JOURNAL OF PRAGMATICS RESEARCH

The Analysis of Emojis and Identities In The Comments Section on Instagram @Ussfeed: From Semiotics to Cyberpragmatics

Muhamad Hilal[1,] Ribut Wahyudi[2]

English Literature Study Program, Faculty of Humanities, UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, Malang, Indonesia[12]

*) Corresponding Author
Email: 200302110213@student,uin-malang.ac.id

Abstract

This study aims to explore the role of emojis in expressing users' political identity in @ussfeed's Instagram comment section, focusing on the types of emojis used, their linguistic functions, and the representation of socio-political identity. Using a qualitative approach, this study integrates Berger's (2010) semiotic theory and Huddy's (2001) Social Identity theory and enriches its analysis with a cyberpragmatics perspective (Yus, 2011) to examine comments related to political issues in the January- April 2024 period. The results reveal that emojis play an important role in enriching textual meaning by adding visual and emotional dimensions, with icons as the most dominant emoji type that reflects various semiotic functions in conveying literal, contextual, and abstract meanings. From a cyberpragmatics perspective, emojis function as a means of digital identity construction where users strategically choose certain emojis to express political affiliation (ingroup) while differentiating themselves from other groups (outgroup). This research provides valuable new insights into how emojis have become an effective communication tool in the digital age while highlighting their role in identity formation in online public spaces and their impact on social interaction and self-representation in the digital world. At the end of this article, the author adds limitations of research and suggestions for future research.

Keywords: *emoji; political identity; cyberpragmatics; digital communication; social media*

JOURNAL OF PRAGMATICS RESEARCH

INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has drastically changed the landscape of human communication. One phenomenon that stands out in this digital era is the widespread use of emojis. Originally a simple icon, emojis have evolved into a rich and complex visual language. More than just a complement to the text, emojis now serve as markers of emotion, expression, and even social identity (Cramer et al., 2016; Riordan, 2017; Sampietro, 2019). This is all the more true as emojis' ability to convey a wide range of emotional nuances has made them a highly effective communication tool. In online interactions, emojis can help avoid miscommunication, strengthen social bonds, and create a warmer and more personalized conversational atmosphere. This phenomenon is all the more interesting to study given how emojis have become integral to modern society's daily lives.

Emojis, which in Japanese means "graphic images", are small 😄 like pictographs, which are commonly added to electronic messages across multiple social media and platforms to help express emotions and emphasize messages, adding complexity to interactions in comment sections. Emoji is a Japanese term that means pictures and letters. It adds to the effectiveness of conversational messages and emphasizes meaning in conversations (Arafah & Hasyim, 2019). In addition, emojis are graphic symbols with predefined names and codes in the Unicode system. Emojis can represent facial expressions, abstract concepts, emotions or feelings, animals, plants, activities, movements or body parts, and objects (Rodrigues et al., 2017).

In line with the complexity of emoji functions, modern society's reliance on emojis in everyday communication requires an analytical approach specifically designed for the digital context. This is where cyberpragmatics (Yus, 2011) emerges as a theoretical framework specialized in studying how meaning is constructed in online interactions. In contrast to traditional pragmatics, cyberpragmatics emphasizes the unique characteristics of digital communication, especially the limitations of nonverbal expressions, which are then replaced by emojis (Rahardi, 2020).

Widiana et al. (2024) found that emoji usage among Javanese netizens in WhatsApp illustrates this complexity. They found that emojis such as folded hands (🙏) function not only as religious expressions but also as politeness markers following Javanese cultural norms (*kurmat, tepa selira*). This finding shows that the meaning of an emoji is context-bound depending on the social (horizontal relations), societal (vertical relations), cultural (group values), and situational contexts (Rahardi, 2020). In a more specific context, such as digital politics on Instagram, cyberpragmatics becomes important to understand how emojis express emotions and build political identities. Emojis such as 🌑 or 🔲 may have neutral meanings in other cultures (Widiana et al., 2024), but in @ussfeed's comment section, they can be a marker of certain group affiliations. Therefore, this study will examine how the context of cyberpragmatics, especially social and cultural aspects, influences the use of emojis in political communication.

This finding is in line with the function of emoji as a means of emphasizing meaning, which can be interpreted that emoji is not only a beautiful decorative symbol in text messages, but also has several functions. First, the two main functions of emojis are to contribute to clarifying the intent and meaning of the conversation, thereby increasing the effectiveness and ease of understanding the message conveyed. Secondly, another function of emojis is to help reduce ambiguity in text messages by providing emotional and social context, which can help the message receiver better understand the sender's intent. Thus, emojis play an important role in modern communication by adding emotional nuance and enhancing the expression of feelings and emotions in text-based interactions (Fischer & Herbert, 2021).

Not only that, but previous studies have shown that emojis are not just everyday communication tools but also tools for building social and political identities. For example, Bai et al. (2019) found that a person's choice of emoji can reflect their political affiliation. Meanwhile, Kannasto et al. (2023) showed that emojis such as Clapping Hands (👏) are often used in the context of political campaigns to show appreciation for a candidate's performance. In other words, these findings confirm that emojis have a complex and

dynamic role in political communication, especially on social media platforms that emphasize visual and interactive communication, such as Instagram.

This characteristic of Instagram as a visual-text platform makes it an ideal medium for researching the phenomenon of political emojis. Unlike text-based platforms, Instagram combines images, videos, and emoji-rich comment sections, allowing for a more multidimensional expression of political identity. Instagram's comment section often becomes a symbolic battleground where emojis are used to voice support or opposition to political views. In addition, Instagram's algorithm, which encourages interaction through likes and comments, also fuels the use of emojis as an effective political communication strategy.

In practice, the use of emojis on platforms like Instagram has become an integral part of contemporary political communication. This is evident in the comment sections of accounts such as @ussfeed, which was chosen as a research sample due to its reputation as a sizable and influential account in disseminating political content on Instagram. Its comment sections are often filled with text and emojis that reflect individual emotions and indicate political affiliation (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). This phenomenon is increasingly interesting to study, especially during election periods that are characterized by intense political dynamics. Users often combine emojis with text to convey messages, express emotions, or even show affiliation with certain groups. This trend of combining emojis and text is because emojis can clarify the intent and nuances of messages that are difficult to express by text alone, and the combination of the two allows for more concise and impactful communication on social media platforms.

More deeply, in the context of social media, emojis serve as a tool to amplify messages and as a means to shape and express social identity. As previous research has shown (Bai et al. 2019), a person's choice of emoji can reflect part of their identity, confirming that emoji are not just a communication tool but also a representation of self in the digital space. It should be noted that social identity itself is a reflection of how individuals want to be seen

by others, which is influenced by various factors such as family, gender, culture, ethnicity, and socialization processes (Ting-Toomey, 2015).

To understand emoji further, we can categorize emoji based on three dimensions: (1) valence, (2) format, and (3) different emotions and facial expressions (Wang et al., 2014). According to Wang, emojis are classified based on their valence into positive (e.g., smile emoji), negative (e.g., frown emoji), and neutral/ambiguous categories. People will generally use positive and negative emojis; rarely do people use neutral emojis in daily communication. Moreover, Aldunate et al. (2018) found that positive and negative emojis effectively drive the interpretation of messages' emotional valence. In contrast, neutral emojis do not show the same significant impact. Interestingly, in a political context, positive emojis are often used to express dissatisfaction or criticism of a particular policy or candidate.

This classification becomes clearer with Berger's (2010) semiotic theory approach, which draws on Peirce's (1931-1958) theory, classifying signs into three main categories: icons, indices, and symbols. This classification is highly relevant to understanding the role of emojis in digital communication. For example, an icon is a sign that directly resembles the object it represents. For instance, emotional emojis like Face with Heart Eyes (😍) depict love or admiration, while Face with Tears of Joy (😂) and Rolling on the Floor Laughing (🤣) express humor or deep happiness. Emojis like Face Crying Out Loud (😭) show sadness, while Face Frowning (😡) signifies anger. Not to forget, emojis also include gestures and identity symbols, such as the Love-You Gesture (🤟), which comes from American Sign Language, and the Flexed Biceps (💪), which symbolizes strength or motivation. In addition, popular emojis like Fire (🔥) are often used to denote something "cool" or trending, while Smiling Face with Sunglasses (😎) symbolizes confidence. Neutral emojis like Slightly Smiling Face (🙂) or Upside Down Face (🙃) reflect politeness, skepticism, or lighthearted sarcasm. Keep in mind that the Unicode Consortium is

constantly updating emojis to reflect modern culture and technology, making them an effective and cross-cultural communication tool (Unicode, Emojipedia, 2024).

Meanwhile, in the index category, the sign has a causal or physical relationship with the object it represents (Branston & Stafford, 2003). For example, emojis such as Raising Hands (🙌) symbolize celebration or gratitude, Folding Hands (🙏) show prayer or gratitude, Clapping Hands (👏) express appreciation, and Handshake (🤝) symbolize agreement or cooperation. This shows that emojis as indexes not only express emotions but also refer to specific actions or events that occur in a political context. Thus, these emojis fall into the index category as they depict physical actions that have a specific meaning, thus strengthening the context of the message in visual communication.

In contrast to icons and indices, symbols are signs whose meaning depends entirely on cultural conventions, with no physical relationship or direct resemblance to the object. For example, the Victory Hand (✌) symbolizes peace or victory, the Red Heart (❤) represents love or compassion, and the Smiling Face with Halo (😇) depicts kindness or innocence. Kannasto et al. (2023) found that emojis like a heart (❤) are often used to show emotional support for candidates, especially in the context of election campaigns. They noted that "hearts were used to convey an affective commitment to the party or the candidate together with promises to vote" (Kannasto et al., 2023, p. 2373). This means that the meanings of these symbols are not universal but rather mediated by social and cultural conventions, so their interpretation depends on the context in which they are used.

Thus, understanding emojis through the semiotic lens as icons, indices, and symbols allows us to see how emojis function as complex and dynamic communication tools. Not only do emojis visually convey emotion and meaning, but they also reflect cultural values and technological developments in modern society. In other words, Berger's (2010) theory provides a strong theoretical framework for analyzing the role of emojis in digital communication, showing how these visual signs are becoming an integral part of human interaction in the digital age.

In a broader context, social identity is not only limited to the personal realm but also has an important role in the political realm. As Huddy (2001) explains, social identities such as gender-based, ethnic, or religious identities can turn into political identities when they are linked to certain issues or conflicts, influencing political behavior such as voter turnout and party affiliation. Huddy uses Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory as a theoretical framework, which states that individuals tend to categorize themselves into certain social groups (ingroup) and distinguish themselves from other groups (outgroup). This process shapes how individuals perceive themselves and influences their attitudes and actions, including in a political context.

However, despite its popularity, the use of emojis in the political sphere has both positive and negative implications that need to be examined further. On the positive side, emojis can strengthen political communication. For example, emojis such as the Red Heart (🖤) are often used to show support for a particular candidate, while the Clapping Hand (👏) is used to show appreciation. In addition, emojis also help reduce miscommunication by providing emotional context to text messages that can sometimes feel dry (Fischer & Herbert, 2021). However, on the negative side, the use of emojis in politics also comes with risks. Emojis such as angry (😠) or sad (😨) can be used to manipulate public emotions, deepen polarization, or even simplify complex issues into mere symbols (Sampietro, 2019).

As a relevant social media platform, Instagram is an interesting space to examine the use of emojis in the context of online communication, especially through the comment section. In this study, the researcher appointed the Instagram account @ussfeed as the object of research, This account was chosen because it is one of the most active accounts and regularly shares content related to culture, technology, health, politics, and social issues, which are the main topics in this study. Another reason the topic of politics was raised in this study is that this year is an important period with many general elections, including presidential, legislative, and regional head elections, significantly increasing the volume of political conversations on social media.

Moreover, the months leading up to elections are often characterized by an intensification of political communication, where social media users, including Instagram, actively use emojis to express support, criticism, and emotions related to political issues. This phenomenon is evident in the comment sections of accounts like @ussfeed, where user interactions reflect political dynamics and show how emojis are used to build narratives, show affiliation, or even influence public opinion. In this case, Instagram becomes a strategic space to observe how social and political identities are shaped through the use of emojis. Not only that, the comments under @ussfeed posts often reflect users' emotions, opinions, and social identities, expressed through a combination of text and emojis that not only express individual emotions but also represent group identities or certain political stances.

More specifically, using emojis, certain symbols, or even emojis that represent specific emotions, such as anger or pleasure, can strongly indicate how individuals or groups respond to a political issue. This means that these comments reflect personal opinions and show how social identities are formed and reinforced through interactions in the digital space. Thus, this study not only looks at emoji as an everyday communication tool but also as an instrument that plays an important role in political dynamics, especially in election periods that are full of competition and mobilization of support. Through this analysis, we can understand more deeply how social media, especially Instagram, has become a platform for constructing and expressing socio-political identities in the digital era.

This is also reinforced by Highfield and Leaver's (2016) research that describes Instagram as a rich terrain for social media analysis, primarily through the use of emojis, hashtags, and comments, and Hu et al. (2017) research that emphasizes the role of emojis not only in expressing emotions, but also in regulating social interactions and constructing the meaning of online communication. Both studies corroborate the argument that Instagram, as a platform dominated by visual content and text- and emoji-based interactions, is an ideal space to explore social and political identity formation. In this

context, these findings are relevant as emojis reflect individual emotions and play a role in constructing collective narratives, especially during politically charged election periods.

Thus, to understand the positive and negative implications of emojis, as well as exploring previous findings, this study aims to recognize the types of emojis used in the context of sentences in comment sections and analyze how emojis can assert users' political identity in a statement?. In contrast to previous studies that have focused on the general function of emojis in everyday communication, this research highlights explicitly the role of emojis in the construction of political identity in the digital space, with the unique context of Instagram comment sections during the election period, an aspect that has not been widely explored in previous studies. More broadly, this research proposes how emojis can amplify the representation of one's identity through the representation of emotion and personality, which will add new insights into the evolution of language and communication practices in the digital age. The research findings from this study are expected to fill the gap in our understanding of how simple visual symbols, such as emojis, have the potential to act as political tools in shaping opinions and group solidarity on social media. In addition, the results of this study are expected to provide new insights for policymakers, social media designers, and educators in designing effective and inclusive communication strategies on social media.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a content analysis method to explore the role of emojis in identity expression in the @ussfeed Instagram comment section. According to Barelson (in Gheyle & Jacobs, 2017), content analysis is a research technique that produces an objective and systematic description of the content in communication media. Referring to Creswell's (2014) qualitative framework, this research design is exploratory in nature, which aims to understand social phenomena through in-depth interpretation of non-numerical data. The selection of the content analysis method in this study aims to identify the meanings and patterns that emerge in the interaction of Instagram users, especially related to political issues in the period January - April 2024.

From the perspective of cyberpragmatics (Yus, 2011), this approach allows the analysis of digital communication strategies where emojis function as nonverbal context compensation and identity construction tools in a visually limited interaction space.

Purposive sampling was applied to select relevant comments from posts with high response rates and containing emojis relevant to expressions of identity or political issues, so that the research could focus on the most informative data and provide in-depth information relevant to the research objectives (Guest et al., 2020), allowing for rich and meaningful analysis. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), purposive sampling is an appropriate method in qualitative research because it allows researchers to focus on the most relevant data sources.

The main data in this study were user comments on Instagram @ussfeed taken from political-themed posts in the period January - April 2024, as this period triggered significant political discussions in Indonesia. The data collected are words, phrases, and emoticons (emoji), each of which has a unique meaning and context in digital communication. The collected data were systematically analyzed, focusing on the words, phrases, and emojis in the comments. The analysis was conducted to examine the use of emojis as a marker of group identity or representation of users' social relationships in the context of political discussions.

The analysis process was carried out through several systematic stages. First, each emoji in the comments was identified and categorized based on Berger's semiotic theory, which classifies signs into icons, indices, and symbols, to understand their function in amplifying the meaning of the comments and explore the dominant emoji categories used. Next, with reference to Huddy's (2001) social identity theory, comments were analyzed to explore the expression of group identity through emoji and the relationship between words/phrases and the political identity they represent, including the categorization of comments as ingroup and outgroup. Cyberpragmatics analysis complements this approach by examining how the selection of specific emojis reflects users' efforts to achieve

maximum communication relevance in digital interactions (Yus, 2011). The analysis results show that emojis can reinforce users' political identities on social media.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

In an increasingly connected digital age, emojis have become a universal language that transcends linguistic and cultural boundaries. Social media platforms such as Instagram have become a unique digital political field in Indonesia. According to the cyberpragmatics theory (Yus, 2011), digital platforms create a new language where emojis are not just images but tools for negotiating meaning. As we will see later, emojis can change function depending on who is using them and in what context. One Instagram account often at the center of political discussions is @ussfeed, which is known for its content raising current social and political issues. The comment section on this account is a place to debate or express opinions and a platform for netizens to express their social and political identities through emojis.

User interfaces on social media platforms such as Instagram support affective communication by encouraging the use of emotional markers in various ways: through like buttons, emojis, and reactions (Boulianne & Larsson, 2023; Sumner et al., 2018; Muraoka et al., 2021). These features allow users to express their emotions and attitudes quickly and efficiently without having to type words. Emojis, as visual symbols, have the power to convey emotions, attitudes, and even political affiliations in a concise yet meaningful way. Danesi (2017) explained that emojis represent emotions and serve as a tool to build identity and social relationships in digital communication. In a political context, emojis are often used to express support, criticism, or satire of certain figures or policies.

In Indonesia, the use of emojis in political communication is also closely related to social and political identity. Emojis serve as a tool for netizens to express group identity based on political, religious, or cultural affiliations. For example, political party supporters often use hand emojis or certain symbols associated with

the party's numbering. This shows support and reinforces group identity in the digital space.

The Instagram comment section of @ussfeed is a relevant case study to understand the role of emojis in political communication in Indonesia, not only as a complement to text but also as a tool to express political identities and attitudes. Netizens utilize emojis such as Fire (🔥) to describe controversial situations or Clapping Hand (🙏) to show support, create emotional nuances, and amplify political messages. This research aims to analyze the role of emojis in expressing social and political identities, not to determine which is most effective, but rather to understand how emojis facilitate interaction and the expression of views in a complex digital space.

Based on Berger's (2010) semiotic theory, emojis can be categorized into three types of signs: icons, indices, and symbols. This categorization is based on the relationship between the sign and the object it refers to and how the meaning of the sign is interpreted. In the context of political communication on Instagram @ussfeed, emojis not only function as a means of expressing emotions but also as a marker of social and political identity. This study analyzes the use of emojis in comments based on Berger's sign categories, with the results summarized in Table 1. The data in the table shows the distribution of the number and percentage of each sign category, providing an overview of how emojis are used to convey meaning in digital communication, especially in posts with political and social topics, which are the main focus of this research.

The emojis analyzed in this study are named according to the description given by the Unicode Consortium, the organization that regulates emoji standards and naming globally. The Unicode Consortium assigns a name and description to each emoji to ensure uniformity of interpretation across different platforms and cultures (Unicode Consortium, 2023). This approach reinforces the understanding that emojis are more than just visual elements; they play an important role in

enriching multimodal communication. Consistent naming standards allow emojis to maintain a relatively stable meaning despite being used in a variety of cultural and political contexts. In line with this understanding, data analysis of emoji usage based on Berger's theory provides deep insights into how Indonesian netizens utilize emojis to express identity, attitudes, and political criticism in the digital space.

Table 1. Emoji Categories in Comments Based on Berger's Theory

No.	Type of Data	Amount	Percentage
1	Icon	22	69%
2	Index	7	22%
3	Symbol	3	9%
	Total	**32**	**100%**

From the results of collecting data on comments on Instagram @ussfeed related to political posts in the January- April 2024 period, 22 icons, seven forms of indexes, and three forms of symbols used by users who actively participated in the data sample were found. These data reflect different forms of signs according to Berger's semiotic categories, which indicate different communicative functions in the political context. Table 1 reveals the dominance of icon emojis (69%), such as 😊 and 🔥, directly depicting expressions or objects. This is in accordance with the principle of cyberpragmatics: humans tend to choose visual signs that are most similar to their original meaning (Yus, 2011).

However, there are also 22% index emojis, such as 👉, to designate arguments. Rahardi (2020) argued that netizens use emojis as digital arrows to direct attention to a particular context. Furthermore, symbols are present as signs that rely on social convention or agreement to understand their meaning. Interestingly, only 9% are true symbols, such as the Red Heart (❤️) used for endorsements. This means that in politics, emojis are more often used for direct intent rather than philosophical meaning.

Meanwhile, emojis can also be a means of expression that reflects their users' social and political identity. As Huddy (2001) explains, social identities such as

gender-based, ethnic, or religious identities can turn into political identities when they are associated with certain issues or conflicts. This transition affects political behaviour, such as voter turnout and party affiliation. Huddy uses Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory as a theoretical framework, which states that individuals tend to categorize themselves into certain social groups (ingroup) and distinguish themselves from other groups (outgroup). This process shapes how individuals perceive themselves and influences their attitudes and actions, including in a political context.

In the context of digital communication, emojis can be a means to express these social and political identities. The use of certain emojis can affirm a person's affiliation to a particular group or express support for political issues relevant to their social identity. For example, supporters of a political party may use emojis of the party flag or certain symbols associated with that party. Emojis serve as a lightweight and visual communication tool and a medium that reinforces social and political identities in the digital space. This shows that emojis have a more complex and profound role in shaping and conveying meaning, especially in political and social contexts that are full of identity dynamics.
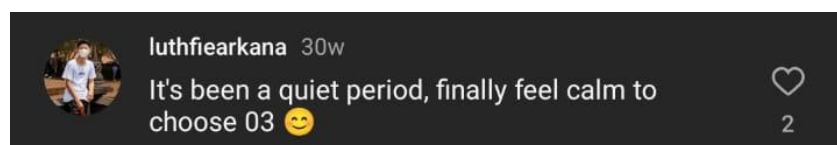

Figure 1

In the comment, the user chose option "03" while expressing a sense of calm and using a Smiling Face (😊). The "03" option refers to a candidate in a political context. This emoji falls into the icon type, where a smile emoji shows satisfaction or support for the choice. While this emoji generally expresses positive emotions, in a political context, it can reflect the user's political support or identity. This comment was taken in a post about taking down campaign props ahead of the election. These comments and emojis can generally reflect a user's preference or

identity, especially concerning political issues or candidates. These comments and emojis reflect the user's identity as part of an ingroup that understands the meaning behind the "03" choice.
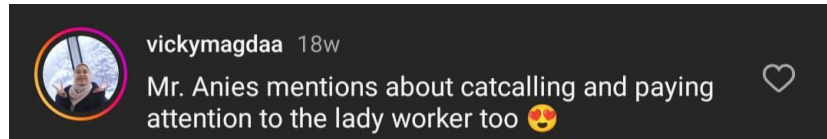

Figure 2

In the context of the last debate of the 2024 presidential election, users commented on Mr. Anies' statement about catcalling and attention to female workers, accompanied by a Face with Heart Eyes (😍). The choice of this topic may reflect users' concern for social and gender issues, which are often associated with political discourse. The emojis used serve as icons expressing agreement or support for the statement. Although this emoji is generally neutral, it could be interpreted as a form of support for Mr. Anies' political views in this context. These comments and emojis can reflect the user's political identity, showing affiliation or sympathy towards a particular political group (ingroup).
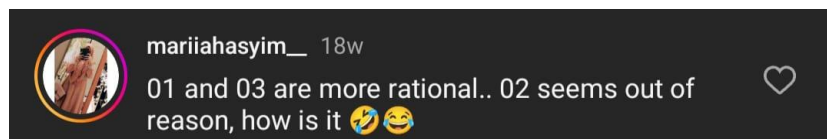
Figure 3

In the context of the final debate of the 2024 presidential election, the comment shows the user's preference for the candidates or options represented by "01" and "03" while criticizing "02" as irrational. The use of the 🤣 (Face with Tears of Joy) and 🤣 (Rolling on the Floor Laughing) emoji icons express satisfaction or confidence in their choice. These emojis are not directly related to politics, but in this context, they serve as a tool to affirm a positive attitude toward a particular political choice. These comments and emojis can reflect the user's political identity as part of the group supporting "01" and "03" (ingroup), while excluding or

criticizing the group supporting "02" (outgroup). This analysis shows how symbols and expressions of emotion can be used to reinforce group identity in a political context.
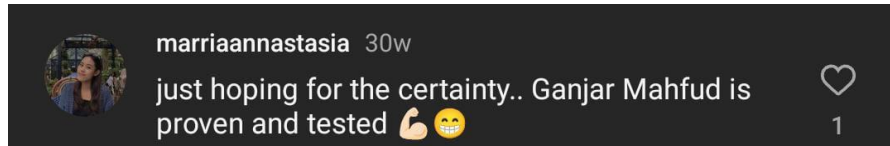

Figure 4

In the post "Dear first-time voter," the comment shows users' support for Ganjar Mahfud's running mate, expressing hope for reassurance and seeing them as a tested and proven choice. The use of the Flexed Biceps (💪) and Beaming Face with Smiling Eyes (😁) emojis expresses optimism and confidence as a symbol of political loyalty, where the Flexed Biceps (💪) emoji is used as a solid endorsement of the candidate of their political choice. Widiana et al. (2024) found that emojis in Javanese culture also often have multiple meanings depending on the community. Without understanding the context, outsiders may mistake it for a simple expression of enthusiasm. Although the emoji itself is directly related to politics, in this context, it reflects the user's political identity as a supporter of Ganjar - Mahfud, which can be categorized as part of the ingroup supporting the pair. These comments and emojis reflect users' solidarity and confidence in their political choices, which is an important aspect of building group identity in the context of elections.
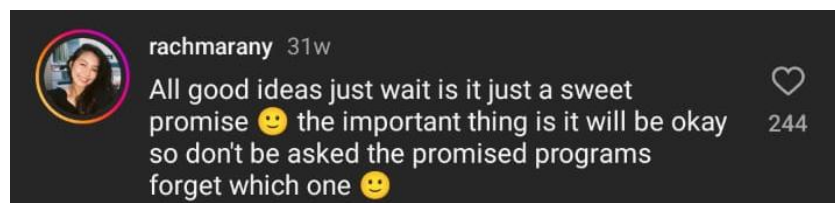

Figure 5

Still, in the context of the final debate of the 2024 presidential election, the comment reflects users' skepticism towards the program promises delivered by the

candidates by suggesting waiting and seeing if the promises will be realized. The use of the Smiling Face (😊) emoji here may be used to convey a message with a lighter or optimistic tone, despite the skepticism. This emoji serves as an icon that balances criticism with positive expressions but is not directly related to politics. This comment and emoji may reflect the user's political identity as someone critical of political promises, who may not fully believe in a particular candidate, making it difficult to categorize as ingroup or outgroup without further context.
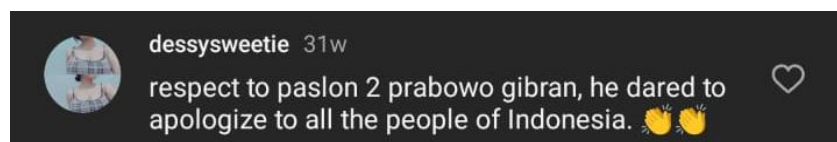
Figure 6

In a post about the third presidential debate, the comment shows the user's respect/proudness towards candidate number 2, Prabowo-Gibran, for their courage to apologize to the Indonesian people. The Clapping Hands (👏) emoji is used in this comment, which shows that the user wants to convey the message proudly. This comment reflects the user's political identity as a supporter or sympathizer of the Prabowo-Gibran pair, which can be categorized as part of the ingroup supporting the pair. By highlighting unique actions in the debate, users affirmed their support and may have attempted to influence others' perceptions of the pair. This analysis shows how political commentary can reinforce group identity and influence public opinion.
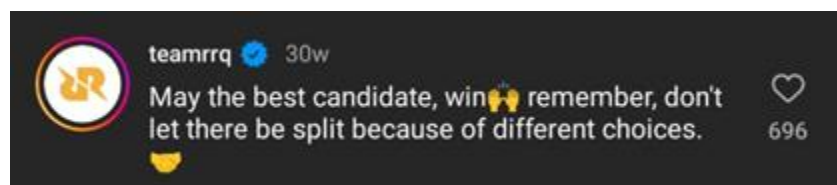

Figure 7

In a post about the three candidates voting in the 2024 General Election, the comment emphasizes wishing for the best candidate to win and reminding people not to be divided by different choices. The Raising Hands (🙌) emoji used in this

comment shows enthusiasm and support for the democratic process, while the Handshake (🤝) emoji emphasizes the importance of maintaining unity and solidarity. This comment reflects the user's political identity of promoting unity and avoiding polarization, which is difficult to categorize as ingroup or outgroup as it does not show explicit support for a particular candidate. This message may aim to promote social harmony and avoid post-election conflict. This analysis shows how political commentary can be used to promote the values of unity in a democratic context.
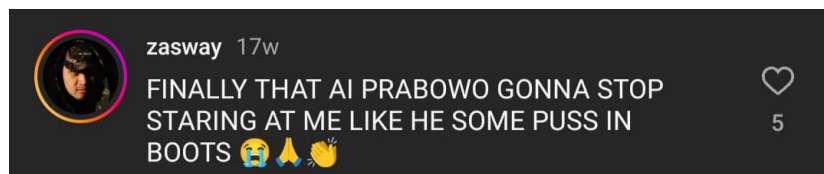

Figure 8

In a post about taking down campaign props ahead of the election, the comment uses a tone of humor and sarcasm to express relief that images or posters of Prabowo will no longer "stare" at users. The Loudly Crying Face (😭), Folded Hands (🙏), and Clapping Hands (👏) emojis used in this comment semiotically function as icons and indexes that enrich the meaning of the text. The Loud Crying Face (😭) emoji here is twisted into a tool of political satire when it is usually a sign of sadness. Cyberpragmatics calls this flipping meaning (Rahardi, 2020), which can mean "your campaign is funny until I cry (political context). Even 🙏 (praying hands), which is generally a religious symbol, here turns into subtle sarcasm. This proves that in the digital world, even sacred signs can become political weapons, and the Clapping Hands (👏) emoji also acts as an index, signalling appreciation or approval of the satirical context of the comment. This comment reflects the political identity of users who may not fully support Prabowo, so it can be categorized as an outgroup in this context. By using humor, users convey criticism or discomfort towards Prabowo's visual campaign, which could also reflect scepticisms or

149

disapproval towards the candidate. This analysis shows how humor and sarcasm can be used in political communication to convey criticism or disapproval.
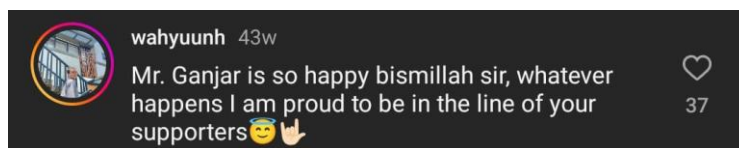

Figure 9

In the comment, the user expresses his pride and support for Mr. Ganjar, using the Smiling Face with Halo (😇) emoji as a symbol that shows sincerity, positive expectation, or kindness in expressing pride and support for Ganjar, with conventional associations linking it to prayer or blessing. On the other hand, the Love-You Gesture emoji (🤟) functions as an icon that conveys a gesture of love or support while also functioning as a symbol of identity that refers to serial number 3, which becomes important in a political or electoral context. This emoji serves as an icon that reinforces the user's positive message and enthusiasm for the candidate. Although these emojis are not directly related to politics, in this context, they reflect the user's political identity as part of Ganjar's support group (ingroup). These comments and emojis show users' solidarity and belief in their candidate, which is an important aspect in building group identity in the context of elections. This shows how symbols and expressions of emotion can be used to strengthen political identity and support for a particular candidate.
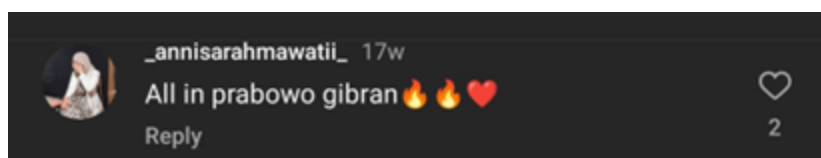

Figure 10

In a post about the end of the pre-election campaign, the comment directly expresses the user's full support for the Prabowo-Gibran pair. The Fire emoji (🔥), as an icon symbolizing intensity, passion, or burning support for the Prabowo-Gibran pair, and the Red Heart emoji (❤️) used in this comment, symbolize that the

user wants to show deep love, loyalty, and emotional support for the character. This comment reflects the user's political identity as part of the Prabowo-Gibran support group (ingroup), explicitly expressing loyalty and support for the pair. By stating "All in Prabowo Gibran," the user affirms his or her political commitment and may be aiming to influence or inspire others in the support community. This certainly shows how short, direct comments can be used to reinforce group identity and political solidarity.

An analysis of the use of emojis in political commentary, as seen in the data shows that emojis not only play a role in emphasizing the meaning and emotional nuances of the message but also become a tool to express the user's social and political identity. Emojis do not simply add expressions of happiness or pride but also serve as markers of users' political affiliations, preferences, and attitudes towards certain issues. Comments accompanied by emojis often reflect a user's political identity, either as a form of support for a particular group (ingroup) or as criticism or rejection of another group (outgroup).

This phenomenon can be understood through the lens of cyberpragmatics (Yus, 2011) which emphasizes that emojis in digital communication function as multimodal signs whose meaning is determined by three key factors: (1) the socio-political context, such as the fire (🔥) emoji which can mean 'burning support' or 'scathing criticism' depending on the political situation; (2) the power relations between users, for example the clapping hand (🙏) emoji which can convey a sincere plea or a subtle insinuation depending on the sender's political position; and (3) the culture of the participants, as found by Widiana et al. (2024) in Javanese communication showed how cultural norms influence emoji interpretation. Cyberpragmatics explains why the same emoji (for example 😊) can have multiple meanings, from sincere support to sharp satire, depending on the political frames constructed by users in digital interactions.

In a political context, such as some of the comments that have been sampled, the use of emojis and comments shows how social media becomes a platform to express solidarity, belief, or even skepticism towards certain candidates or issues. This finding is in line with Papacharissi's (2015) research, which shows that symbolic expressions such as emojis can strengthen group identity and influence the dynamics of political discussions. In addition, Marwick and Boyd (2011) explain how social media users manage their identities through the content they share, including the use of emojis. Highfield and Leaver (2016) also emphasize the role of visuals and symbols in political communication, while Erle et al. (2022) examine how emojis are used to express emotions in digital contexts, including politics. With this, emoji use in political commentary is personal and has significant social and political dimensions.

CONCLUSION

This study explores the role of emojis in expressing users' social and political identities in @ussfeed's Instagram comment section. The results show that emojis serve as a means of expressing emotions, reinforce text messages, and represent political affiliation and group identity. From the perspective of cyberpragmatics (Yus, 2011), this flexibility of emoji meaning shows how digital communication creates a dynamic context of interpretation, where visual signs can change function according to users' power relations and political goals. Based on Berger's (2010) semiotic theory, emojis can be categorized as icons, indices, and symbols, with icons being the most dominant. Huddy's (2001) Social Identity Theory explains how emojis are used to distinguish ingroup and outgroup. Emojis can reinforce political identity and influence online interactions by combining these two theories, which are enriched by a cyberpragmatics approach. In a political context, emojis are used to express support, criticism, or satire of certain figures or policies, reflecting the user's political affiliation. Cyberpragmatics asserts that the meaning of political emojis is contextual, depending on digital community norms and the purpose of

communication. This research highlights the potential of emojis in shaping public opinion and increasing engagement, but it also potentially reduces the depth of discussion. The findings can be utilized by social media designers, policymakers, and educators to create digital spaces that are more inclusive and support positive identity expression.

Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Future Research

The study of the role of emojis in expressing political identity in Instagram comments has several strengths, such as clear objectives, strong theoretical underpinnings, and relevant data sources. However, its limitations include a narrow focus on one specific Instagram account over a short period, lack of user demographics, potential interpretation bias, absence of quantitative data, overemphasis on emojis as a political tool, insufficient analysis of the impact on political discourse, and limited consideration of the evolution of emoji over time which may limit the generalizability of the findings. The results are not representative of emoji use in other online political discussions. To address these weaknesses, future research could expand coverage by including data from other platforms and time periods, incorporating demographic information, involving multiple coders for bias reduction, integrating quantitative analysis, exploring broader emoji functions, assessing the impact on political opinion, and considering a longitudinal approach to track the evolution of emoji meaning in political contexts. In addition, this research has not further explored how emojis can influence public perceptions of an issue or political figure, for example, whether the use of certain emojis can increase or decrease support for a policy or candidate. Future research can also add the analysis of more than one Instagram account as a source of data and comparison of users who use emojis, as well as explore the broader functions of emojis in comments and captions in political posts. Furthermore, future research could examine how emojis are used in the broader context of political campaigns, including in political advertisements or other campaign content, and extend the

analysis to other social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, or TikTok to understand variations in emoji use in political contexts across platforms.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

REFERENCES

Aldunate, N., Villena-González, M., Rojas-Thomas, F., López, V., & Bosman, C. A. (2018). Mood detection in ambiguous messages: the interaction between text and emoticons. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00423

Arafah, B., & Hasyim, M. (2019). Linguistic functions of emoji in social media communication. *Opcion 35*(24), 558-574.

Bai, Q., Dan, Q., Mu, Z., & Yang, M. (2019). A Systematic Review of Emoji: Current Research and Future Perspectives. *Frontiers in Psychology, 10*, 2221. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02221

Berger, A. (2010). *The objects of affection: semiotics and consumer culture*. Springer.

Boulianne, S., & Larsson, A. O. (2021). Engagement with candidate posts on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook during the 2019 election. *New Media & Society.* https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211009504

Branston, G., & Stafford, R. (2010). *The media student's book*. Routledge.

Cramer, H., De Juan, P., & Tetreault, J. (2016). Sender-intended functions of emojis in US messaging. *Proceedings of the 18th International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction with Mobile Devices and Services,* 504–509. https://doi.org/10.1145/2935334.2935370

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approach*. Sage publications.

Danesi, M. (2017). *The semiotics of emoji: The rise of visual language in the age of the internet*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Erle, T. M., Schmid, K., Goslar, S. H., & Martin, J. D. (2022). Emojis as social information in digital communication. *Emotion, 22*(7), 1529–1543. https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000992

Fischer, B., & Herbert, C. (2021). Emoji as Affective Symbols: Affective Judgments of Emoji, Emoticons, and Human Faces Varying in Emotional Content. *Frontiers in Psychology,* 12, 645173. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.645173

Gheyle, N., & Jacobs, T. (2017). Content Analysis: A short overview. *Internal research note, 10.* https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.33689.31841

Highfield, T., & Leaver, T. (2016). Instagrammatics and digital methods: Studying visual social media, from selfies and GIFs to memes and emoji. *Communication Research and Practice, 2*(1), 47–62. https://doi.org/10.1080/22041451.2016.1155332

Hu, T., Guo, H., Sun, H., Nguyen, T. T., & Luo, J. (2017). *Spice up Your Chat: The Intentions and Sentiment Effects of Using Emoji* (arXiv:1703.02860). arXiv. http://arxiv.org/abs/1703.02860

Huddy, L. (2001). From Social to Political Identity: A Critical Examination of Social Identity Theory. *Political Psychology, 22*(1), 127–156. https://doi.org/10.1111/0162-895X.00230

Kannasto, E., Laaksonen, S.-M., & Knuutila, A. (2023). I 🫶 🩷 FI You! - Emojis as Emotional-Political Signifiers in Finnish Election Campaign Discussion Online. *Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences.* https://doi.org/10.24251/HICSS.2023.294

Luor, T., Wu, L., Lu, H.-P., & Tao, Y.-H. (2010). The effect of emoticons in simplex and complex task-oriented communication: An empirical study of instant messaging. *Computers in Human Behavior, 26*(5), 889–895. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2010.02.003

Marwick, A. E., & Boyd, d. (2011). I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience. *New Media & Society, 13*(1), 114-133.

Muraoka, T., Montgomery, J., Lucas, C., & Tavits, M. (2021). Love and Anger in Global Party Politics. *Journal of Quantitative Description: Digital Media, 1*, 1–38. https://doi.org/10.51685/jqd.2021.005

Papacharissi, Z. (2015): *Affective Publics. Sentiment, Technology, and Politics.* Oxford University Press.

Pérez-Torres, V. (2024). Social media: A digital social mirror for identity development during adolescence. *Current Psychology, 43*(26), 22170–22180. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-024-05980-z

Rahardi, R. K. (2020). Konteks dalam perspektif Cyberpragmatics. *Linguistik Indonesia, 38*(2), 151-163. https://ojs.linguistik-indonesia.org/index.php/linguistik_indonesia/article/view/132

Riordan, M. A. (2017). Emojis as Tools for Emotion Work: Communicating Affect in Text Messages. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 36*(5), 549-567. https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X17704238

Rodrigues, D., Lopes, D., Prada, M., Thompson, D., & Garrido, M. V. (2017). A frown emoji can be worth a thousand words: Perceptions of emoji use in text messages exchanged between romantic partners. *Telematics and Informatics, 34*(8), 1532–1543. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2017.07.001

Sampietro, A. (2019). Emoji and rapport management in Spanish WhatsApp chats. *Journal of Pragmatics, 143*, 109–120. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2019.02.009

Sumner, E. M., Ruge-Jones, L., & Alcorn, D. (2018). A functional approach to the Facebook 'Like' button: An exploration of meaning, interpersonal functionality, and potential alternative response buttons. *New Media & Society. 20*(4), 1451-1469

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behaviour. In S. Worchel & W. G. Austin (Eds.), *Psychology of intergroup relations* (2nd ed., pp. 7–24). Chicago: Nelson-Hall

Ting-Toomey, S. (2015). Identity negotiation theory. In J. Bennett (Ed.), *Sage Encyclopedia of Intercultural Competence* (pp.418-422). Sage Publications.

Wang, W., City University of HongKong, Zhao, Y., City University of HongKong, Qiu, L., Peking University, Zhu, Y., & Tsinghua University. (2014). Effects of Emoticons on the Acceptance of Negative Feedback in Computer-Mediated Communication. *Journal of the Association for Information Systems, 15*(8), 454–483. https://doi.org/10.17705/1jais.00370

Widiana, Y., Abdullah, S. N. S., & Sumarlam, S. (2024). Phatic emoji of Javanese netizens in social media: A cyberpragmatics perspective on a creative communicative strategy. *Creativity Studies*, *17*(2), 589–600. https://doi.org/10.3846/cs.2024.16797

Yus, F. (2011). *Cyberpragmatics: Internet-mediated communication in context.* John Benjamins Pub. Co.