

Connotation and Myth: Language Expression of Gen Z through WhatsApp Emoticon

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Abstract

Compared to previous generations, Generation Z (Gen Z) lives in a different lifestyle and culture. Since their youth, Gen Z cannot be separated from digital and technological aspects in their daily life. In communication, it can be assumed that Gen Z is familiar with the use of WhatsApp as their primary communication medium. It is proven that in the period of the Covid-19 pandemic, WhatsApp was crucial as a communication medium by Gen Z. On the other hand, communication patterns in digital space are quite different from traditional verbal communication. There are many features in WhatsApp, one of them is emoticon features, that make the process of language interpretation become ambiguous and multi-interpretative. This study aims to uncover that language phenomenon, especially by analysing connotations and myths represented in WhatsApp emoticons used by Gen Z, using the perspective of Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. The results of this research show that through the WhatsApp emoticons used by Gen Z, it can be concluded that WhatsApp emoticons are often used arbitrarily by Gen Z, which then implies certain connotative meanings, which are also related to the context of the conversation being built. The myth that underlies this phenomenon is the cultural background of Gen Z as a generation that cannot be separated from technological aspects, thus allowing for their authentic uniqueness in language styles, caused by the mediated language through digital platforms such as WhatsApp.

Keywords: Connotation, Myth, Gen Z, Semiotic, WhatsApp Emoticon.

Abstrak

Dibandingkan dengan generasi sebelumnya, Generasi Z (Gen Z) hidup dalam gaya hidup dan budaya yang berbeda. Sejak kecil, Gen Z tidak bisa lepas dari aspek digital dan teknologi dalam kesehariannya. Dalam berkomunikasi, dapat diasumsikan bahwa Gen Z sudah tidak asing lagi dengan penggunaan WhatsApp sebagai media komunikasi utama mereka. Terbukti pada masa pandemi Covid-19, WhatsApp menjadi sangat krusial sebagai media komunikasi oleh Gen Z. Di sisi lain, pola komunikasi di ruang digital sangat berbeda dengan komunikasi verbal tradisional. Terdapat banyak fitur dalam WhatsApp, salah satunya fitur emoticon, yang membuat proses pemaknaan bahasa menjadi ambigu dan multitafsir. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengungkap fenomena bahasa tersebut, khususnya menganalisis konotasi dan mitos yang direpresentasikan dalam emoticon WhatsApp yang digunakan oleh Gen Z, dengan menggunakan perspektif teori semiotika Roland Barthes. Hasil dari penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa melalui emoticon WhatsApp yang digunakan oleh Gen Z, dapat disimpulkan bahwa emoticon WhatsApp seringkali digunakan secara arbitrer oleh Gen Z, yang kemudian mengimplikasikan makna konotatif tertentu, yang juga terkait dengan konteks percakapan yang dibangun. Mitos yang melandasi hal tersebut adalah latar belakang kultural Gen Z sebagai generasi yang tidak lepas dari aspek teknologi, sehingga memungkinkan terjadinya keunikan yang otentik dalam gaya berbahasa, yang disebabkan oleh faktor bahasa yang termediasikan melalui platform digital seperti WhatsApp.

Kata Kunci: Konotasi, Mitos, Generasi Z, Semiotika, Emoticon WhatsApp.

Introduction

Gen Z is a generation born between the middle of the 1990s and early 2010s (Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022). Dimock (2019) stated that Gen Z was born between 1997-2012, while McCrindle (2014) stated that Gen Z was born between 1995-2010. The categorization of Gen Z is based on sociological factors, where this generation shares the same events, trends, and developments throughout their historical timeline that shape their characteristics (McCrindle, 2014). McCrindle (2014) in (Lev, 2021) stated that seven key influential factors affect and shape the characteristics of Gen Z such as (1) demographics and life expectancy, (2) generational aspects, (3) technology, (4) global, (5) information needs, (6) education, and (7) social. In the context of Indonesian Gen Z, there are some characteristics which are often associated with Gen Z, such as (1) confidence, (2) creative, (3) competitive, (4) realistic, (5) curious, (6) independent, and (7) exclusive (Hendrastomo & Januarti, 2023).

One of the important aspects which massively affects the characteristics of Gen Z is technology. It is commonly stated that one defining characteristic of Gen Z is their proficiency and reliance on technology. Gen Z only experienced life with the internet and constant connection (Dwidienawati & Gandasari, 2018). Having grown up in a digital era, they are considered the first truly digital natives (Lanier, 2017). Gen Z was born and grew up in a digital and technological environment. They learnt how to use technology and interacted with others on social networks from a very young age. Even Gen Z tended to be addicted to technology (Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022). In short, it can be said that Gen Z cannot be

separated from technology and social networks.

Gen Z's ability to adapt to the latest technology significantly affects their communication style. Gen Z is a generation that is dominant in communicating through social media. They think that social media is more important than the real world. For them, social media is a necessity (Anwar, 2019). One of the most popular social media platforms used by Gen Z is WhatsApp. Nowadays, WhatsApp is commonly used as a daily communication platform. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, WhatsApp became the main communication platform in almost all social sectors, such as the workplace, education, etc. After the pandemic, WhatsApp is still a crucial communication platform among people, including Gen Z.

It is interesting to see how language as a means of communication is mediated through WhatsApp, especially by Gen Z. Since the language is mediated through a specific platform, there are some different language patterns compared to direct and traditional verbal language communication. In social media, some factors affect language patterns used by Gen Z, such as anonymity and the preference to use visual expression (Ajmain, 2020), borderless boundaries and hyperreality (Mulawarman & Nurfitri, 2017), the use of indirect communication, arbitrary, and slang words (Nasution et al., 2022) Those factors make the communication pattern in a mediated platform become more complex and multi-interpretative.

Moreover, WhatsApp provides unique and interesting features for sending messages, such as emoticon symbols. Emoticons are often used to describe a person's expression during a chat.

Emoticons have various shapes, such as a yellow circle without a nose, hand expressions such as handshakes and high-fives, and other objects like vehicles, foods, animals, etc. Hanafi et al. (2021) stated that students often use emoticons to express their feelings when chatting, both in daily chat activities and chatting around lecturers on WhatsApp. Some functions of using emoticons in WhatsApp include reducing misperception, showing feelings that cannot be expressed through text, and increasing intimacy (Mariyam, 2021).

However, the language and meaning patterns of WhatsApp emoticons used by Gen Z are often distorted. It is only sometimes in accordance with the meaning that should be attached to certain emoticon expressions. Daulay et al. (2023) argued that not every emoticon is used by its meaning and function. Sometimes, it is based on the user's arbitrary perspectives and feelings. For example, a smiling expression can be interpreted as angry, or a crying expression can be interpreted as joking. This phenomenon represents the arbitrary characteristic of language, where there is no exact and closed relationship between the symbol of language and its meaning. The arbitrary characteristic of language makes the language itself more flexible and more creative.

Based on the above phenomenon, it is interesting to research further about the use of WhatsApp emoticons by Gen Z. This research will examine the use of WhatsApp emoticons by Gen Z using a semiotic approach by Roland Barthes, especially related to the concepts of connotation and myth. The semiotic approach is often used as a theoretical framework for analysing languages and signs from a cultural perspective.

Barthes developed his concept of semiotic theory based on Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of signifier and signified, where signifier was a written or spoken mark of a sign and signified was the concept to which the signifier refers (Bressler, 1994). However, Barthes argued that the concept of signifier and signified was more comprehensive than the linguistic area. It included other areas outside the language. He even considered social activities, such as how humans dress, body language, images, videos, etc., as signs. Barthes took Saussure's theory of signification-significance and expanded it into a theory of language and its connotations of meaning. He emphasized the interaction between the text and users' personal and cultural experiences that would reveal the meaning of a sign (Sitanggang, 2020)

In his theoretical concept of semiotics, Barthes distinguished between two levels of signification or the process of making a sign and meaning. The first level is denotation. It refers to the relation between expression (signifier) and content (signified). That interaction produces explicit, direct, closed, and specific meaning between the signifier and the signified or between the sign and its reference to reality. It is called denotation or literal meaning (Syakur, 2018).

However, according to Barthes, there are second signification levels called connotation and metalanguage that come after the first level. Connotation refers to the second level of signification, where denotative meaning in the first level of signification becomes a signifier and meets new signified, so there is a new meaning after that. The new meaning is usually associative and relates to society's sentiments, emotions, or values. It is often

implicit and ambiguous (Sui & Fan, 2015). Metalanguage happens when denotative meaning in the first level of signification becomes signified and meets new signifieds, so there is a new form of language after that. In other words, connotation and metalanguage are the second level of signification. Connotation orients to the exploration of new meaning, while metalanguage orients to the exploration of new forms of language (Lustyantie, 2012).

Moreover, Barthes viewed myth as the next phase after the second level of signification. Myth refers to the communication system in delivering a message, so it is not the object, concept, or idea itself. Myth is the way how a message is delivered. Myth is beyond language. In revealing the myth, semiologists do not need to consider the details of the linguistic scheme; they need to understand the total scheme of signification. Barthes compared myth as a mask, which blocked people from seeing the true face of a thing (denotative meaning) and finally distorted the meaning. Myth is also related to social, cultural, and political power since myth is a constructed system to deliver a specific message to the audience (Setiawan, 2017).

Based on the above explanation, this research used Roland Barthes' semiotic theory to analyse the phenomenon through the following research questions: (1) what are some emoticons that Gen Z often uses to express their feelings and worldview, and (2) how connotation and myth analysis that arise from the use of WhatsApp emoticons by Generation Z?

Methodology

This research was conducted through field studies and literature studies. Field studies were carried out by providing questionnaires to obtain data about




WhatsApp emoticons that are often used and represent the feelings and worldview of Gen Z. The questionnaires were distributed to students of the English Education Study Program of Universitas Tidar as the subject of this research, as well as the representation of Gen Z.




While literature study was conducted after obtaining data about the use of WhatsApp emoticons by Gen Z. After conducting field studies through the questionnaires, researchers get data that has been collected. Then, the researcher sorted the data to get data in accordance with the research problem. This makes it easy for researchers to analyse the data. The data obtained was then analysed using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory approach to find out the cultural model surrounding Gen Z through the analysis of metalanguage and connotations of WhatsApp emoticons used by Gen Z. The last step in this research is concluding the data that has been analysed.

Finding and Discussion

This section will show the data that researchers have collected through the analysis of questionnaires distributed to Gen Z to answer the problem formulation of this study. The data researchers get Gen Z's most used emoticon and the meaning of using the emoticon in communication. The results of these questionnaires are shown in the table below.


Table 1. Questionnaires Result


Sign	Percent
	80,5%
	51,2%
	51,2%


	19,5%
	19,5%
	15,9%

The data shows that the most widely used emoticon is crying loudly at 80,5%, followed by folded hands at 51,2%, rolling on the floor laughing at 51,2%, then blushing at 19,5%, and smiling face with tears at 15,9%.


Based on the data above, most Gen Z use these emojis on a whim because sometimes emojis with different meanings can better describe the feelings they want to convey. An *emoji* is a symbol that expresses one's feelings or emotions in chat. However, the use of emojis also depends on the person.


For example, the crying loudly  emoticon signifies intense emotions that could bring tears, such as extreme sadness, frustration, or relief. Gen Z often uses this emoji when something is hilarious, bringing tears of laughter or leaving them speechless. Alternatively, it is used sincerely to express deep sadness and tears.


The folded hands emoji  serves multiple interpretations, often representing prayer, expressions of gratitude with "please" or "thank you," and occasionally symbolizing a high five. It can also convey emotions such as sorrow, regret, or pleading. Gen Z similarly interprets this emoji in line with its conventional meanings.

The rolling-on-the-floor laughing emoji  typically signifies uncontrollable laughter in response to something highly amusing. Its visual depiction features a figure doubled over in laughter, often with tears streaming from both eyes. This

emoticon encapsulates the essence of hilarity and amusement. When employed by Gen Z, it is interpreted in line with its literal meaning, conveying the sheer hilarity of the situation at hand.

The slightly smiling  emoji conveys a broad spectrum of positive, happy, and friendly sentiments. However, its tone can also be interpreted as patronizing, passive-aggressive, or ironic, suggesting that "everything is fine" when it is not. Gen Z uses this emoji in line with its literal meaning.

The blushing smile emoji , featuring smiling eyes, a smiling face, and red cheeks, expresses genuine happiness or positivity. Gen Z frequently uses this emoji when feeling shy or experiencing great happiness.

The smiling face with tears emoji  is commonly used to convey a bittersweet feeling or mixed emotions. It depicts a yellow face with a single teardrop rolling down from one eye. This emoji can simultaneously represent happiness and sadness, capturing joyous yet nostalgic or sentimental moments. It also signifies a sense of relief or gratitude after overcoming a difficult situation or personal hardship. It serves as a reminder that there is always hope for a brighter future, even in tough times.

The emoji that tends to be used randomly by Gen Z shows the freedom in language expression, supported by technological developments that have become a medium of language in the latest era. The dominant tendency that emerges is a shift in connotative meaning, where Gen Z uses many language symbols that do not match their expression. For example, the expression of crying is interpreted as laughing, and the expression of a knotted

smile is interpreted as a polite response, which indicates that the relationship is not very familiar, even cold. The abundant use of emojis also shows that Gen Z is quickly associated with popular culture, which also becomes Gen Z's identity, which is different from previous generations.

Discussion

This section will discuss some important points about Gen Z's use of emoticons. The discussion will focus on signification, or the process of creating denotative and connotative meaning, and investigate how myth delivers messages through WhatsApp emoticons.

Based on the explanation from the finding, Gen Z distinguishes the use of WhatsApp emoticons based on their communication partner. When they communicate with their teacher, their lecturer, their parents, or an older person, or when the communication is on formal occasions, they will use emoticons as are the literal expressions attached to these emoticons. They will choose emoticons that are not ambiguous. It creates denotative meaning.

For example, Gen Z massively uses the folded hand emoticon. They often use it when conversing with their lecturers to show respect, gratitude, or the sign that the instruction is understood. All respondents to the questionnaires stated that they use this emoticon as its literal meaning, especially when their conversation is on formal occasions. The meaning created by this emoticon is not distorted. The primary function of using this emoticon is to strengthen the expression of respect and gratitude.

Another example is the use of a blushing emoticon. Almost all respondents to the questionnaires stated that they use

this emoticon as its literal meaning to express happiness or positivity. They use this emoticon on formal and informal occasions, such as when conversing with lecturers to show gratitude and positivity and when conversing with their friends to show happiness, excitement, and positivity. The meaning created by this emoticon is not distorted. It also creates denotative meaning.

The last example is the use of rolling on the floor laughing emoticons. In using this emoticon, almost all respondents also stated that they use it as its literal meaning to express funny situations where they cannot hide their laugh. They often use this emoticon in informal situations, such as conversing with friends. Besides expressing the funny situation, the function of using this emoticon is to indicate a close relationship. The meaning created by this emoticon is not distorted. It creates denotative meaning.

On the other hand, there are also some situations where using emoticons affects the creation of connotative meaning. For example, when Gen Z communicates with their friends, they often choose ambiguous emoticons to make the conversation more expressive. The emoticons' meaning is often distorted from the literal expressions attached to these emoticons. Finally, it creates a connotative meaning.

An example of this is the use of a crying loudly emoticon. In literal meaning, this emoticon expresses extreme sadness and weep. However, many respondents stated that they often use this emoticon to express something hilarious so that they can stand the laughter. Some other respondents stated that they use this emoticon to express a heart-touching condition. The meaning created by this emoticon is distorted from

sadness into the expression of laughter, panic, surprise, and heart-touching condition. This emoticon creates connotative meaning, which depends on the emotional condition of the sender.

Another example is the use of a smiling face with a tear emoticon. This emoticon is unique because of its ambiguity. The emoticon contains a signifier of a smile and a signifier of a tear in one expression. So, basically, it is a paradox. Some respondents stated that they use this emoticon to express sadness. Some other respondents said they use this emoticon to empathize with a sorry condition. However, some respondents said they use this emoticon to express gratitude after a challenging situation or a personal hardship. The meaning created by this emoticon is complex and varied, depending on the sender's personal emotions.

The last example is the use of emoticons with a simple smile. In literal meaning, this emoticon functions to express happiness, represented by a smile. However, some respondents stated that sometimes they use this emoticon to express disappointment, indicating an unwanted situation, but they try to be all right with it. Some respondents also stated that this emoticon indicates a cold and awkward situation. The function of this emoticon is to hide the disappointment with a smiley face. Overall, the meaning created by this emoticon is sometimes distorted from happiness into disappointment. This emoticon also creates connotative meaning, depending on the sender's emotions.

Beyond the first level (denotation) and the second level (connotation) of signification above, there is a myth about how the ideology operates in Gen Z's subconscious mind when delivering their expressions through WhatsApp emoticons.

The myth can be traced through some patterns, as follows.

Firstly, Gen Z communicates in a mediated platform. This differs from the previous generation, where communication was more verbal and direct. In a mediated platform like WhatsApp, Gen Z likes combining verbal expression with other visual elements, such as emoticons. Besides emoticons, there are other visual elements such as memes, stickers, etc. The function of these visual elements is to strengthen the expression or emotions.

Secondly, in a mediated platform, the communication becomes indirect. There is no face-to-face situation, and sometimes, there is anonymity. It implies the degree of seriousness in communication. The language and emotion expressed through the mediated platform sometimes become more accessible because there is relatively no direct punishment if they are wrong in choosing their expression. However, this condition depends on the context of the situation. If they communicate on a formal occasion, they can see it as a formal occasion and create a severe communication. However, when the situation is informal, they become more accessible to express their feelings through various language expressions.

Thirdly, the aspect of freedom in mediated communication often affects the creation of connotative meaning through emoticons. As explained in the previous part, many emoticons are used without considering their literal meaning or expression. The use of emoticons is often based on the sender's personal feelings or emotions, so there is often a distortion in the implicated meaning. On the one hand, it indicates the arbitrary characteristics of language, especially when the sender uses emoticons based on their personal

preference. On the other hand, it also indicates the creation of hyperreality. When the communication is mediated in a specific media, the meaning or the reality is often distorted from the real one.

Overall, those patterns reveal Gen Z's cultural situation. They were born into the digital era and have lived in it since their young age. They used to communicate in mediated platforms with each unique characteristic. This finally differentiated Gen Z's language pattern from that of other generations.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that the loudly crying emoticon is the most used by Gen Z. They use it to express extreme laughter or convey panic or surprise. The folded hands emoticon is also popular among Gen Z and is often used to express gratitude or show respect. The "rolling on the floor laughing" emoticon is used literally to indicate something hilarious. The simple smile emoticon is used when they feel disappointed but try to appear okay. The blushing smiley emoticon is used to express happiness or positivity. The smiling face with tears emoticon has a complex meaning that depends on the sender's emotions.

The choice of emoticon often depends on the communication partner, with denotative meanings typically emerging in formal situations, such as interactions with teachers, respected individuals, or elders. In contrast, connotative meanings are more prevalent in informal conversations, such as interactions with friends. Gen Z's use of emoticons on platforms like WhatsApp reveals deeper ideological patterns beyond mere denotation and connotation. Unlike previous generations who communicated

more verbally and directly, Gen Z frequently integrates verbal expressions with visual elements such as emoticons, memes, and stickers to enrich communication. This mediated communication, characterized by a lack of face-to-face interaction and often including anonymity, encourages more expressive and less severe uses of language and emotion. Emoticons often reflect personal feelings rather than literal meanings, contributing to a distortion or hyperreality in communication. These patterns highlight the cultural landscape of Gen Z, whose unique communication styles have been shaped by their upbringing in the digital era, distinguishing them from earlier generations.

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