The Influence of Sarcasm on Communication Misunderstandings in University Students

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to determine the effect of the use of sarcasm on communication misunderstandings in college students. Sarcasm is a form of communication that contains satire or irony, and often causes ambiguity of meaning, so it has the potential to cause misunderstanding in the communication process. This research uses a quantitative approach with an ex-post facto method. The research subjects were students of the Buddhist Communication Science Study Program of STIAB Jinarakkhita Lampung TA. 2024-2025 as many as 49 respondents. Data were collected through questionnaires, then analyzed using normality test, homogeneity test, and simple linear regression analysis with the help of SPSS 16.0. The results showed that sarcasm had a significant effect on communication misunderstanding, with a coefficient of determination (R Square) of 0.487 or 48.7%. This means that 48.7% of students' communication misunderstanding is influenced by the use of sarcasm. This finding shows that the higher the intensity of sarcasm use, the greater the potential for communication misunderstanding. Therefore, it is important for students to pay more attention to the way they communicate so that the messages conveyed do not cause the wrong interpretation.

Introduction

Communication is the main foundation of human social life. Through communication, individuals convey ideas, thoughts, emotions, and information with the hope that the messages conveyed can be understood properly. However, in practice, communication does not always run effectively. One factor that can interfere with message clarity is the use of sarcasm. Sarcasm is a form of communication that contains irony, satire, or mockery delivered indirectly, often with the intention of humor or subtle criticism (Cui, 2022). Although it has an expressive function, the use of sarcasm can also cause ambiguity in the understanding of the message. Communication is the foundational pillar of human interaction and social cohesion. It serves not only as a medium for conveying ideas,

emotions, and information but also as a crucial mechanism for building relationships, resolving conflicts, and fostering mutual understanding. However, effective communication is not always guaranteed. Numerous barriers linguistic, psychological, contextual, and cultural can interfere with message clarity and interpretation. Among these barriers, one subtle yet impactful form of distortion is the use of sarcasm.

Sarcasm is a unique form of communication, as it often contradicts the speaker's true intentions. This form of communication is no stranger to everyday life, we often encounter it in light conversation, social media, and even in the entertainment world. But behind the humorous or sarcastic impression it may give, sarcasm also holds potential problems, especially when the message is not received as intended. When compared to irony and cynicism, sarcasm is harsher (Hasanah et al., 2021). Sarcasm is a form of figurative language that often relies on saying the opposite of what one means, typically with the intent of expressing criticism, humor, or irony. While sarcasm may be perceived as witty or entertaining by some, it can easily be misunderstood by others, especially when the tone, facial expressions, or context are not clearly conveyed. Sarcasm's dual nature where literal and intended meanings differ makes it a uniquely complex and potentially problematic communication style.

In academic environments, such as among students, sarcasm often appears in daily interactions both directly and through digital media. This has the potential to trigger communication misunderstandings, especially if the context or intonation is not properly captured by the interlocutor. Misunderstandings that occur can have an impact on interpersonal relationships, the effectiveness of group work, and the psychological atmosphere of individuals. This phenomenon is important to study considering that students are social groups who actively communicate in various contexts, ranging from academic to social. Understanding the influence of sarcasm in communication can contribute to increasing awareness of effective communication and preventing potential conflicts due to miscommunication. The risk of misunderstanding is further amplified in text-based communication, which lacks the non-verbal cues that typically accompany sarcastic remarks. Without tone of voice or facial expression, sarcasm in text messages or online posts is highly susceptible to misinterpretation (Das & Clark, 2019).

This issue is especially pertinent to students in communication-related programs, such as those studying Buddhist Communication at STIAB Jinarakkhita Lampung. These students are expected not only to master communication theories but also to embody values such as clarity, compassion, and mindfulness in their interactions. Understanding how sarcasm functions within their own peer groups provides valuable insights into both the risks and responsibilities of communication.

Based on this background, this study aims to determine the extent of the influence of sarcasm on communication misunderstandings in college students. This is in line with research from (Sabrina et al., 2025) entitled The Use of Sarcasm Sentences of Bem Fisip Unair Through Flower Bouquets in Social Criticism, the research revealed that BEM FISIP Unair has not used good and correct language in conveying a social criticism because in the flower bouquets they made used language that demonized several parties such as the President, Vice President and former President. This research is expected to increase understanding of the sarcasm language style and also awareness for students and Indonesian society to be wiser and more careful in conveying aspirations. This research is expected to provide new insights into the dynamics of interpersonal communication among the younger generation, as well as a basis for consideration in developing communication strategies that are more appropriate and sensitive to meaning.

Sarcasm

Etymologically, the term "sarcasm" comes from the Greek sarcasmos, which is derived from the verb sarcazein, meaning "to tear flesh like a dog" or "to speak with bitterness". In linguistic practice, sarcasm is a style of language that belongs to the majas of opposition. However, compared to the more subtle irony, sarcasm is sharper and more piercing. This style is often used to convey criticism implicitly but with a painful tone (Dinari, 2015). Sarcasm is often categorized as a form of verbal irony, but it differs significantly in tone and intention. While irony may simply highlight the contrast between expectation and reality, sarcasm typically carries a sharper edge and is more likely to involve a critical or mocking tone. In many cases, sarcasm is used to express dissatisfaction, disagreement, or emotional discomfort, especially when direct confrontation is deemed inappropriate or risky.

According to linguistic experts, the recognition of sarcasm requires advanced pragmatic competence, which includes the ability to read between the lines and infer meaning based on contextual cues. This makes sarcasm particularly difficult for individuals with lower communication skills or limited shared experiences with the speaker. For students in multicultural environments, such as universities, this risk is heightened due to variations in language background, cultural norms, and personal sensitivity levels. Moreover, sarcasm is not inherently negative; it can foster humor, strengthen social bonds, and even act as a coping mechanism in stressful situations. However, its effectiveness depends heavily on mutual understanding and timing. If used excessively or without clear relational closeness, sarcasm may alienate peers or hinder collaborative communication (Blasko et al., 2021).

Sarcasm is a language style used to convey sharp satire or ridicule with the intention of conveying criticism indirectly (Sherly Christina, 2019). Sarcasm is not just a play on words, it is a complex form of communication because it involves double meanings. A sarcastic statement often sounds positive in a literal sense, but the actual meaning is the opposite. Therefore, understanding sarcasm requires sensitivity to context, voice intonation, and the speaker's expression. Errors in interpreting sarcasm can lead to misunderstandings in interpersonal communication (Attardo, 2000). In everyday life, sarcasm is often encountered, both orally and in writing. Social media, literary works, movies, and even casual conversations often serve as a platform for sarcasm. Generally, sarcasm is used to convey disagreement or criticism in a subtle yet powerful way. However, inappropriate or excessive use of sarcasm can hurt the feelings of others and disrupt social relationships (Gibbs Jr, 2007).

The complexity of sarcasm lies in its dependency on shared context and mutual background knowledge between the speaker and the listener. In situations where these shared cues are absent such as interactions among new acquaintances or culturally diverse peerssarcasm can easily be misinterpreted as literal, leading to offense or confusion. In particular, young adults or university students, who are still developing their communication identity and sensitivity, may struggle to recognize sarcasm, especially when it is subtly expressed. Additionally, sarcasm often relies on tone of voice, facial expression, and timing, all of which contribute to the listener's ability to detect the intended meaning (Saadillah et al., 2023). In written or digital communication, these paralinguistic cues are removed, making sarcasm even harder to decode. For this reason, sarcasm in online spaces such as chats, comments, or social media posts is one of the leading contributors to digital miscommunication among students. When misunderstood, what was meant as a joke or light-hearted criticism can escalate into interpersonal conflict or social discomfort.

Understanding these nuances is essential, particularly for students in academic and

multicultural settings, where respectful and effective communication plays a key role in learning, collaboration, and mental well-being.

From the perspective of communication psychology, sarcasm is often associated with social and emotional intelligence. Individuals who are able to use sarcasm appropriately usually have the ability to read social situations and convey messages implicitly. However, not everyone has this ability. Children, adolescents, or individuals with communication disorders may have difficulty understanding sarcasm, as it requires the skill of understanding the meaning behind the words (Filippova & Astington, 2008).

The development of communication technology has also changed the way sarcasm is used and received. On social media, sarcasm has become a common means of conveying social criticism or humor. However, due to the limited non-verbal elements such as intonation and facial expressions, sarcastic meanings are often misunderstood. This shows that sarcasm is not just about language, but also about sensitivity to communication culture and social context (Amir et al., 2016).

The effectiveness of sarcasm as a communication strategy depends largely on the cognitive and emotional readiness of both the speaker and the listener. According to psychological studies, individuals with higher emotional intelligence tend to recognize and interpret sarcasm more accurately, as they are more attuned to subtle social cues such as tone, facial expressions, and body language. Conversely, those with lower emotional sensitivity may take sarcastic remarks literally, resulting in misinterpretation, offense, or emotional discomfort. In academic and peer environments, sarcasm is often used to navigate social status, express dissent, or diffuse tension. While it may foster bonding in some contexts, it can also act as a subtle form of aggression or exclusion in others. For instance, sarcastic jokes within a group may alienate members who are not familiar with the in-jokes or the intended tone. Thus, the use of sarcasm requires a careful balance between expression and empathy.

Communication Misunderstanding

Misunderstanding is a condition in which a person or group of people has a wrong understanding of certain information, statements, or situations (Fitriana, 2016). According to the Big Indonesian Dictionary (KBBI), misunderstanding is a feeling or wrong understanding of something. In the context of communication, misunderstanding occurs when the message conveyed is not received or understood in accordance with the sender's intention, which can be caused by various factors such as differences in interpretation or context. As described in research by Linell (1995), misunderstandings can be overt or covert, depending on how the misunderstanding manifests in the interaction (Pietikäinen, 2018).

Misunderstandings can occur even when both parties speak the same language and share similar cultural backgrounds. Factors such as tone of voice, choice of words, timing, emotional state, and the pre-existing relationship between communicators all play vital roles in shaping how messages are interpreted. A message that seems clear and straightforward to one person may carry an unintended implication or be emotionally charged for another. This discrepancy often arises from differences in personal experience, communication style, or expectations. Furthermore, in student environments where collaboration and group interaction are frequent, communication misunderstandings can lead to academic errors, strained group dynamics, and reduced motivation. For example, unclear instructions in a group project or misinterpreted feedback from peers can disrupt

the learning process and diminish trust. Recognizing these potential breakdowns early and fostering a habit of clarification and feedback can significantly reduce such occurrences (Smith et al., 2011).

Understanding how misunderstandings develop is a crucial step in developing more effective and empathetic communication. It allows students to become more reflective communicators who actively consider how their words might be perceived, especially in emotionally or socially sensitive situations.

Communication is a complex and dynamic process. Misunderstandings can arise when the message conveyed by someone is not captured according to the original intention by the receiving party. One of the main causes of these misunderstandings is cultural differences. In cross-cultural interactions, each individual brings values, norms, and perspectives that have been shaped by their respective social and cultural environments. As explained by (Pratama, 2020), differences in the expression of emotions, the use of body language, or the interpretation of certain words or phrases can cause messages to be ambiguous or misinterpreted by the other party. Therefore, it is important for every individual to have cultural awareness when interacting with people from different backgrounds. In addition to cultural factors, psychological aspects such as cognitive bias, assumption-making, and emotional filtering also contribute to communication breakdowns. People often interpret messages through the lens of their own emotions and experiences, which may distort the original intent of the speaker. For instance, a neutral statement may be perceived as critical if the listener is feeling insecure or stressed. These internal filters operate unconsciously and can significantly alter how messages are decoded.

The impact of misunderstandings cannot be taken lightly. In personal relationships, misunderstandings can lead to emotional conflict, while in professional contexts, they can hinder teamwork and productivity. (Crockett et al., 2022) found that persistent misunderstandings in close relationships can cause psychological distress and even impact one's physiological state. This shows that miscommunication affects not only the mind, but also the body. In academic and social settings, especially among university students, the consequences of repeated misunderstandings can be far-reaching. Miscommunication may not only affect personal relationships but can also hinder academic collaboration, reduce participation in group discussions, and create an atmosphere of distrust among peers. When misunderstandings are not addressed, they may contribute to anxiety, withdrawal, or social fragmentation within learning environments. Additionally, the increasing reliance on digital communication tools such as email, messaging apps, and social media has introduced new layers of complexity. These platforms often strip messages of important contextual cues such as facial expressions, gestures, or intonation that help interpret meaning in face-to-face interactions. As a result, students may misinterpret sarcasm, humor, or even constructive feedback, leading to unnecessary conflict or disengagement.

This growing challenge underscores the importance of developing communication literacy and critical awareness, particularly in higher education. Equipping students with the skills to express themselves clearly, interpret messages accurately, and seek clarification when needed is crucial for building an inclusive and supportive academic environment.

To prevent misunderstandings, effective communication is key. This includes using clear language, active listening, and ensuring mutual understanding through clarification or paraphrasing. In the context of intercultural communication, (Begniga & Asif, 2020) emphasizes the importance of cultural sensitivity and empathy, as a person's perception of a message is heavily influenced by their cultural background. With this approach, interactions

can take place more harmoniously. Beyond interpersonal interactions, communication misunderstandings also influence group performance and institutional dynamics. In collaborative learning settings, unclear instructions, misinterpreted intentions, or failure to confirm mutual understanding may result in inefficiency, frustration, or even project failure. When such issues are left unresolved, they can negatively impact students' academic outcomes and diminish their motivation to participate in group activities.

Moreover, the long-term accumulation of unresolved misunderstandings can shape the communication climate within student communities. If miscommunication is common and rarely clarified, it may normalize a culture of misinterpretation, avoidance, or passive aggression. Students may begin to assume negative intent behind ambiguous messages, leading to further relational strain and reduced psychological safety. Therefore, institutions of higher learning have a critical role in cultivating communication awareness as part of student development. Training programs, workshops, or embedded curriculum components that focus on interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, and clarity in messaging can contribute greatly to minimizing the risks and consequences of communication misunderstandings.

Cultivating awareness in communication is an important step towards creating healthy interactions. Someone who realizes the potential for misunderstanding will be more careful in conveying messages and in receiving information. Research by (Dewantara et al., 2023) shows that in a multi-ethnic society, communication awareness can help reduce conflicts that are often triggered by differences in perception. Therefore, building a culture of reflective and open communication is important. A reflective and open communication culture not only prevents misunderstandings but also promotes empathy, active listening, and mutual respect. In university settings, this culture can be developed through intentional practices such as feedback loops, collaborative dialogue sessions, and peer communication mentoring. Encouraging students to paraphrase, ask clarifying questions, and validate others' perspectives helps reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation.

Incorporating reflective communication into classroom activities, counseling sessions, or extracurricular programs can also foster greater awareness of how words and messages are received. When students are trained to be mindful of their own communication styles and to consider the perspectives of others, the campus environment becomes more inclusive, safe, and conducive to learning. Ultimately, reducing communication misunderstandings is not solely the responsibility of individual students it requires institutional commitment to promoting clear, respectful, and culturally sensitive interaction at all levels.

Method

This research is ex-post facto research (non-experimental research), namely survey research that is descriptive in nature to obtain quantitative data because researchers do not give treatment to respondents so that researchers only reveal the variables as they are without connecting with other variables. This research is an approach to research subjects to examine what the research subject already has naturally without any deliberate effort to provide treatment to bring up the variables to be studied. In addition, ex-post facto research is research conducted by measuring things that have taken place in the context of the current time without manipulating the variables under study (Surwanto et al., 2023). The research subjects or respondents in this study were STIAB Jinarakkhita Lampung students.

The research design used in this study includes: making observations, compiling problem backgrounds, identifying problems, formulating problems, making theoretical foundations

related to the influence of sarcasm on communication misunderstandings in students, compiling research methodologies, determining research variables, making instrument grids, collecting data using questionnaires, analyzing data, making conclusions and suggestions.

This research employed an ex-post facto quantitative method, which is suitable for analyzing phenomena that have already occurred without any manipulation or intervention by the researcher. The ex-post facto design allows the study to explore the causal relationships between independent and dependent variables based on existing data and conditions. In this context, the researcher aimed to identify the influence of sarcasm (independent variable) on communication misunderstandings (dependent variable) among students.

The population of the study consisted of students enrolled in the Buddhist Communication Science Study Program at STIAB Jinarakkhita Lampung in the academic year 2024–2025. A total of 49 respondents were selected using total sampling, considering the manageable size of the population and the aim to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon within the specific context of Buddhist higher education.

The data collection technique employed in this research was a structured questionnaire containing both closed-ended and Likert-scale items. The questionnaire was developed based on relevant theories and previous studies related to sarcasm and communication misunderstandings. Prior to the actual data collection, a pilot test was conducted to ensure the reliability and validity of the instrument.

In terms of statistical analysis, the data were processed using SPSS 16.0 software. Several steps were followed to ensure the robustness of the findings:

1. Normality Test: Conducted using the Shapiro-Wilk test to assess whether the data followed a normal distribution.
2. Homogeneity Test: Implemented through Levene's test to check for the equality of variances across groups.
3. Simple Linear Regression Analysis: Used to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between sarcasm and communication misunderstandings.
4. Hypothesis Testing: Conducted through t-tests and correlation analysis to verify the significance of the predictive relationship.

Ethical considerations were also maintained throughout the research process. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, assured of their anonymity, and asked to provide informed consent. Participation was voluntary, and data confidentiality was strictly upheld. This methodological approach ensures that the findings of the study are both statistically valid and contextually grounded, offering meaningful insights into the dynamics of student communication behaviors in academic settings.

Findings

Normality Test

The results of the normality test in the Saphiro Wilk column show that the significance value> 0.05, namely in the sarcasm variable (X) has a significance value of 0.616 and comunication misunderstanding (Y) has a significance value of 0.686, meaning that the variable data (X) and (Y) are declared normally distributed.

Tabel 1. Tests of Normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	Df	Sig.	Statistic	Df	Sig.
Sarcasm	.128	28	.200[*]	.971	28	.616
Communication Misunderstandings	.107	28	.200[*]	.974	28	.686

source: SPSS 16.0 data processing

Homogeneity Test

The homogeneity test uses the compare means one-way-anova analysis. Based on the results of the homogeneity of variances test, it can be seen that the significance value of (X) is 0.860 and (Y) is 0.652, meaning that both variables have a significance value of more than 0.05. Then the two variable data are declared to have the same or homogeneous variance.

Tabel 2. Test of Homogeneity of Variances

	Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
Sarcasm	.032	1	26	.860
Communication Misunderstandings	.208	1	26	.652

source: SPSS 16.0 data processing

Simple Linear Regression Analysis

Simple linear regression analysis is an analysis used to determine the relationship or relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable. In this study, simple linear regression analysis was used because there is only one independent variable.

Tabel 3. Hasil Uji Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	T	Sig.
1	(Constant)	21.909	14.203		1.543	.135
	Sarkasme	.783	.157	.698	4.971	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Kesalahpahaman
source: SPSS 16.0 data processing

Hypothesis Test

The decision on the hypothesis that has been proposed is based on the results of the t test analysis. Basically, the hypothesis test uses the same method as the linear regression analysis test and the coefficient test results.

Based on table 4, it can be seen that the value in the coefficient of determination (R Square) column is 0.487 or 0.487 x 100% = 48.7%. The coefficient of determination (R Square) states that the amount of influence given by the independent variable on the dependent variable is 48.7%. Meanwhile, based on table 5 in pearson correlation, a value of 0.505 is obtained (at a positive value), so that the increasing sarcasm will increase communication

misunderstanding.

The results of this study support the hypothesis proposed by the researcher, which shows that there is a Positive Effect of Sarcasm on Communication Misunderstandings in Students by 48.7%. The calculation results show that Ho is rejected and Ha is accepted, so it can be concluded that 48.7% of communication misunderstandings are influenced by sarcasm. Based on the results of the study, information was obtained that the overall value of the application of Sarcasm by students was in the high category, namely 76%. While Communication Misunderstanding is in the high category, which is 70%.

Tabel 4. Linear Regression Test Results

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.698a	.487	.468	6.007
a. Predictors: (Constant), Sarkasme				

Sumber: Output SPSS 16.0

Tabel 5. Correlation Level Calculation

Correlations		Kesalahpahaman Komunikasi	Sarkasme
Communication Misunderstandings	Pearson Correlation	1	.505**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.006
	N	28	28
Sarcasm	Pearson Correlation	.505**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.006	
	N	28	28
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).			

Sumber: SPSS 16.0 data processing

Discussion

The interpretation of the study's results reveals a strong association between the frequent use of sarcasm and the occurrence of communication breakdowns among students, particularly within diverse academic environments. These findings reinforce the idea that sarcasm, while often used for humorous or expressive purposes, can significantly disrupt the clarity of interpersonal communication. Especially in academic environments where students come from diverse social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, the use of sarcasm without a shared understanding of its meaning increases the likelihood of miscommunication.

Psychologically, sarcasm requires both the sender and receiver to engage in complex inferencing, involving context interpretation, tone, and facial cues. However, when these cues are absent as is often the case in digital or text-based communication interpretation becomes subjective, and misunderstandings are more likely to occur. The fact that 76% of respondents reported high usage of sarcasm, while 70% experienced frequent

communication misunderstandings, clearly highlights the correlation between these two variables.

Furthermore, sarcasm in digital interactions particularly on social media platforms amplifies the risk. Without tone of voice or body language to provide clarification, written sarcasm may be interpreted literally, causing offense or confusion. This phenomenon supports prior research that emphasizes the need for media literacy and contextual awareness when engaging in digital communication.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study aligns with the Relevance Theory by Sperber and Wilson, which argues that successful communication depends on shared cognitive environments. When such shared understanding is lacking, particularly regarding indirect or ironic language, the communicative intent may be lost or misinterpreted entirely.

In a broader educational context, these results suggest the importance of promoting communication awareness and emotional intelligence among university students. Programs aimed at enhancing interpersonal sensitivity, empathetic listening, and contextual judgment may help reduce communication failures caused by sarcastic language. As communication is foundational not only to academic collaboration but also to students' social development, the ability to use language appropriately and effectively is essential.

Conclusion

Taking into account the results and discussions presented in this study, the following extended conclusions can be drawn; Sarcasm has a statistically significant effect on communication misunderstandings among university students, contributing to 48.7% of miscommunication cases. This underlines the need to be cautious in using sarcastic language, especially in formal or diverse social settings. Although sarcasm is often perceived as humorous or expressive, it carries a high risk of being misinterpreted, particularly when contextual or paralinguistic cues are absent. Students may unintentionally offend or confuse others by relying on sarcastic expressions.

These findings highlight the urgency of increasing communication literacy among students. Developing awareness about the implications of language use including non-literal language can help create a more respectful and effective communication climate on campus. Educators and institutions may consider integrating communication training into student development programs. Emphasizing emotional intelligence, interpersonal sensitivity, and cultural competence can empower students to communicate more mindfully and avoid unnecessary conflicts caused by sarcasm or ambiguous language.

Future research could explore additional variables that influence communication misunderstandings, such as cultural background, communication style (e.g., passive-aggressive behavior), or the use of dark humor in digital contexts. Longitudinal studies might also examine how students adapt their communication patterns over time in response to increased awareness or training.

In conclusion, while sarcasm may serve expressive or critical functions, its potential to cause misunderstanding must not be underestimated. A clear, empathetic, and context-aware language approach fosters more meaningful and harmonious student interactions.

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