



Use of Emojis and Emoticons in Face-Threatening Acts and Mitigation on WhatsApp among Law Undergraduates of Godfrey Okoye University and University of Nigeria, Enugu Campus

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ABSTRACT

Background: The increasing use of WhatsApp among university students has transformed patterns of interpersonal communication, particularly in academic contexts where interaction often involves requests, corrections, and disagreements. These exchanges can threaten participants' social image, making the management of face-threatening acts an important aspect of digital communication. Emojis and emoticons have emerged as key resources for conveying tone and maintaining social balance in such interactions. However, while several studies have examined emoji use in digital communication, there remains a gap in understanding how emojis and emoticons are used specifically to mitigate face-threatening acts in WhatsApp interactions among Nigerian law undergraduates.

Objective: This study examined how undergraduate law students in Nigeria use these visual markers in WhatsApp communication to mitigate face-threatening acts, with particular attention to requests, corrections, disagreements, and interactional repair.

Method: A qualitative research design was adopted. WhatsApp messages were purposively collected from undergraduate law students at Godfrey Okoye University and the University of Nigeria, Enugu Campus. The population of the study consisted of undergraduate law students in the selected universities, from which a sample of 50 participants was drawn through purposive sampling based on their willingness to share relevant WhatsApp interactions involving face-threatening acts. The data were anonymised and analysed using Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987) and Crystal's Internet Linguistics (2011). A discourse-analytic approach was employed to identify patterns in the use, placement, and functions of emojis in managing face-threatening acts and the data were presented as selected anonymised WhatsApp chat excerpts organised into thematic categories.

Results: The findings revealed that emojis were used strategically to soften requests, reduce the force of corrections and disagreements, and repair potentially offensive statements. Preemptive, inline, and post-hoc placement played distinct roles in shaping interpretation. While some emojis promoted friendliness and solidarity, others introduced ambiguity or, in some cases, intensified tension. The analysis also showed that group context and local interactional norms influenced how these markers were interpreted and used.

Conclusion: The study demonstrates that emojis function as important pragmatic tools in WhatsApp communication, enabling students to balance clarity with politeness in an academic



environment. Their use reflects an awareness of social relationships and the need to manage face in both private and group interactions.

Unique Contribution: This study provides insight into how visual digital resources operate as part of language use in Nigerian academic contexts, highlighting their role as context-sensitive tools for managing interpersonal meaning in computer-mediated communication.

Key Recommendation: It is recommended that students and educators develop greater awareness of the communicative functions of emojis in academic interactions, and that digital communication skills, including the appropriate use of such visual markers, be incorporated into academic training.

Keywords: Emojis, Emoticons, WhatsApp, Face-threatening acts, Politeness, Digital communication, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Human communication goes beyond the simple exchange of information. It is shaped by culture, context, and the circumstances of interaction (Halliday, 1978). In every interaction, individuals aim to be recognised and accepted according to social expectations, a concept known as face, which is central to social dynamics (Goffman, 1967). In many contexts, communication emphasises politeness, respect, and the avoidance of direct confrontation. Politeness theory explains that people seek to maintain their own face as well as that of others (Brown and Levinson, 1987). In situations of disagreement or criticism, communicators use strategies such as hedging, praise, and humour to reduce potential conflict.

With the rise of computer-mediated communication, new tools such as emojis, emoticons, and creative punctuation serve as substitutes for non-verbal cues (Crystal, 2011; Herring, 2013). These features help soften messages that might otherwise appear blunt or harsh. WhatsApp, in particular, has become a widely used platform for student interaction, supporting both academic and social communication (Chiluwa and Adegbola, 2019; Nwonyi et al., 2024; Chiluwa, 2020; Ogbaeja & Nwafor 2017). Among law students, whose interactions are often argumentative, emojis help reduce face-threatening acts, maintain harmony, and signal solidarity.

Cultural context also influences emoji use. Users often integrate humour and informal expressions in digital interactions, reflecting shared communicative practices (Ofulue, 2015). For instance, certain emojis can convey gratitude, requests, or apology depending on context (Chiedu, 2024). This study examines how undergraduate law students use emojis and emoticons to manage face-threatening acts on WhatsApp. By combining politeness theory with internet linguistics, the study explores how digital communication adapts traditional strategies of face management to online environments (Crystal, 2011). The study addresses a gap in the literature by examining the use of emojis and emoticons as context-sensitive pragmatic tools for mitigating face-threatening acts among Nigerian law undergraduates, a dimension that has received limited scholarly attention within this specific academic and cultural context.



REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Communication is a social process through which individuals manage not only the exchange of information but also their relationships and social image. Central to this process is the concept of face, which refers to the positive social value that a person claims for themselves in interaction (Goffman, 1967). Brown and Levinson (1987) further distinguish between two aspects of face: positive face, which reflects an individual's desire to be liked, appreciated, and approved of by others, and negative face, which represents a person's desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition. Both aspects of face are vulnerable during social acts such as criticism, disagreement, or requests, making careful management essential in maintaining smooth interpersonal relationships.

Digital communication platforms, particularly WhatsApp, introduce new challenges to face management because they lack many of the non-verbal cues that help regulate social interactions, such as facial expression, voice tone, and gesture (Herring, 2013; Aligwe et al., 2017). In the absence of these cues, users rely on textual and symbolic strategies to convey meaning clearly while maintaining politeness. These strategies include hedges, careful wording, emojis, and other symbolic markers that signal the sender's intentions and awareness of the recipient's social needs. By doing so, digital communicators are able to reduce misunderstandings and preserve social balance even in potentially sensitive exchanges.

Emojis and emoticons have become central tools for conveying emotion, intention, and social meaning in text-based communication. Initially, they began as simple combinations of punctuation marks to indicate emotion, such as a smiling face or frown. Over time, however, they have evolved into complex visual symbols that represent a wide range of expressions, gestures, and ideas (Danesi, 2017). Within WhatsApp communication, emojis such as smiles, winks, and folded hands are used deliberately to soften the force of messages, signal humour, express politeness, or acknowledge the social context of an interaction (Chiedu, 2024). Their use reflects both a functional and social understanding of the interaction, allowing senders to manage the tone of their messages carefully.

Empirical research further shows that emojis are effective in reducing perceived harshness and enhancing friendliness in digital messages. For example, Riordan (2017) and Kaye, Malone, and Wall (2016) demonstrate that the strategic use of visual markers can reduce the potential for offence, making messages appear more cooperative and approachable. Beyond softening messages, emojis also function as markers of social identity, relational closeness, and shared cultural knowledge. In Nigerian contexts, for instance, users often combine emojis with humour, local expressions, or culturally familiar symbols to preserve politeness and reinforce solidarity (Odebunmi, 2017; Ofulue, 2015).

WhatsApp provides a rich and flexible environment for these practices, allowing users to adapt their communication strategies to the context, purpose, and audience of each interaction (Chiluwa, 2020). Whether in private chats or group conversations, the placement, timing, and type of emojis used influence the way messages are interpreted. Overall, emojis have become



important pragmatic resources, supporting clarity, politeness, and interpersonal harmony in digital interaction. Their careful use reflects users' awareness of social expectations and their ability to negotiate meaning in ways that maintain both positive and negative face in online environments.

THEORETICAL CONCERNS

Understanding why students use emojis and emoticons the way they do requires a perspective that captures both human social needs and the digital environment in which they interact. This study draws on Politeness Theory, developed by Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson (1987), and Internet Linguistics, articulated by David Crystal (2011) as analytical frameworks for interpreting WhatsApp interactions among undergraduate law students in this study. Together, these frameworks help explain how visual markers in WhatsApp conversations serve both social and communicative purposes within the specific context of Nigerian law undergraduate interactions.

Politeness Theory focuses on the human desire to be respected and valued in interaction. Brown and Levinson (1987) describe two aspects of face. Positive face is the wish to be liked, appreciated, and approved of, while negative face is the wish to act freely without feeling imposed upon. Everyday communication, even among students, constantly navigates these needs as observed in the WhatsApp exchanges analysed in this study. In WhatsApp messages, a request for help, a correction, or a disagreement can threaten a peer's sense of self or social image. Emojis, such as a folded-hands icon or a smiling face, act as social tools that help students soften their words, acknowledge the other person's feelings, and maintain harmony. For example, when a student writes "Please send the notes," the folded-hands emoji signals respect and humility, reducing the potential imposition of the request. Similarly, a wink emoji following a correction can indicate light-heartedness, allowing the recipient to accept feedback without feeling criticized.

Internet Linguistics highlights how digital communication reshapes human interaction. Unlike face-to-face conversation, WhatsApp lacks vocal tone, facial expressions, and gestures. Emojis and emoticons fill this gap, allowing students to express emotions, intentions, and subtle social cues in a text-based environment as demonstrated in the WhatsApp data analysed in this study. A laughing emoji after a blunt statement can communicate friendliness or humour, while an apologetic emoji can repair potential misunderstandings. These symbols bring humanity into a digital space, helping messages feel warm, thoughtful, or humorous rather than cold or abrupt. They also demonstrate students' awareness of group norms, relationships, and context-specific communication rules within the selected universities under investigation.

Politeness Theory, developed by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, explains that people communicate in ways that protect their own social image and that of others. David Crystal's work in Internet Linguistics shows how online communication creates new ways to express meaning, including the use of emojis and emoticons. In WhatsApp interactions among students, these visual markers are used carefully to soften requests, correct mistakes, or disagree without



causing offence as specifically evidenced in the discourse of law undergraduates analysed in this study. The choice and placement of each emoji reflect the student's understanding of social expectations and their desire to maintain friendly and respectful relationships. Emojis add warmth, humour, and a sense of connection to digital messages, making online communication feel more personal and considerate.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative approach to examine how undergraduate law students use emojis and emoticons to manage face-threatening acts in WhatsApp interactions. The focus is on meaning and interpretation within naturally occurring communication rather than numerical analysis. The specific research design adopted for this study is qualitative discourse analysis. Data were drawn from WhatsApp conversations among law students at Godfrey Okoye University and the University of Nigeria, Enugu Campus. The researcher did not access participants' phones or private chats directly; rather, participants voluntarily submitted relevant chat excerpts for the study. The population of the study consists of undergraduate law students from the selected universities. Participants were recruited based on their willingness to share WhatsApp interactions that met the study criteria. A purposive sampling technique was used to select only interactions that involve disagreement, correction, or requests, where face-threatening acts are most likely to occur. The sample size comprises selected WhatsApp chat excerpts that met the inclusion criteria for face-threatening acts. Both group and private chats were included to capture differences in communication patterns.

The instrument for data collection was WhatsApp chat transcripts obtained with participants' consent. Ethical standards were observed throughout. Consent was obtained, and all identifying information was removed to ensure anonymity. No passwords or unrestricted access to personal devices were required at any stage of the data collection process. The data were analysed using qualitative discourse analysis, with attention to the types of emojis used, their context, and how they function to soften or manage face-threatening acts in interaction. Data were presented in the form of extracted conversational excerpts and analysed thematically based on recurring patterns of emoji use in mitigating face-threatening acts.

RESULTS

This section presents selected excerpts from WhatsApp interactions among undergraduate law students at Godfrey Okoye University and the University of Nigeria, Enugu Campus. The extracts illustrate how emojis and emoticons are used in managing face-threatening acts such as requests, corrections, and disagreements. Particular attention is given to how these visual elements shape meaning, reduce tension, and support interpersonal relationships in digital interaction. The analysis shows that emojis are not merely decorative. Rather, they function as pragmatic resources that help participants negotiate tone, intention, and social positioning in conversations that may otherwise appear blunt or confrontational.



Emojis in the Mitigation of Requests

Requests naturally impose on the recipient and therefore threaten negative face. In WhatsApp interaction, students regularly use emojis to reduce this imposition and present their requests as polite and considerate.

Extract 1

A: “Pls can you send me the assignment topic 🙏”

This request was softened through both lexical and visual means. The use of “🙏” reduces directness, while the folded-hands emoji signals humility and appeal. Together, they frame the request as a favour rather than an obligation, making it more acceptable to the recipient.

Extract 2

F: “Abeg help me mark attendance if I come late 🙏”

In this example, the request occurs within a group context, where multiple participants are present. The folded-hands emoji performs an important face-saving function by acknowledging the imposition publicly. It protects the speaker’s image and reduces the likelihood of negative judgement from others in the group.

Extract 3

M: “Please send your contributions before 8pm guys, let’s meet the deadline 🤗”

Although this message carries a directive force, the hugging emoji softens its tone. It introduces warmth and solidarity, presenting the instruction as a shared responsibility rather than a command. This reflects how students balance task orientation with relationship maintenance in group communication.

Extract 4

T: “Can someone drop the case note here please 😊”

Here, the simple smiling emoji reduces the neutrality of the request and makes it appear more friendly. While the message is already polite, the emoji reinforces a cooperative tone and signals that the speaker values group harmony.

Across these examples, emojis consistently function to reduce the force of requests. Their presence transforms potentially imposing statements into socially acceptable interactions.



Emojis in the Mitigation of Corrections and Disagreements

Corrections and disagreements are particularly sensitive because they threaten the positive face of the recipient. The data show that students rely heavily on emojis to soften such acts and avoid conflict.

Extract 5

C: “I don’t think that’s the right section 😊 check s.84(2)”

The correction challenges the recipient’s accuracy, making it a clear face-threatening act. The wink emoji introduces a playful tone, reducing the seriousness of the correction. It signals that the speaker’s intention is helpful rather than critical.

Extract 6

X: “Nice answer, but that authority is weak 😊”

This extract combines positive and negative evaluation. The initial praise supports the recipient’s positive face, while the criticism introduces a threat. The embarrassed laugh emoji softens the impact of the criticism by suggesting hesitation and friendliness. It allows the speaker to remain honest without appearing harsh.

Extract 7

V: “Your citation is clear as always 😊”

Although this statement appears complimentary, the wink emoji introduces ambiguity. Depending on the context, it may signal light teasing or mild sarcasm. This shows that emojis can serve indirect communicative purposes and are not always straightforward markers of politeness.

Extract 8

B: “That’s not the ratio in that case 😊 you might want to recheck it”

Here, the disagreement is softened through both hedging and emoji use. The phrase ‘you might want to recheck it’ reduces directness, while the emoji further minimises the threat. The combined strategy helps maintain a respectful tone during academic correction.

These examples demonstrate that emojis play a central role in balancing clarity and politeness. They enable students to express disagreement without damaging interpersonal relationships.



Emojis in Repair and Interactional Management

In addition to softening messages at the point of production, emojis are also used to repair meaning after a potentially face-threatening statement has already been made.

Extract 9

A: “You misread Okonkwo vs Okonkwo. That ratio is not what you think.”

A: “ ”

The initial statement is direct and may be perceived as blunt. The follow-up emoji functions as a repair mechanism. Its placement after the message helps to reframe the tone, signalling that the correction is not intended to offend. This illustrates how WhatsApp allows for adjustment of meaning even after a message has been sent.

Extract 10

D: “That argument doesn’t make sense.”

D: “😄 I mean it’s confusing, not bad”

In this case, the speaker immediately revises the original statement. The laughing emoji helps to reduce the harshness of the initial comment and signals that the speaker is not being overly serious. The repair shows awareness of the potential face threat and an attempt to restore balance.

Extract 11

K: “Submit it before 6pm.”

K: “🙏 please don’t forget”

Here, a direct instruction is followed by a mitigating emoji and polite expression. The second message softens the first, transforming it from a command into a reminder. This demonstrates how sequential organisation contributes to face management.

Failure of Emoji Mitigation

While emojis often support politeness, they do not always succeed in reducing face threat. In some cases, they may even intensify tension.



Extract 12

G: “That statutory provision is clearly section 12.”

H: “No it’s section 21”

G: “Fine ”

The eye-roll emoji expresses frustration rather than politeness. Instead of softening the disagreement, it escalates tension and signals dissatisfaction. This example highlights that emoji interpretation depends on context and choice. Not all emojis function as mitigating devices.

Summary of Patterns

The analysis reveals several consistent patterns. Emojis are frequently used to soften requests, making them appear less imposing. They also play a crucial role in managing corrections and disagreements by reducing their potential to threaten positive face. In addition, emojis support interactional repair, allowing speakers to adjust tone after a message has been delivered. These findings align with Riordan (2017) and Kaye, Malone, and Wall (2016), who also found that visual markers reduce message harshness, though this study extends their work by highlighting the context-specific use among Nigerian law undergraduates.

The effectiveness of emojis depends on context, relationship between participants, and placement within the message. The prominence of folded-hands and winking emojis in group chats may reflect cultural norms of politeness and peer solidarity among students in Enugu State.

Emojis and emoticons function as important pragmatic tools in WhatsApp communication among undergraduate law students. They enable users to navigate the tension between clarity and politeness, particularly in an academic environment where disagreement and evaluation are common. The findings differ in some respects from Odeunmi (2017), whose study suggested that emoji use was more generalised across academic disciplines; this study shows specific patterns related to law students’ argumentative interactions.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of WhatsApp interactions among undergraduate law students at Godfrey Okoye University (GOU) and the University of Nigeria, Enugu Campus (UNEC) revealed clear patterns in the use of emojis and emoticons to manage face-threatening acts. Emojis were frequently used to soften requests. The folded-hands emoji, often combined with polite wording such as “please” or “abeg,” helped acknowledge the imposition and invite assistance. In private chats, emojis reinforced personal politeness, while in group chats they also demonstrated public deference and maintained group harmony. Winks, smiles, and embarrassed laughs were used to reduce tension in corrections and disagreements, allowing recipients to receive feedback playfully rather than defensively. Inline placement of emojis within messages proved particularly effective for instant stance marking. Post-hoc emojis, such as quick smiles or apologetic icons, were also employed



to repair potential missteps after blunt statements, reframing comments as friendly or non-offensive. In contrast, inappropriate tokens like eye-rolls or sarcastic laughter sometimes escalated tension, highlighting that emoji effectiveness depends on choice, timing, and group context.

These findings are consistent with previous research showing that visual markers reduce perceived harshness and ambiguity in digital communication (Riordan, 2017; Kaye, Malone, & Wall, 2016). Chiedu (2024) similarly notes that Nigerian users strategically employ emojis to maintain politeness and social harmony. The present study confirms that this strategy is active among law undergraduates, who operate in academic contexts where argumentative exchanges and evaluations are common. Unlike general social media discourse examined in earlier studies (Odebunmi, 2017; Ofulue, 2015), the findings reveal that Nigerian law students combine verbal hedges with emojis in private chats and use conventional emoji patterns in group chats to preserve collegiality while fulfilling academic obligations. This suggests that the use of emojis is sensitive not only to social norms but also to task-specific academic demands.

The study further highlights instances where emoji mitigation failed, indicating that not all emojis function as effective softeners. Eye-rolls or sarcastic emojis sometimes intensified face-threatening acts, showing that the context, relationship between participants, and familiarity with emoji conventions influence interpretation. Possible reasons for these patterns include the absence of non-verbal cues in text-based communication, participants' awareness of group hierarchies, and culturally informed expectations of politeness in Nigerian academic settings.

These results demonstrate that emojis and emoticons are deliberate, context-sensitive strategies for managing social relationships in WhatsApp academic interactions. Their use reflects students' awareness of positive and negative politeness, as well as their ability to balance clarity with interpersonal harmony. By situating the findings within similar studies, the analysis not only confirms existing knowledge about the pragmatic functions of emojis but also extends it by highlighting their nuanced application in Nigerian law undergraduate academic contexts.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study is that emojis and emoticons play a central and deliberate role in managing face-threatening acts in WhatsApp interactions among undergraduate law students. This is evident in the ways students used emojis to soften requests, reduce tension in corrections and disagreements, and repair potentially offensive statements. The patterns observed demonstrate that these visual markers are employed strategically, reflecting students' awareness of social norms, group dynamics, and the need to balance academic task demands with interpersonal harmony. Instances where emojis failed to mitigate tension, such as sarcastic or frustrated icons, highlight that their effectiveness depends on context, choice, and placement within the interaction.

Beyond their immediate communicative function, the study underscores that emojis are essential components of students' digital literacy. Their use goes beyond decoration to serve as tools for



negotiating politeness, maintaining positive social relationships, and fostering respectful online academic interactions. This emphasizes that understanding the pragmatic and social dimensions of emoji use is crucial for students, educators, and researchers seeking to support effective and harmonious communication in digital academic environments.

Ethical Clearance

This study relied exclusively on WhatsApp messages collected from student academic groups at Godfrey Okoye University and the University of Nigeria, Enugu Campus, with the consent of participants for research purposes. No personal identifying information was included in the analysis, and all students were anonymised using labels such as A, B, C, etc. The study adhered to ethical guidelines for research involving human communication data, and all materials were stored securely.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

Author's Contribution

The author conceived the study, designed the research framework, collected and analysed the WhatsApp data, and prepared the manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The dataset used in this study consists of anonymised WhatsApp messages from undergraduate law student groups at Godfrey Okoye University and the University of Nigeria, Enugu Campus, collected between January and March 2026. The compiled dataset used for analysis is available from the author upon reasonable request.

Citation

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