Semiotic Analysis of Emojis in The Comments Section of Nasdaily's Instagram

Mochammad Alvin Pratama Putra[1], Dwi Taurina Mila Wardhani[2], Yopi Thahara[3]

Universitas Abdurachman Saleh Situbondo
alvintama863@gmail.com, dwimeela@gmail.com, yopithahara@gmail.com

Abstrak *– Penelitian ini mengkaji makna semiotik penggunaan emoji dalam kolom komentar posting Instagram Nas Daily, seorang influencer media sosial Israel-Palestina. Penelitian ini menggunakan teori semiotik Saussure (1959) yaitu hubungan antara penanda dan petanda, serta teori linguistik emoji Evans (2017), membahas peran afektif dan kontekstual emoji dalam komunikasi online. Desain deskriptif kualitatif diikuti, dan data dikumpulkan dari tangkapan layar emoji dalam komentar pada postingan Instagram Nas Daily pada 26 November 2024 tentang Beasiswa Nas. Analisis data menerapkan model empat tahap Spradley (1980): Analisis Domain, Analisis Taksonomi, Analisis Komponen, dan Analisis Tema Budaya. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa emoji memiliki fungsi komunikatif tertentu, di mana fungsi yang paling sering digunakan adalah Substitusi dan Penguatan. Set emoji yang paling sering digunakan adalah People, Symbols, dan Smileys. Ini memungkinkan individu untuk mengekspresikan emosi, menonjolkan pesan mereka, atau bahkan menggantikan kata-kata itu sendiri. Studi ini menemukan bahwa pengguna Instagram umumnya menggunakan emoji untuk merangkum dan memperkuat pesan mereka, terutama dalam konteks yang mendukung dan positif seperti di kolom komentar Nas Daily. Secara semiotik, emoji terungkap memiliki makna yang kaya dan merupakan sarana komunikasi visual yang kuat, dan penggunaannya berkontribusi pada pembentukan hubungan sosial di lingkungan virtual.*

Kata Kunci: Emoji, Instagram, Nasdaily, Semiotik.

Abstract *- This study investigates the semiotic meaning in which emojis are used in the comment section of Nas Daily's Instagram posts, an Israeli-Palestinian social media influencer. This study employs Saussure's (1959) theory of semiotics i.e., signifier and signified relationship and Evans's (2017) linguistic theory of emojis, discussing their affective and contextual roles in online communication. A qualitative descriptive design was followed, and data were collected from screenshots of emojis in comments on the Instagram post by Nas Daily on November 26, 2024, about the Nas Scholarship. Data analysis applied Spradley's (1980) four-stage model: Domain Analysis, Taxonomic Analysis, Componential Analysis, and Cultural Theme Analysis. Results show that emojis serve certain communicative functions, where the most frequent functions are Substitution and Reinforcement. The most commonly used emoji sets are People, Symbols, and Smileys. These allow individuals to express emotions, emphasize their messages, or even replace words themselves. The study finds that Instagram users typically use emojis to summarize and reinforce their messages, especially in favorable and supportive settings such as in Nas Daily's comments. Semiotically, emojis are unveiled to be endowed with rich meaning and potent visual means of communication, and using them contributes to social relationships' formation in virtual environments.*

Key words: Emojis, Instagram, Nasdaily, Semiotics.

INTRODUCTION

In the digital era, information and communications technology has revolutionized the way people communicate, particularly on social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook. Communication is no longer carried out merely verbally but also visually and symbolically using images, videos, and digital symbols such as emojis (Forceville, 2020). In this context, semiotics is a relevant analytical theory to examine how these digital signs form and convey meaning. Semiotics, as defined by Chandler (2007), is the study of signs and how they generate meaning in all forms of communication, both verbal and non-verbal. Ferdinand de Saussure (1959), a father of modern semiotics, proposed that there are two significant aspects of a sign: the signifier (the physical form of the sign) and the signified (the concept or meaning that is expressed by the form). The relationship between them is arbitrary and governed by social norms within a particular society. One of the most apparent innovations in internet communication is the use of emojis. Beyond their decorative function, emojis are a "new semiotic code" (Danesi, 2017), with the ability to replace or augment verbal communication and express emotional nuances

that are otherwise lost in text internet communication. Emojis have been termed the "body language of the digital age" (Evans, 2017), as they succeed in portraying emotional tone and intent graphically.

Instagram, as a highly visual social media site, presents an ideal space for examining digital communication through emojis. Instagram not only enables users to share visual content in the form of videos and images but also to express identity, emotion, and social belonging through the utilization of tools like comments and stories (Hu, Manikonda, & Kambhampati, 2014; Manovich, 2017). On Instagram, in the comment section, emojis usually appear as visual responses expressing support, humor, criticism, or solidarity.

Although earlier studies have examined the semiotic role of emojis in advertising (Yasa, 2020), political discourse (Rachman, 2024), and affective engagement on social media apps such as TikTok (Zappavigna & Logi, 2024), none have formally applied Saussurean semiotics to examine emoji usage in teen-oriented, interactive spaces such as Instagram. This study bridges this gap by conducting a semiotic analysis of emoji use in the comment section of Nas Daily's Instagram page, a widely popular content creator with a young and heterogeneous global following.

Using Saussure's theory of signs, this research would wish to explore how meaning is socially and culturally constructed using emojis and how digital signs are utilized as communicative resources in the creation of emotion, identity, and interaction on social media. The study would wish to contribute to existing research in visual linguistics and online communication by bringing an understanding of how the younger generation is utilizing visual signs to construct meaning in a virtual online environment.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative study design with an analytical descriptive approach. Descriptive qualitative research is a method that tries to thoroughly summarize some happenings experienced by individuals or groups in plain language. When it came to researching Emoji use, this research involved collecting and analyzing data that represents Emoji choices on the comment section of Nasdaily's Instagram. Applying Saussure's signifier and sign theory, scholars are able to categorize Emojis to unveil their visual appearance and meanings that align with them. Furthermore, the study can be enriched by adding Vyvyan Evans' six roles of Emojis into the analysis, which will be used to categorize and analyze the data, as well as to explain how Emojis serve various roles in communication within the community.

The data source for this research was the comments section of Nas Daily's Instagram account. Nas Daily has been actively using Instagram since 2016, when he began his ambitious project. In his content, he shares knowledge about exploring the world and sharing positive stories about various cultures. The data studied included comments written by followers, which included emojis. The data collection period covered a post on November 26, 2024, in the comments section of the @nasdaily Instagram account, which discussed the Nas Scholarship.

The researcher himself is the main instrument in the case of this study. The researcher, as the one who conducts the research, is the one who performs the task of searching for suitable data, observing, analyzing, and then reporting the findings. In this study, additional research instruments involved the use of reader validators to validate the findings through conducting Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). It was important to involve participants who are active users and highly involved in social media activities, specifically on the Instagram social media platform. This was in line with the overall objective of the study to comprehensively study the use of emoji in the comment section on Instagram. Two readers participated in the validation, all of whom are students of the 8th semester in the Faculty of Letters. Their participation can provide variety and various insights into the validation of data on Emoji use in the comment section of Instagram.

To systematically collect and analyze information, the data collection technique uses a structured approach outlined in numerical steps, which ensures accuracy and completeness in obtaining and interpreting data. Data will be collected by exploring the comments column of the Nasdaily Instagram account, then selecting comments that contain emojis, taking screenshots of comments containing emojis, and finally analyzing the meaning of emojis in comments, and classifying them based on category and role.

For the analysis, the researcher used Spradley's (1980) analytical model from his book Participant Observation, which offers a comprehensive framework for qualitative analysis. This model consists of four distinct steps: domain analysis, taxonomic analysis, componential analysis, and cultural theme analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
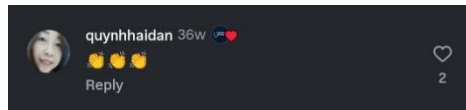
Results

1.   Substitution

Figure 1 The Comment Containing Emoji on the Post

P1D10: 👏

Category: People

Signifier: The signifier in this datum is the emoji itself. The emoji is three clapping hands symbol. It features two yellow hands clapping.

Signified: This emoji represents feelings of love or affection for something. According to emojipedia.org, this emoji is two hands clapping emoji, which when used multiple times can be used as a round of applause. In the context of comments, this emoji signifies appreciation, recognition, or support, praise, and encouragement. In a digital context, it can also mean "amazing!" or "respect." Three emoji emphasize the point: not just "good," but "very good.". Semiotically, this is a sign of emphasis, emphasizing praise for the content/initiative posted.

Role: This emoji acts as a **substitution**, because emojis stand alone to replace verbal expressions such as "Great!" or "Good job!", etc. These emojis are designed to replace words, expressions, or verbal messages that should be expressed to show appreciation, without any text.
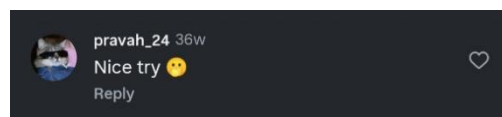
2.   Contradictory

Figure 2 The Comment Containing Emoji on the Post

P1D30: 😳

Category: Smileys

Signifier: The signifier in this datum is the emoji itself. The emoji is a face with open eyes and hand over mouth symbol. A yellow face with open (non-smiling) eyes and a hand over the mouth.

Signified: This emoji is a symbol that signifies awkward. According to emojipedia.org, this emoji is used to convey shock or surprise or creating confusion. In the context of comments, this emoji signifies an implied meaning like "That's cute, but it doesn't work." or "I appreciate your effort, but it's a bit funny/embarrassing." (in a joking tone). It seems hesitant and unsure.

Role: This emoji functions as a **contradictory.** The text says "nice try," which means a good attempt, but the emoji suggests that something is being hidden or that the person feels awkward, so the meanings are contradictory.
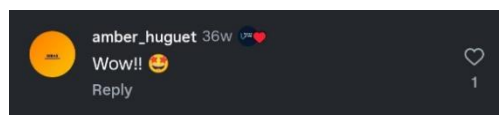
3.   Reinforcement

Figure 3 The Comment Containing Emoji on the Post

P1D25: 🤩

Category: Smileys

Signifier: The signifier in this datum is the emoji itself. The emoji is a star-struck symbol. A yellow face with a broad, open smile, showing upper teeth on most platforms, with stars for eyes, as if seeing a beloved celebrity. Color of stars widely varies by platform, though commonly gold or red.

Signified: This emoji is a symbol used to express awe or excitement. According to emojipedia.org, this emoji is used to express that someone or something is extraordinary, interesting, impressive, or exciting. In the context of comments, this emoji signifies intense emotional feelings about something considered extraordinary or admirable. This emoji's meaning is a symbol of awe, enthusiasm, or excitement.

Role: Emojis act as **reinforcement** by conveying the user's feelings of awe. The text "wow!!" already expresses admiration or positive surprise. This emoji also shows admiration/a look of fascination. So the text and emoji have a similar meaning and reinforce the expression of admiration already conveyed by the word "wow!!".
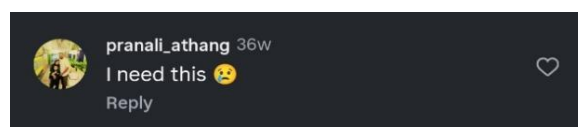
4.   Complementary

Figure 4 The Comment Containing Emoji on the Post

P1D54: 😳

Category: Smileys

Signifier: The signifier in this datum is the emoji itself. The emoji is a crying face symbol. A yellow face with raised eyebrows and a slight frown, shedding a single, blue tear from one eye down its cheek.

Signified: This emoji represents feeling sad about something. According to emojipedia.org, this emoji can convey moderate levels of sadness or pain. In the context of comments, this emoji signifies amplifying the commenter's feelings of emotion, despair, or emotional distress, including high hopes accompanied by sadness or anxiety that those hopes may be difficult to achieve.

Role: This emoji serves as a **complementary** function. The text shows a strong need or desire. This emoji adds an extra emotional dimension, not just "need," but a strong need accompanied by feelings of sadness or urgency. Emojis add a deeper layer of emotion to statements, thus complementing verbal text with additional emotional information (sadness).

5.   Emphasis

Figure 5 The Comment Containing Emoji on the Post

P1D79: 🔥

Category: Animals & Nature

Signifier: The signifier in this datum is the emoji itself. The emoji is four fire/flame symbol. Depicted as a red, orange, and yellow flickering flame.

Signified: This emoji is a symbol that appears when something is cool or on fire. According to emojipedia.org, this emoji is commonly used for various metaphorical expressions related to fire, including the slang hot ("attractive") and lit ("excellent"). In the context of comments, this emoji signifies passion, high energy, determination, self-confidence, and excellence. The author conveys a strong sense of self-confidence, as if "I am worthy, I am passionate, I am ready to win."

Role: The emoji acts as a **emphasis** by conveying the user's sense of confidence. The text makes an enthusiastic and confident claim that he has registered, believes this is his chance, and is confident that he will be elected. This emoji does not contradict the text, but rather intensifies the enthusiasm and confidence expressed. This emoji is used to emphasize the emotional power and confidence of the claim in the text. There are four emojis that affirm and reinforce the intensity of emotion and confidence in the message.

Table 1 Comparison table of emoji categories and roles

Categories of Emojis	Roles of Emojis					Total
	R1	R3	R4	R5	R2	
C2	10	8	4	6	0	28
C8	7	5	7	1	0	20
C1	2	3	6	3	2	16
C3	6	5	2	1	0	14
C9	1	2	0	0	0	3
C5	0	1	0	0	0	1
Total	26	24	19	11	2	82

Notes :

R = Role   C = Category

R1 = Substitution   C1 = Smileys

R2 = Contradictory   C2 = People

R3 = Reinforcement   C3 = Animals and Nature

R4 = Complementary   C5 = Activity

R5 = Emphasis   C8 = Symbols

    C9 = Flags

Discussion

Based on the research results, only six of the nine emoji categories and five of the six emoji roles were identified overall. The absence of some categories may be due to their low relevance to the topics discussed in Nas Daily's Instagram comments, especially in the comments on the post dated November 26, 2024. Specifically, categories such as Food & Drink, Travel & Places, and Objects are not found in the data, while the Activity category has only one entry and Flags has only three entries, possibly due to their irrelevant connection to the main topic. For roles, only five roles were found in the data out of six roles, with only one role not found in this data, namely discourse management. This absence may be due to the type or nature of the content, which tends to be educational and informative about Nas scholarships, generally differing from the type of content typically created by Nas Daily on his Instagram account, which often provides information about cultures around the world, resulting in comments of praise, support, and expression from other users. As a result, the lack of interactive discourse in the comments limits the emergence of the discourse management role in the dataset.

Data analysis shows that the People and Symbols emoji categories are the most frequently used, appearing twenty-eight times for the People category and twenty times for the Symbols category. This is because many users express support and praise, such as the heart and clapping emoji. The Smileys category appears sixteen times, and these emojis are quite common because they are typically used to express emotions through facial expressions. The Animals & Nature category appears fourteen times, primarily in the Sky & Weather subcategory, which includes only fire emojis.

Among the five roles that emerged, Substitution and Reinforcement were the most common and most frequently appeared, with Substitution appearing twenty-six times and Reinforcement appearing twenty-four times. The Substitution role appeared most frequently because in the current era, users more often use emojis as a tool to convey non-verbal messages to replace the text/verbal messages they want to convey, as emojis are considered effective in replacing and expressing messages. The Reinforcement role also frequently appears because users want to emphasize their messages and feel more expressive when conveying them, even though there is already verbal text in their comments. Following these are the Complementary and Emphasis roles, which also appear fairly frequently. This is because the Complementary role provides additional information and expression to the verbal message being conveyed, making the message more profound. Similarly, the Emphasis role, though not very common, is used when users want their message to be highlighted by Nas Daily or other users, for example by repeating emojis to emphasize intensity in the message. The Contradictory role is the least common because most users focus on giving praise and support.

The comparison of categories and roles found in this data, it is clear that the nature and type of content greatly influence the selection of emojis used and the role of emojis that users want to convey. The frequent use of the People and Symbols categories, along with the Substitution and Reinforcement roles, demonstrates that content containing positive information about education tends to receive more messages of support, love, and praise from users or followers, as highlighted in Nas Daily's content about the initiative to provide scholarships.

Comparing the findings of this study with four previous studies reveals several similarities and differences. This study analyzes the use of emojis in the Instagram comment section of Nasdaily. In this context, emojis are not merely visual decorations but semiotic signs that shape social and emotional meaning in the digital space. Compared to the research by Hidayat and Nurliah (2023), which analyzed the meaning of social support in the lyrics of Fiersa Besari's song "Pelukku untuk Pelikmu," there are similarities in the function of signs as representations of emotions and affection. However, the difference lies in the medium: while song lyrics build meaning narratively and personally, emojis in Instagram comments operate visually and concisely, yet remain effective in conveying social support, such as through emojis like 🙌 or 😍 . Both demonstrate that connotative meaning can be shaped through cultural context, even through different forms of representation.

In addition, the findings of this study are in line with research conducted by Zappavigna and Logi (2024), who examined the relationship between emojis and environmental affiliation in TikTok comments. They highlighted how emojis are used to build implicit emotional connections between users. In comments about Nasdaily, this is reflected in the role of emojis as substitutes and reinforcements for expressions of admiration or enthusiasm. For example, the use of the 🔥 emoji without any verbal text indicates that messages are not only conveyed through verbal text but can also be expressed using emojis. The use of emojis as reinforcers demonstrates collective emotional engagement, showing that emojis are not only expressive but also foster a sense of community within digital communities.

Meanwhile, a study by Yasa (2020), on the visual semiotics of Teh Pucuk Harum advertisements offers a different

but still relevant approach. In advertisements, visual elements such as colors and symbols are designed top-down to shape the brand image. In contrast, in Instagram comments, emojis are used participatively and spontaneously by users (bottom-up). Although the contexts are different, both show that visual symbols can influence audience emotions and reinforce messages. The use of emojis such as ✨ in comments shows that users are active producers of meaning, not just consumers.

Rachman (2024), who studied the use of emojis in the Facebook community "Palestine" using a critical semiotic approach, shows that emojis can convey political attitudes, ideologies, or resistance. In this study, although the context is lighter and more educational, emojis do not always reinforce the message; instead, emojis are sometimes used ironically or humorously, depending on the context. This shows that emojis have the potential to be complex discursive tools, although their intensity varies depending on the social context and communication theme. This study differs from Rachman's research, which focuses on political attitudes that tend to be serious. This study focuses on education and even entertainment in the current era, especially for the younger generation. Therefore, the percentage of data generated differs due to the different contexts. This study also prioritizes the overall meaning of emojis based on the context of the post text and comment text, unlike Rachman, who identifies emojis by creating meanings and roles that tend to be different. For example, when two different emojis appear in one comment, ❤️👏, these emojis are interpreted individually, not as a new emotion from the combination of emojis. Therefore, this study is more reliable in determining the intended role of emojis in user comments, as it interprets them based on the overall context.

From this comparison, it can be concluded that regardless of differences in media, purpose, and context of use, emojis continue to play a significant semiotic role in shaping meaning, whether emotional, social, or discursive. This study enriches the literature on the role of emojis as a sign system in social media, particularly in the context of positive and participatory public interaction, as found in the comments on the Nasdaily account. The analysis of emoji usage in the Nasdaily comment section provides valuable insights into the dynamics of digital communication, especially in today's digital age. However, this study also highlights the potential for confusion and misunderstanding arising from emoji, emphasizing the need for careful consideration and clarity in their use. Additionally, the potential for confusion may increase due to differing interpretations of emojis across cultures. Therefore, it is important to consider cultural nuances when integrating emojis into communication to ensure that the intended message is conveyed accurately.

As in this study, the process of analyzing data caused confusion for the researcher and two readers who acted as validators after conducting a focus group discussion (FGD). There were several data points that caused confusion, such as data P1D30, which was a comment from the user account @pravah_24 that said, "Nice Try 😳" The combination of text and emoji created confusion about the intent of the comment, particularly the meaning of the emoji. After discussing and analyzing it based on the context of the content, the emoji was interpreted to imply "That's good, but it didn't work" (in a playful tone). The emoji appears hesitant and uncertain. The role of this emoji is Contradictory because the emoji conveys a meaning that contradicts the text. "Nice Try" is read literally (as praise), while the emoji can indicate sarcasm. The Contradictory role could also apply to this emoji because it adds an emotional context not mentioned in the text, namely a tone of surprise/sarcasm, but the Contradictory role is more appropriate because it has the most intense role in that context.

CONCLUSION

Provide a statement that is expected and stated in the "Introduction" may eventually result in "Results and Discussions"; the end is compatibility. In addition, the prospect of developing research results and implementing advanced studies can also be added. Avoid Statistical Data and submit recommendations for future research based on sources. In general, the results of this study indicate the important role of emojis in supporting online communication in social interactions, especially in today's social media era, particularly in Nasdaily Instagram comments, which have a fairly wide social interaction reach, namely interactions between users from all over the world. In this study, it was found that Instagram users tend to use emojis that can convey various emotions, such as those in the People, Symbols, and Smileys categories, to complement or replace their comments. Emojis also serve as a useful communication tool in the fast-paced digital age, replacing words and used to convey the nuances of communication by users. In fact, users now typically only use emojis to express their intentions in the comment section because it is simpler. Overall, this study found that emojis are a visual language that plays a crucial role in building social meaning on social media platforms, particularly in fostering connections between Nas Daily and followers. In addition, this study also shows that emojis used in Nasdaily's Instagram comments are not only used as textual aids, but also as symbols that carry social, emotional, and cultural meanings. This study highlights

the importance of considering cultural context when using or interpreting emojis. Since the interpretation and meaning of emojis tend to vary significantly across cultures, this must be understood and respected to avoid misinterpretation.

As per the conclusion of the semiotic analysis of the use of emoji on Nasdaily's Instagram comment wall, in the future it is suggested that a more extensive study be conducted by comparing the use of emoji on the social media pages of other celebrities with contrasting professional achievements and personalities. It must also adopt a multimodal approach in bringing together emoji analysis with comment text, and other visual content such as images or captions, in order to gain an even richer understanding of meaning. Audience perception can also be covered in future studies by means of questionnaires or interviews in order to directly determine how users themselves perceive the emojis which they use, so that interpretation of meaning becomes not only subjective on the researcher's part. Even a mixed quantitative and qualitative approach can provide more balanced results, like quantitatively counting the frequency of use of certain emojis and then qualitatively analyzing their meaning. Additionally, a cultural and linguistic context analysis of emoji meaning is also worth exploring since Nas Daily has followers all over the world. Finally, other semiotic theories such as Charles Sanders Peirce's theory or discourse analysis can be used in an attempt to get broader insights when interpreting visual signs in online communication.

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