

BEHAVIORAL ENGAGEMENT OF STUDENTS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT USING WHATSAPP AS A LEARNING TOOL

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ABSTRACT

As a free, secure, and reliable instant messaging and voice/video calling app worldwide, WhatsApp allows users to send texts, photos, videos, documents, and location information over an internet connection, using end-to-end encryption for security.

WhatsApp has been extensively used by many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Indonesia as a near synchronous online learning platform. This program enables users to make announcements, exchange ideas and learning materials, and participate in online debates. Some recent publications inform its utilization in learning language, yet little discusses how students engage in the learning activities. Therefore, to fill this void, the present study aims to investigate the students' behavioral engagement during online learning using WhatsApp. To collect the data, this study employed observation and semi- structured interviews. An observation was completed in one class at a state university in Kediri, East Java, Indonesia to perceive how the students responded to the teacher's instructions during the learning process. Meanwhile, the interviews were conducted with nine students in a similar class. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that students engaged behaviorally by (1) posing questions or comments politely, (2) using emoticons and emojis as politeness reinforcements, and (3) confirming the unclear information behind the scene. Implications for teaching and further studies are discussed.

This study aims to determine how Indonesian students use WhatsApp as an English learning tool and how it impacts their English proficiency. This study employed a mixed-methods approach, with surveys and interviews serving as data collection instruments. The results indicate that Indonesian students use WhatsApp as an English learning tool for discussions, sharing information, and practicing English. The study also found that using WhatsApp can improve students' English skills, particularly in speaking and writing. Furthermore, students feel more comfortable and confident using English through WhatsApp. The results of this study can be used as a reference for developing more effective English teaching strategies using digital technology.

Keywords: WhatsApp, English learning, digital technology, English proficiency,

INTRODUCTION

English language learning is a crucial aspect of education in today's era of globalization. However, many students still experience difficulties in learning English, particularly in speaking and writing. Therefore, innovations in English language learning are needed to improve students' English skills and increase their engagement in the learning process.

Student engagement (behavioral engagement) in the learning process is a crucial factor in determining student success in learning English. Student engagement can be defined as active participation in the learning process, both physically and mentally. In the context of English learning, student engagement can include participation in discussions, asking questions, and other activities related to English learning.

WhatsApp is one example of digital technology that can be used to increase student engagement in English learning. By using WhatsApp, students can discuss, share information, and practice English online. This study aims to determine how students engage in English learning using WhatsApp as a learning tool.

Research Objectives:

- To determine how students engage in English learning using WhatsApp as a learning tool.
- To determine the factors that influence student engagement in English learning using WhatsApp.

Research Benefits:

- To provide useful information for English teachers and researchers about the use of WhatsApp as an English learning tool to increase student engagement.
- To help improve students' English skills by increasing student engagement in the learning process.

So far, online learning has received considerable attention as an alternative to traditional face-to-face and instructor-led education (Douglas & Van Der Vyver, 2004; Hidayati et al., 2021). Online teaching offers a huge opportunity to expand the learning environment for diverse student populations across various ranges of regions. Moreover, the current after-pandemic situation has strengthened the position of online learning to be the solution for distance learning (Hidayati et al., 2021). In online learning, teachers usually utilize several strategies and applications that support them in delivering materials, communicating with students, sharing information, and conducting discussions (Irianti & Sulastri, 2018; Ramalia, 2021). Among the applications, WhatsApp Messenger is present as one of the most commonly used applications in the Indonesian EFL teaching and learning milieu.

As a handy and friendly-user application, WhatsApp has been preferred to assist language teachers in facilitating the learning process. Its utilization has provided many benefits, especially in enhancing students' English vocabularies (Bensalem, 2018; Hashemifardnia et al., 2018; Jafari & Chalak, 2016), improving their reading and writing skills (Ahmed, 2019; Susanti & Tarmuji, 2016), boosting the students' learning motivation as well as reducing their learning anxiety (Ali & Bin-Hady 2019; Indaryani & Suliworo, 2018), and more importantly, helping teachers deliver instructions (Alshammari, 2017) which are commonly sent in the chat groups feature (Amry, 2014). Due to these potential advantages, WhatsApp chat groups are currently getting more popular among language teachers and educators.

In the recent learning trends in which many schools and universities in Indonesia implement online learning, teachers and lecturers require extra effort to effectively attract students to stay engaged. Zhang, et al. (2007) inform that students require teachers to promote online discussion forums to provide guidance, which makes them more comfortable in the discussion. To meet this challenge, this research believes that teachers need to play the role of a mentor. In other words, students'

participation in the online learning platforms is shown by the positive reactions of all parties in the online environment. Very, Unfortunately, it is a really hard effort to make sure that all students give full attention during online learning, because the teachers could not control their activities and movements constantly.

Considering the difficulties in online learning, teachers must consider students' involvement in the learning process. This refers to the students' engagement to the degree of attention, effort, participation, interest, and enthusiasm shown by students when they are learning or being taught and it relates to students' investment in learning and their commitment to achieving learning goals. In this context, students' engagement is a multidimensional concept that is generally considered to include behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Although there are three types of engagement, behavioral engagement has been studied the most extensively concerning student achievement and graduation rates (Brophy, 1988). Behavioral engagement can be observed when students contribute to classroom discussion, participate in academic tasks, and prove that they are listening to the teacher's instruction, especially in an online learning atmosphere, behavioral engagement can be observed. The literature shows that students with a high sense of belonging, teacher and peer support, and positive expectations show higher behavioral engagement and obtain good learning outcomes (Wooley & Bowen, 2007). The pioneering work by Finn (1989) saw that students' behavioral engagement while participating in classroom activities is a starting point for good grades and identification with school.

Many studies have discussed students' engagement in EFL contexts (Harunasari & Halim, 2019; Sadoughi & Hejazi, 2021), yet rarely do studies discuss students' behavioral engagement during online learning, especially in the WhatsApp-mediated online learning (Rabbianty et al., 2021). Therefore, the current study is an investigative attempt to answer the following research question (RQ), "How do the EFL students engage behaviorally in the WhatsApp-mediated online learning?" under the concept of behavioral engagement articulated by Fredricks et al., (1996). It measures the students' behavioral engagement in terms of time-on-task, student persistence in completing the assigned work, and the level of effort the student invests in completing the tasks. It also considers the students' behavior in following the instructions when learning and participating online.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Behavioral Engagement

Behavioral Engagement is the level of active participation, effort, and concrete actions that a person—especially a student—shows in a learning activity or assignment, which includes attendance, adherence to rules, and extra effort.

It is a concept used to describe the level of active student participation in the learning process. Behavioral engagement can be defined as concrete actions taken by students during the learning process, such as:

- Participating in class discussions
- Asking questions
- Completing assignments and activities
- Interacting with teachers and peers
- Using available learning resources

High behavioral engagement can improve students' learning abilities, increase motivation, and reduce negative behaviors. Therefore, behavioral engagement is an

important aspect of the learning process that teachers and educators need to pay attention to.

In the context of learning English using WhatsApp, behavioral engagement can be defined as students' active participation in online discussions, sharing information, and practicing English through the WhatsApp application.

WhatsApp Group: A Near Synchronous Learning Forum

A concept that uses WhatsApp groups as a learning platform that allows students to interact and learn near-synchronously. Near Synchronous means that interactions between students and teachers, or between students themselves, occur almost simultaneously, but not necessarily in real time. In WhatsApp groups, students can send messages, images, videos, and other files, and receive replies from teachers or their peers in a relatively short time.

Advantages:

- Students can learn flexibly and independently
- Teachers can monitor student progress and provide feedback
- Students can interact with teachers and their peers online
- Can improve students' communication and collaboration skills

WhatsApp group provides pedagogical, social, and technological benefits supporting the implementation of online learning to deliver certain announcements, share ideas and learning resources, and have online discussions (Amry, 2014). It can also increase the students' motivation and accelerate the development of knowledge in the study group. In addition, online learning with the help of WhatsApp can enhance students' collaboration, share useful knowledge and information, and maintain the joy of learning. In short, participation, collaboration, and fun learning are the values the students could gain amid the learning process since it provides several benefits, such as their collaborative usage, free download, easy to use, availability for sharing comments, text, images, videos, sounds, and documents, ease to post announcements and publish their work in the groups, creation, and dissemination of information and knowledge easily (Jimoyiannis, Tsiotakis, Roussinos, & Siorenta, 2013). Given this fact, the WhatsApp group is considered effective to use as an EFL teaching platform.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design:

This study employed a qualitative research design with a case study method. The aim of this study was to determine students' behavioral engagement in learning English using WhatsApp as a learning tool.

Sample

The sample for this study was 58 students studying English at a high school. The sample was selected using a purposive sampling method, selecting students with diverse English language abilities and who had used WhatsApp as a learning tool.

Setting and Participants

In a qualitative study, the participant selection aims to locate information-rich individuals or cases (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). In line with this, an appropriate sampling strategy should be purposeful and be based on the assumption that the researcher wants to discover, understand and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, the researchers purposefully chose to invite participation from one cohort of fourth-semester EFL students in a state university in Kediri, East Java, Indonesia. Fifty eight students of class A from an EFL class (24 males; 34 females) were recruited to be observed. This class was chosen because of their enthusiasm to participate in this study. Furthermore, nine of the students (6 males; 12 females) were selected for further interviews. The selection criteria were decided due to the students' activeness in the WhatsApp group; 6 of them were very active, 6 others were active, and 6 students were less active. Before the data collection, the participants were informed to fill in a consent form to declare their willingness as well as protect their confidentiality

Research Instruments

- Observation: Observations were conducted to determine students' behavioral engagement in learning English using WhatsApp.
- Interviews: Interviews were conducted to determine students' perceptions of using WhatsApp as an English learning tool.
- Content Analysis: Content analysis was conducted to determine the types of interactions that occurred within WhatsApp groups.

Research Procedures:

1. Establishment of a WhatsApp group for English learning.
2. Observation of student behavioral engagement in English learning using WhatsApp.
3. Interviews with students to determine their perceptions of using WhatsApp as an English learning tool.
4. Content analysis of the WhatsApp group to determine the types of interactions that occur.

Data Analysis

The collected data will be analyzed using thematic analysis. Themes emerging from the data will be identified and analyzed to determine student behavioral engagement in English learning using WhatsApp.

Validity Criteria:

The validity criteria for this research are:

- Credibility: The data collected must be accurate and reliable.
- Transferability: The research results can be applied to other similar contexts.
- Dependability: The research results are reliable and trustworthy.

By using a systematic and controlled research methodology, this research is expected to provide valid and reliable results regarding student behavioral engagement in English learning using WhatsApp as a learning tool.

The technique of Collecting the Data

The researchers used observation and semi-structured interviews to answer the research question in collecting the data. The observation was conducted by looking at the textual communication done by students in WhatsApp groups during the classes to evaluate how they question and respond to the teacher's instructions. It was conducted

in a listening and speaking class in three meetings. Meanwhile, semi-structured interviews were conducted to identify students' participation, effort, attention, persistence, and positive conduct regarding the online learning on WhatsApp. The interviews were conducted online via WhatsApp Messenger from August-September 2025.

Posing questions or comments politely

Students' persistence reflects their commitment to completing the course and study plan. Persistence is considered a positive outcome measure (Cookson, 1988) and it indicates a positive behavioral engagement. In an online learning environment, persistence is usually defined as completing online courses and related to online behaviors such as participation and discussion. In line with that, WhatsApp as a learning platform has been providing a positive experience for most participants. This encouraged them to contribute to the learning activities by actively commenting on every teacher's instruction and questioning the teacher anytime they needed to confirm particular information. According to the participants' statements, they always considered etiquette and politeness once they commented or replied to the teacher's instruction and asked questions. The following excerpts support.

Excerpt 1

Adi: "To respond to a piece of information that the lecturer gave, the first thing I did was to read the information carefully and carefully so that there would be no misinterpretation/misunderstanding. Only then, do I reply message/information by paying attention to etiquette in sending messages? The examples are:

- All right, sir/ma'am. Thank you for the information 🙏
- Noted, sir/ma'am. Thank you 🙏"

Excerpt 2

Dewi: "During online learning on WhatsApp, the lecturer often conveys messages about approval and other info. I usually respond to her with expressions of agreement or disapproval, also thanking her for the information to show my respect. The examples are:

- Thank you for the information, Ma'am 🙏
- See you too, Ma'am. Have a nice day ✨
- I agree, Ma'am 🙏"

The students mentioned that they participated actively in the online class by giving positive or negative responses depending on the given information. Furthermore, they also considered the language use based on the politeness patterns and ethics applied in the Indonesian context. The students' sensitivity to the language use, form, and context showed that they have high critical language awareness (Hidayati, et al., 2019). In line with this, Molinari (2004) mentions that etiquette allows students to link to group members, group processes, and learning contents. This leads them to build their soft skills in online learning which embed the value of education, and the ability to implement the contents and correlate them with realities (Sener, 2012). Furthermore, the students' interaction in the WhatsApp group indicates their learning satisfaction which is central to the education experience (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). To strengthen the arguments, the following screenshots were taken from the observation.

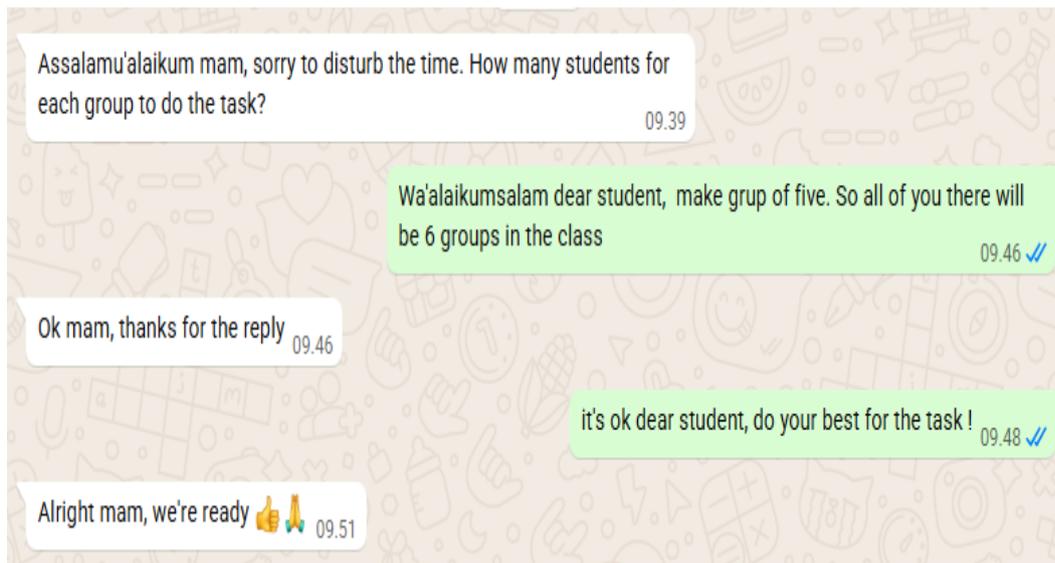
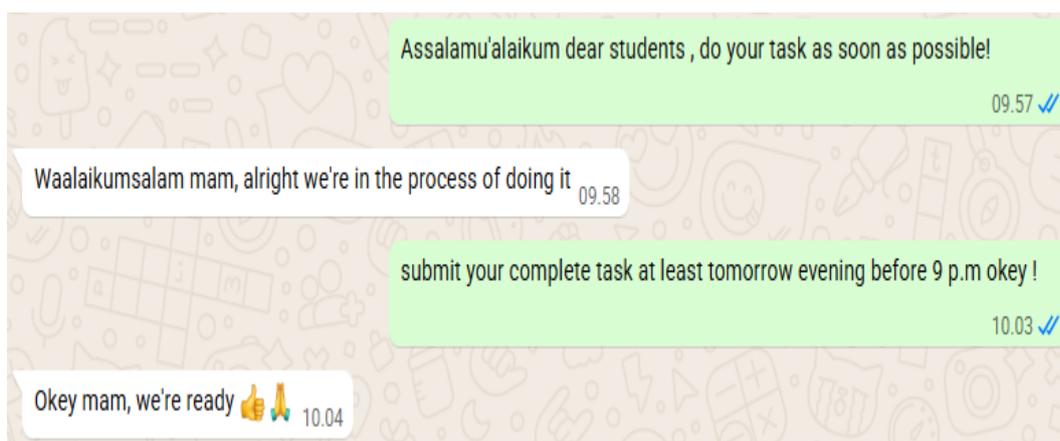


Figure 1 A Students' question to the teacher



Picture 2 Students' responses to a teacher's instruction

Picture 1 illustrates the way a student asked a question about the given task. She would like to confirm the earlier instruction and ask whether she could upload the overtime video that she had made or if she needed to retake it. This student began her message by greeting "Assalamu'alaikum Warahmatullahi Wabarakatuh". As Brown and Levinson (1987), Ferguson (1981), and Laver (1979) pointed out that it is commonly used as a ritualized politeness greeting in general Islamic society. Since the majority of students in this class were Muslim, so was the teacher. Furthermore, the students usually asked for an apology before coming up to the body of the message. After revealing the content, the student closed the question by thanking the teacher. Culturally speaking, this messaging pattern fulfilled the politeness requirement based on the accepted values in the surrounding. In a similar vein, Picture 2 also reveals the students' ways of responding to the teacher's instruction. All of them commenced their reply by posing greetings "Wa'alaikumsalam, Good morning." These expressions were aimed at showing their politeness. Huang (2008) argues that politeness views among

people are different depending on cultures. What the Indonesian people considered to be polite might not be right for western people and vice versa. Moreover, Holmes (2001) and Cutting (2002) contend that politeness is significantly related to word selection to fit the right situations. The greetings selected by the students were the most appropriate dictions to show respect to teachers in Indonesian contexts. By showing that, the students are successful to perform a polite profile which is appreciated by the education community. Furthermore, greetings are also one of the characteristics of a good social manner (Soo et al., 2011; Hei et al., 2013).

Politeness strategies in online texts can also be distinguished based on gender. It is said that women tend to use longer texts than men (Pratama, 2019). They also use abbreviations and emoticons significantly more than men and the younger they are, the more abbreviations they use (Ling, 2005). A longer message is supposed to convey more information to clear off misunderstandings.

Han & Hyland (2015) stated that the teachers should carefully plan their strategies to enhance the students' engagement. WhatsApp as a platform for information sharing tasks has received very positive feedback from participants, indicating that it is a promising virtual tool and environment that can promote interaction in English learning. This will potentially improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the learning experience (Boyinbode et al., 2017). To conclude, the finding informs that WhatsApp has given meaningful online learning activities that can encourage EFL students to engage positively, and therefore, it is recommended to utilize as a learning platform for university students.

Using emoticons or emojis as politeness reinforcements

As mentioned earlier, cultures differ in the politeness strategies of a particular society. In the research context in which communication is built in the cyber community, the potential to form different politeness strategies is widely open. This type of communication has been infiltrating human life and transforming the principle and features of politeness (Pratama, 2019). He continues that the shift of politeness pattern in online learning is through the presence of multimodal texts in the message. Multimodality in this context means that during cyber communication, people tend to share information not only by texts but also through pictures, sounds, and even videos. These modes are considered as the representation of human expression when attending to cyber communication.

WhatsApp emoticons are becoming an important tool as an online facilitator for communication for the primary reason that emoticons can enhance the messages and can help the students to express emotions or feelings (Kannan & Shreya, 2017; Lestari, 2019). In addition, (Kavanagh, 2016) contends that WhatsApp emoticons also help convey positive politeness strategies. An emoticon is a combination of two words – Emotion and icon (MacAlpine, 2014). Primarily, emoticons were created with a combination of symbols and punctuations. This is also defined as facial emotions or a combination of characters and text messages to show the writer's mood (Crystal, 2001). At least, four of many factors, such as anxiety, attitude, ability, and motivation affect students' learning, especially in the online environment. Those emotional patterns were usually represented through particular emoticons.

Excerpt 3

Cici: "Emoticons in WhatsApp are commonly used by students when studying online. These emoticons seem to be able to increase the level of politeness of a message being conveyed"

because it is like representing my feelings. Such as, a hand that is pleading or is holding hands while looking down symbolizes forgiveness. Although the original maning might be different... students, including I, consider this emoticon to be an emoticon that must be used at the end of a message when chatting with teachers/lecturers.”

Excerpt 4

Nila: *“On WhatsApp, I only do textual communication, thus, I'm afraid that other people will misunderstand what I wrote. So, to show my welcome and interest..., I like to use emoticons. Simply, it shows what I feel, because people do not see my facial expression in chat....”*

Students' attitudes toward online learning may vary. They may feel excited, happy, confident, and adequate, or may feel bored, frustrated, and inadequate. Amidst the online learning through WhatsApp, the students frequently expressed their attitudes by inserting emoticons in some parts of their chats. Kannan & Shreya (2019) asserted that it is important to comprehend facial expressions since emoticons 'are graphic icons that determine the emotion or mood as seen on a person's face (p. 55).' There were certain emoticons the students used to reveal their moods. The following screenshots taken from observation exemplify the most frequent WhatsApp Emoticons shown during the interaction.



Figure 3 Common emoticons used by student

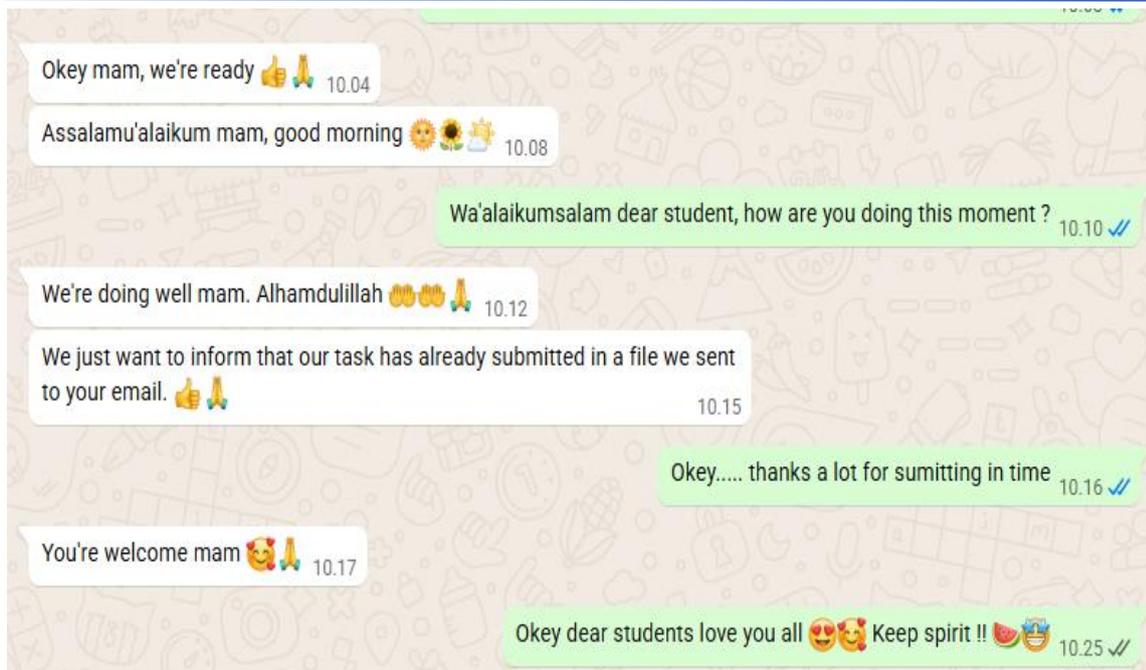


Figure 4 Other frequently used emoticons

Those two pictures inform the WhatsApp emoticons that mostly appeared to represent the students' feelings, as follows.

- 😊 = shy but excited
- 😊 = smiling
- 🙌 = keeping up the spirit
- 🙏 = apologizing / thanking / greeting
- 😊 = grateful/showing closeness
- 🙌 = hugging/showing warmth

These students' facial expression representation can help them express their learning satisfaction as the result of the performance of any educational institution. Satisfaction relates to the students' contribution in terms of motivation, learning, assurance, and retention (Biner et al., 1996). Mensink & King (2020) described that contribution as the conclusion of the efforts of teachers and students, and it shows students' interest in learning. In addition, psychological factors are factors that are psychologically or spiritually related to a student's contribution to learning. As one of the internal factors, psychological conditions may affect the online learning process. (Irawan et al., 2020) investigated students' psychological impacts on online learning during the pandemic of Covid-19. Those issues are students feeling saturated with online education, lockdown, and social distancing cause students' anxiety because of a lack of interpersonal communication, and economic issues, especially for those whose parents are from lower economic status, since they need to provide internet cost during online learning. It may lead to students' emotional disorders and reflect on their communication, in this case, WhatsApp-mediated learning.

Confirming the unclear information behind the scene

Students have diverse personality types that influence their learning preferences. Those who feel insecure in the WhatsApp Group textual communication tend to be inactive both in commenting and questioning. Instead of posting messages in WhatsApp groups, they would secretly send private chats to their colleagues or teacher to confirm particular issues. Some of the students in this class experienced such a feeling. In the interviews, they articulated:

Excerpt 5

Dany: *"I usually prefer to confirm the unclear information to my friends to my understanding. For example, I asked Alisa, "Alisa, did the assignment from Mrs. Ann mean that we have to watch the video and then we record it, right?" I did this because I was too shy to read to many students, therefore, I prefer this way. I sometimes chat with the lecturer as well, if it is too urgent."*

Excerpt 6

Cici: *"Many of us like to ask questions behind the group, so we are more comfortable asking questions to friends or chatting in the class group without lecturers. This is because I'm too shy, I think... and fear being wrong. From my personal experience, I once asked a question in the group but the responses from the lecturer and friends seemed as if my question was wrong and stupid, so I felt humiliated. So, I was a little afraid of the responses and judgments were given by other people."*

Students' learning styles and preferences need to be considered in the teaching and learning circumstance since it is an important factor that has a significant influence on e-learning. (Harrington & Loffredo, 2010). Teachers might face extroverted and introverted students. Those who are introverted usually find themselves insecure in sending messages in the WhatsApp Group because they are afraid of the negative evaluation from their teacher and counterparts. This condition promotes learning anxiety which potentially impacts learning success (Hidayati et al., 2020). Furthermore, learning. Therefore, teachers are encouraged to facilitate the students who feel hesitant to contribute to the group's textual communication.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has shown that using WhatsApp as an English learning tool can increase students' behavioral engagement in the learning process. Students who use WhatsApp as an English learning tool demonstrate high behavioral engagement in online discussions, sharing resources, and practicing English.

The results of this study also indicate that WhatsApp can be an effective learning platform for improving students' English skills. Students can use WhatsApp to interact with their teachers and peers, share resources, and practice English online.

Implications:

- Teachers can use WhatsApp as an English learning tool to increase student behavioral engagement.
- Students can use WhatsApp as an effective learning platform to improve their English skills.
- This study can serve as a reference for future research on the use of digital technology in English learning.

Limitations:

- This study is limited by the sample size of only 30 students.
- This study did not consider other factors that may influence student behavioral engagement.

Recommendations:

- Future research could use a larger sample size and consider other factors that may influence student behavioral engagement.
- Teachers can use the results of this study as a reference for developing more effective English learning strategies using digital technology.

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