

# Dry Text Reception as Digital Body Language on WhatsApp: A Study of Meaning Interpretation Based on Stuart Hall's Reception Theory

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the reception of "dry text" as a form of digital body language and the understanding of message meaning among WhatsApp users. In the evolving digital communication landscape, the absence of explicit non-verbal cues in text-based interactions, often referred to as "dry text," presents unique challenges to message interpretation. Using a qualitative descriptive approach grounded in Stuart Hall's Reception Theory, this study analyzes the nuanced understanding of message meaning, considering the interplay between context, relationship dynamics, and the individual's psychological state. The study findings reveal that the interpretation of "dry text" is highly subjective and context-dependent, with factors such as relational intimacy, communication history, and current mood significantly influencing reception. While some users interpret "dry text" as efficient, others perceive it as negative, indifferent, or even rude. This study highlights the critical role of users' communicative competence in navigating ambiguous digital cues and the potential for miscommunication when non-verbal signals are absent. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of digital body language and the complexity of meaning-making in text-based communication.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of information and communication technology has fundamentally changed the pattern of human interaction, shifting from dominant face-to-face communication to massive dependence on digital platforms. In Indonesia, internet penetration continues to show a positive trend, along with increasing access to the internet network, as much as 74.6% of the total population of around 285 million people in January 2025 [1], indicating widespread adoption of digital connectivity.

This dominance is reinforced by 356 million active mobile connections, with a connection ratio per population reaching 125%, indicating multi-device ownership and the crucial role of mobile communication in everyday life. Among the various digital communication applications, WhatsApp, with its intuitive interface and instant messaging features, has become the dominant platform globally, including in Indonesia.

WhatsApp facilitates instant messaging, enabling communication without geographical boundaries. However, the text-based nature of WhatsApp communication

inherently removes many of the non-verbal cues—such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language—that are essential to understanding comprehensive meaning in face-to-face interactions. This absence creates a unique communication environment in which interpretation can be highly subjective. One phenomenon that has emerged from this environment is “dry text,” which is characterized by brevity, a lack of explicit emotional markers (such as emojis or expressive punctuation), and often straightforward, unadorned language [2].

Interpreting “dry text” presents significant challenges. What a sender intends as efficient or neutral may be perceived by a recipient as cold, angry, or dismissive. These differences in reception underscore a critical gap in understanding how meaning is constructed and negotiated in digital text-based conversations where traditional nonverbal cues are absent or minimized. While previous research has explored the role of emoji and emoticons in enriching digital communication [3] and the impact of message brevity on engagement [4], [5], less attention has been paid to the specific implications of the absence of such expressive elements, particularly in the context of personal messaging such as WhatsApp.

This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the reception of “dry text” as a form of “digital body language” among WhatsApp users. Using Stuart Hall’s Reception Theory, this study seeks to understand how WhatsApp users interpret and make sense of messages characterized by their “dryness,” and explores the factors that influence their understanding and the potential for miscommunication that may arise. By analyzing the nuanced interpretation of “dry text,” this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the meaning-making process in contemporary digital communication and provides insights into the evolving nature of interpersonal interactions in the digital age.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 *Digital Media (New Media)*

Digital media is information shared through digital devices or screens. Basically, it is any form of media that relies on electronic devices for its creation, distribution, display, and storage [6]. Digital media, also known as new digital media, itself consists of a combination of data, text, sound, and various types of images stored in digital format and distributed through networks such as broadband optic cables, satellites, and microwave systems [7].

Meanwhile, according to Carey [8] not much different, new media is internet-based media using computers and sophisticated mobile phones. The two main forces of initial change were satellite communication and the use of computers. The key to the great power of computers as a communication machine lies in the digitalization process that allows all forms of information to be carried efficiently and mixed together.

Even today the development of digital media has experienced significant progress over the past few years. Some important developments in digital media include the development of technology and platforms, technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), virtual reality (VR), and augmented reality (AR) have opened up new opportunities in digital media.

### 2.2 *WhatsApp*

WhatsApp was founded in January 2009 by Jan Koum and Brian Acton, two former Yahoo! employees who were inspired by the desire to create a simple, ad-free communication system. The first version of WhatsApp was just an application to display user status (availability status), but in a short time it developed into an instant messaging platform across operating systems. WhatsApp became a pioneer in removing communication limitations based on credit and operators, by allowing users to send text messages, images, videos, and

audio in real-time over the internet network [9].

The use of the WhatsApp program is very effective with the support of its features compared to other instant messaging applications. The speed of messages without a long time to be delayed, able to operate in weak signal conditions, large data delivery capacity for text, voice, photos and videos, without advertising interference and the nature of its distribution makes WhatsApp one of the alternative media in providing information and improving performance [9].

[10] said, WhatsApp is an adaptation to social culture and its users including adaptation in communicating without reducing the quantity, quality, and modernity of the way of communicating. WhatsApp Messenger is an application that is able to reach the dimensions of sophistication, usefulness, and civilization.

WhatsApp responded by launching various adaptive features, including temporary messages (disappearing messages), permanent group mute, multi-device beta, and the expansion of WhatsApp Pay in several countries. It has even integrated with AI and automated business services, such as chatbots for customer service and direct product ordering via messages. This transformation shows the convergence of WhatsApp within the framework of Society 5.0, namely a society that focuses on solving social problems through the integration of humans and technology [11].

### 2.3 Message

A message is a signal or a symbol that will be conveyed by an individual with the desire that the message will express or create a certain meaning or effect in the other person who wants to communicate. While the message in the introductory book of Communication Science written by [12], that a message is a series of signals or symbols created by someone for a certain purpose with the

hope that the delivery of the symbol will be successful in creating something.

A message as: the actual physical product that the source encodes. Please note the difference between encoding and message because both seem similar. Encoding is a process that occurs in the brain to produce a message, while a message is the result of the encoding process that can be felt or received by the senses.

Messages in communication have several key elements, including the sender (the person or entity sending the message), the recipient (the person or entity receiving the message), the communication channel (the medium used to convey the message), and the context (the situation or condition in which the message is delivered) [13].

Compared to the study of verbal communication, the study of nonverbal communication is actually relatively new. While the first field began to be taught in ancient Greece, namely the study of persuasion, especially speech, the earliest study of the second field may have only begun in 1873 by Charles Darwin who wrote about facial expressions. Since then, many people have studied the importance of nonverbal communication for successful communication, not only communication experts, but also anthropologists, psychologists, and sociologists.

Nonverbal symbols are more difficult to interpret than verbal symbols. There is no reliable dictionary that can help nonverbal translators. Simply put, nonverbal messages are all signals that are not words. According to Larry A. Samovar and Richard E. Porter, nonverbal communication includes all stimuli (except verbal stimuli) in a communication setting, produced by individuals and their use of the environment, that have potential message value for the sender or receiver; thus this definition includes both intentional and unintentional behaviors as part of the overall communication event; we send

many nonverbal messages without realizing that they are meaningful to others.

Most nonverbal cues are also not universal, but rather are culturally bound, so they are learned, not innate. Only a few nonverbal cues are innate. We are all born knowing how to smile, but most experts agree that where, when, and to whom we express these emotions are learned, and therefore influenced by context and culture. The way we move through space when communicating with others is based primarily on our physical and emotional responses to environmental stimuli. While most of our verbal behavior is explicit and cognitively processed, our nonverbal behavior is spontaneous, ambiguous, often fleeting, and beyond our conscious awareness and control. That is why Edward T. Hall called this nonverbal language "the language of silence."

#### 2.4 *Stuart Hall Reception Theory*

Reception comes from Latin, namely *recipere*, in English reception which can be interpreted as acceptance. Reception in a broad sense is a way of giving meaning and processing text to media displays, so that it can produce a response to it. Reception theory is the interpretation carried out by the audience which focuses on how the audience receives the message [14].

Stuart Hall's theory of encoding/decoding is a significant contribution to the study of media and cultural communication. In this text, Hall offers a rationale that deconstructs the classical linear model of communication (sender-message-receiver), replacing it with a structural approach that acknowledges the social and ideological complexities of communication practices [15].

Hall begins by highlighting the weaknesses of traditional models of communication that are too linear and fail to understand the processes of production and reception of meaning in mass media. He proposes that

communication should be seen as a complex structure of domination that includes four distinct but interconnected moments: production, circulation, distribution/consumption, and reproduction. Each of these moments is not deterministic and has its own unique modalities and conditions of existence.

Hall's central concept is that meaning is not determined finally by the sender (media producer), but through a process of encoding and decoding that has the possibility of divergence. In this context, Hall asserts that the media encodes messages in a certain discourse structure, but the recipient has the capacity to read or reinterpret the message differently.

In simple terms, encoding can be understood as a process of production, construction, and framing of reality, which generally uses the ideology of the dominant group or serves hegemonic values. While decoding is a process of meaning and reproduction of messages. The encoding/decoding model proposed by Stuart Hall aims to further explain how meaning and messages are sent and interpreted [16]. In simple terms, Hall's theory explains that messages constructed by producers (mass media or communicators) cannot always be interpreted similarly by message recipients or audiences.

Meanwhile, the decoding process is highly dependent on the audience's perception, thoughts, and past experiences. This is what makes the decoding process varied and unique for each individual and at the same time allows it to be non-linear or different from the initial purpose of message production. In the decoding process, Hall classifies the audience into three message understanding positions:

- 1) Dominant-hegemonic position, A person is in a dominant-hegemonic position when they understand and receive messages according to the code used by the sender.

- 2) Negotiation (negotiated position), Meanwhile, the negotiation position is a classification for audiences who accept the dominant meaning of the message while providing their own interpretation, but adjusting it to the personal or local context.
- 3) Oppositional (oppositional position). As for the oppositional position, which is the opposite of the dominant-hegemonic position. The recipient understands the message but rejects it and reinterprets it from a perspective that is contrary to the encoder [16].

The gap between the sender's and receiver's codes often causes "misunderstanding" or different meanings. For example, the sender may use a dominant code, but the receiver may interpret it in an oppositional framework. This shows that the meaning of a message is not fixed, it is flexible and debatable.

## 2.5 Digital Body Language

The term digital body language was first popularized by [17] in her book 'Digital Body Language: How to Build Trust and Connection, No Matter the Distance'. According to her, digital communication is increasingly dominating social and professional interaction spaces, people no longer speak using body language, because most communication is done virtually and the form of communication relies more on how to convey something than the intended meaning. This concept is called digital body language.

[17] introduced the concept of digital body language as a set of non-verbal cues that emerge in technology-based communication. This concept emphasizes the importance of understanding the implied meaning in digital messages, given the absence of physical elements such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and body

gestures that usually accompany face-to-face communication. Erica Dhawan identified a number of key indicators that represent digital body language and play an important role in building trust, connection, and the effectiveness of long-distance communication.

There are several important elements conveyed in the concept of digital body language according to Erica Dhawan, namely:

- 1) Choice of Words and Tone of Message
- 2) Use of Punctuation and Emoticons
- 3) Response Time and Immediacy
- 4) Message Structure and Writing Format
- 5) Level of Formality and Cultural Context
- 6) Appropriate Use of Digital Media

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to comprehensively understand the reception of "dry text" as digital body language among WhatsApp users and the factors that influence the understanding of the meaning of their messages. This approach is relevant to explore the meanings constructed by users based on their experiences and social contexts [18]; [19] with a post-positivism paradigm. The unit of analysis is WhatsApp users who actively use dry text in group and personal communication. This unit was chosen because they are in direct interaction with the research object. Data collection techniques were carried out through in-depth interviews with a number of active WhatsApp user informants from various age and professional backgrounds. Data were analyzed using the Hall encoding-decoding framework to identify patterns of meaning in dry text messages.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

WhatsApp, a messaging app launched in 2009 by Jan Koum and Brian

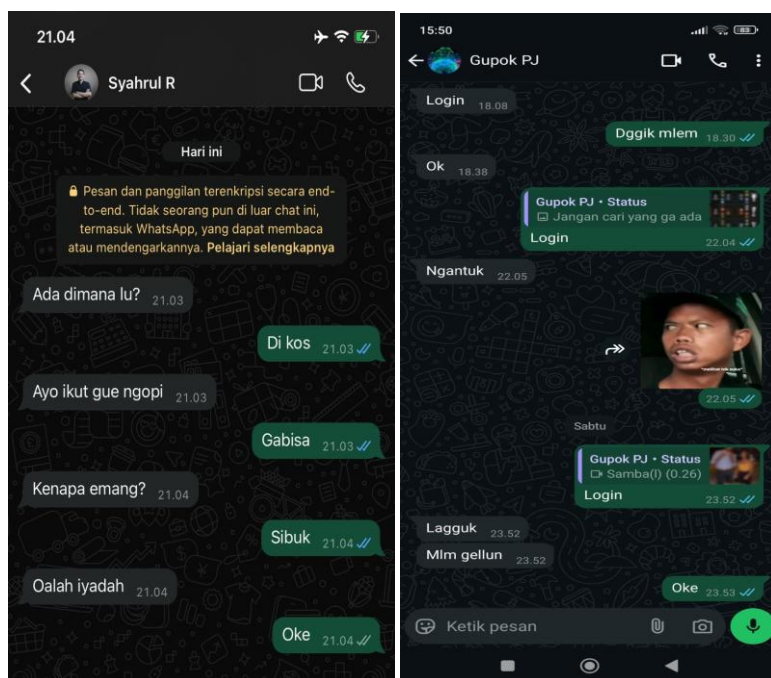
Acton, has undergone a major transformation since being acquired by Facebook in 2014. With over two billion active users, WhatsApp has become a major communication medium globally, including in Indonesia. Innovations such as end-to-end encryption, the Status feature, and AI integration through Meta AI have further strengthened its position in everyday digital life.

However, in the practicality of digital communication, new challenges arise, one of which is the phenomenon of dry text—a text communication style that lacks emotional expression. Messages such as “okay,” “yes,” or “hmm” can be perceived as neutral, cold, or even offensive, depending on the social context, the relationship between users, and emotional expectations in communication.

The dry text phenomenon is closely related to the concept of digital body language proposed by [20], namely a form of body language that is transformed into text-based communication. On WhatsApp, the absence of non-verbal cues such as tone of voice and facial expressions makes message interpretation dependent on additional elements such as emojis, punctuation, and time of delivery.

The findings of this study reveal that the reception of “dry text” among WhatsApp users is a multi-faceted phenomenon, deeply embedded in the dynamic interplay of contextual cues, relational history, and individual psychological states. Participants consistently reported that the interpretation of “dry text” messages was described as concise, lacking in emojis or expressive punctuation, and straightforward. This supports [15] premise that message decoding is an active and often negotiated process, where the “preferred meaning” of the sender can be reinterpreted by the receiver. For example, a simple “Ok” from a close friend might be understood as an affirmative response, whereas the same “Ok” from a boss in a professional context, or from a romantic partner during an argument, might be perceived as dismissive or passive-aggressive.

Based on the interpretation of data from WhatsApp screenshots and in-depth interviews with six informants, it was found that all informants tended to occupy a negotiated reading position, namely accepting part of the dominant meaning of the message but adjusting it to the personal context, social relations, and experiences of each individual.



#### Informant 1

Understands the potential for misinterpretation in text messages and tends

to clarify the intent of the message. He adjusts the interpretation to the context of the relationship and the emotional situation in

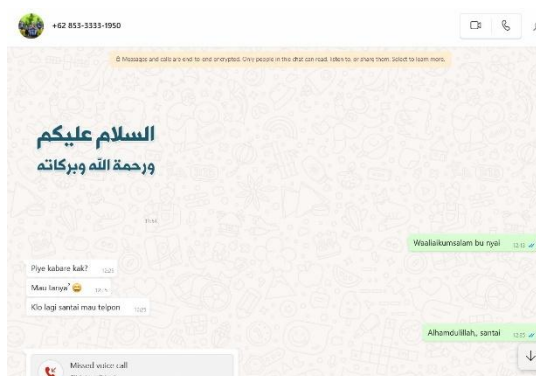
which the message is received. He exhibits dominant and negotiated reading, depending on the situation.



#### Informant 2

Interpreting dry text based on social context, such as the sender's business and the culture of communication on social media. In

religious communities, a flat style is considered normal. Negotiated reading is clearly seen from the ability to interpret flexibly.

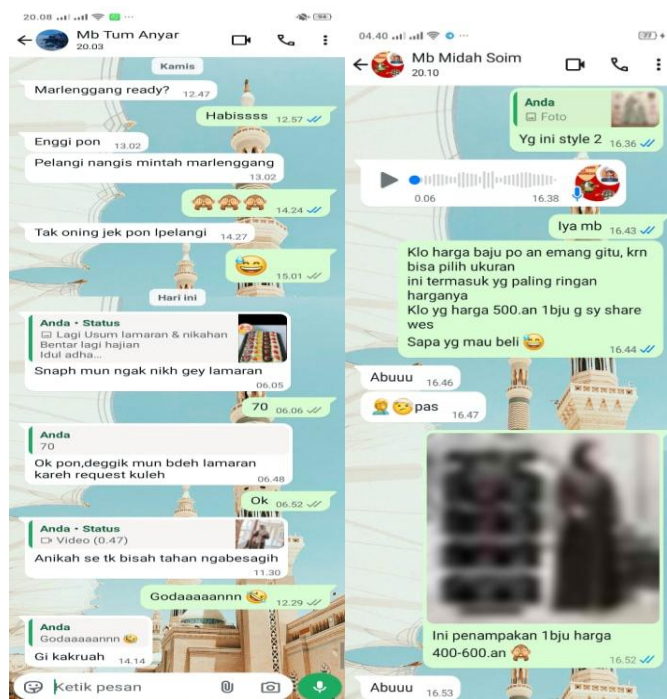


#### Informant 3

Relying on social relations, local culture, and the use of voice notes and emoticons to complement meaning. He

rereads and adapts the message to the personal context, demonstrating a strong form of negotiated reading.

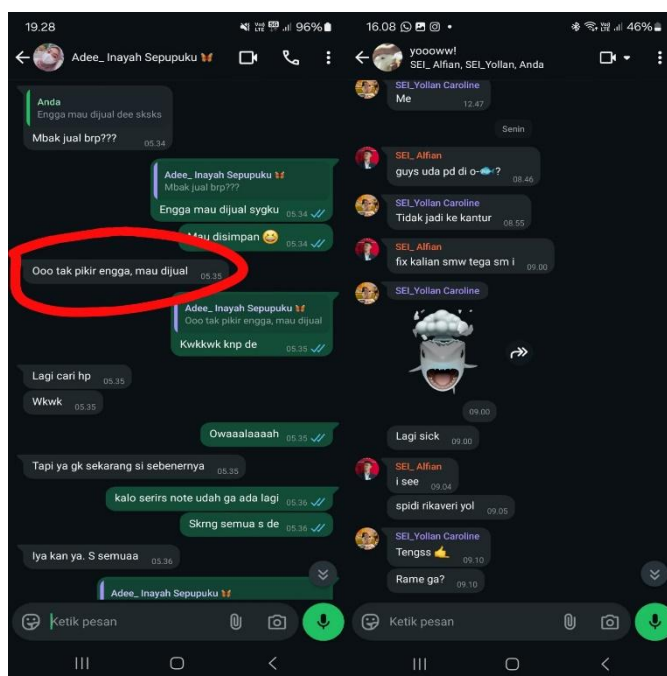




## Informant 4

Recognizes the importance of context and communication habits in interpreting

messages. Sometimes accepts the meaning directly (dominant), but at other times adjusts it to the personal situation (negotiated).

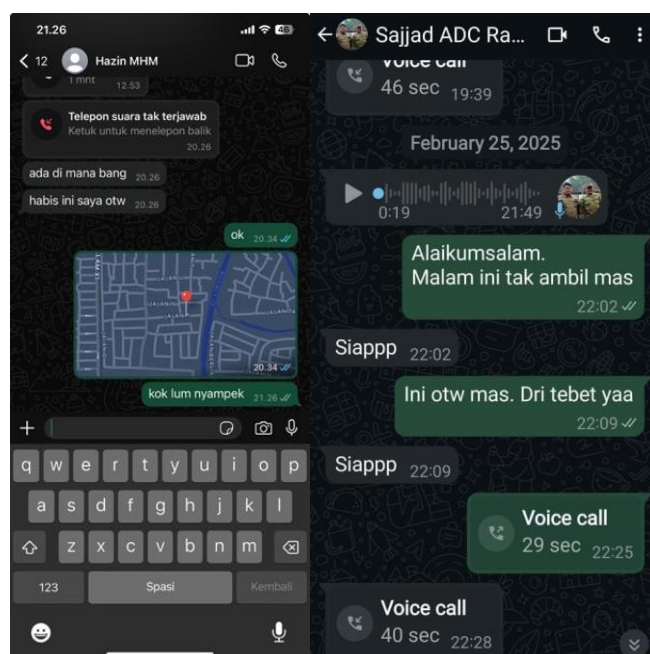


## Informant 5

Experiences confusion when receiving dry text and feels the need for additional confirmation. He tends to modify

the meaning based on personal experience and interpretation, thus demonstrating strong negotiated reading.





#### Informant 6

Criticizing the short communication style that is often considered ambiguous. He believes that the effectiveness of the message depends on the recipient's ability to read the context and background. He also adjusts the meaning of the message to the knowledge and culture of communication, which reflects negotiated reading.

The reading of a message is greatly influenced by the relationship between the sender and the recipient, as well as the cultural values that are adhered to. In the Indonesian context, warm and caring communication is still the main expectation, so that dry text is often misinterpreted. With this theory, dry text is understood not only as a communication style, but as a symbolic form that is open to various interpretations. A text that looks "dry" can have a polite, formal, or even emotional meaning, depending on the context of the relationship and the recipient's experience. This shows that in digital communication, meaning is not only determined by the text, but also by who is reading it, in what situation, and with what socio-cultural background. So that From the data results above, it can be described according to Stuart Hall's reception theory as follows:

- a. **Dominant Reading**, some informants interpreted dry text as an honest

expression that is appropriate to the context. They understand that time constraints and digital pressures can affect how someone responds to messages.

- b. **Negotiated Reading**, some informants felt that dry text was acceptable in certain situations, but still hoped for clarification or additional expressions such as emojis to clarify the meaning.
- c. **Oppositional Reading**, other informants interpreted dry text as a form of indifference or even passive aggression. They felt offended or disrespected when receiving such messages, especially in the context of close relationships.

Essentially, "dry text" functions as a paradox in digital communication: it offers efficiency and directness but at the cost of potential expressive clarity. Its reception is not a simple decoding of text symbols but a complex negotiation of meaning, heavily influenced by interpersonal dynamics, situational context, and subtle cues of response time. This study places dry text as part of the dynamics of digital body language and analyzes it through a reception framework, to understand how WhatsApp users construct meaning from messages that lack verbal and visual expression.

While it can be a functional and even intimate mode of communication in established relationships, its use demands greater awareness from the sender regarding the potential interpretations of the recipient. This study therefore reaffirms that “digital body language,” even in its minimalist form, is a powerful, if often implicit, component of online interactions that requires greater communicative competence to prevent miscommunication and foster more meaningful connections in the digital realm.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study has described how the reception of “dry text” as a form of digital body language in the WhatsApp communication environment, highlights the complex process by which the meaning of messages is understood by users. A comprehensive analysis reveals that the interpretation of “dry text” is far from universal, but rather manifests as a nuanced and highly subjective phenomenon shaped by the convergence of interpersonal, contextual, and psychological factors. The inherent absence of explicit non-verbal cues in “dry text” demands greater cognitive effort from the recipient, often leading to interpretive ambiguity and a higher potential for miscommunication, underscoring the complexity of meaning-making in text-based digital interactions.

One important finding is the profound influence of relational intimacy and communication history on how “dry text” is perceived. In established, close relationships, “dry text” is often perceived as a sign of efficiency or even a deeper level of comfort, signaling a bond in which explicit expression is no longer a prerequisite for understanding. Conversely, in more formal or newly formed relationships, the same “dry text” can trigger feelings of uncertainty, coldness, or even disrespect, highlighting the important role of pre-existing social frameworks in guiding interpretation and reducing potential communicative friction.

Furthermore, this study illuminates the significant impact of the immediate

situational context and emotional states of senders and receivers on the reception of “dry text.” Messages perceived as “dry” in moments of emotional vulnerability or conflict are more susceptible to negative interpretations, regardless of the sender’s original intentions. This vulnerability to emotional projection underscores the fragility of “dry text” as a communicative tool when precision of emotional delivery is paramount. The need for users to engage in internal disambiguation or external clarification reflects the challenges posed by minimalist digital communication, encouraging a more conscious approach to message construction.

Additionally, the tempo of digital interactions, particularly the speed of response, emerges as an often overlooked but powerful element of digital body language. Quick “dry text” responses often convey attentiveness, while delayed responses can inadvertently indicate disinterest or lack of concern, affecting the overall interpretation of the message and the perceived quality of the interaction. This suggests that even in the absence of traditional nonverbal cues, users are adept at extracting meaning from subtle digital signals, treating response time as an important indicator of engagement and emotional availability.

In conclusion, “dry text” goes beyond mere linguistic brevity; it is a complex communicative value that functions as a distinct, if often ambiguous, form of “digital body language.” Its reception is a dynamic negotiation process, where encoded meaning is continually shaped by the recipient’s subjective lens, informed by the relational dynamics, contextual nuances, and implicit cues of digital interaction. This research, informed by Stuart Hall’s Reception Theory, underscores the need for increased digital communicative competence among WhatsApp users to navigate the inherent ambiguity of “dry text,” foster clearer understandings, stronger interpersonal bonds, and minimize the risk of widespread miscommunication in our increasingly digital world.

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