

Exploring the Role of WhatsApp in Shaping Ethical Communication Practices within Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

Social media has become one of the most dominant communication tools, especially among academics. WhatsApp, as one of the most widely used instant messaging platforms, has become an essential means for lecturers and students to interact academically. This paper presents the results of a study aimed at exploring the attitudes and behaviours of students and lecturers in communicating through WhatsApp groups. This study employed a quantitative descriptive method, with a questionnaire instrument distributed online to lecturers and students of the German Literature Department. There were 199 respondents who were willing to fill out the questionnaire. Findings reveal that the types of messages frequently shared in the group are questions about course materials and assignments. A majority of students demonstrate openness and honesty in admitting mistakes, maintain impartiality during non-conductive communication situations, and exhibit high vigilance toward prize offer messages from unknown sources by blocking or rejecting them. However, only a small proportion of users consistently respond to messages sent by other group members in academic WhatsApp groups. There is a notable tendency to avoid direct confrontation to preserve social harmony, which presents an ethical dilemma between openness and maintaining interpersonal relationships.

Keywords: *WhatsApp Group, Communication Ethics, Interpersonal, conflict management*

Introduction

In the contemporary digital era, social media has emerged as one of the most dominant communication tools, particularly within academic settings. WhatsApp, as one of the most widely used instant messaging platforms, has become an indispensable medium for interaction between lecturers and students. Research by Alharbi & Alshammari (2020) indicates that WhatsApp enhances collaboration among students and facilitates more in-depth discussions related to academic material. The utilization of WhatsApp in educational contexts not only enables rapid and efficient communication but also promotes improved collaboration and information exchange. However, this convenience introduces new challenges concerning communication ethics that must be addressed.

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Roberts & Arnett (2008) defines communication ethics as communication practices guided by responsibility, respect, and care for others. Similarly, Shan & Christians (2015) describes communication ethics as the moral principles and values that govern individuals' communicative behaviour across various contexts. In the digital age, communication ethics are increasingly critical to ensuring positive social interactions. Communication, in general, refers to the relational process through which information is conveyed directly or via media (Wewer, 1998). It is fundamental to personal relationships, social life, and professional success, and is essential for human existence (Herter-Ehlers, 2020). Communication manifests in various forms, including intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, organizational, and mass communication (Safitry, 2021). Within educational and social contexts, understanding communication ethics is vital for cultivating individuals capable of engaging effectively and ethically. Johannesen (2010) highlights principles such as honesty, integrity, and responsibility as core to communication ethics. In social media contexts, these ethical considerations become even more significant, as online interactions can shape perceptions and relationships among individuals.

In the current digital landscape, communication between students and lecturers is increasingly mediated by information technology, notably through instant messaging applications like WhatsApp. In Indonesia, WhatsApp is among the most prevalent communication platforms, including within academic environments. The use of WhatsApp groups as official communication channels facilitates swift and efficient information exchange. Nonetheless, despite these advantages, challenges related to communication ethics, member responses, and potential emotional impacts arising from interactions persist. WhatsApp has evolved into a multifaceted communication tool, offering unlimited text, image, and voice messaging capabilities (Jäcklein-Kreis, 2013). It operates as an internet-based instant messaging application for smartphones (Jäcklein-Kreis, 2013). Emoticons and pictograms on WhatsApp serve complex functions beyond merely substituting face-to-face interaction (Hinz, 2015). The platform supports group communication, as exemplified by the Shalihah group, which uses WhatsApp for religious education and character development (Suryani, 2017). In organizational contexts, WhatsApp groups fulfill four primary communication functions: informative, regulative, persuasive, and integrative (Subekti & Toni, 2021). These functions enable efficient dissemination of instructions, work reports, and foster organizational integration (Subekti & Toni, 2021). Despite its popularity and versatility, users must remain vigilant regarding potential security issues and employ the application competently and reflectively (Jäcklein-Kreis, 2013).

Previous studies have demonstrated that effective communication within WhatsApp groups can enhance engagement between students and lecturers in the learning process (Sari, 2020). However, there remains a gap in understanding the types of information shared, as well as the responses and emotions of group members toward such information. Moreover, communication ethics within these groups is a critical concern, given that interactions on this platform can influence lecturer-student relationships (Batubara, et.al., 2024). According to Church & de Oliveira (2013), WhatsApp usage can improve communication and interaction between lecturers and students, facilitating discussions and information sharing. Similarly, Bouhnik & Dshen (2014) found that WhatsApp can increase student participation and promote more effective communication. Additionally, Rambe & Bere (2013) revealed that WhatsApp enhances collaboration and teamwork among students, as well as knowledge and information sharing.

This study aims to explore the attitudes and behaviours of students and lecturers in communicating through WhatsApp groups, as well as to examine the communication ethics applied in this context. The research is expected to provide deeper insights into communication dynamics within academic environments and offer recommendations to improve communication ethics and effectiveness on this platform.

Method

This study employed a quantitative descriptive approach, utilizing an online questionnaire distributed to lecturers and students of the German Literature Department. The questionnaire collected data on academic communication via WhatsApp from the perspectives of message senders, message receivers, and the content of messages shared. The instrument was grounded in Gibb's interpersonal communication concepts, which include description, problem orientation, provisionalism, empathy, equality, spontaneity, evaluation, superiority, certainty, neutrality, control, and strategy. The questionnaire comprised 15 items related to message senders, 14 items concerning message receivers, and 10 items about the messages shared. A total of 199 respondents participated in the study. Data were analyzed using percentage calculations.

Results

The questionnaire results regarding the role of WhatsApp social media in fostering communication ethics in the academic world were categorized into three perspectives: message senders, message receivers, and messages shared.

Message Senders

From the message senders' perspective, the most frequently sent messages by students in academic WhatsApp groups pertained to assignments/course materials (75.4%) and academic information (66.3%). Although students had ample opportunities to engage in academic discussions, only 33.7% utilized the WhatsApp group for discussion purposes. Meanwhile, 31.7% sent social or non-academic messages. The majority of respondents indicated that their primary motivation for sending messages was to support academic activities, such as sharing assignment details and discussing course materials. This finding confirms that WhatsApp groups function effectively as collaborative media.

Interpersonal Communication in WhatsApp Groups

WhatsApp groups also serve as platforms for interpersonal communication. Occasionally, some members exhibit feelings of superiority based on intellectual abilities or physical characteristics. Regarding teamwork tasks, 92% of students clearly defined the job descriptions of each member, while 3.5% delegated tasks selectively. Only 2.5% of students took over others' work, and 2% disregarded others' opinions or suggestions, as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

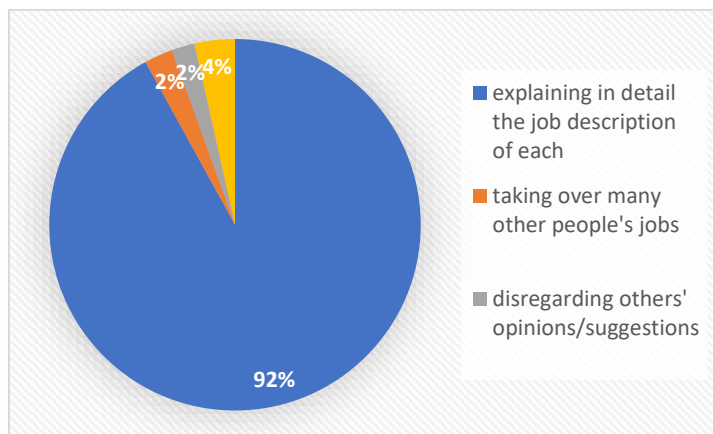


Figure 1: Superiority in Communication

From the perspective of dogmatic behavior, only 0.5% of students provided unreasonable excuses when they made mistakes. In contrast, a majority of 65.8% were willing to admit their errors, while 28.6% demonstrated openness by listening to others' opinions upon recognizing their mistakes. Meanwhile, 5% of students exhibited other responses, such as apologizing followed by reasonable explanations, correcting typographical errors after apologizing, committing to avoid repeating mistakes in the future, acknowledging and apologizing for errors, deleting messages accompanied by clarifications, and accepting alternative viewpoints regarding their mistakes.

In the context of communication within WhatsApp groups, students generally maintain an impartial attitude, which contributes to enhancing communication effectiveness and minimizing conflicts, as illustrated in the figure 2 below.

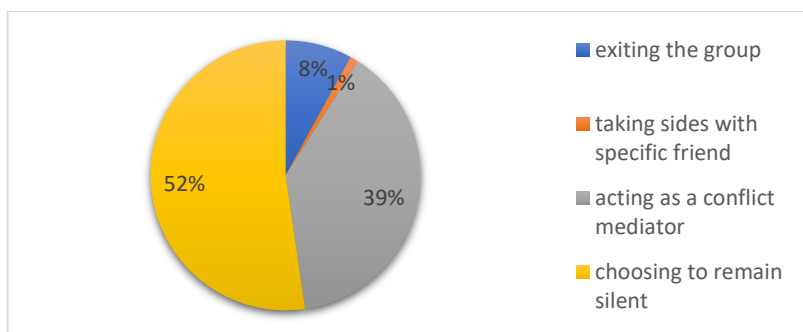


Figure 2: Attitudes in Non-Conductive Situations

When communication within WhatsApp groups becomes non-conductive, the majority of students (52.3%) prefer to remain silent, whereas 38.7% take on the role of mediators in conflict situations. A smaller proportion, 8%, choose to leave the group, and only 1% side with particular peers. These data suggest that message senders tend to avoid direct confrontation. This behavior can be interpreted as an effort to preserve social harmony within the group; however, it simultaneously raises ethical concerns as it conflicts with the principle of openness essential to healthy communication. This phenomenon reflects a

dilemma between maintaining interpersonal relationships and the necessity of delivering constructive criticism openly.

The students' ability to regulate and manage interactions is further evidenced by the high level of trust lecturers or authorities place in them. Specifically, 82.9% of students convey information appropriately, while 17.1% express other communication behaviors, such as delivering honest and unexaggerated information, communicating clearly, correctly, and politely, providing situationally appropriate information without concealment, following instructions properly, offering factual information with courteous and respectful language, and communicating wisely.

From the perspective of message recipients, students require strategic plans or tactics to comprehend information within WhatsApp groups effectively to achieve communication goals. Regarding messages about prize offers from unknown sources, the responses are diverse, as depicted in the following figure.

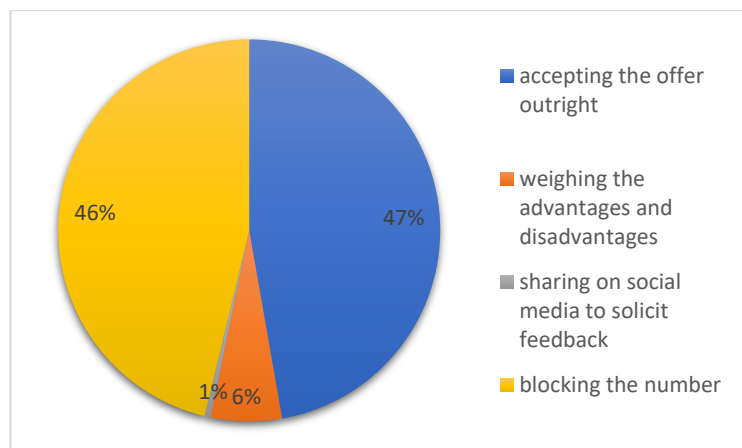
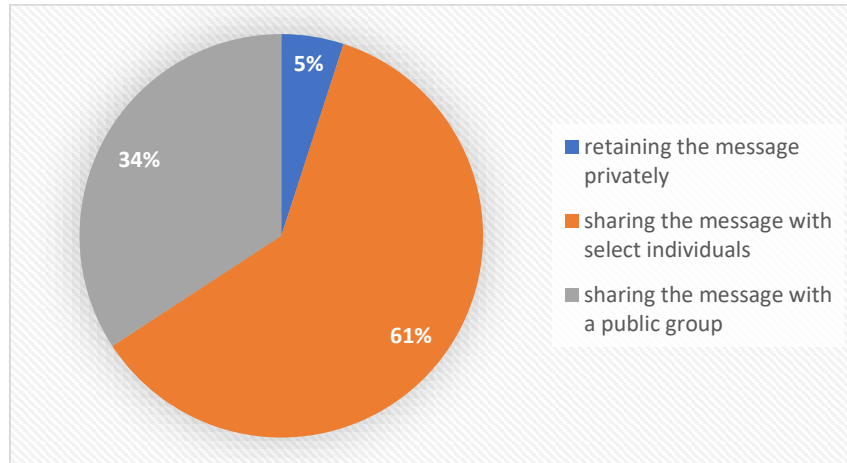


Figure 3: Vigilant Attitudes in Receiving Prize Messages

Figure 3 illustrates that 47.2% of students adopt a cautious stance when receiving prize offers from unknown individuals, with 46.2% opting to block these unknown numbers outright. Conversely, 6% of students deliberate on the potential advantages and disadvantages of such prize offers, while a marginal 0.5% share the messages on social media platforms to solicit opinions from their peers.

The act of sharing messages constitutes a significant facet of communication. The students' capacity to comprehend and appropriately respond to received messages is pivotal in achieving effective communication. When students encounter messages or information deemed shareable, their responses vary, as depicted in Figure 4.



Discussion

This study on communication ethics within academic WhatsApp groups offers valuable insights into the dynamics of digital communication in higher education contexts. The findings reveal that WhatsApp serves as a central medium facilitating academic interactions, yet it also introduces multifaceted ethical challenges.

From the perspective of communication theory particularly focusing on the sender, receiver, and message components and Gibbs' interpersonal communication theory (1961), these results can be critically examined to elucidate how communication ethics manifest and how theoretical frameworks support or challenge observed practices.

Firstly, regarding the sender, communication theory underscores the sender's obligation to convey messages clearly, relevantly, and without inciting conflict. This aligns with ethical principles mandating message integrity and respect toward receivers (Arnett, 2013). Within academic WhatsApp groups, senders predominantly focus on academic content and assignments, reflecting an awareness of the group's primary purpose. However, the prevalent tendency to remain silent during unproductive discussions (52.3%) suggests discomfort or an inability to directly manage conflicts, posing a challenge to theories advocating openness and active dialogue.

Secondly, from the receiver's standpoint, communication theory highlights the active role of receivers in critically and empathetically interpreting and responding to messages. Gibbs (1961) emphasizes openness, empathy, and effective conflict management as foundational to interpersonal communication. The finding that 38.7% of students act as mediators during conflicts supports this notion, demonstrating efforts to maintain harmony and constructively manage disputes. Nonetheless, the majority's choice of silence during unproductive exchanges may reflect conflict avoidance, contradicting openness principles and indicating ethical dilemmas between preserving social relationships and expressing candid criticism.

Thirdly, concerning the message itself, WhatsApp communication extends beyond text to include non-verbal elements such as emoticons and images, which enrich message meaning (Hinz, 2015). Proper use of these symbols can enhance clarity and reduce ambiguity, fostering ethical and effective communication. Conversely, misuse may provoke misunderstandings or conflicts. This study finds that messages in academic WhatsApp groups often incorporate elements reinforcing meaning and social norms, corroborating communication theories that emphasize context and medium in message delivery.

Furthermore, Gibbs' interpersonal communication theory offers a robust framework for understanding ethical and effective digital communication. The cautious attitudes toward suspicious messages and the blocking of unknown numbers by most students (47.2% and 46.2%, respectively) reflect heightened ethical awareness in safeguarding communication security and comfort. This aligns with Gibbs' assertion that interpersonal communication necessitates risk management and protection against disturbances. However, blocking unknown contacts may raise ethical concerns regarding openness and inclusivity, challenging ideal interpersonal communication models.

Additionally, the predominant use of WhatsApp groups for academic discussions and assignment sharing (33.7% and 75.4%) underscores the platform's role as an effective collaborative tool. This supports theories highlighting social media's function in social integration and information exchange. Yet, the preference for forwarding messages to specific individuals (60.8%) over group sharing (34.2%) suggests a more private, selective communication pattern, which may influence group dynamics and communication ethics.

Conclusion

In summary, communication ethics within academic WhatsApp groups emerge from a complex interplay among sender responsibility, receiver criticality and empathy, and message characteristics. Classical communication theories and Gibbs' interpersonal theory generally corroborate these findings but also reveal tensions between openness and social comfort that shape real-world communication practices.

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