
Sense of Humor in Student Task Discussion During Covid-19 Pandemic, Is It Important?

Sense of Humor dalam Diskusi Tugas pada Mahasiswa Selama Pandemi Covid-19, Pentingkah?

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ABSTRACT

The government has established a Study-From-Home (SFH) program to prevent the spread of Covid-19. Implementing the SFH program is an alternative for students to continue to carry out online learning as a substitute for face-to-face meetings. Online task discussion through WhatsApp groups is a solution for completing common tasks which are considered quite effective. However, learning tasks during a pandemic were considered quite burdensome, such as increased stress levels. Previous studies show that increased stress and anxiety during SFH can be reduced through humor. This study conducts an argumentative literature review to determine the importance of humor in students learning during the covid-19 pandemic. This paper shows that humor in the task discussions has an essential role during the Covid-19 pandemic. With humor, it is expected that the level of students' anxiety during the SFH program decreases. It is also expected to have a positive impact on the effectiveness of group communication in task discussions.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19) pandemic has a broad impact on various sectors, including the education sector. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, or UNESCO, expressed full support for implementing the Study-From-Home (SFH) program on a large scale. In line with UNESCO, the Government of Indonesia has adopted learning from home policy through the Ministry of Education and Culture (Kemendikbud, 2020). The policy aims to break the spreading chain of Covid-19 and prioritize the safety and health of educators and students in the learning process. The extension of the SFH program will take into account the latest pandemic situation that can not be predicted when it will end.

The SFH program during the pandemic requires technology-based communication activities and the internet (online). The development of technology allows accessible communication during learning through various media, such as e-learning, Google Classroom, WhatsApp, Zoom, and other media (Pakpahan & Fitriani, 2020). Based on the Global Web Index survey results, since 2014, WhatsApp has occupied the top position with 54 percent of the total number of message processing application users and is estimated to increase (Prasanti & Indriani, 2017). A previous study showed that 57% of students felt the learning process with WhatsApp was very useful (Pustikayasa, 2019). However, the study also showed that using WhatsApp as a learning platform does not fully affect the value of learning.

WhatsApp is a relatively affordable application for smartphone-based learning, for example, to complete tasks from educators (Pustikayasa, 2019). Using WhatsApp can also gain new learning opportunities, foster effective

communication, enable relevant feedback, offer formal and informal learning opportunities, and support collaborative learning (Simon, 2016). The WhatsApp group was chosen as a learning media because it can be used for group discussion outside class hours (Pustikayasa, 2019). In another study, Zhafira (2020) suggested that the WhatsApp group became one of the most popular learning media students. Some of these statements explain that the WhatsApp application is very useful in implementing the SFH program and is considered adequate for group communication activities, including task discussion activities.

The practice of the SFH program during the Covid-19 pandemic has several obstacles. The SFH program is not entirely well-received by students. Some students have difficulty understanding the lecture materials given online. SFH Program is limited interaction, so learning is not deep and meaningful (Firman, 2020). Obstacles in technological facilities, networks, and pandemic situations become a source of problems in implementing online learning (Hasanah et al., 2020). In addition, Jamaluddin et al. (2020) added a harmonious statement that other factors hinder online learning, such as the limited internet quota, number of tasks, network instability, limited availability, and mastery of technological tools. Online learning also creates a new task load, which triggers students' stress, anxiety, and tension (Livana et al., 2020).

The tensions during the pandemic have prompted individuals to seek out catharsis. Through catharsis, individuals can express the pressure they feel, thereby reducing the burden and getting emotional relief (O'Connell in Rini, 2019). Emotional relief from the tension can be obtained through humor. Faridah (2017) explained that speech containing humor could reduce pressure and act as a rescue mediator. Stefani (2020) stated that humor spread through social media is considered quite effective in helping to reduce anxiety in the community. Humor gathered can maintain and increase social solidarity during a pandemic (Stefani, 2020). In line with Bloch, Browning, and McGrath's statement in Johnson & Johnson (2014), humor increases cohesiveness and reduces tension. Therefore, this study aims to synthesize humor's function, especially in task discussion context among students during the Covid-19 pandemic.

2. THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

WhatsApp as learning platform during the covid-19 pandemic

WhatsApp is one of the applications often used by various people in Indonesia, including university academics such as students and lecturers (Sukrillah et al., 2018). WhatsApp is an instant messaging application for exchanging pictures, videos, photos, documents, voice messages, and creating a group chat. This application allows users to communicate with many people simultaneously and can be used to share information and discuss (Kurniawati & Diniyah, 2018). WhatsApp provides convenience for its users with features that can support the learning and discussion process. The features include video calls, voice calls, notes, personal or group chats, video attachments, photos, and documents. In using these features, the collaboration aspect becomes very much needed in the learning process. According to Hapsari & Yonata (2014), collaboration skills can allow exchanging ideas and information to find creative solutions. Collaborative skills also support completing tasks that depend heavily on how they interact with each other. WhatsApp features can facilitate lecturers and students to do online learning (Arizona et al., 2020). On the other hand, almost everyone uses WhatsApp because it is relatively easy, cheap, and fast.

Task discussion through WhatsApp groups

Now, WhatsApp is one of the social media that is often used during a pandemic. For students, WhatsApp is used to implement the SFH program and discussion between individuals and groups. Group discussion is an activity where each group member gets the same opportunity to express opinions and exchange ideas, finding an alternative in solving problems (Fajrillah, 2020). Students can discuss with their friends using one of WhatsApp's features in a group chat and personal chat when receiving assignments from lecturers, both individual and group assignments. This discussion helps students to complete the task given by the lecturer, even though the lecture session has ended (Yulianto et al. 2020). Learning activities via the WhatsApp group are considered to bring benefits to the achievement and attitudes of students towards learning and education on a mobile basis (Barhoumi, 2015).

In addition to completing tasks, discussions through WhatsApp groups show relevant characteristics for developing a social presence (Robinson et al., 2015). This statement is supported by Suardika et al.'s (2020) findings that compared learning through WhatsApp groups with face-to-face learning. The results showed that learning through WhatsApp groups had a more substantial shared value, but both had similarities in social presence. This social presence helps students develop cooperation when discussing through WhatsApp groups (Yulianto et al. 2020).

In addition to some of the advantages of WhatsApp, several factors hinder the discussion of tasks. Obstacles that occur from the technical side can be in-network disruptions and require ample storage space on the smartphone (Hasanah et al., 2020). In addition to systems and technology barriers, communication and discussion processes in learning activities can also be disrupted due to problems that come from users due to a large amount of information received (Rahardjo et al., 2020).

Task load as the determinant variable of anxiety

During a pandemic, much information can cause students to become anxious, stressed, and depressed. Stress can be caused by the number of tasks, procurement of quizzes, and difficulty understanding the material (Livana et al., 2020). Oktaria et al. (2019) added that the demand for understanding broad knowledge and skills in a limited time

could cause stress for students. These demands cause individuals to receive excessive information. This excess information makes it difficult for individuals to process the information received, so it causes them to feel depressed, tired, anxious, angry, or demotivated in interaction (Rahardjo et al., 2020).

Students who feel depressed tend to have excessive anxiety. Anxiety is a feeling of fear (both realistic and unrealistic) accompanied by increased psychological reactions if the individual is faced with an unclear and uncertain situation (Novliadi, 2009). Anxiety can be measured using the Hamilton Anxiety Rating Scale (HARS) compiled by Max Hamilton in Vivin (2019). Fourteen symptoms appear in individuals when they feel anxiety, namely: (1) feelings anxiety; (2) tension; (3) fear; (4) sleep disturbances; (5) intelligence disorders; (6) feeling depressed (gloomy); (7) bodily/physical (muscular) symptoms; (8) somatic/physical (sensory) symptoms; (9) cardiovascular symptoms; (10) respiratory symptoms; (11) gastrointestinal symptoms; (12) urogenital symptoms; (13) autonomic symptoms; and (14) behaviors/attitudes. According to Endler and Hunt in Novliadi (2009), anxiety is dependent on humans and the stimuli that generate anxiety itself.

During the implementation of the SFH program, the task load is the primary stimulant of anxiety and stress for students. According to Maharani's (2017) research, there is a significant relationship between academic stress and learning task load. Academic stress poses additional demands on an individual's ability to cope. Often academic stress makes learners feel stressed during their studies (Sharma & Pandey, 2017). Overly burdensome learning tasks lead to increased stress and anxiety. In another study, Livana et al. (2020) also argued that most Indonesian students' stressors during the Covid-19 pandemic were learning tasks. As respondents in the study, students admitted more college tasks during the SFH program than before implementing the SFH program. This change in task capacity then triggers anxiety and increased stress among students.

Anxiety in dealing with stressors can be overcome through various self-defense mechanisms (Karim et al., 2018). According to Sigmund Freud in Piliang (2018), the self-defense mechanism is a strategy used by individuals to prevent the open emergence of *id* impulses and deal with *superego* pressure on the *ego* to reduce or alleviate anxiety. To reduce excessive anxiety, individuals can rely on defense mechanisms in themselves. Sigmund Freud in Alwisol (2014), classifies defense mechanisms into seven categories, namely: (1) identification; (2) transfer/compromise reaction; (3) repression; (4) fixation; (5) regression; (6) reaction formation; and (7) projections. On the other hand, Karim (2018) and Srivastava & Maurya (2014) presented the research results that sensitivity to humor functions as a self-defense mechanism against anxiety, especially anxiety about task loads during a pandemic.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was designed using an argumentative literature review approach. We use literature review to arrange the argument in terms of sense of humor in students learning context during the covid-19 pandemic. We used PICO(S) Framework to find the literature from several scientific journal articles, news in the mass media, books, and other relevant sources. PICO(S) is used as a tool to determine keywords from research questions. PICO(S) consists of population, intervention, comparison, outcome, and study design (Table 1).

Researchers also use the *Google Scholar* search engine to find relevant scientific articles. We use several keywords, such as humor during the pandemic, online learning, academic stress on the task, anxiety during the pandemic, WhatsApp group as a learning media. In this study, researchers only focused on discussing the role of humor in reducing students' stress and anxiety levels amid the Covid-19 pandemic, especially in group communication activities through task discussions. Then we selected several articles and used only articles related to the research question.

Table 1. Implementation of PICO(S) to arrange the keywords

| Criteria | Inclusion | Exclusion |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|
| Population | University students | Adolescence |
| Intervention | Covid-19 pandemic | Another pandemic |
| Comparison | - | - |
| Outcome | Using a sense of humor as a coping strategy in students learning context during the Covid-19 pandemic | Using a sense of humor as a coping strategy during the Covid-19 pandemic generally |
| Study design and publication type | Quasi-experimental studies, randomized control and trial, systematic review, qualitative research, and cross-sectional studies | - |
| Publication years | Post-2011 | Pre-2011 |

Language

English, Indonesian

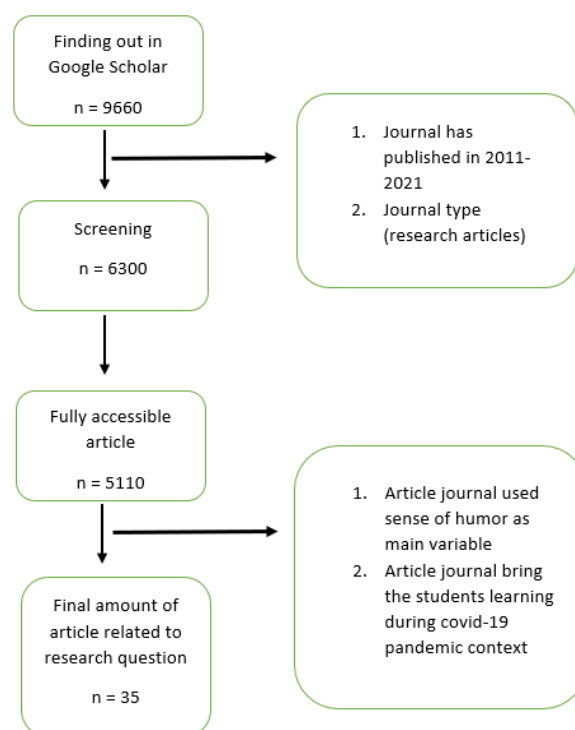
Another language excluding
English and Indonesian

Figure 1. Process of selected articles

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Humor to reduce anxiety

Humor has a universal nature, meaning it can be felt and enjoyed by everyone around the world. However, everyone has a different sense of humor. Humor is prevalent because it can make people happy, laugh, or perhaps free from the burden of thought (Istiningtyas, 2014). Someone needs a sense of humor to observe, feel and express humor (Hartanti, 2008). According to Munthe (2019), sensitivity to humor is an individual's feeling to perceive, express, and capture humor. These feelings are associated with the frequency of smiling, laughing, and responding to things related to entertainment and reacting, appreciating, and even solving problems using humor. If someone lacks a sense of humor, then any incident will not leave a funny impression. Meanwhile, according to Meredith in Hartanti (2008), humor sensitivity is the ability to laugh at all things, including himself, but still love and like it.

Humor is a complex and unique phenomenon that can be found in all cultures. In general, humor is an experiential tendency to provoke laughter and provide entertainment (Stefani, 2020). According to Dr. Chaya Ostrower in Stefani (2020), humor has three components: intelligence, joy, and laughter. Intelligence is concerned with cognitive experience, happiness as an emotional experience, and laughter as a physiological experience. Laughter is used as a defense mechanism to guard against the overwhelming anxiety caused by quarantine situations. Laughter often reduces the suffering associated with deprivation and restriction of freedom of movement (Stefani, 2020).

Some experts' humor theory tries to explain how something can cause laughter or amusement in someone. The theory of humor is unlimited in number, none of which can describe humor as a whole and comprehensively. Theories tend to be influenced by one another (Setiawan in Rahmanadji, 2007). Manser, in Rahmanadji (2007), divides humor into three groups, namely: (1) The theory of superiority and underestimation, the laughing party is in a higher position, while the object being laughed at is in a degradation position (underestimated). Plato, Cicero, Aristotle, and Francis Bacon in Rahmanadji (2007) said that people would laugh when something is funny and out of the ordinary. Ridiculous in this context is defined as something that does not follow the rules and can ignite anger; (2) The theory of imbalance, despair, and association. All forms of humor are based on association, in which two situations are impossible to happen at once. This context gives rise to various associations; (3) The theory of release of tension or release from stress. Humor can arise from a lie and deception, it can appear in the form of sympathy and understanding, and it can be a symbol of relieving tension and pressure.

Humor needed during a covid-19 pandemic

In a pandemic situation, individuals need entertainment in humor to relieve anxiety and free themselves from tension. Through humor, individuals can reduce their stress levels, especially on tasks, exams, and learning. Based on research from Yovetick, Dale & Hudak in Novliadi (2009), it was found that individuals with a high sense of humor tend to feel relatively low anxiety than individuals with an intense feeling of humor when faced with tense situations. Based on the findings of Yovetick et al., Kelly (2002) continued a similar study by adding anxiety variables associated with a sense of humor. As a result, researchers concluded that individuals with a sense of humor tend not to feel excessive worry (Kelly, 2002).

The phenomenon of student anxiety in facing tasks during a pandemic encourages students to seek entertainment on their own or through friends. However, in the pandemic conditions, students became more isolated. Through digital platforms, such as social media, students can still spread fun (humor) and maintain a sense of togetherness (Chiodo et al., 2020). Social media can be used as a medium for accessing and producing virtual humor (Weitz, 2017). Hubler & Bell (2003) stated that virtual humor plays an essential role in online communities or groups. Virtual humor is easier to access and shared in groups for entertaining purposes even if its members do not meet in person. Baym in Stefani (2020) also argues that humor in social media communication is essential in creating social meaning online. The presence of humor can affect the relationship between group members, giving rise to the closeness between members. Exchanging humor in groups strengthens solidarity among its members (Baym in Stefani, 2020).

According to Driessen (2004), at least ten forms of humorous expression are favored by social media users. The five most popular forms of humor expression are (1) *PowerPoint* humor, which is a funny text in the form of a *PowerPoint* presentation; (2) funny photos accompanied by tickling text; (3) *manipphoto*, which is an explicitly manipulated photograph that is usually combined with other visual forms; (4) *phanimation*, namely the mobile version of *mani photo*; and (5) jokes, namely short stories with *punchlines*. During a pandemic, group members or *online* classes tend to access virtual humor in the form of jokes (both planned and spontaneous), funny experiences, cartoons, memes, funny pictures, or anything that feels comfortable if enjoyed individually or in groups (McCabe et al., 2017). Such humor often causes e-laugh to be represented by laughing "haha," abbreviated "LOL," or using emojis (Weitz, 2017). The e-laugh is a bodily response and joking gesture that is an inseparable part of group communication activities.

Individuals tend to access humor according to their tastes. That way, the individual will obtain satisfaction, happiness, or be a little freed from the burden of the mind (Istiningtyas, 2014). Feelings of joy will trigger a laughing effect. Laughter is known as a natural remedy because of the physiological effects of mental humor. Laughter is also used as a defense mechanism to keep from great anxiety during a pandemic (Stefani, 2020).

In Muskerina et al. (2018), Chen and Martin stated that humor could be a way to overcome individual difficulties and make individuals assess a situation to be more positive. In another study, Istiningtyas (2014) describes the positive impact of humor (inherent in each of its functions) and can be felt in several fields. There are, First, Physical Health. The research of Dr. Lee Berk and Dr. Stanley Tan in Istiningtyas (2014) presents laughter on the immune system. Laughter can increase the resistance of immune cells in fighting viruses that attack the body. Secondly, humor can generate positive emotions that cause a person to feel cheerful and reduce depression, anxiety, tension, and irritability. Humor that lowers negative moods can change the perception of a boring task to be more exciting and can generate positive emotions in the short term.

Humor has a positive impact on the individual sphere and the broader field, namely social relations. Humor is a social phenomenon that humor and laughter are much more common in the company of other people. People who have much humor about socializing are considered pleasant friends and make them more involved in socializing. Fourth, Contributions in Academics. Humor positively affects educational programs because it can trigger and stimulate memory, creativity, motivation, and even reduce stress. Humor can increase communication effectiveness, direct attention, open the mind, increase understanding, and provide energy for educators and students.

It should be noted that not all humor produces positive and potentially good effects on mental health. Some humor even has the opposite effect. Aggressive humor is a style that criticizes or manipulates other people, such as sarcasm, teasing, belittling, etc. In addition to the aggressive humor, there are also negative humor styles. Hostile humor is carried out by blaming and sacrificing oneself excessively. This effort is made to please others by insulting oneself to be funny and then laughed at. Humor that is not delivered at the right time can also negatively impact, namely creating a tense situation that can even lead to conflict (Wandi, 2020).

According to Mirawati et al. (2019), internet-based media can create a tendency to abuse entertainment or bad jokes and interfere with individual involvement in the organization. To use humor wisely and adequately, individuals need to pay attention to the situation and conditions and the media. Humor can be used appropriately so that the quality of humor is maintained. Humor as a means of social communication is expected to be understood and accepted by various individuals and solutions to anxiety during a pandemic (Rahmanadji, 2007).

Humor during SFH program among students

The SFH program during the Covid-19 pandemic was called a solution for learning activities that prioritized the safety and health of educators and students. Although not fully effective, educational actors are trying to find communication media solutions with many advantages over other media. WhatsApp is considered one of the most

popular learning media for students (Zhafira, 2020). WhatsApp is equipped with features that support student communication, including when discussing academic tasks. In addition, WhatsApp groups showed relevant characteristics for developing members' sense of social presence (Robinson et al., 2015).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, students were faced with unusual conditions. The academic tasks received become heavier for students. Not a few parties criticized the implementation of the SFH program, which is considered too burdensome for students (in terms of tasks) and can trigger stress and anxiety. It can be analyzed that the anxiety experienced by students includes the type of realistic anxiety. This natural anxiety is triggered by the real object of anxiety which is excessive task load.

Based on the literature that has been compiled, some researchers state that self-defense mechanisms can alleviate anxiety and academic stress. One of them is humor (Karim, 2018; Srivastava & Maurya, 2014; Stefani, 2020). Individuals with a high sense of humor tend to feel relatively low anxiety than individuals with an intense sense of humor when faced with tense situations (Yovetick, Dale & Hudak in Novliadi, 2009). It means that people who have a high sense of humor can still enjoy humor that brings a sense of pleasure, even intense situations.

Virtual humor is popular with social media users, especially during the pandemics that limit face-to-face meetings. Virtual humor can take the form of jokes (both planned and spontaneous), funny experiences, cartoons, memes, funny pictures/videos, and other forms (McCabe et al., 2017; Weitz, 2017). The presence of humor in WhatsApp groups can make task study discussions more enjoyable. Hopefully, anxiety about the workload can be alleviated, the effectiveness of group communication will increase, and the solidarity and cohesiveness of members can be maintained.

5. CONCLUSION

Amid the Study-From-Home (SFH) program, students have several media alternatives to support learning and discussion. WhatsApp is one of the most effective discussion tools. However, students are often faced with a reasonably heavy academic task load. As a result, most students feel depressed, stressed, and have excessive anxiety. To overcome these anxieties, students can enjoy humor according to their preferences and needs. Several studies have proven that through humor, individuals can obtain satisfaction, pleasure, or be a little free from the burden of the mind. Humor has an important role and is considered effective in relieving students' anxiety when facing a task load during a pandemic.

Humor can be enjoyed individually or in groups. During pandemics, individuals prefer virtual humor. Virtual humor is considered more accessible and shared to entertain each other, even if they do not meet in person. Likewise, members often use virtual humor in WhatsApp group task discussions to relieve themselves from anxiety and stressful task load. In addition to causing laughter and fun, virtual humor in the groups is considered to maintain and increase social solidarity. The improvement in social solidarity resulting from humor is supposed to help relieve members' anxiety levels. The level of anxiety that has subsided is expected to impact communication effectiveness in the task discussion group positively.

The author realized that this study has several limitations, including writing, availability of reference sources in reference articles or supporting articles, and limited time for preparation. It is hoped that the following researchers can continue this study by using more complete variables, more complex phenomena, more varied methods, and using more renewable reference articles.

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