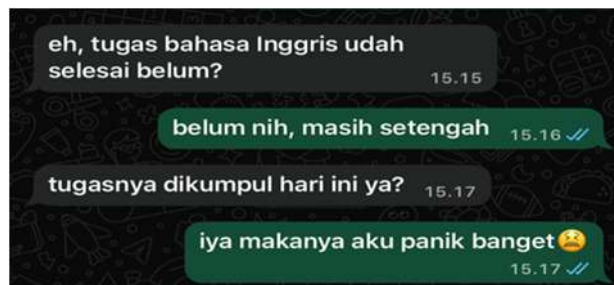


Figure 7. *WhatsApp Conversation Data 7 Emoji 😳 softening tone and expressing anxiety about an assignment*

Figure 7 shows a conversation about an English assignment that must be submitted the same day. The message "Iya makanya aku panik banget 😳" uses the emoji 😳 (flushed face) to express a combination of anxiety, stress, and mild panic in an academic context. The emoji functions here as an emotional disclosure marker, communicating the speaker's psychological state more vividly than words alone could achieve. From a pragmatic perspective, this illustrates how emojis can serve as emotional contextualization cues, helping the recipient understand the urgency and emotional weight behind a message. The context of academic pressure is central to interpreting this emoji's meaning correctly.

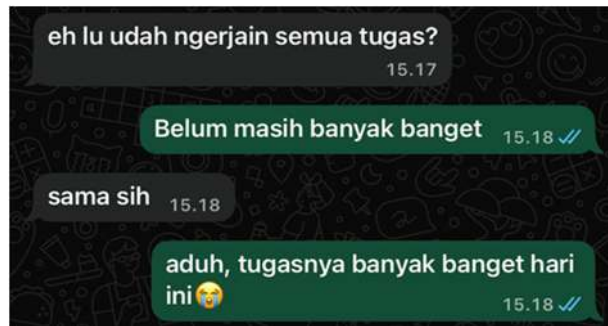


Figure 8. *WhatsApp Conversation Data 8 Emoji 🤯 expressing academic stress and emotional burden*

Figure 8 presents a conversation in which two students discuss their unfinished assignments. The message “Aduh, tugasnya banyak banget hari ini 🤯” uses the emoji 🤯 (loudly crying face) to express the feeling of being overwhelmed by academic tasks. In this context, the emoji does not literally indicate crying; rather, it functions as an emotional exaggeration device that conveys frustration, exhaustion, and stress. This shift from literal to contextual meaning is a key characteristic of emoji pragmatics. The emoji creates solidarity between the participants by making the emotional state visible, which in turn invites an empathetic response from the conversation partner.

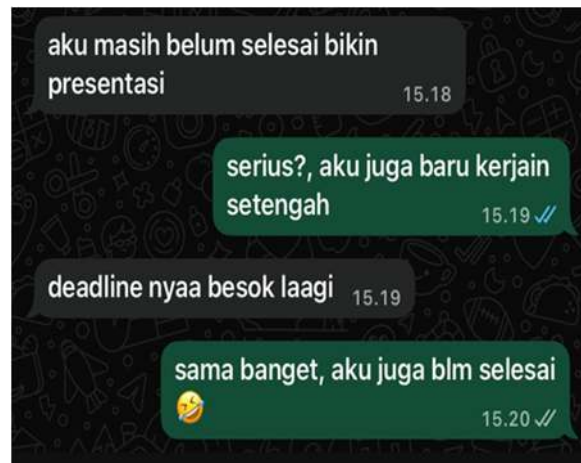


Figure 9. *WhatsApp Conversation Data 9 Emoji 🤣 expressing solidarity humor under deadline pressure*

Figure 9 illustrates a conversation between two students who both have an unfinished presentation due the next day. The message “Sama banget, aku juga blm selesai 🤣” employs the emoji 🤣 (rolling on the floor laughing) to transform a stressful situation into a moment of shared humor and solidarity. Rather than expressing genuine amusement, the emoji functions as a coping mechanism, using humor to reduce anxiety and build emotional solidarity between the participants. This reflects the psychological dimension of emoji use in digital communication, where emojis help speakers manage negative emotions and maintain a positive communicative atmosphere even in difficult situations.

Taken together, the analysis of the eight conversation figures above demonstrates that emojis in Generation Z’s WhatsApp communication are context-sensitive, multifunctional, and pragmatically significant. Their meanings are not fixed but dynamically shaped by the communicative situation, the relationship between participants, and the emotional state of the

speaker. This finding confirms that a pragmatic approach is essential for understanding how meaning is constructed and interpreted in contemporary digital communication.

In conclusion, the use of emojis by Generation Z on WhatsApp reflects a shift in communication practices, where meaning is constructed not only through words but also through shared visual symbols. Emojis have become an evolving component of digital language and play a crucial role in everyday interactions among Generation Z.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that emojis play a significant role in Generation Z's digital communication on WhatsApp by functioning as pragmatic tools that help express emotions, intentions, attitudes, and interpersonal meanings more effectively. The findings reveal that emoji interpretation is highly context-dependent and influenced by the communication situation, social relationships, and emotional conditions of the participants. Through a pragmasemantic perspective, this study demonstrates that meaning in digital communication is constructed through the interaction of verbal language, visual symbols, and social context. Furthermore, Generation Z uses emojis creatively and flexibly to compensate for the absence of nonverbal cues in text-based communication. Future studies are recommended to examine

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