

The Impact of Emoji Use on Perception Differences in Online Conversations among Teenagers

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ABSTRAK

In the digital era, teenagers now communicate more often through online platforms. One of the current growing phenomena is the use of emojis. Emojis act as nonverbal elements that can influence various aspects of the communication process. Emojis can affect the intonation and clarity of meaning of the message to be conveyed, without elements of sound or facial expressions, written messages are often ambiguous or even misperceived. Emojis are effective in reducing communication confusion by providing additional visual cues about the sender's intentions and emotions. This study aims to understand the phenomenon of emojis used in online conversations in depth and their impact on differences in perception among teenagers. This study utilized a qualitative research design with a case study approach among teenagers. The study's results showed a significant influence on differences in perception and perspective in the use of emojis among teenagers. So, it is important to understand the context and meaning of emojis to reduce the risk of misunderstandings and differences in perception in online communication in this digital era. Through a better understanding of the use of emojis, it is hoped that a more effective and harmonious communication environment can be created.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Role of Emojis in Shaping Intonation in Online Communication Among Teenagers In this digital era, communication has significantly evolved and shifted to online platforms, especially among teenagers. Online platforms like WhatsApp, Line, Telegram, and many more have become the current communication trend. Many phenomena have emerged, one of which is the use of emojis. Emojis serve as nonverbal elements that can influence various aspects of the communication process, such as intonation. Emojis are features provided by certain messaging applications in the form of graphic symbols or ideograms that represent various facial expressions, emotions, ideas, feelings, concepts, and specific symbols. The emoji feature is expected to help users facilitate communication through written text between individuals.

This aligns with Maulidina's (2021) statement that emojis indeed play a role as nonverbal elements that can influence various aspects of the communication process, one of which is intonation. Emojis can influence the intonation and clarity of meaning of a message to be conveyed. Without vocal elements or facial expressions, written messages often experience ambiguity and even misperception (Maulidina, 2021). According to research by Derks, Fischer, & Bos (2008), emojis help overcome these limitations by providing visual cues for intonation. For example, a message containing the text "I am very happy today" can have a greater impact and be easier to understand when a smiling emoji is added compared to the same text without an emoji (Derks et al., 2008). The use of emojis can change the reader's perception of a message; emojis function as an important tool in shaping the intonation of digital messages, although their effect still depends on context and individual interpretation.

Online conversations should be able to convey messages clearly without misunderstandings between the communicator and the recipient. To avoid such misunderstandings, users are expected to utilize the emoji feature to facilitate online conversations. If a user wants to send a message, they can include an emoji button or character that describes their current state and the message they are writing. On the other hand, the recipient of the message will be able to easily understand the sender's state, allowing for effective online conversation without misunderstandings (Bakhtiar et al., 2022).

The wise and appropriate use of emojis aims to improve the quality of online communication, which can enhance user interaction experiences and reduce misunderstandings (Bakhtiar et al., 2022). Emojis help clarify the sender's intentions and feelings, thereby minimizing misunderstandings that are difficult to explain through text alone. Appropriate emoji use can also increase social connectedness and empathy between individuals to create a more friendly and personal communication that can be built better. Emoji use can replace the user's expressions, which are a form of non-verbal communication, so it can be said that emojis are also a non-verbal message that usually accompanies text messages in communication.

With the emoji feature, users are expected to be helped in facilitating communication through written text between individuals. If a user wants to send a text message, they can include an emoji button or character that describes their current state. On the other hand, the recipient of the message will be able to easily receive a better description of the sender's state, so that the interaction between the two parties feels more lively and not bland (Bakhtiar et al., 2022). Thus, the appropriate use of emojis can enhance digital interaction and make online conversations more effective, engaging, and capable of influencing the communication process.

The above statement is supported by Flores-Salgado & Castineira-Benitez (2018), who found that emojis can help reduce the likelihood of misunderstandings and foster love and friendship. However, the negative impact of using the wrong emoji was also recognized by previous researchers, as incorrect emoji usage can make a message confusing and difficult to understand (Ningsih et al., 2024). With errors in emoji meaning, there are factors that can lead to many ambiguous interpretations for users. The effect caused by errors in emoji meaning is that message recipients feel the emoji used is not a representation of emotion for the sender, even though the primary function of emojis is to support the message being conveyed. This has led to cases of strained friendships due to misunderstandings of emoji meaning. Additionally, the effect caused by errors in emoji meaning also leads to ineffective communication, causing recipients to feel lazy and unwilling to reply to the message. This aligns with research conducted by Derks et al. (2008) that emojis have proven effective in reducing confusion in communication by providing additional visual cues regarding the sender's intent and feelings.

Research indicates that appropriate emoji selection can make messages more engaging, memorable, and enhance communication effectiveness by creating a more intimate and empathetic atmosphere in digital interactions (Park et al., 2014). Furthermore, the meaning of emojis can vary depending on the conversation context and the user's cultural background. Therefore, it is important to choose emojis that align with the message context to avoid misunderstandings (Peck & Barger, 2017). For example, the phrase "I'm fine" can have a different meaning if accompanied by a smiling emoji compared to a neutral emoji. Using clear context in sentences is crucial to reduce the likelihood of misunderstandings. Additionally, social media platforms can help by providing features such as tooltips or brief descriptions to help users understand emoji meanings, and by educating users and implementing good communication practices, ambiguity in emoji use can be significantly reduced.

The focus of this research is how emoji use alters intonation in online teenage conversations. Previous studies have not extensively explored this subject. Riordan (2017) analyzed the role of emojis in online conversations, such as conveying emotions, enhancing message clarity, and being used in interpersonal and professional communication, which has also been the focus of most other previous research. Some studies have also examined how emojis affect how people understand the meaning contained in text messages; however, these studies have not specifically investigated how emojis can replace or alter intonation in online conversations.

One relevant study is by Minich (2025), which explored the use of emojis by teenagers in text-based messages. This study found that teenagers use emojis not only to express emotions directly but also to convey more complex and contextual meanings. For instance, emojis can be used sarcastically or to add humor, depending on the conversation's context. This indicates that emoji interpretation is highly context-dependent and can differ between individuals. Furthermore, research by Butterworth et al. (2019) showed that the perception of emojis is also influenced by factors such as the sender's gender.

In this study, messages containing affective emojis (like kissing faces or hearts) were considered more appropriate and preferred when sent by women compared to men. Conversely, less affective but still friendly emojis (like smiling faces) were rated as equally appropriate but more preferred when sent by men. These

findings highlight how social factors can influence emoji interpretation in online conversations (Butterworth et al., 2019). Another study by Cavaleiro et al. (2024) highlighted that emoji use can influence the perception of messages and their senders. For example, the use of positive emojis in messages can increase the perceived warmth and credibility of the sender. However, this effect can vary depending on the communication context, such as the formality of the situation or the relationship between the sender and receiver.

A study conducted by Aden Quhaj (2024) at STIKOM Yogyakarta indicated that the use of emojis in digital communication has a significant impact on message comprehension, emotional expression, communication effectiveness, and reactions to messages. With an R^2 value of 0.634, this study suggests that 63.4% of the variation in these aspects can be explained by emoji usage. This confirms that emojis play an important role in enhancing clarity and expression in online conversations.

Changes in intonation in text-based communication are at the core of this research, as this is an important part of our understanding of how messages are sent and received. While these elements are difficult to transmit directly in text-based communication, intonation in oral communication is typically marked by variations in pitch and vocal stress. Therefore, this research attempts to fill this gap by looking at how emojis are used to convey different intonations in teenage conversations on instant messaging applications and social media. Additionally, this study focuses on the teenage age group as its primary subject. This differs from many previous studies that often focused on the general population or social media users without age restrictions. Teenagers are a group that is more active in using emojis as part of their online conversations, so this research provides more specific insights into how they interpret and use emojis to create intonational effects in text. Thus, this research not only contributes to the field of digital linguistics but also to understanding the communication patterns of the younger generation in the technological era.

In the context of teenagers, differences in emoji perception can have important implications for their online communication. Teenagers may have different interpretations of emojis compared to other age groups, and these differences can affect how messages are understood and received. Therefore, this research aims to fill this gap in the literature by investigating how differences in emoji perception influence online communication among teenagers.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative research design with a case study approach, aiming to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of emoji use in online conversations and its impact on perceptual differences among teenagers. The case study approach was chosen because the problem being studied is contextual and complex, specifically related to the interpretation of meaning arising from variations in emoji use in online conversations.

Research subjects were determined using purposive sampling, a sampling technique based on specific considerations (Sugiyono, 2019). This technique was chosen with specific criteria: teenagers who are active users of social media or instant messaging applications and have experience using emojis in their daily interactions, thus expected to provide relevant and in-depth data.

Data collection was carried out by distributing online questionnaire links via social media and WhatsApp groups. Respondents were chosen through voluntary response sampling, meaning anyone willing to complete the questionnaire according to the general criteria: teenagers aged 14–21 who actively use emojis in online conversations. With this approach, 154 respondents were obtained, both male and female, from various teenage age backgrounds. This open approach was chosen to gain a broader and more diverse picture of teenagers' perceptions of emojis.

The instruments used were open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Questionnaires were used to explore initial perceptions and tendencies of emoji use by the subjects, while interviews were conducted to further explore the subjects' experiences and subjective interpretations of emoji meanings used in various communication contexts. The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis, with stages including data transcription, coding, theme identification, and interpretation of the meaning contained within these themes.



3. RESULT

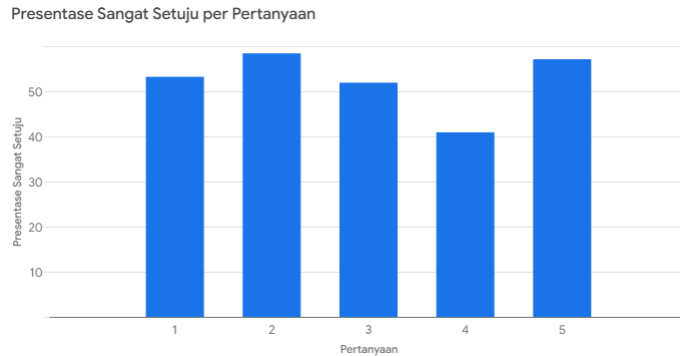


Figure 1: Emoji Usage Diagram

Figure 1 presents a bar diagram illustrating respondents' perceptions regarding emoji usage in online conversations. This data was gathered from five questionnaire questions designed to measure teenagers' tendencies in using emojis for online communication.

The results for each question are as follows:

1. ***I often use emojis when communicating daily via messaging apps.***
53.2% of respondents strongly agreed, indicating that the majority of teenagers are accustomed to using emojis in their daily communication.
2. ***Emojis make online interactions feel more dynamic and engaging.***
58.4% strongly agreed, reinforcing that emojis play a role in enhancing the emotional and visual quality of online communication.
3. ***I feel comfortable using emojis in various forms of online conversations.***
With 51.9% strongly agreeing, this signifies that emoji use has become a natural part of teenagers' digital interactions.
4. ***In my opinion, emojis are an important element in online conversations today.***
40.9% of respondents strongly agreed, demonstrating their awareness of the importance of visual elements in conveying meaning.
5. ***I see emoji use as an effective way to add nuance or context to text messages.***
57.1% strongly agreed, showing that teenagers consider emojis to function as a substitute for intonation or expression in written conversations.

The average percentage for "strongly agree" statements is **52.5%**, indicating that more than half of the respondents strongly support the use of emojis in online communication.

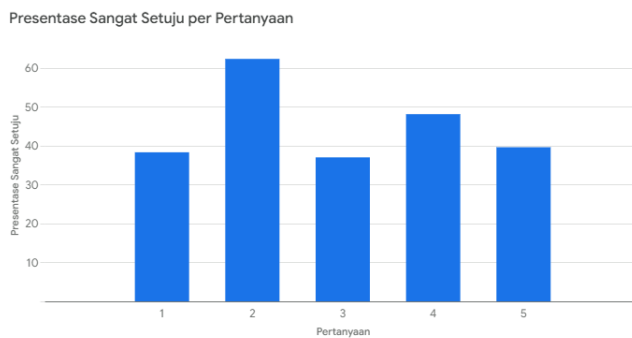


Figure 2: Diagram of Perception Differences

Figure 2 visualizes the results from questionnaire questions exploring the extent to which teenagers experience or are aware of differing perceptions of the emojis they use. The results for each question are as follows:

1. ***I have experienced misunderstandings in online conversations due to differing interpretations of emojis used.***
38.3% of respondents strongly agreed, indicating that misunderstandings caused by emojis are fairly common.
2. ***I am confident that a single emoji can have different meanings for different people.***
With 62.3% strongly agreeing, this shows a high awareness that emoji interpretation is highly subjective.
3. ***Sometimes, I find it difficult to understand the true intention behind the use of an emoji in a message.***
37% of respondents strongly agreed, signifying that comprehension challenges are still frequently encountered.
4. ***Inappropriate emoji use can change the overall meaning of a text message.***
48.1% strongly agreed, highlighting the significant potential for emoji selection to influence the recipient's perception.
5. ***I feel that some emojis have unclear meanings and can cause confusion.***
39.6% strongly agreed, supporting the view that not all emojis have explicit meanings.

The average percentage for "strongly agree" statements is **45.06%**, confirming the risk of misunderstandings in online communication due to diverse emoji interpretations.

Table 1. Interview Questions

No	Questions
1.	How often do you use emojis in digital communication, and what is your main reason for using them?
2.	In your opinion, how do emojis affect the tone or nuance of an online conversation?
3.	Have you ever experienced a misunderstanding due to emoji usage? Could you share an example?
4.	What are your thoughts on the different interpretations of emojis by different people?
5.	In your opinion, do all emojis have a clear meaning? Why or why not?
6.	In a professional context, such as work emails or university communication, do you still use emojis? Why or why not?
7.	What is your opinion on the importance of understanding context and culture when using emojis in online communication?

Interview Results

To delve deeper into the meaning of emojis, researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with two teenagers who had completed the questionnaire. The interview results showed that the use of emojis in online conversations is significantly influenced by context and the relationship between individuals. The findings from these interviews reinforced the quantitative data obtained through the questionnaire. Some quotes from the interview results illustrate this phenomenon:

- **Respondent A (18 years old, Female):** "Sometimes I send a smiling emoji 😊 to be polite, but my friend said I was being sarcastic. I got confused because I just meant to be friendlier."
- **Responden B (19 Years Old, Male):** "Aku pernah dapat pesan dari temen pake emoji api 🔥". Aku kira dia marah, ternyata maksudnya tuh keren. Jadi awalnya aku sempat salah paham."

Based on the interview results, it is concluded that the use of emojis in communication has several important characteristics.

1. Emoji interpretation is highly dependent on conversation context and the relationship between users. The meaning of an emoji can differ depending on the situation and the closeness of the people involved in the interaction.
2. Misunderstandings often occur due to differences in cultural background, experience, or individual ways of interpreting symbols. Emojis are not always universally understood, so the intended message can be interpreted differently by the recipient.

3. Teenagers tend to choose emojis as an alternative to facial expressions and vocal intonation that are lost in online conversations. However, their effect remains subjective, as emotional responses to an emoji can vary among individuals. Thus, although emojis help convey emotions, their meaning is still influenced by personal and situational factors.

4. DISCUSSION

The Role of Emojis in Online Conversations

In today's digital era, emojis have become a vital component of online communication. Originally created to display visual expressions and convey emotions concisely, emojis have now evolved into a kind of language of their own, capable of expressing attitudes, moods, and even social contexts that are often difficult to articulate with words alone. While emojis simplify communication, their use and interpretation vary greatly depending on culture, generation, platform, and usage context, leading to differences in understanding.

Generally, emojis help make online conversations feel warmer and more personal, reducing the stiffness often found in text-based communication. For instance, a message like "Okay." might come across as flat or cold, but adding a smiling emoji (😊) at the end changes the tone to be more friendly and open. Emojis are often used to express emotions or intentions that cannot be conveyed through facial expressions or vocal tone in text-based interactions. According to Riordan (2017), emoji usage can strengthen emotional expression and enrich meaning in online conversations. In digital communication, many emojis serve to represent intentions or simply express emotions that cannot be conveyed as easily as in face-to-face communication.

Ambiguity in Emoji Meanings

However, emojis also possess an inherent ambiguity in their use. Evans (2017) explains that emojis are not merely cute images or decorative elements in text messages, but part of a complex visual language. He emphasizes that the meaning of an emoji heavily depends on the user's social and cultural context. For example, the folded hands emoji (🙏), commonly associated with gratitude or prayer in Western cultures, holds a wider range of meanings in other cultures. In some Asian cultures, the emoji is more often interpreted as a respectful greeting or gesture of honor (Evans, 2017).

The Influence of Technology Platforms

Emoji perception is also influenced by differences in technology platforms. Since emoji designs can vary across devices and operating systems, the same emoji may be interpreted differently depending on the platform. For example, a "smiling" emoji (😊) may appear warm and friendly on one platform but look flat or even unsettling on another. These differences can lead to confusion or misinterpretation in cross-platform communication (Isaac, 2019). Moreover, emoji usage is highly context-dependent. In informal settings, emojis are often used to convey humor, familiarity, or emotional closeness. However, in formal contexts such as academic or professional communication, the use of certain emojis—like the "wink" (😉) or "kiss" (😘) emojis, may be considered inappropriate or unprofessional (Manganari, 2021).

Gender Differences

Another relevant issue is gender differences in emoji usage. Several studies have shown that women tend to use emojis more frequently than men and are generally more expressive in their emoji choices. This suggests that there are communication style differences between genders (Alburaidi, 2023). Therefore, it is important for users of social media and online communication platforms to be more aware of and sensitive to potential perception differences when using emojis, in order to avoid misunderstandings.

Generational Differences

Furthermore, differences in perception and views between generations also influence the meaning of emojis. For example, Generation Z often uses emojis in a more extreme or sarcastic way. For instance, the 'face with tears of joy' emoji, historically used to indicate genuine laughter, is now considered by some members of Generation Z as outdated, and they often replace it with the 'skull' emoji to visualize 'dying of laughter' (Ummah, 2019). Therefore, when adults or millennials use the "face with tears of joy" emoji in online conversations with teenagers, it can give an impression of being old-fashioned or out of touch, even if the emoji has the correct meaning.

Effectiveness of Emoji Usage

Effective communication does not only depend on the message we want to convey, but also on how that message is received and interpreted by the interlocutor. Therefore, understanding the background and social context of the interlocutor is key to avoiding misunderstandings. Emojis are like a language; they will continue to evolve over time. They reflect social trends, technological advancements, and cultural changes. This makes emojis very dynamic but also vulnerable to misperception or misinterpretation. In a global and multicultural context, emojis still pose their own challenges. What is considered funny, friendly, or polite by one individual might be considered strange, sarcastic, or even offensive by another. Therefore, although emojis are proven to be an effective visual communication tool for adding emotional nuance to text messages, their use must be accompanied by a good understanding of the context and audience. We cannot assume that the meaning of the emojis we use will be received the same way by everyone. The willingness to ask and explain the intent behind emoji usage, as well as the readiness to understand others' interpretations, are essential for building more inclusive, polite, and meaningful online communication.

The use of emojis in online conversations has become very common, especially among teenagers. With 52% of respondents strongly agreeing that emojis play a role in their interaction methods, it is clear that these symbols significantly influence information delivery. Emojis not only serve as visual additions but can also create profound differences in understanding. In communication, emojis are often used to show feelings, add nuance, or clarify the intent of the message being conveyed. However, the meaning contained in each emoji can vary depending on the culture and experience of each individual. For example, an emoji considered funny by one group might be interpreted differently by another group, which can lead to confusion and misunderstanding. This is reinforced by studies showing that emojis function as substitutes for nonverbal expressions in online interactions, helping reduce message ambiguity and increasing emotional engagement (Riordan, 2017). Additionally, emojis speed up message processing because the human brain responds faster to visual symbols than to words (Telaumbanua et al., 2023). Excessive or inappropriate use of emojis can lead to misunderstandings, especially if emoji meanings differ across cultures (Novak et al., 2015). A recent study by Mangarani (2021) also shows that emojis are often used as substitutes for facial expressions in online communication, helping to reduce the stiff impression in conversations (Manganari, 2021). Nevertheless, it is important to consider the context and recipient of the message for emojis to function effectively. Emojis not only enrich communication but also play a vital role in building interpersonal relationships in the digital era.

Based on the research conducted by Bakhtiar et al. (2022), there is a significant difference in communication effectiveness between groups that use emojis and groups that do not use emojis in their communication. This indicates that the presence of emojis has an effect on communication effectiveness and can enhance text communication via any social media. In this study, emojis were applied to two experimental groups. Messages containing rude words were sent; in group 1, messages were sent without emojis, while in group 2, emojis were added. The results showed that messages sent to group 1 seemed blunt and offensive, whereas messages in group 2, with added emojis, seemed to lean towards humor, making the message appear less offensive. Thus, emojis can influence emotions, making a message seem like a joke and preventing the recipient from feeling offended. Emojis also do not just serve as decorations in communication; they play an important role in changing perceptions and message reception (Bakhtiar et al., 2022). The meaning of emojis is not absolute; instead, it is heavily influenced by the communication context in which the emoji is used. Research by Weissman & Tanner (2018) found that emojis like (smile) can be interpreted differently depending on the accompanying text—for example, as a genuine expression in a positive sentence or sarcasm in a negative one (Weissman & Tanner, 2018). A similar study by Kutsuzawa et al. (2022) confirmed that almost 40% of participants changed the meaning of ambivalent emojis or emojis that have different meanings and can be interpreted in more than one way based on sentence context (Kutsuzawa et al., 2022). Additionally, the recipient's cultural factor plays a significant role. Guntuku et al. (2019) noted that emojis such as (praying hands) might be interpreted as "thank you" in Southeast Asia, but as help or a high-five in Western cultures (Guntuku et al., 2019). These findings indicate that understanding emojis requires comprehensive consideration of linguistics, situation, and the user's cultural background. Therefore, it is important to remember that emoji usage can also change how messages are received and understood. If someone knows about different contexts and cultures, they can communicate better and reduce the risk of misunderstandings. In today's increasingly connected modern world, understanding and using emojis wisely is crucial.

The use of emojis in online conversations can significantly influence a person's perception. This influence can increase the effectiveness of online conversations. Although aligning perceptions between two people is not easy, using emojis can help reduce the possibility of misunderstanding. In this study, the subjects were individuals who were not intimately familiar with or did not know the communicator well. When a subject received a seemingly rude message, the communicator would conclude that the subject seemed rude, blunt, and unfriendly. However, if the subject added an emoji at the end of the message, the atmosphere, which

initially appeared serious, could become warm and enjoyable. The appropriate use of emojis delivered to the right person can help the communication partner understand the message conveyed and also reduce misunderstandings during communication. The use of emojis can change perceptions in online conversations, help reduce misunderstandings, and improve communication effectiveness (Bakhtiar et al., 2022).

In professional situations, emojis help marketing strategies, increase customer engagement, and build more empathetic relationships with customers. Organizations can also better leverage emojis and build stronger relationships with their audience by understanding and applying them wisely, keeping in mind professionalism, communication context, and cultural differences that can affect message interpretation (Pratiwi, 2025). Therefore, companies must understand how emojis function as a communication tool and how to use them. Emojis can serve as a link between employees and customers by using the right approach, making the user experience more relevant and personal, which will enable better communication and stronger relationships with their customers.

In today's digital era, where much communication is done indirectly through text, emojis have become a kind of "digital body language." Various studies show that understanding the meaning of emojis is crucial in online conversations. However, emoji usage is not always universal. According to Rahayu et al. (2024), the meaning of emojis can vary depending on context and individual interpretation, so a proper understanding can prevent miscommunication. This indicates that one emoji can be interpreted differently by different people, especially if they come from different cultural backgrounds or age groups (Rahayu et al., 2024). If the understanding of emoji meanings is not accurate, the risk of miscommunication will increase.

Similar sentiments were expressed by Iansfri et al. (2025), who stated that the appropriate use of emojis in marketing communication can increase message effectiveness while avoiding misunderstandings. This indicates that emojis are not just text decorations but elements with a strategic role in conveying message intent emotionally and persuasively. Additionally, Chairunnisa & A.S (2017) emphasize that emojis and emoticons play an important role in conveying emotions such as anger, happiness, or sadness, which are often lost in written communication, and understanding these symbols helps reduce the potential for misunderstanding in communication. By understanding the meaning of each emoji, users can choose the appropriate symbol that matches their intended meaning and mood, making the message more targeted and preventing misunderstandings (Chairunnisa & A.S., 2017).

5. CONCLUSION

The use of emojis in online conversations has been proven to significantly influence the delivery of meaning and emotion, especially among teenagers. Emojis can substitute nonverbal elements such as intonation and facial expressions, which cannot be conveyed through text. When used appropriately, emojis can clarify messages, reduce misunderstandings, and enhance the effectiveness and warmth of online communication. However, the meaning of emojis is not always universal and can lead to ambiguity depending on context, culture, and individual perception. Based on this study, it is recommended that users, particularly teenagers, be more mindful and thoughtful when using emojis to avoid misinterpretation. It is also important to understand the communication context and the background of the message recipient. Education on the meaning and usage of emojis is necessary to foster more effective, friendly, and harmonious online conversations in this ever-evolving technological era.

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