

Representation of Expressions of Congratulations via WhatsApp Stickers from the Viewpoint of the Sender and Receiver of the Message

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Abstract

Communication of condolences in the digital era has experienced significant changes with the presence of WhatsApp stickers as a nonverbal medium. This research aims to explore how stickers are used to convey condolences, both from the perspective of the sender and recipient of the message. Using a qualitative approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 active WhatsApp users who had used or received stickers in the context of condolences. The research results show that stickers are chosen by senders to convey empathy visually, overcome language barriers, and maintain a polite impression, especially in relationships that are not too close. Symbols such as flowers, candles, or neutral colors are common choices because they are considered universal. However, message recipients had mixed responses. Most appreciated the sender's good intentions, but some felt that the stickers were less personal and did not convey enough depth of emotion in a situation of intense grief. The potential for miscommunication is also found if the context and sticker symbols are inappropriate or difficult to understand. This study highlights the importance of sensitivity in using WhatsApp stickers as a medium for emotional communication as well as the need for digital literacy to support more empathetic and effective visual communication.

Keywords: *WhatsApp stickers; digital condolences; nonverbal communication.*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital communication technology has transformed how people convey messages, especially during emotionally sensitive moments such as expressing condolences. Instant messaging applications like WhatsApp have become primary tools for daily interactions, including the expression of empathy in a fast and practical manner. With features such as text, emojis, and stickers, WhatsApp provides users with various means to express emotions visually and symbolically. Among these tools, stickers have emerged as a widely used visual element, offering a nonverbal way to communicate emotions. However, expressing sympathy through digital media presents specific challenges, as such acts demand a high degree of emotional nuance, cultural sensitivity, and perceived sincerity.

In traditional communication, offering condolences is typically delivered face-to-face or through handwritten notes or phone calls, where tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language help convey emotional depth. In contrast, digital expressions—especially via stickers—lack these rich contextual cues, which may affect how the message is perceived. While stickers can offer immediacy and visual symbolism, there remains a question of whether they are adequate substitutes for more personal or verbal forms of communication.

According to Bernabéu & Ortega (2023), WhatsApp currently serves over two billion active users globally, making it one of the most influential platforms for digital communication. Stickers, a relatively recent addition to the platform, have quickly become one of its most popular features. In emotionally charged contexts like expressing condolences, stickers allow users to visually represent their feelings through symbolic imagery. Common condolence-themed stickers often feature universal symbols such as flowers, candles, praying hands, or muted color tones, which are seen as safe and respectful. These choices reflect a desire for visual clarity and universality—but they also raise questions about whether such images can adequately replace personal messages.

A study by Pew Research Center (2021) noted that approximately 67% of WhatsApp users employ stickers to express emotions in everyday conversations. However, a survey by the Digital Society Institute (2022) found that nearly 45% of recipients felt that condolence messages sent via stickers were less personal and emotionally resonant compared to written messages or direct phone calls. This highlights a significant tension between the convenience of digital communication and the emotional demands of sensitive interpersonal exchanges.

From a theoretical standpoint, stickers can be examined through the lens of nonverbal communication theory, which recognizes that symbols, color, and design can convey affective meaning (Knapp & Hall, 2014). However, unlike spontaneous nonverbal cues in face-to-face interactions, digital stickers are deliberately selected and mediated, which may alter their perceived authenticity. Furthermore, the social construction of meaning theory (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) suggests that the interpretation of visual symbols is shaped by cultural background and individual experience. This opens the possibility for misinterpretation, especially when the sender and recipient have different symbolic understandings.

While a number of prior studies have examined the use of emojis and stickers in digital communication, most have focused on their general utility in enhancing emotional tone or in casual contexts. Sugiyama (2015) explored how stickers enhance emotional bonding by providing visual support to text. Skovholt et al. (2014) observed that while stickers can reduce formality and ease interaction, they may fall short in scenarios that require emotional depth, such as expressions

of grief. Similarly, Dresner & Herring (2010) emphasized that digital media often lack contextual richness, increasing the potential for ambiguity in meaning.

Despite this body of research, there remains a significant gap in examining how stickers are specifically used to convey condolences on WhatsApp, particularly from both the sender's and the recipient's perspectives. Most existing studies emphasize general functions rather than context-specific emotional expression. Moreover, there is limited understanding of how users interpret the appropriateness, sincerity, and effectiveness of stickers in situations marked by loss and mourning.

Therefore, this study aims to address that gap by exploring the nuanced role of WhatsApp stickers as tools for expressing sympathy. By investigating both the motivations of the sender and the interpretations of the recipient, this research provides a more holistic view of how digital visual communication functions in emotionally sensitive contexts. The findings will contribute to a deeper understanding of how empathy, sincerity, and social norms are negotiated in computer-mediated communication (CMC), especially when nonverbal cues are transformed into digital formats.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of individual perceptions and experiences in using WhatsApp stickers as a means of expressing condolences. This approach was chosen to explore the subjective meanings attached to communication behavior in emotional contexts, and to examine the dynamics that occur between the sender and the recipient of the message.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants based on specific criteria aligned with the objectives of the research. The selected participants were active WhatsApp users who had previously sent or received condolence stickers. A total of 20 key informants were interviewed in-depth to explore their motivations, perceptions, and responses related to the use of stickers in such emotionally sensitive situations.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, which allowed flexibility in the discussion while still adhering to core research questions. In addition, the researcher conducted content analysis of various digital messages, particularly those stickers commonly used in condolence contexts. Data were obtained not only from interviews but also from observations of sticker usage patterns in several WhatsApp groups.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, involving the identification of recurring patterns and themes from interview transcripts and documented content. Each statement was coded and categorized based on key concepts, which were then synthesized into overarching

themes. This approach enabled the researcher to capture the variety of meanings and interpretations conveyed by the participants.

In addition to thematic analysis, narrative analysis was also employed to explore how the experience of expressing condolences was constructed and conveyed through digital media. This narrative approach examined the story structure, the role of visual symbols in conveying emotion, and how such narratives influence perceptions of empathy and sincerity in communication. Special attention was given to local figures or community narratives featured in digital expressions of sympathy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Increased Public Awareness through Media Platforms

In today's fast-paced digital world, traditional media like radio and television still play a meaningful role especially in remote or rural areas where internet access is limited (P. Ma et al., 2023). When environmental messages are delivered in local languages, they become more understandable and feel closer to the daily lives of the people (Hunt et al., 2019). For instance, radio programs that feature local environmental figures or tell real stories from the community have proven effective in building trust and emotional connection.

At the same time, social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp have become powerful tools to reach younger generations and urban populations (Sullivan et al., 2019). Visual content such as infographics, short videos, and interactive posts can easily grab attention especially when highlighting urgent issues like plastic pollution or deforestation (Pinto et al., 2019). Campaigns using hashtags and online challenges have gone viral, inspiring people to join in and share the message across their own networks (Hanafy & Mostafa, 2024).

More personalized approaches, like location-based content for example, updates about local conservation efforts have also boosted community engagement (Yén, 2023). When messages are tailored to match local concerns, such as mangrove protection in coastal areas, people tend to care more because the issue feels relevant to their everyday reality (Patalo et al., 2023). Additionally, documentaries and special media coverage have helped deepen public understanding of complex environmental problems. Features focusing on mangrove forests, for instance, have shown how these ecosystems are not only ecologically important but also bring economic value to communities (Sianipar et al., 2024).

WhatsApp Stickers as Non-verbal Communication

The following is the frequency table of variable X1.2, with the statement: WhatsApp stickers can serve as a form of non-verbal communication in the virtual world.

Table 1

WhatsApp Stickers as Non-verbal Communication

	Frequency	Percent
Disagree (2)	32	8.0
Slightly Disagree (3)	180	45.0
Agree (4)	121	30.3
Strongly Agree (5)	67	16.8
Total	400	100.0

Regarding whether WhatsApp stickers function as a form of non-verbal communication in the digital space, 47.1% of respondents agreed (30.3% agreed and 16.8% strongly agreed). Interestingly, 45.0% were somewhat neutral, suggesting uncertainty about classifying stickers as genuine non-verbal communication tools. Although only 8.0% of respondents disagreed with the use of this terminology, it's important to note that the language used isn't always easy to understand especially for older people or those living in remote areas. This means that messages delivered in Bahasa Indonesia might not be fully understood, and in some cases, could even be misunderstood.

This near-even split between agreement and neutrality reveals a significant ambivalence among users regarding the communicative nature of WhatsApp stickers. While almost half the respondents recognize stickers as valid non-verbal communication tools in digital environments, the equally large neutral response suggests many users may not have explicitly considered stickers in this theoretical framework before. The data indicates that while stickers are widely used, their classification as a legitimate form of non-verbal communication remains contested in users' perceptions.

This ambivalence may stem from the hybrid nature of stickers, which combine elements of traditional non-verbal communication (facial expressions, gestures) with digital mediation and often textual elements. Traditional non-verbal communication theory (Burgoon & Hoobler, 2002) emphasizes the spontaneous, often unconscious nature of non-verbal cues in face-to-face interactions. In contrast, sticker selection is deliberate and mediated, potentially diminishing their perceived authenticity as genuine non-verbal expressions.

The relatively small percentage (8.0%) who explicitly rejected stickers as non-verbal communication suggests that outright dismissal of stickers' communicative function is uncommon. Instead, the data points to an ongoing negotiation among users about how to categorize and understand these relatively new communicative tools within existing frameworks of human interaction.

According to Walther's (2011) Social Information Processing Theory, individuals adapt to the reduced non-verbal cues in computer-mediated communication by developing alternative

mechanisms to convey social and emotional information. WhatsApp stickers may represent one such adaptation, functioning as "digital non-verbal cues" that compensate for the absence of physical gestures, facial expressions, and vocal intonations.

The considerable agreement (47.1%) with stickers as non-verbal communication suggests a growing recognition of their communicative legitimacy. This parallels Tang and Wang's (2020) observation that digitally mediated symbols increasingly function as legitimate paralinguistic features rather than mere embellishments to text. The data suggests that stickers occupy an evolving position in users' communication frameworks—neither fully equivalent to traditional non-verbal cues nor merely decorative elements.

The relatively small percentage (8.0%) who reject stickers as non-verbal communication may represent users who maintain stricter boundaries between physical and digital communication modes. These users may value the spontaneity and authenticity of traditional non-verbal cues that cannot be fully replicated in digital environments. This finding aligns with Gibson's (2019) observation that some communicators maintain "modality purism," preferring clear distinctions between different communication channels and their associated norms.

The ambivalent perception of WhatsApp stickers as non-verbal communication tools reflects a broader tension in how users conceptualize emerging digital communication formats. While 47.1% of respondents agreed that stickers function as non-verbal communication, the substantial neutral response (45.0%) indicates uncertainty about this classification. This aligns with the hybrid nature of stickers, which blend visual cues reminiscent of traditional non-verbal signals—such as facial expressions and gestures—with intentional digital selection and occasional textual elements. According to Burgoon and Hoobler's (2002) theory of non-verbal communication, non-verbal cues in face-to-face interactions are typically spontaneous, immediate, and unconscious. In contrast, the deliberate act of selecting a sticker may reduce its perceived authenticity as a true non-verbal cue, contributing to users' ambivalence.

Nevertheless, the minimal outright rejection (only 8.0%) of stickers as non-verbal communication tools suggests a general openness to their communicative role. This is consistent with Walther's (2011) Social Information Processing Theory, which posits that users of computer-mediated communication adapt to the lack of physical non-verbal cues by developing alternative symbolic systems to convey affect and relational intent. Stickers serve as one such system, compensating for the absence of physical presence with rich visual representations. This adaptation process has been noted by Tang and Wang (2020), who argue that emojis and stickers increasingly function as paralinguistic elements—legitimate substitutes for non-verbal communication in digital spaces, rather than mere decorative add-ons.

Moreover, the hesitance to fully embrace stickers as non-verbal communication may reflect what Gibson (2019) describes as “modality purism”—a preference among some users to maintain strict distinctions between digital and physical communication forms. Such users may view traditional non-verbal cues as inherently more genuine due to their spontaneity and embodied context. Overall, the findings suggest that WhatsApp stickers occupy an evolving position in digital communication: not fully equivalent to traditional non-verbal cues, yet increasingly accepted as meaningful expressive tools in their own right.

Stickers for Expressing Congratulations

The following is the frequency table of variable X1.3, with the statement: WhatsApp stickers can better represent feelings of empathy as an expression of condolence:

Table 2

Stickers for Expressing Congratulations

	Frequency	Percent
Disagree (2)	52	13.0
Slightly Disagree (3)	107	26.8
Agree(4)	183	45.8
Strongly Agree (5)	58	14.5
Total	400	100.0

When specifically addressing the use of stickers for congratulatory messages, 60.3% of respondents agreed that stickers could effectively represent feelings of joy and celebration (45.8% agreed and 14.5% strongly agreed). Only 13.0% disagreed, while 26.8% remained neutral. This suggests that stickers are viewed as particularly appropriate for positive emotional expressions like congratulations.

The strong majority agreement (60.3%) regarding stickers' effectiveness for congratulatory expressions reveals a significant finding about digital emotional communication. This notably higher agreement compared to general sticker usage (51.1%) or stickers as non-verbal communication (47.1%) indicates that users find stickers especially suitable for positive emotional expressions. This aligns with the inherent visual and often animated nature of congratulatory stickers, which frequently incorporate celebratory imagery (fireworks, champagne, trophies), positive facial expressions (smiles, applause), and vibrant colors that visually amplify positive sentiments.

The relatively low disagreement rate (13.0%) further emphasizes that even users who might not regularly use stickers generally acknowledge their appropriateness for celebratory contexts. This suggests a broad social acceptance of stickers as legitimate tools for positive

emotional expression, even among those who may personally prefer other communication methods.

The neutral responses (26.8%), while substantial, are significantly lower than neutrality toward stickers as non-verbal communication (45.0%). This reduced ambivalence may indicate that users have clearer perceptions about stickers' role in specific emotional contexts (congratulations) compared to their theoretical classification within communication frameworks. In practical terms, users appear more certain about what stickers can effectively do (convey congratulations) than how they should be categorized conceptually.

From a socio-emotional perspective, these findings suggest that digital congratulatory expressions may be less constrained by traditional communication norms than other forms of emotional expression. The playful, animated, and visually expressive nature of congratulatory stickers appears to align well with the social expectations surrounding joyful acknowledgments of others' achievements.

This aligns with Buehler's (2021) "medium-message congruence theory," which proposes that communication effectiveness increases when the characteristics of the medium align with the nature of the message being conveyed. The visually rich, dynamic, and often exaggerated nature of congratulatory stickers mirrors the social performance aspects of congratulations in face-to-face settings, where expressions tend to be energetic and animated.

The relatively low disagreement (13.0%) about stickers' effectiveness for congratulations suggests widespread acceptance of this particular application, even among those who might be more skeptical about stickers in other contexts. This points to a contextual flexibility in users' communication preferences—while text messages might be preferred for deeper emotional exchanges (as suggested by the preference for personalized messages), stickers appear to have found a legitimate niche for quick, visually impactful positive acknowledgments.

The finding also reveals how positive emotional expressions might be governed by different communicative norms than other emotional states in digital contexts. While serious or complex emotions might demand more personalized text expression, joyful acknowledgments seem more compatible with the playful, visually expressive nature of stickers. This creates interesting implications for how different emotional states are digitally mediated and the varying thresholds of acceptability for different communication tools across emotional contexts.

The findings on the use of stickers for congratulatory messages highlight important aspects of digital emotional communication that align closely with Buehler's (2021) medium-message congruence theory. This theory suggests that communication effectiveness increases when the characteristics of the medium align well with the nature of the message. Stickers being

visually rich, often animated, and incorporating celebratory imagery such as fireworks, smiles, and trophies are particularly well-suited for expressing positive emotions like joy and celebration.

This congruence explains why a strong majority of respondents (60.3%) agreed that stickers effectively convey congratulatory sentiments, a higher level of agreement compared to stickers used for general or nonverbal communication purposes. From a communication theory perspective, stickers function as digital nonverbal cues that replace traditional facial expressions and gestures in face-to-face interactions, supporting the broader role of nonverbal communication in digital environments (Burgoon & Hoobler, 2002).

The relatively low disagreement and neutral responses further suggest a broad social acceptance and clarity regarding the appropriateness of stickers for specific emotional contexts, especially joyful acknowledgments. Moreover, this reflects the flexibility users exhibit in selecting communication media based on contextual emotional norms while deeper, more complex emotions may require personalized textual messages, joyful expressions align well with playful, visually expressive media. This phenomenon also resonates with the Uses and Gratifications theory, where users actively choose media that satisfy their social and emotional needs effectively (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). Overall, these findings illustrate how digital communication tools like stickers mediate emotional expression by blending media features with social expectations, enhancing the social performance of positive digital interactions.

Social Influence on Sticker Usage

The following is the frequency table of variable X1.4, with the statement: Social influence on sticker usage:

Table 3
Social Influence on Sticker Usage

	Frequency	Percent
Disagree (2)	52	4.5
Slightly Disagree (3)	107	26.0
Agree(4)	183	54.0
Strongly Agree (5)	58	15.5
Total	400	100.0

The survey investigated whether respondents send congratulatory stickers because they observe others doing so. Results showed that 69.5% agreed with this statement (54.0% agreed and 15.5% strongly agreed), suggesting that social norms significantly influence sticker usage patterns. Only 4.5% disagreed, while 26.0% remained slightly disagree.

This finding aligns with Social Contagion Theory (Christakis & Fowler, 2013), which posits that behaviors, attitudes, and even emotional expressions can spread through social networks via observation and imitation. In the context of WhatsApp communication, users may adopt the use of stickers not necessarily because of personal preference, but because they observe peers using them, thereby normalizing the practice within their social circles.

The relatively low percentage of disagreement (only 4.5%) indicates that opposition to socially influenced sticker use is minimal, further affirming the role of peer behavior in shaping digital communication patterns. The 26.0% who were slightly disagreeing may reflect users who are aware of the influence of others but do not consciously let it determine their own choices.

This pattern reflects a broader trend in digital behavior, where users often follow unspoken norms or platform-specific etiquettes that emerge organically within online communities. WhatsApp stickers, particularly those used for emotional or social expressions like congratulations or condolences, appear to be influenced more by communal habits than by individual initiative.

Furthermore, this supports the notion that digital communication tools are not just technical instruments but also socially embedded practices. The decision to use stickers is shaped not only by their functional value but also by a desire to align with group behavior, reduce social distance, and conform to expected communicative styles.

This has implications for both communication scholars and developers. From a research perspective, it underscores the importance of social learning and cultural context in understanding digital media use. From a platform design perspective, it suggests that socially driven features—such as trending stickers or suggested sticker packs based on group usage—can increase engagement and acceptance of new communication forms.

This finding is strongly supported by Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), which posits that individuals learn behaviors through observation, imitation, and modeling, especially when the observed behavior appears socially rewarded or widely accepted. In the context of WhatsApp communication, when users see stickers being used frequently and positively received in their social groups, they are more likely to adopt the same behavior. This observational learning reinforces the behavior, making it part of the user's habitual communication repertoire.

In addition, the pattern aligns with Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations Theory (2003). According to this theory, new communication practices—such as using digital stickers—are more likely to be adopted when early adopters and opinion leaders within a social system use and validate them. As more people in a user's network employ stickers for greetings or emotional expressions, the practice diffuses socially, reaching the majority over time. The high agreement

in the survey reflects that sticker usage may have moved from the early adoption stage to becoming a social norm within certain WhatsApp communities.

From the perspective of Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973), users are active agents who choose media and content to satisfy specific needs—such as emotional expression, social connection, and group belonging. Using stickers, particularly in response to peer behavior, may fulfill the need to maintain social cohesion and interpersonal alignment within digital communities. The use of stickers becomes a way to “fit in” with digital conversational norms and demonstrate responsiveness.

Furthermore, this behavior underscores the performative aspect of digital communication, where users signal emotional alignment or politeness through shared symbolic expressions. Sticker use, in this sense, functions not just as a communication tool but also as a social ritual, reinforcing group identity and cohesion in the absence of face-to-face interaction.

The relatively low disagreement rate (4.5%) further affirms that sticker usage is widely normalized and rarely challenged, highlighting the effectiveness of social modeling in shaping digital communication habits. Meanwhile, the 26.0% who slightly disagreed may represent users with a higher sense of individualism or stronger preference for direct, verbal communication methods.

In conclusion, the convergence of social learning, perceived norms, and gratified needs explains why stickers have become an embedded part of WhatsApp communication. Rather than merely reflecting individual preferences, their usage is socially constructed, contextually influenced, and reinforced by group dynamics. Future research could explore how these social mechanisms vary across cultures and age groups, and how the lifecycle of digital communication norms evolves over time.

In sum, the data highlights that WhatsApp sticker usage is not merely a matter of personal expression but is significantly mediated by social influence and group dynamics. Understanding this can help explain why certain digital behaviors proliferate rapidly, while others fail to gain traction.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study examined the use of WhatsApp stickers for conveying congratulatory and condolence messages, viewed from both the sender's and the receiver's perspectives. The findings reveal that although stickers are generally accepted and widely used in positive emotional contexts, users often regard them as supplementary rather than as full substitutes for more personalized text-based communication. Social norms and observational learning play a significant role in shaping sticker usage habits, suggesting that digital communication practices evolve through social contagion mechanisms.

This research contributes to a deeper understanding of computer-mediated communication, particularly in how users navigate visual tools to express positive emotions. It also underscores the importance of considering both sender intentions and recipient interpretations when evaluating the emotional effectiveness of digital communication.

Suggestion

For developers of messaging platforms, this research suggests that providing diverse, culturally appropriate congratulatory stickers could enhance user experience. However, platforms should also continue supporting personalized text communication, as many users still prefer this for meaningful expressions. For users, awareness of the potential gap between sticker convenience and perceived sincerity could inform more effective digital communication strategies. Combining stickers with personalized messages might optimize both efficiency and emotional resonance.

This study has several limitations. First, the sample, while reasonably large, may not be representative of all WhatsApp users, particularly given the higher representation of younger users. Second, the study focused broadly on congratulatory expressions without distinguishing between different types of achievements (e.g., professional milestones versus personal celebrations).

Future research could explore more specific contexts for congratulatory expressions, examine cross-cultural differences in sticker usage, and investigate the combined use of stickers with other communication modes. Longitudinal studies might also track how sticker usage evolves as users become more familiar with these digital tools.

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