

Interpersonal Communication Dynamics of Universitas Terbuka Students in the Social Media Era

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ABSTRACT

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This study examines the dynamics of interpersonal communication among Universitas Terbuka students in the era of social media, focusing on the use of WhatsApp as the primary medium of interaction. As a distance-learning institution, Universitas Terbuka relies on social media to bridge the physical and geographical gaps between students, making it an essential platform for fostering communication. Employing a qualitative case study approach, the research involved in-depth interviews with active students from various academic disciplines. Findings indicate that WhatsApp plays a central role in enabling fast, flexible, and efficient communication in both academic and social contexts. Nevertheless, such communication also faces challenges, including miscommunication and blurred boundaries between private and public spheres. Despite these challenges, students tend to build social bonds and collaborate effectively through WhatsApp-based communication..

Keywords: *interpersonal communication, students, Universitas Terbuka, social media, social dynamics*

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technology, particularly social media, has brought significant changes to the way individuals interact and communicate. Students, as part of the digital generation, are among the most active users of social media platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok, and Twitter to build relationships, share information, and express themselves. Communication activities that were once primarily conducted face-to-face are now more frequently carried out through social media. The term “gadget” is more appropriately defined as a device; thus, the “gadget generation” refers to a generation whose daily lives are continuously connected to devices containing elements of information technology. These devices have become an inseparable part of life. Technology assists and facilitates humans in completing their tasks more effectively and efficiently. In the modern era, technology is easily accessible to anyone, at any time, and in any place. For example, today, almost all communication devices such as smartphones provide applications that allow users to access the internet with ease (Muttaqin et al., 2021). In relation to the learning process, social media constitutes part of instructional media that continues to undergo renewal in line with contemporary developments (Dwistia

et al., 2022). However, with the emergence of social media, the dimensions of communication have shifted. Social media serves as an intermediary for interpersonal communication in virtual spaces, often eliminating physical context. Nevertheless, social media also opens new opportunities to maintain long-distance communication, expand social networks, and express oneself more freely. Research indicates that students, or the millennial generation, today have a substantial need for technology in communication. Through social media, students can expand their networks of social relationships. Interpersonal relationships that were once confined to face-to-face interactions can now extend into the virtual world, creating more complex and diverse connections (Putri et al., 2024). WhatsApp is not only used to fulfill personal information needs through two-way communication but also functions as a communication tool that supports professional activities; indeed, its use has become highly important for sustaining the operations of organizations or institutions (Yahya & Dirgantara, 2022). Interpersonal communication, commonly referred to as interpersonal interaction, involves a dialogic process and reflects greater interaction. Those engaged in such communication participate in a dual-role exchange, alternating between speaker and listener (Ummah, 2019). In addition to interpersonal communication, there is also

group communication, which may be divided into large-group and small-group communication (Abidin, 2022). The development of information and communication technology has transformed interpersonal communication in terms of how individuals interact, including among students today. Students now communicate not only in person but also through technology, one example being the use of WhatsApp. A relevant case is Universitas Terbuka (UT) students, who utilize this digital-era technology as part of a distance learning system. Among the social media platforms used for interpersonal communication among UT students, WhatsApp is one of the most prevalent. The use of social media in interpersonal communication also brings its own unique dynamics. These dynamics are of particular interest for study because they are closely tied to peer-to-peer learning processes in an academic environment. Therefore, this research aims to explore in greater depth how Universitas Terbuka students build interpersonal communication in today's digital era. Based on the importance of the research titled *The Dynamics of Interpersonal Communication among Universitas Terbuka Students in the Social Media Era*, this study addresses the question: What are the dynamics of interpersonal communication among Universitas Terbuka students in the social media era?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Interpersonal Communication Theory

Interpersonal communication theory refers to the process of conveying messages between two or more individuals that occurs within a personal and direct relationship. According to Abidin, citing Joe Ayres, "there is no uniform meaning among experts in defining interpersonal communication." Some simply regard interpersonal communication as one of the "levels" in the process or occurrence of human communication (Abidin, 2022). Interpersonal communication theories are widely applied in the context of personal relationships—namely, communication processes that take place between two individuals, whether directly or through specific media (Ummah, 2019). Interpersonal communication, also referred to as interpersonal interaction, aims to improve human relationships by avoiding and resolving personal conflicts, reducing uncertainty, and expanding knowledge and experiences with others (Rahman, 2023). It is a specific form of human communication that occurs when we interact simultaneously with others and influence one another (Susanti, 2015).

2.2 Komunikasi di Media Sosial WhatsApp

Social media has become an integral part of global society, particularly in Indonesia. Due to ongoing technological developments and innovations, the use of social media continues to increase day by day (Dwistia et al., 2022). WhatsApp, as one of the most widely used social media platforms, enjoys high levels of popularity, especially among students. Consequently, the

application is frequently used both for socializing and for delivering messages in individual and group contexts (Hatta & Zia Ulhaq, 2022). Interpersonal communication via WhatsApp reflects the way digital technology has transformed how people communicate. As one of the most popular social media platforms among students, WhatsApp enables interpersonal communication to occur online through text, voice, image, and video messages. The dynamics of interpersonal communication among students in the social media era reflect changes in interaction patterns influenced by technological advancements. While communication has become faster, more efficient, and more flexible, it also faces challenges such as emotional detachment in message delivery and a reduction in face-to-face interaction.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative method, which involves the use of studied subjects and various collections of empirical data, including case studies, interviews, texts or documents, observations, and visual materials. The study adopts a descriptive qualitative approach. The descriptive research method is intended to describe existing phenomena, whether ongoing or past (Rahman, 2023). Moleong (2017) defines qualitative research as research intended to understand phenomena experienced by research subjects holistically, and to describe them in words and language within a specific natural context. In this context, a qualitative approach was used to examine interpersonal communication among Universitas Terbuka students through interactions occurring on WhatsApp.

Informants were selected using purposive sampling, in which participants are chosen based on criteria relevant to the research objectives (Sugiyono, 2020). Data collection techniques included in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation. Interviews were conducted to explore students' experiences and communication strategies in interpersonal interactions. Observations were carried out during learning activities conducted via WhatsApp to directly observe the interpersonal communication process. Documentation included photographs taken during learning activities to support data analysis.

Data analysis was carried out descriptively by reviewing interview and observation results, enabling the researcher to identify interpersonal communication dynamics among Universitas Terbuka students in the social media era. To ensure data validity, triangulation of sources and methods was applied by comparing data from various informants and data collection techniques (Moleong, 2017). This research is expected to provide an in-depth description of the interpersonal communication dynamics of Universitas Terbuka students in the social media era. The following section presents the profiles of several students who served as informants in this study.

Table 1. Informan

No	Name	Study Program	Year of Entry
1	Galang	Law	2021
2	Eni	Communication Science	2021
3	Adit	Communication Science	2022
4	Puput	Accounting	2023
5	Irma	Communication Science	2023
6	Doni	Management	2022

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Forms of Communication Among Universitas Terbuka Students in the WhatsApp Social Media Era

Communication among students can take place through direct interpersonal interaction, either face-to-face or via digital media such as WhatsApp, Telegram, or Instagram. This form of communication allows for the exchange of messages that are personal and more in-depth, as it involves emotions, expressions, and an understanding of each individual's socio-cultural context. Some scholars simply regard interpersonal communication as one of the "levels" within the process or occurrence of human communication (Abidin, 2022). Interpersonal communication theories are widely applied in the context of personal relationships—namely, communication processes that occur between two individuals, whether directly or through certain media (Ummah, 2019).

Social media increasingly facilitates user interaction, making it easier for individuals to connect with one another. WhatsApp is an instant messaging application that enables the exchange of audio, video, images, and text messages free of charge through mobile devices and available internet connections. The application is accessible on mobile devices, desktop computers, and laptops. It allows users to create group chats, engage in conversations, and make voice and video calls at no cost worldwide (Asari, 2023).

As one of the most widely used social media platforms, WhatsApp has a high usage rate, particularly among students (Hatta & Zia Ulhaq, 2022). Consequently, the application is extensively used both for social purposes and for delivering messages in individual or group contexts. Through this platform, students can easily present the best version of themselves to the public, select the content they wish to share, and build a digital identity that reflects their personality, interests, and values.

This process often helps students expand their social networks, build relationships with peers, lecturers, and broader communities (Putri et al., 2024). During the COVID-19 pandemic, from 2019 to 2022, when face-to-face meetings were not possible and remote communication became a necessity, the delegation of

tasks through such means became increasingly common. Schools were closed and teaching-learning activities were conducted online; offices were also closed, with employees working from home (WFH) (Syahputra et al., 2024).

Based on interviews conducted with six Universitas Terbuka students, it was found that communication via WhatsApp generally takes two primary forms: group communication and direct interpersonal messaging. Group communication on WhatsApp tended to be informative in nature, where students shared academic information such as tutorial schedules, assignments, and other academic coordination matters. One informant stated the following:

"Every day, there is always new information in the group, whether from the tutor or from classmates. It makes me feel closer, even though the classes are online." (Interview with Adit, Friday, May 16, 2025)

"Although the courses are online, through WhatsApp I still feel like part of the student community because the sense of togetherness remains." (Interview with Puput, Friday, May 16, 2025)

"If there is a schedule change or important information from the tutor, it's always announced in the group, so it's absolutely necessary to keep monitoring it." (Interview with Doni, Friday, May 16, 2025)

"The WhatsApp group isn't just for coursework—it's also a place to build relationships with peers in the same department." (Interview with Eni, Friday, May 16, 2025)

"Interacting in the group has taught me to be more polite and careful in delivering messages, because everyone can read them." (Interview with Galang, Friday, May 16, 2025)

"Almost every day, I use WhatsApp just to ask about assignments, participate in discussions, or other matters." (Interview with Irma, Friday, May 16, 2025)

From a communication perspective, learning and technology are interrelated, and it can be concluded that learning methods can serve as channels for delivering academic information through the use of advanced technology as the medium. This is evident from interviews with WhatsApp users who have long used the application on their smartphones. If an image needs to be sent, it is easily possible, as the high image quality supported by the application allows the recipient to receive it without difficulty.

Videos can also be sent effortlessly, as can documents such as Word files containing assignments from lecturers, eliminating the need to send them via email. With just a smartphone, the files can be sent directly and immediately received by the intended lecturer. This feature not only facilitates lecturers in delivering teaching materials in class but also simplifies the evaluation process of teaching and learning, as assignments can be given and submitted using the technological convenience provided by WhatsApp. This raises awareness among both students and lecturers about adopting a new learning system based on electronic technology that is directly connected to the internet.

Through strategies implemented via WhatsApp, the platform plays a central role in increasing the intensity of communication among Universitas Terbuka students. As a practical and instant communication medium, WhatsApp enables students to remain constantly connected in both academic and social contexts. Based on interview results, students reported that they use WhatsApp more frequently than other social media platforms due to its convenience.

Table 2. Data Analysis

Thematic Theme	Subtheme	Respondent's Quote	Notes/Research Conclusion
WhatsApp Usage	Changes in Interpersonal Communication Patterns	"Yes, even though we study online, we can still keep in touch" (Interview with Puput, Friday, 16 May 2025)	Helps build and maintain relationships, including using language that strengthens message delivery.
Communication Barriers	Challenges in Interpreting Messages	"Sometimes messages in the group are misunderstood because the writing is unclear" (Interview with Doni, Friday, 16 May 2025)	Misunderstanding occurs due to unclear messages, especially without direct interaction.
Self-Expression and Convenience	Adaptation and Strategies in Digital Communication	"I prefer sending voice notes because it's easier to explain"	Voice notes improve clarity in communication.

		(Interview with Irma, Friday, 16 May 2025)	
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4.2 The Role of WhatsApp Social Media in Communication Intensity

Voice notes help improve communication clarity. Social media has emerged as one of the most popular terms spanning all generations. With social media, activities that were previously conducted conventionally through face-to-face interaction can now be carried out virtually, either synchronously or asynchronously (Abdillah, n.d.). The use of social media by institutions or universities for publication purposes can reach the public widely and quickly, as internet technology is now used by the majority of people (Baru & Sahid, 2023).

Social media serves as a medium for discussion, making it easier for students to search for learning materials—especially as today's students already use advanced technology and need to have social media accounts that they can use to discuss with peers both on and off campus (Dwistia et al., 2022). Through WhatsApp, it is easy to interact and communicate. In communication, the language used must also take into account and uphold good values and ethical norms (Wahyuni et al., 2021).

The findings of this study are as follows:

1. The use of communication media is applied appropriately through the WhatsApp smartphone application among its users, especially within the scope of higher education.
2. Learning methods can also be facilitated through WhatsApp as a supporting medium for delivering learning materials and assignments to students.
3. Communication is made easier with the availability of supporting features such as chat, image sharing, audio/voice messages, audiovisual/video sharing, and document transfer in formats such as Microsoft Word or PDF.
4. Efforts are made to utilize technological advancements for more positive activities, such as supporting facilities for the teaching and learning process in higher education.

5. CONCLUSION

The study shows that social media plays a role in shaping the dynamics of interpersonal communication among Universitas Terbuka students. As a distance learning institution, Universitas Terbuka students utilize WhatsApp not only as a medium for academic information and coordination but also as a space for social interaction that replaces the role of face-to-face communication. WhatsApp facilitates faster, more flexible, and cross-location communication, yet it also presents challenges such as miscommunication, limited non-verbal expression, and social tendencies that may arise if not balanced with direct interaction.

The effectiveness of interpersonal communication also depends greatly on students' ability to use social media wisely and ethically. WhatsApp supports real-time two-way communication—whether in the form of text, voice, or video—which makes academic coordination, group discussions, and the building of more personal social relationships among students easier. However, these communication dynamics also face challenges, such as misunderstandings due to poorly conveyed messages, feelings of being ignored when messages are not promptly replied to, and privacy issues stemming from blurred boundaries between personal and academic spaces. Therefore, developing digital communication skills becomes an essential aspect of supporting both the learning process and the social life of students in the era of social media.

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