# Happiness Expressions Through WhatsApp Stickers: Semiotic Analysis

Chairunnisa[a,1,*], Mita Setriana Gultom[b,2], Ocha Octavia[c,3],Teza Aditra Ginting[d,4]

[a,b,c,d]*English Department, Universitas Sumatera Utara, Medan, 20155, Indonesia*
[1]*chairunnisa055@students.usu.ac.id;* [2]*mitasetriana@students.usu.ac.id;* [3]*ocha.octavia@students.usu.ac.id;*
[4]*tezaaditra@students.usu.ac.id*

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The rise of WhatsApp stickers has transformed digital communication, enabling richer emotional expression beyond text and emojis. This study investigates how happiness is represented in WhatsApp stickers by applying Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory, which views meaning as the interaction between the signifier (form) and the signified (concept). Using a descriptive qualitative method, data were collected through observation of WhatsApp chats and short surveys among 5 English Literature students at Universitas Sumatera Utara. Stickers that visually represent happiness were identified and analyzed based on their visual features and users' interpretations. Results show that happiness is symbolized through big smiles, curved or slit eyes, lively gestures, bright colors, and decorative icons such as hearts, stars, and sparkles. These visual signifiers consistently represent signified meanings of joy, excitement, or satisfaction. The study concludes that WhatsApp stickers serve not just as visual decoration but as meaningful semiotic tools that enhance emotional connection and social bonding in online interaction. This contributes to both theoretical understanding in semiotics and practical insights into digital emotion communication.

## I. Introduction

In today's digital era, the boundary between words and images in communication has become increasingly blurred. Messaging applications such as WhatsApp have changed the way people interact by combining short text messages with visual elements. Among these elements, stickers have become one of the most expressive tools for showing feelings, attitudes, and even cultural meanings. Stickers allow users to express emotions more vividly than plain text, which can sometimes feel flat or emotionless. Through a mix of humor, visuals, and cultural symbols, stickers have become an important part of digital communication, especially in expressing happiness and other positive emotions.

Unlike emojis, which are standardized and limited in design, stickers offer a wider range of expression. Their detailed features, such as facial expressions, gestures, and sometimes animations, allow users to show different levels of happiness, from soft smiles to loud laughter. Because of their visual richness, stickers can be understood as semiotic signs that form meaning through images and shared understanding. Based on Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory, every sign has two parts: the signifier, which refers to the physical form of the sign such as color or image, and the signified, which is the concept or feeling the sign expresses. Meaning does not come from the image alone but from how users collectively interpret it in a particular cultural context. For example, a sticker showing a jumping cartoon character may represent excitement or celebration depending on how people perceive it in conversation.

Several previous studies have examined visual elements in digital communication. [1] found that emoticons help users express emotions effectively and reduce misunderstandings in online conversations. Similarly, [2] concluded that emoticons enrich messages by adding emotional context,

serving as substitutes for facial expressions in digital settings. [3] argued that emojis and stickers have evolved into independent semiotic systems that are capable of expressing complex emotions and social meanings. In educational and interpersonal contexts, [4] discovered that WhatsApp stickers help students build emotional connection and creativity, often through humor or playful language use such as code-mixing. Likewise, [5] observed that stickers and emojis can sometimes act as complete responses in informal chat, showing that visual cues may replace short written expressions. From a cultural perspective, [6] studied Minangkabau-style WhatsApp stickers and found that they represent local humor and cultural identity, while [7] showed that vehicle stickers in Sorong convey social values and community identity. These findings indicate that visual symbols in digital communication not only express emotion but also carry cultural and social meaning.

Previous research also supports the idea that visual cues help shape emotional meaning in digital cmmunication. Studies such as those by [8], [9], [10], [11], and [12] show that expressive visuals, contextual cues, and shared cultural symbols influence how users interpret emotions in stickers. These findings align with the present study, suggesting that happiness stickers work not only as decorative elements but as meaningful signs shaped by context and user intention. Other research, such as that conducted by [13] analyzed COVID-19 WhatsApp sticker memes in Oman and showed that stickers act as emotional and social coping tools during difficult times. Stickers in such contexts help users share humor, maintain optimism, and strengthen social bonds.

These studies collectively demonstrate that visual symbols play a major role in digital communication by providing emotional expression, cultural representation, and social connection. However, most of these studies tend to discuss stickers and emojis in general communication, humor, or identity contexts. Very few focus on one specific emotion, such as happiness, or explore how it is visually represented through a semiotic approach. Furthermore, most of the existing research applies Peirce's triadic semiotic model, which focuses more on representational logic rather than the direct relationship between image and meaning. There remains a lack of studies that apply Saussure's dyadic model to analyze how happiness is visually communicated in stickers, especially among university students who actively use WhatsApp in their everyday life.

Given this research gap, [14] the present study adopts Saussure's dyadic semiotic model as its primary theoretical framework, supported by Paul Ekman's Basic Emotions Theory for validating emotional expressions. The choice of Saussure's dyadic model over Peirce's triadic framework offers distinct analytical advantages for examining happiness in WhatsApp stickers. While Peirce's model emphasizes the interpretant and the logical process of sign interpretation through three interrelated components (representamen, object, and interpretant), Saussure's dyadic approach focuses directly on the relationship between form (signifier) and concept (signified), making it more suitable for analyzing how visual elements in stickers are immediately recognized and understood as expressions of happiness. This direct, binary relationship allows for a clearer examination of how specific visual features such as smiles, colors, and gestures consistently map onto emotional meanings within a shared cultural context. Moreover, Saussure's emphasis on the arbitrary yet conventional nature of signs helps explain why certain visual combinations become culturally recognized markers of happiness in digital communication, without requiring analysis of individual cognitive interpretation processes.

This model is particularly effective for studying WhatsApp stickers because it captures how users collectively assign meaning to visual symbols through repeated social use, rather than through logical deduction or representational reference. In strengthening this theoretical foundation, [15] revisits Saussurean dichotomies, offering deeper insight into how digital signs including stickers operate within structured systems of meaning. To verify whether the visual features in WhatsApp stickers truly reflect natural expressions of happiness, this study also incorporates Ekman's Basic Emotions Theory, which identifies universal human emotions such as joy, sadness, anger, and fear. According to Ekman, each emotion has distinct facial features that are recognized across cultures, for example, a smiling mouth and raised cheeks are common indicators of happiness.

Building on this theoretical foundation, this study aims to analyze how happiness is represented and communicated through WhatsApp stickers used by English Literature students at Universitas Sumatera Utara. To achieve this aim, the study addresses three interconnected research questions. First, it examines what visual elements (signifiers) in WhatsApp stickers are used to represent happiness among English Literature students at Universitas Sumatera Utara. Second, it investigates

how these visual signifiers relate to their signified meanings of happiness according to Saussure's dyadic semiotic model.

Theoretically, this research demonstrates that Saussure's semiotic theory remains relevant for analyzing modern digital communication, providing insight into how people create and share meaning through visual symbols. Practically, it explains how users express happiness, strengthen social connections, and create positive emotional experiences through stickers in their conversations. In short, WhatsApp stickers are more than decorative images; they are meaningful semiotic signs that express happiness in creative, expressive, and culturally influenced ways.

## II.     Method

This section explains the research design, participants, data collection methods, data analysis, and ethical considerations used in this study. As mentioned in the introduction, the main goal of this research is to identify and classify stickers that represent happiness in WhatsApp conversations among English Literature students at Universitas Sumatera Utara. This topic was chosen because most previous studies about digital symbols such as emojis, emoticons, and stickers have focused more on their general roles, humor, or cultural meaning, rather than on how happiness is shown and understood through stickers in real communication.

To achieve this aim, the researcher used a descriptive qualitative method with a self-observation approach. This method allows the researchers to observe, describe, and interpret signs of happiness as they appear naturally in their own authentic conversations. It focuses on understanding meaning and interpretation instead of using numbers or statistical data. This approach is particularly suitable for this research because it explores how people use and understand visual signs to show feelings, especially happiness, in digital communication. The self-observation method provides access to genuine, naturally-occurring data that reflects actual sticker usage patterns rather than artificially generated responses, ensuring ecological validity in examining how happiness is semiotically constructed in everyday digital interaction.

### A.  Research Participants

This study employed a self-observation approach in which the researchers also served as participants. The four participants were the authors of this study: Chairunnisa, Mita Setriana Gultom, Ocha Octavia, and Teza Aditra Ginting, all of whom are students from the English Literature Department at Universitas Sumatera Utara. This dual role of researcher-participant was deliberately chosen for several methodological reasons. First, it provided direct access to authentic communication data from individuals who actively use WhatsApp stickers in their daily interactions for both academic and personal purposes. Second, as English Literature students with backgrounds in language and communication studies, all participants possess analytical skills and theoretical knowledge necessary for understanding how meaning is created through symbols and visual elements, which enhances the depth of semiotic interpretation. Third, the shared educational and social context among the researchers allowed for rich collaborative analysis grounded in mutual understanding of the cultural and contextual factors that shape sticker usage.

The decision to use self-observation aligns with established qualitative research traditions such as autoethnography and reflexive inquiry, which recognize that researchers' insider perspectives can yield valuable insights into communicative practices. However, the researchers acknowledge that this approach introduces potential subjectivity and bias, as interpreting one's own communication practices may lack the critical distance typically afforded by external observation. To address this limitation, validation strategies including collaborative analysis and peer debriefing were implemented, as detailed in the validation and reliability section below.

### B.  Data Collection

Data were collected through systematic observation and documentation of WhatsApp stickers used in the researchers' group chat conversations. The researchers identified and compiled stickers that they naturally used to express happiness in their everyday digital communication. This process involved reviewing chat histories over a period of time and selecting stickers that visually and contextually represented various forms of happiness, joy, satisfaction, or positive emotions.

The stickers were selected based on three explicit criteria. First, visual characteristics: stickers had to display clear facial expressions such as smiles, curved or closed eyes, or gestures such as raised arms or waving hands that are commonly associated with happiness. Second, contextual usage: stickers had to have been used in conversational contexts where positive emotions, celebrations, or cheerful responses were being communicated. Third, shared recognition: all four researchers had to

agree that the sticker was primarily intended to convey happiness or a related positive emotion when used in conversation.

In total, 15 stickers were collected and identified as representing happiness. These stickers were chosen based on their visual characteristics such as color, expression, and movement, as well as the context in which they appeared in conversation. Screenshots of the stickers were captured and personal information such as names, timestamps, and other identifying details were removed to maintain privacy and focus the analysis solely on the visual semiotic elements of the stickers themselves.

Because the data came from the researchers' own communication practices, there was no need for external questionnaires or interviews. The researchers' intimate familiarity with the contexts in which these stickers were used provided rich interpretive insight into their meanings and functions. This insider knowledge allowed for nuanced analysis of how visual elements map onto emotional expressions in real communicative situations.

*C. Data Analysis*

The analysis process used Saussure's semiotic theory, which focuses on how signs produce meaning. In this framework, a sign consists of two parts: the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the form of the sign, such as the image, facial expression, or color used in the sticker. The signified is the meaning or concept that the sign expresses, such as joy, excitement, or satisfaction.

Each sticker was analyzed by identifying these two elements and interpreting how they work together to form meaning. For example, a sticker showing a wide smile or raised arms may represent excitement or celebration, while a softer smile or gentle gesture may indicate calm happiness or comfort. The analysis proceeded through collaborative discussion among all four researchers. Each sticker was examined collectively, with researchers sharing their interpretations of the visual signifiers and the emotional signified meanings based on their actual usage experiences in conversation.

To make the interpretation stronger, the researchers also used Ekman's theory of basic emotions, which identifies universal facial expressions for emotions like happiness, sadness, anger, and fear. This theory helped ensure that the visual signs in the stickers matched commonly recognized emotional expressions. After analyzing the stickers, the researchers grouped them based on shared visual features and emotional meanings. Each group was then described in detail to explain how different types of happiness were visually represented in the stickers.

*D. Validation and Reliability*

To ensure accuracy and trustworthiness despite the self-observation approach, several validation strategies were employed. First, the study used collaborative analysis as a form of peer debriefing. All four researchers participated equally in the interpretive process, discussing each sticker's visual elements and emotional meanings until consensus was reached. This collaborative meaning-making process helped reduce individual bias and ensured that interpretations were not based solely on one person's subjective view.

Second, the researchers engaged in reflexive practice throughout the analysis. They maintained awareness of their dual roles as both researchers and participants, explicitly discussing how their personal experiences with sticker usage might influence their interpretations. This reflexivity helped identify and address potential biases in the analytical process. Third, the analysis was grounded in established theoretical frameworks Saussure's semiotics and Ekman's basic emotions theory which provided systematic criteria for identifying and interpreting visual signifiers and their emotional meanings. By anchoring the analysis in these recognized theoretical models, the study maintained conceptual rigor and avoided purely idiosyncratic interpretations. Fourth, the researchers documented their analytical discussions and maintained records of how consensus was reached for each sticker's interpretation. This transparency in the analytical process enhances the study's credibility and allows readers to assess the reasonableness of the interpretations presented.

While the self-observation approach limits the generalizability of findings to broader populations, it offers the significant advantage of providing authentic, naturally-occurring data with deep contextual understanding. The validation strategies employed help ensure that the interpretations are trustworthy and systematically derived, even within the constraints of the methodological approach.

*E. Ethical Considerations*

This study followed ethical standards for qualitative research. Because the researchers served as participants and the data came from their own group chat conversations, issues of informed consent

and privacy intrusion were minimized. All researchers were fully aware of the research purpose and voluntarily participated in both data collection and analysis.

The chat data were drawn from the researchers' private group conversation, and all personal information including names, profile pictures, timestamps, and other identifying details were removed from the screenshots before analysis. The data were used exclusively for academic purposes and were stored securely throughout the research process. No external parties had access to the original chat data.

The researchers acknowledged their ethical responsibility to represent their communication practices honestly and to conduct the analysis with integrity. The self-reflexive nature of the study required careful attention to avoid misrepresenting or selectively presenting data to support predetermined conclusions. By maintaining transparency about the methodological approach and its limitations, the researchers ensured that the study was conducted responsibly and ethically.

## III.     Results and Discussion

The results of this study were obtained through the observation and documentation of WhatsApp stickers used by the four researcher-participants, all English Literature students at Universitas Sumatera Utara, to express feelings of happiness. A total of 15 stickers representing the expression of happiness were selected for in-depth semiotic analysis. Using Ferdinand de Saussure's dyadic model of semiotics, each sticker was examined as a sign consisting of a signifier the visual form such as color, gesture, expression, and icon and a signified, namely the concept of happiness. The analysis revealed two complementary dimensions: first, how visual elements function as signifiers that consistently represent happiness, and second, how those visual signs carry contextual and social meanings within digital communication.

*A.  Facial Expressions: The Big Smile and Curved Eyes*

The most prominent visual cue found in the data is the smiling face, often with curved or closed eyes that indicate a relaxed and genuine emotional state. This feature corresponds closely to Paul Ekman's concept of the Duchenne smile, a universally recognized marker of authentic joy. Even in stylized digital form, this expression retains its communicative power, showing that digital signs remain anchored in the biological and psychological bases of emotion. Beyond facial expressions, body movement or kinesics also plays an essential role. Many stickers depict open arms, waving hands, or dynamic poses that amplify the intensity of happiness, functioning as substitutes for physical gestures and tone that are otherwise absent in text-based conversation. These lively movements project enthusiasm and friendliness, transforming static text exchanges into emotionally rich interactions.

Table 1. Signifier and Signified Stiker Happiness in WhatsApp

| No. | Signifier | Signified |
|---|---|---|
| 1. |  | **Exuberant Happiness/Overwhelming Joy**<br><br>The wide, open mouth (a form of big smile) and the animated visual style suggest an intense, outward burst of happiness, reflecting excitement or vigorous positive reaction. It expresses a sense of freedom, positivity, and shared excitement that invites others to feel the same emotional energy. In digital interaction, this sticker functions as a semiotic tool for amplifying cheerful mood and social connection—it doesn't just say "I'm happy," but visually *radiates* that feeling. |
| 2. |  | **Contentment/Deep Satisfaction**<br><br>The closed, curved eyes (or "slit eyes" ) emulate the classic Duchenne smile, indicating a feeling of calm, heartfelt, and intense inner satisfaction or delight. It can also indicate soft happiness and peaceful contentment. Expressing a feeling of warmth, appreciation, and relaxed joy, a kind of happiness that is inward and calm rather than loud or energetic. In digital communication, it functions as a gentle emotional cue that conveys affection, gratitude, and emotional harmony between speakers. |

3.



14:28

**Excitement and Eagerness/Warm**

The extremely wide-open mouth (big smile) and the open, embracing arms represent a "lively gesture" , conveying enthusiastic excitement and open, unreserved joy. It expresses happiness as a *shared and performative act*, inviting others to participate in that positive feeling. In digital conversation, this sticker works as a visual exclamation of joy—used to celebrate, welcome, or respond to cheerful news in a playful and energetic way.

4.



13:44

**Gentle Delight/Pleasant Satisfaction.**

The slight upturn of the mouth and the slit eyes signify a sweet, tranquil moment of joy or satisfaction. It communicates sincerity and friendliness, often used to show appreciation, care, or contentment in digital conversations. Unlike loud expressions of happiness, this sticker represents inner joy—a calm, heartfelt smile that connects emotionally through subtlety.

5.



13:46

**Affectionate Joy/Overwhelming Delight**

The pink color (bright color ), rounded form, and the prominent heart icon (decorative icon ) link the feeling of joy directly with warmth and affection. It expresses care, tenderness, and positive emotional connection. In digital communication, this sticker functions as a semiotic sign of love-based joy, showing that the sender's happiness is sincere, gentle, and shared with affection toward the receiver.

6.



13:54

**Blissful Adoration/Fond Contentment**

The upward gaze and the posture of hands resting under the chin (suggesting contemplation or deep feeling) combined with a big smile point to a tranquil or adoring form of satisfaction or bliss. Represents happiness that is polite, caring, and emotionally tender. In digital interaction, this sticker communicates sincerity, gratitude, and sweetness, functioning as a nonverbal expression of soft joy and emotional connection.

7.



13:54

**Friendly/Social Joy or Glee**

The visible big smile and the enthusiastic waving hand (lively gesture ) communicate a positive, welcoming, and high-energy form of happiness and social connection. It indicates happiness as a relational act showing delight in connecting with others. In digital communication, this sticker functions as a cheerful greeting or farewell, symbolizing joy in maintaining friendship and positivity in interaction.

8.



13:55

**Pure, Unrestrained Joy/Celebratory Excitement**

The widely spread arms and open mouth (big smile) function as a lively gesture symbolizing freedom, overwhelming joy, and celebratory excitement. Representing happiness as an *outward and inclusive emotion*, inviting others to participate in the sender's cheerful state. In digital communication, this sticker is often used to greet, celebrate, or share joyful news, functioning as a semiotic sign of openness, warmth, and shared enthusiasm.

| 9. |  13:47 | **Comfortable Contentment**<br><br>The yellow color (bright color ) and the closed, curved eyes emphasize a sense of peaceful, relaxed satisfaction or joy, signifies peaceful, sincere happiness a calm and emotionally stable joy that communicates friendliness, comfort, and quiet appreciation. It embodies warmth and contentment without exaggeration, functioning in digital communication as a subtle yet heartfelt expression of happiness and goodwill. |
|---|---|---|
| 10. |  13:49 | **Celebratory Excitement**<br><br>The yellow color (bright color ) and the closed, curved eyes emphasize a sense of peaceful, relaxed satisfaction or joy.<br><br>The image of Chicken Little raising both hands and smiling with closed eyes signifies celebratory and triumphant happiness, a vivid expression of joy, relief, and excitement. It represents happiness as an active, shared emotion, marking moments of success or gratitude. In digital communication, this sticker functions as a lively sign of positivity, enthusiasm, and relief symbolizing a pure and contagious form of joy. |
| 11. |  13:56 | **Intense Affectionate Joy/Love-Struck Happiness**<br><br>The eyes being filled with hearts (decorative icons ) and the cheek blushes directly link the feeling of happiness with a powerful sense of love or intense positive emotion. A strong, expressive emotion that combines joy, admiration, and fondness. It represents the experience of being emotionally moved or delighted by someone or something beloved. In digital communication, this sticker functions as a symbol of joyful affection, visually expressing love, admiration, and enthusiastic approval through the powerful metaphor of heart-shaped eyes. |
| 12. |  14:06 | **Triumphant or Appreciative Satisfaction**<br><br>The wide, toothy smile and the gesture of hands pressed together (often used for thanks or a successful plan) signify satisfaction or excited appreciation and joy. An energetic emotion that conveys admiration, encouragement, and shared excitement. It represents happiness as an active and social emotion, showing pleasure not only in personal joy but in others' success or humor. In digital conversation, this sticker functions as a symbol of playful approval and enthusiastic positivity, strengthening connection and emotional rapport between users. |
| 13. |  14:06 | **Sweet/Tender Happiness and Delight**<br><br>The pink color (bright color ) combined with the closed, "slit eyes" and gentle expression signifies soft, peaceful joy and delight. It conveys calm joy rather than excitement, expressing appreciation, care, and emotional connection. In digital communication, this sticker functions as a subtle sign of affection and contentment, symbolizing happiness that is soft, heartfelt, and emotionally secure. |
| 14. |  13:44 | **Contentment/Delighted Satisfaction**<br><br>The exaggerated big smile and closed eyes effectively communicate a feeling of deep, perhaps slightly humorous, satisfaction or pleasant contentment that expresses inner satisfaction, kindness, and warmth. It showed an emotion that is gentle yet sincere, reflecting balance, optimism, and simplicity. In digital communication, this sticker functions as a sign of quiet delight, affection, and positivity—symbolizing happiness that feels natural, steady, and heartfelt. |

| 15. |  | **Fun-Loving Excitement/Energetic Joy**<br><br>The bright pink color and the bouncy, dynamic posture (lively gesture ) are strong visual cues for high-energy, celebratory excitement and joy. A vibrant emotion that radiates excitement, positivity, and social connection. It represents happiness as a *shared and active experience*, inviting others to join in the joyful mood. In digital interaction, this sticker functions as an expressive sign of enthusiasm, optimism, and communal joy, embodying the essence of cheerful self-expression. |

### B. Expressive Visuals: Movement, Color, and Symbolic Details

Color and supplementary decorative elements further reinforce the conveyed emotion. Bright hues particularly yellow and pink dominate the stickers, with yellow symbolizing optimism, warmth, and cheerful satisfaction, while pink evokes affection, tenderness, and gentle delight. Decorative icons such as hearts, sparkles, and stars serve as emotional modifiers that clarify or intensify meaning, transforming the abstract concept of happiness into a visually recognizable code of positivity and care. In these happiness stickers, color functions as an emotional language that transcends words. Typography and graphic style also contribute to meaning construction: rounded fonts, soft contours, and clean lines add to the atmosphere of friendliness and approachability. These visual decisions together illustrate how happiness is designed not only as an individual feeling but also as a shared emotional gesture expressed through form, motion, and color.

### C. Discussion

The analysis of 15 WhatsApp stickers expressing happiness reveals that visual signs consistently convey emotional nuances of joy through distinct combinations of color, expression, and gesture. Using Ferdinand de Saussure's dyadic model, each sticker was interpreted as a sign composed of the signifier (the visual form) and the signified (the emotion of happiness). The findings show that facial expression serves as the primary signifier, with big smiles and curved or closed eyes often corresponding to Ekman's "Duchenne smile" universally representing joy, satisfaction, and warmth. Gestures such as open arms, waving hands, and dynamic poses reinforce these emotions by symbolizing excitement, friendliness, and shared happiness. Moreover, color and decorative elements act as emotional modifiers; bright hues like yellow and pink, along with icons such as hearts, stars, and sparkles, strengthen the emotional tone and associate happiness with affection, enthusiasm, and positivity.

These findings align with and extend previous research on visual communication in digital contexts. [1] that emoticons help users express emotions effectively and reduce misunderstandings in online conversations. The present study supports this finding by demonstrating that WhatsApp stickers, with their more complex visual features compared to simple emoticons, provide even richer emotional expression through the combination of facial expressions, colors, gestures, and decorative elements. Similarly, [2] concluded that emoticons enrich messages by adding emotional context and serving as substitutes for facial expressions in digital settings. This study extends that conclusion by showing specifically how different visual signifiers such as the distinction between wide, open-mouthed smiles versus gentle, closed-eye smiles communicate different subtypes of happiness, from exuberant joy to calm contentment.

The findings also resonate with [3] argument that emojis and stickers have evolved into independent semiotic systems capable of expressing complex emotions and social meanings. The present analysis demonstrates this by revealing how stickers function not merely as decorative additions but as sophisticated semiotic tools that combine multiple visual codes (facial expression, color, gesture, iconography) to construct nuanced emotional meanings. The identification of several subtypes of happiness exuberant joy, contentment, affectionate happiness, and social or friendly happiness illustrates the complexity and expressiveness of stickers as a semiotic system, validating Wilde and Sachs-Hombach's theoretical claim through empirical evidence.

From a social and interpersonal perspective, the study's findings support [4] observation that WhatsApp stickers help users build emotional connection and creativity. The present analysis shows that happiness stickers specifically facilitate positive social bonding by conveying warmth, friendliness, and shared joy. For instance, stickers with waving gestures or open arms not only express the sender's happiness but also perform a relational function by inviting connection and participation from the receiver. This aligns with [13] finding that WhatsApp stickers act as emotional

and social coping tools. While Al Zidjaly studied COVID-19 memes in Oman and emphasized stickers' role in sharing humor and maintaining optimism during difficult times, the present study demonstrates that even in everyday, non-crisis communication, happiness stickers serve similar functions they strengthen social bonds, create positive emotional atmospheres, and help users navigate the emotional dimensions of digital interaction.

The role of color as an emotional signifier in the present study echoes [12] discussion of the semiotic basis for visual elements in social media communication. The finding that yellow consistently represents optimism and warmth, while pink conveys affection and tenderness, demonstrates how culturally shared color associations operate as part of the semiotic system through which happiness is visually constructed and recognized. This supports Bamigbola's argument that visual communication relies on shared cultural symbols and learned associations. Similarly, the use of decorative icons such as hearts and sparkles as emotional modifiers aligns with findings by [11]who showed that contextual cues and visual symbols significantly influence how users interpret emotions in digital stickers.

The cultural dimension of sticker usage, while not the primary focus of this study, also emerges as relevant. [6] found that Minangkabau-style WhatsApp stickers represent local humor and cultural identity. Although the stickers analyzed in the present study were not specifically culturally marked, the participants' shared background as Indonesian university students suggests that their interpretations of happiness stickers are shaped by their cultural and social context. This indicates that while certain visual signifiers of happiness (such as the Duchenne smile) may be universal, the specific ways they are stylized, combined with other elements, and deployed in conversation reflect culturally specific communicative practices.

Several subtypes of happiness were identified in this study: exuberant or celebratory joy (shown through wide gestures and energetic poses), contentment and calm delight (represented by relaxed expressions and soft colors), affectionate happiness (conveyed through hearts, blushes, and gentle smiles), and social or friendly happiness (illustrated by waving gestures and open postures that express warmth and connection). This typology demonstrates that happiness is not a monolithic emotion but encompasses a range of affective states and social functions. The ability of WhatsApp stickers to differentiate among these subtypes through visual design highlights their sophistication as a communicative medium and supports the theoretical claim that stickers function as a nuanced semiotic system.

The findings also demonstrate the practical application of Saussure's dyadic model to digital communication. By focusing on the relationship between signifier (visual form) and signified (emotional concept), the analysis revealed how meaning is constructed through conventional associations that users collectively recognize and employ. For example, the signifier of a wide, open-mouthed smile consistently maps onto the signified meaning of exuberant joy across multiple stickers, while the signifier of closed, curved eyes consistently represents contentment or deep satisfaction. This consistency validates Saussure's concept of the arbitrary yet conventional nature of signs there is no inherent reason why curved eyes "must" signify contentment, but through repeated social use and shared cultural understanding, this association becomes stable and recognizable within the community of WhatsApp users.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this exploratory study. The analysis is based on stickers used by four researcher-participants who share a common educational background and social context as English Literature students at Universitas Sumatera Utara. This small, homogeneous sample limits the generalizability of the findings to broader populations of WhatsApp users. Different age groups, cultural backgrounds, or social contexts might employ and interpret happiness stickers differently. Additionally, the self-observation approach, while providing access to authentic, naturally-occurring data and deep contextual understanding, introduces potential subjectivity and lacks the critical distance afforded by external observation. The study's findings should therefore be understood as preliminary insights into how happiness is semiotically represented in WhatsApp stickers within this specific group, rather than as universal patterns applicable to all users.

Despite these limitations, the study makes valuable contributions to understanding digital emotion communication. It demonstrates that WhatsApp stickers are not merely decorative visuals but function as sophisticated semiotic tools capable of representing complex emotional states and facilitating social connection. The visual combinations of facial features, colors, gestures, and decorative elements create a shared cultural understanding of happiness that enhances emotional expression in digital communication. By providing visual, relatable, and culturally resonant cues,

stickers convey positivity and strengthen social bonds more effectively than text alone. This research validates the continued relevance of Saussure's semiotic theory for analyzing contemporary digital discourse and highlights the importance of visual communication tools in expressing complex emotional states and promoting positive affective engagement in computer-mediated communication. Future research with larger, more diverse samples would strengthen these findings and enable broader generalizations about how happiness and other emotions are visually communicated through stickers across different user populations and cultural contexts.

## IV. Conclusion

The research study concludes that WhatsApp stickers function as significant semiotic tools for conveying enjoyment in digital communication. Through applying Ferdinand de Saussure's dyadic model, which highlights the relationship between the signifier and the signified, it was discovered that visual elements like wide smiles, closed or curved eyes, dynamic body gestures, bright color palettes, especially yellow and pink, and decorative symbols like stars, sparkles, and hearts consistently serve as signifiers representing different levels of happiness. Joy, affection, satisfaction, excitement, and social warmth are among the signified meanings that these signifiers connect to. The results also show that these visual arrangements represent culturally and contextually mediated user interpretations in addition to being consistent with Paul Ekman's idea of universal emotional expression. Therefore a result, WhatsApp stickers go beyond their decorative function to become dynamic semiotic systems that support social cohesiveness, emotional expression, and interpersonal connection in online communication. In terms of theory, this study supports Saussurean semiotics' constant significance to current digital discourse in the real life, it emphasizes how visual communication tools can express complex emotional states and promote positive affective engagement in computer-mediated communication.

## References

[1]     M. B. D, "ISSN 0216 – 809X (Print) ISSN 2685 – 4112 (Online) A Semiotic Analysis Of Emoticon Symbols on Whatsapp Messenger In Students' Chat Activies," vol. 20, no. 1, pp. 92–105.

[2]     R. F. Alfarez, D. A. Syahrani, and L. S. Dewi, "Semantic Study ' Analysis of the Meaning of Using Emoticons ( ) and ( ) In chat applications ( whatsapp ) for everyday life ,'" vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 1–8, 2024.

[3]     H. Von, H. Verlag, L. R. A. Wilde, and K. Sachs-Hombach, "Introduction to the Semiotics of Emoji and Digital Stickers," *Interdiscip. J. Image Sci.*, vol. 38, no. 2, pp. 151–157, 2023, doi: 10.1453/1614-0885-2-2023-15747.

[4]     H. Hasyim, G. Gusnawaty, and I. M. Said, "Language variation of sticker usage among students on whatsapp," *J. Educ. Soc. Commun. Stud.*, vol. 1, no. 3, pp. 121–126, 2024, doi: 10.58881/jescs.v1i3.20.

[5]     B. V Amolo, P. J. Y. Belleza, C. A. Bernadas, P. A. M. G, and R. T. Cabatac, "Can Emojis and Stickers Substitute for Words ? Their Relationship t o Students ' Writing Proficiency," vol. 06, no. 07, pp. 176–183, 2025.

[6]     M. Willis, A. Khusairi, and S. Yazan, "Stiker Whatsapp Gaya Minangkabau: Analisis Semiotika," *J. Penelit. Sej. Dan Budaya*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 180–196, 2022, doi: 10.36424/jpsb.v8i2.328.

[7]     K. Laturauw, T. Y. Putra, and N. Rumaf, "Analisis Makna Stiker Kendaraan Umum di Kabupaten Sorong menggunakan Perspektif Roland Bartes," *J. Frasa J. Keilmuan Bahasa, Sastra, dan Pengajarannya*, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 1–31, 2022.

[8]     A. H. Sarro, A. Unde, and M. Mau, "Representation of Expressions of Congratulations via WhatsApp Stickers from the Viewpoint of the Sender and Receiver of the Message," *Palakka  Media Islam. Commun.*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 33–46, 2025, doi: 10.30863/palakka.v6i1.7746.

[9]     Y. D. puspaningrum, "Representasi Maskulinitas Karakter Stiker 'Bts' Pada Aplikasi Whatsapp Messenger," *Univ. Muhammadiyah Surakarta*, vol. 1, pp. 01–33, 2022.

[10]    T. N. Fitria, "More Than Just a Sticker: The Semiotic Analysis and Religious Dimensions of Indonesian Halal Labels," *J. Ilm. Ekon. Islam*, vol. 11, no. 04, pp. 1–23, 2025.

[11]    E. Linares Bernabéu and M. B. Alvarado Ortega, "Unveiling humour in digital discourse: The pragmatic functions of humorous stickers in Spanish WhatsApp chat groups," *Lodz Pap. Pragmat.*, vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 55–82, 2025, doi: 10.1515/lpp-2024-0008.

[12]    M. A. Adewusi, T. Odekeye, and K. Sophia, "KIU Journal of Education (KJED)," vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 66–81, 2023.

[13]    N. Al Zidjaly, "Covid-19 WhatsApp sticker memes in Oman," *Discourse Soc.*, vol. 33, no. 5, pp. 690–716, 2022, doi: 10.1177/09579265221120479.

[14]    F. de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*. London: Harris, Roy, 1983.

[15]    J. E. Joseph, "Saussure's dichotomies and the shapes of structuralist semiotics," *Sign Syst. Stud.*, vol. 50, no. 1, pp. 11–37, 2022, doi: 10.12697/SSS.2022.50.1.02.