

EXPLORING EMOJI AS A VIABLE CULTURAL TOOL IN WHATSAPP COMMUNICATIONS AMONG MALAYSIAN UNDERGRADUATES

AUTHORSHIP

Ahmad Fakrusy Syakirin Ahmad Sabri 

Urusetia Penerangan Darul Iman (UPDI), 20200 Kuala Terengganu.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2199-1651>

E-mail: fakrusy@gmail.com

Siti Zanariah Yusoff 

Centre of Modern Languages and Communication, Faculty of Languages and Communication, University Sultan Zainal Abidin, 21300 Kuala Nerus, Terengganu.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8878-306X>

E-mail: zanariah Yusoff@unisza.edu.my

Isyaku Hassan 

Centre of Modern Languages and Communication, Faculty of Languages and Communication, University Sultan Zainal Abidin, 21300 Kuala Nerus, Terengganu.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8260-2894>

E-mail: isyaku87@gmail.com

Received in:

2021-08-10

Approved in:

2021-09-07

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24115/S2446-6220202173D1727p.351-362>

INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal communication is a process of conveying and receiving verbal and non-verbal messages (MURPHY, 1997). These days, interpersonal communication evolves channels due to the rise of multimedia technology which has led to the boom of social media in 2006 with the emergence of Facebook and other social media platforms (HASSAN, AZMI, ABDULLAHI, 2020).

The advancement of communication technology, and changes in how we symbolize or visualize our messages, have led to the birth of emojis. The Japanese language is where the word emoji came from 絵 (e ≅ picture) 文 (mo ≅ writing) 字 (Ji ≅ character) (DAVIS, EDBERG, 2016). It was invented in Japan before the age of smartphones, where teenagers had been

using them on pagers (CLARK, 2015). This form of message in digital communication has led to it being Word of the Year in 2015 according to The Oxford Dictionary.

Emojis have become such a landmark in digital and social media communication that in 2010, leading tech companies such as Microsoft, Apple, IBM, Adobe Systems or Google joined in the Uniboard Consortium created a fixed set of categories of emojis to form a uniform emoji class (Feelings, Animals, Vehicles, Buildings) such as the word class (Noun, Adjectives, Verbs) into their devices (PELE, 2016). However, in the wake of emojis being the new symbols of conveying a message, it is a double-edged sword. For instance, written language has its benefits and downsides in achieving the communication goal. Written language can convey detailed explanations with a clear flow, but, it can also lead to ambiguity and disconnect in seeing and understanding the emotions of receiver and sender (GOODMAN, 2019; HIGHFIELD AND LEAVER, 2016).

The social context of Malaysians in terms of technology and internet usage shows an increase in users of the internet and social media (ABDULLAH et al., 2021). According to a New Straits Times article in 2018, Chief of Statistics, Datuk Seri Dr Uzir Mahidin said, last year, households across Malaysia with computer and mobile phone access rose to 74.1 percent and 98.1 percent respectively, compared with 67.6 percent and 97.9 percent in 2015. With the hard statistics, it shows that Malaysia's Internet penetration is now 85.7 percent, showing most of the population have access to smartphones and the internet along with an increase in social media activities. This parallel link can be seen in the Digital News Report in 2017, which found out that Malaysians are the world's largest users of WhatsApp at 51 percent. The former Communications and Multimedia Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Salleh Said Keruak attributed the findings to Malaysia's good internet facilities and penetration (BERNAMA, 2017). The latest statistics found that an estimation of 59 percent of the Malaysian population uses smartphones and the rate of users is expected to increase over the years (MÜLLER, 2019). The report came from an analysis of aggregate SwiftKey Cloud data between October 2014 and January 2015 and includes both Android and iOS devices (SWIFTKEY, 2015). The findings show that Malaysian users are the largest users of emojis. Malaysians also show the most emoji-savvy languages (those with the biggest emojis vocabulary). In a study conducted by Hazwanie (2018), her research stated WhatsApp ended up as the most popular social medium compared to other platforms (mean score = 4.65) among UniSZA Students.

In short, these findings and statistics show that the Malaysian demographic is suitable for studies regarding online communication specifically involving emojis and WhatsApp, due to the high usage patterns of said communication symbols. This also opens up an opportunity to investigate the attitudes of the users and the communication culture of undergraduates to better understand the usage context and cultural influence behind the usage. Malaysia is a multi-racial country, which is comprised of Malays, Chinese, Indians, and others (ATEK et al., 2021). However, due to the limitations of time, the following discussion focuses only on one group - Malaysian undergraduates. The context of the culture in Malaysia can be generalized as valuing honesty, courtesy, and family. (FONTAINE, RICHARDSON, YEAP, 2002). According to Evason (2016) in her article on "*Malaysian Culture*", great consideration is made to ensure that what is said, how it is said, and how much is said does not offend the other person in the interaction. This cultural detail on how Malaysians communicate may have a part in influencing how they use Emojis in communicating.

There are numerous studies conducted about emoji usage. Along with the growth of emojis users in Malaysia, the studies within the issue of emojis, in general, are plenty albeit in a more general sense such as researches on motives, frequency, and attitudes towards emoji usage (PRADA, 2018; NIKOLA, 2016). Another general analysis was done on emojis titled "*The use of emojis by Millennials*", studied the what, how, where, and why of emoji usage among the young generation (JOVER, 2018). However, these studies focus on how emojis are used and the logic behind them and rarely touched on the subject of impacts toward communication done by emojis. In terms of studies relating emojis with communication are also numerous such as analyzing the functions of emojis, and how communication is done through the usage of emojis and emoticons (DÜRSCHIED, 2017; LUONGO, 2017). For instance, Skovholt (2014) in her research studies about emojis used in the workplace and emails and the functions of emojis in emails. These studies of emojis and communication can be related but do not apply to the context of WhatsApp communication. Suresh (2018) researched the influence of emojis on communication using social media among college students of Mysuru. The paper discusses understanding the influence of emojis on student's daily life and their expectations towards communication in the age of emojis on different online platforms such as E-mails, Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Instagram. However, like previous research, the positive impacts, and user's attitudes, and cultural aspects that influence its usage in the aspect of WhatsApp communication were not studied in detail.

With the gap mentioned, this paper aims to explore the positive impacts emojis have on communication between users of WhatsApp and to determine the attitudes of users about their usage of emojis and Malaysian cultural influences towards the usage in communication within the platform of WhatsApp. This study also aims to answer two questions, what kind of improvements or positive impacts did emojis have towards WhatsApp communication, and what are the attitudes of users and Malaysian cultural influences surrounding the usage of emojis in WhatsApp communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW

WhatsApp is a messenger application that has a variety of functions, like text messages, images, audio files, video files, and links to web addresses (BOUHNİK, DESHEN, 2014). It is free to download and use an online messaging platform that can be used in smartphones and also its web-based version names Whatsapp Web. WhatsApp has become highly addictive and can create a great impact on the regular user, especially students (BANSAL, JOSHI, 2014). As established beforehand, WhatsApp ended up as the most popular social media platform among students in UniSZA (HAZWANIE, 2018). This is due to WhatsApp being an integral part of communicating between themselves and their educators. WhatsApp Messenger has numerous collaborative features (BERE, 2012).

The main reason for its popularity in university is the group chat which supports the interaction of up to 50 group members and unlimited messaging with only the requirement of a smartphone and internet access. In this regard, it is a rich user base to understand the positive impacts of emojis in improving communication and user's attitudes surrounding its usage. Through this context of communication, it also gives many opportunities to answer the question of students' experiences in using emojis, on how impactful emojis are in improving WhatsApp communication. Moving on to the studies involving emojis and communication,

Dürscheid (2019) stated in her article the functions of emojis in everyday life either as a complement or replacement for text. The researcher listed several functions of emojis in communication such as border and sentence intention signals, allographs, and ideograms. These functions give new insights into the functionality of emojis which impacted how we communicate in the written digital communication. However, those emojis can state the intention relating to the message preceding them; in that case, according to Gallmann's terminology are dubbed as 'sentence intention signals'. (DÜRSCHIED, 2019). This highlight in the study suggests that emojis can positively impact communication by adding an emotive dimension to written text.

Another qualitative analysis was done to determine the motive in using emoticon stickers. The title of the research was "*Smiley face: why we use emoticon stickers in mobile messaging* (LEE et al., 2016). Findings showed that users strategic and functional purposes behind using emoticon stickers. For instance, female informants use emoticons for social presence, attract attention, and forming sympathy among users. Emojis are used as a substitution of the personal non-verbal cues that we have on face-to-face interactions (KAYE et al., 2017). These findings give clues on the socio-cultural impacts emojis have towards written communication other than emoting. Luongov (2017) also findings showed that emojis functions show expressions, enhance their creative abilities, and add a positive and friendly tone to a message. In terms of emojis improving communication, the majority of the questionnaire informants believed that emojis improve communication albeit according to the context it is used (LUONGO, 2017). These positive nuances that emojis provide are continued in the research done by Brisson (2015), which stated a finding that emojis can recreate some cues from face-to-face communication such as being able to express their facial expressions, gestures and incorporate objects into their conversation. Emojis also allowed natural exchange and progression of a digital conversation (BRISSE, 2015). Overall, these research suggest that emojis function as a significant addition to the written text in digital communication.

Relating to past literature regarding Emojis with Malaysian culture, there is a considerable lack of literature in the said area. One of a few research done towards emojis in Malaysia mostly relates to interpretations of emojis among undergraduates conducted by Annamalai and Salam (2017). This study analysed 210 undergraduates' interpretations of 75 smileys (face-like) meanings in WhatsApp Messenger. Findings showed that their interpretation of various smiley emojis is different from its intended meaning. The researchers attributed this key finding to users being in different mobile operating platforms, cultural and belief perceptions of the users. Though the core question was answered, the mentioning of culture being an important influence in the emoji interpretation and usage was not fully explored. Another research on the cultural influences and emoji usage was done by Guntuku, Li, Tay, and Ungar (2019) titled "*Studying Cultural Differences in Emoji Usage across the East and the West*". Although there are differences in setting and scope, this study highlights what different cultural backgrounds can influence emoji usage. The study aims to uncover the differences and similarities in emoji usage within those two different cultures. Emoji has its universal meaning across cultures. However, this research elaborated that Emoji usage in the East and West reveals culture-specific patterns. For example, in the aspect of interpersonal communication when using emojis, Westerners tend to use more Emojis than Easterners. This was correlated by their culture which in Asia, tends towards harmony and proper relationships whereas outcomes and direct communication were more important for western folks. (GUNTUKU, 2019). This finding may shed light on how Malaysian culture influences emoji usage since Malaysia is at the eastern part of the world as Eastern culture. Other researches that pointed out the cultural influence towards Emojis were mostly focusing on the meaning rather than the reason or pattern of usage. Although the use of emoji is universal, the understanding of the meaning of emoji that accompanies emotional expression is highly dependent on its user culture (SITI, AZIANURA, 2012).

This study implements the conceptual framework to narrate and study the impacts of emojis concerning other theories and past studies to form a cohesive progression. It is arranged in a logical structure to aid provide a picture or visual display of how ideas in a study relate to one another (GRANT, OSANLOO, 2014). Below is the framework beginning with the inception of the research question and the need to solve it. It begins with the purpose to fill the gap in

addressing the impacts of emojis and discovering potential advantages to emojis usage with the Malaysian cultural influences towards emoji usage. Then, a literature review process of previous findings from various studies presented impacts and attitudes about emojis usage, which acts as a reference to uncover the current beneficial impacts, attitudes, and cultural effect regarding emojis usage among undergraduates in UniSZA.

METHODOLOGY

This research utilizes the basic qualitative design, which is characterized as data collection that involves interview, observation, and/or archival (content) data then the interpretation is based on a combination of researcher perspective and data collected (MERRIAM, 2009). The focus of this research is on human communication and interpretation of meaning. Thus, the researchers obtained data through interviews and observation from informants who received and sent emojis while communicating in WhatsApp. This study uses the purposive sampling technique which is the deliberate choice of an informant due to the qualities they possess (ETIKAN, 2016). The requirements of the informants are having experienced the act of sending or receiving emojis in WhatsApp, in the possession and having used a smartphone and being a Malaysian UniSZA undergraduate. This research selected eight Malaysian undergraduate students from different faculties and courses from UniSZA to be involved in the interview. The identity of the informants is kept confidential and labeled as P1 until P8.

This method includes observation, informal and unstructured interviewing. The informants were interviewed one by one with a recorder and transcribed to gather accurate responses. To avoid the interview discussion going astray due to its open-ended nature, the researcher categorized it according to research questions. The interview begins with questions about the informant's background and their general experience in using emojis while communicating. The next part focuses on answering one of the research questions of this research by asking the informant about the beneficial impacts of their emojis usage. Further suggestions of impacts can be given to stimulate the discussion. Then, the informant's opinions and attitudes towards emojis usage in digital communication are investigated in-depth with situational questions to uncover the Malaysian Cultural influences towards their emoji usages. Further suggestions of impacts can be given to the focus group to stimulate the discussion. The data gathered from the informants is analysed through the content analysis method. Through this method, the data gained is condensed into categories fitting the requirements of the research questions. For this research, the answers provided from the interview session are analysed and categorized to answer the research questions about their experience, attitudes and positive impacts emojis had in their WhatsApp communication. The cultural influences are also drawn out from the data and related to the context of Malaysian culture.

FINDINGS

Improvements in WhatsApp Communication

In this study, the content analysis process resulted in three themes, namely positive impacts of emojis are increasing communication effectiveness, promoting solidarity in communication, and improving the efficiency of communication. From the data analysis, five out of six informants mentioned that emojis can deliver emotions and intentions which increases their understanding and the understanding towards the receiver, positively impacting communication in WhatsApp. P1 (2019) mentioned that emojis help him in communication in showing feelings. This increases the understanding of his receivers towards his message. Besides that, he also clarified that emojis draw attention to the messages, stating that in group chats it makes messages more attractive to read and stand out. P2 (2019) mentioned that emojis can deliver feelings and intentions in text. For instance, she used salivating emojis with saliva to show the intention of hunger to her receiver. P4 and P5 (2019) both described emojis as an effective display of emotions in WhatsApp chatting. P6 (2019) mentioned using emojis to show sadness when he is feeling sad. This usage influences the message in communication adding a layer of emotion to better see what the sender is feeling. This leads to an increase in meaning and understanding through the illustration of emotions. This finding relates with Luongov's (2017) findings which showed that emojis function to show expression and enhancing the tone of the message. Thus, through these nuances, it increased the meaning in

the message while communicating and support emojis as being a viable tool in WhatsApp communication.

From the analysis, P1, P3, P4, and P5 stated that emojis assisted them not only to improve the meaning of the message but to improve and maintain relations with the sender. P1 (2019) mentioned that the usage of emojis is a norm nowadays in WhatsApp communication, cited:

“And the usage of emojis nowadays is very apparent. It’s almost like the usage of emojis itself becomes ethical sometimes”

He also considered the lack of emojis as a sign of insincerity which pushes the matter of emojis being pertinent in maintaining social relations. In other words, emoji usage can be seen as a sign of courtesy that shows the sender taking time to respond while communicating. P3 refers to messaging without emojis that can offend people due to the meaning of the sender not fully expressed or seen by the receiver. The informant also mentioned emojis playing a role in describing how the users truly feel which enables solidarity and maintaining relationships. P4 briefly answered the question of the benefits of emojis, stating that it helps her with showing positive feelings effectively which then eases the receiver’s feelings. P5 explained that emojis benefitted him through visualizing the friendliness in his message, stating that communication with words may offend or seem too serious to the receiver. With emojis such as a smiling face, it gives a friendly impression to the receiver. P5 also added that emojis create an identity and humanize the sender. He exemplified with a situation of dissatisfaction among group members stating:

So we console them with only typing the thing is that it’s just words on a blank paper. It’s colorless. So it can’t calm the person’s feelings.

With emojis, it creates empathetic imagery of the sender, creating understanding and maintaining the social environment in WhatsApp. This relates to the theory of Media Features in that emojis create perceived playfulness which increases their sense of social connectedness (HSIEH, TSENG, 2017). Through this effect, the process of communication within WhatsApp is less rigid and not confined to text-only messages akin to e-mail, promoting a friendly online presence. The presence of emojis creates a less formal environment which makes WhatsApp a more appealing communication experience among undergraduates. However, the non-formal nature of these emojis also brings its own set of implications in communication which is explored in user attitudes.

Emojis have impacted the digital communication spectrum to focus more on the conciseness and speed of reaction in a predominantly visual, digital culture (ANDREEA, 2016). P1 mentioned that emojis helped him in saving time to write while communicating on WhatsApp. This greatly improved his efficiency in communicating. P2 also mentioned emojis contain the embedded meaning, this meant that meaning that can be conveyed with wordy chat can be simplified with just an emoji. She also mentioned that emojis helps as a replacement for hard to describe situations but rely on the interpretation of the sender. P3 also mentioned emojis changing the way to communicate as it replaces the usage of text citing:

If we are angry we will not write that we are angry. So let’s use the angry emoji which they will understand.

She also mentioned simple things such as the above should not be explained, leading to her emoji usage mainly to avoid redundancy to text when chatting in WhatsApp. This ease of communication due to emoji usage also is mentioned by P4, stating that for convenience, she simplified her messages with emojis. This enables her to efficiently communicate. The ability to make the message shorter and convenient is further benefitted by a wide array of non-face characters (symbols, animals, objects, food, etc.) (KELLY, WATTS, 2015). Not only are emojis visualize non-verbal cues and enhance message meaning, but it also indirectly creates a more efficient way of communicating in WhatsApp.

Emoji Usage in WhatsApp Communication

General opinion and views of all informants are recorded towards favoring the presence of emojis current age. P1 (2019) stated that emojis are important in the technological age. He

considered emojis as ethical and shows courtesy in communication due to the rise of social platforms. This reason for this social expectation was further elaborated especially in group communication which emojis helps to build a presence. Other informants also mentioned the social factors involving the purpose of emojis. P2 (2019) mentioned that emojis in the current age help create bonds between users. This is done through building identity with the use of emojis because family and friends may create their own meanings for some emojis (KELLY, WATTS, 2015). P3 (2019) also has a positive attitude towards emojis for maintaining and building social relations as a display of friendliness. Other informants hold a more functional view of emojis in communication. P2 and P3 (2019) view emojis as a necessity to describe emotions and complex thoughts. Emojis are considered a tool by P4 and P5 (2019), to reduce the time for text. This ease the communication convenience to the user to send a message and connect people faster. Attitudes about emojis being needed to avoid bland communication were also elaborated by P3 and P6 (2019). They stated that emojis give life to texting in general and avoid being bland and toneless. P6 (2019) further explained his view that emojis give balance to communication. In a sense like verbal communication with non-verbal communication completing the communication experience. However, he stated words and emoji usage in written communication have to be balanced. This attitude touches on the argument that dependence on symbols (emojis) can devolve the language (GOODMAN, 2019). Meaning that if we rely on simple visual tools such as emojis, it renders the communication to be overly simplified and lacking descriptive meaning. Thus, the usage of emojis mustn't be overused, this allows users to reap the social benefits that emojis without diluting the meaning of the message and the articulate nature of written communication.

When asked about a rhetorical question on "What if communication in WhatsApp has no emojis", informants revealed mostly negative attitudes towards the lack of emoji presence in communication. P1 (2019) explained that communication without emojis shows insincerity from the sender. He added, no emojis can also lessen the impact of presence in group chats, saying messages would go unnoticed. P2, P3, and P6 (2019) describe the lack of emojis in WhatsApp communication as becoming dull and boring. The absence of these colourful icons and symbols can be considered likening to communication missing the non-verbal aspects. When asked about communication with the only emojis as the opposite to the above paragraph, also revealed not favouring attitude towards just chatting with the only emojis. P1 (2019) mentioned using just emojis would not be appropriate especially in important matters. P2, P3, P4, P5 (2019) elaborated on the same attitude that it can cause confusion, misinterpretation, and the portrayal of the sender not taking the communication process seriously. Thus, based on the overall attitudes conclude that too many emojis and too few emojis are viewed as detrimental in communication (THOMPSON, 2016; PELE, 2016).

The context of usage involves whom emojis were used by the informants and whether informal or formal context. All informants mentioned and viewed their usage of emojis in communication as mostly in an informal context. P1 said that he uses emojis with his course mates, friends, and family. When questioned further about the usage, the informant also mentioned he uses emojis when communicating with someone of higher ranking such as lecturers. He mentioned the usage of emojis with them depends on the level of solidarity with the superior. He further clarified emoji usage with lecturers only involves simple forms of emojis and not too expressive. This view of the context of emoji usage continues with P2, explaining that she only uses emojis with friends and family, superiors such as lecturers are considered a formal context and unsuitable for emoji usage. This trend in the rare usage of emojis in informal context continues for all informants with different degrees. P3 also rarely uses emojis with lectures, only using it and with simple ones such as a normal smiley emoji. She also rarely uses emojis with acquaintances saying that she avoids them to minimizing misunderstanding. P4 also mentions not using emojis with lectures same as P5 rarely has experience using emojis in an official context. P6 viewed the usage of emojis with superiors and parents, saying only using a limited amount of emojis due to respect of higher-ranking individuals. This was explained in the research titled "The Dark Side of a smiley" by Gliskson (2017), findings underline the common advice in business guides that the use of smileys in formal contexts should be avoided, regardless of age or gender. When used informal work settings, smileys, unlike actual smiles, have a negative impact on inter-personal first impressions (GLIKSON, 2017)

Based on these testimonies and attitudes regarding emoji usage. This study would like to recommend a few measures to ensure that emojis are used for a better communication experience in WhatsApp. Based on a common attitude shared by the informants, the frequency of emoji usage should be balanced with the text message. Lack of emoji usage results in bland and uninteresting conversations, comparing it to that to a communication process without the non-verbal aspects (P2, P3, P6). Meanwhile, the overuse of it will lead to confusion, misinterpretation, and the portrayal of the sender not taking the communication process seriously. Thus a balanced usage of emojis is recommended to ensure an effective communication process without taking away the core meaning of messages. Overall, all informants mentioned their emoji usage within an informal setting such as with family and friends. This is due to emojis potentially incurring a bad impression towards the emoji sender when using the tool in a formal setting (GLIKSON, 2017). Thus, it is recommended that emoji usage is to be limited while communicating in an informal setting such as with friends and family, casual group chats, and others within that nature.

DISCUSSION

Malay cultural influences in whatsapp emoji usage

Based on the findings from previous research questions, the Malaysian culture context caused emoji users to utilize emojis to maintain harmony and relationships, and instill high context values in emoji usage. The first influence of Malaysian Culture relates to the value of maintaining harmonious relations. According to Evason (2016), great consideration is made to ensure that what is said, how it is said and how much is said does not offend the other person in the interaction. Malaysians mostly maintain a level of politeness while communicating to preserve good relations with others and maintain face (EVASON, 2016). This correlates with the reasons that most informants mention which were their usage of emoji helps in maintaining relations and showing courtesy while communicating. P1 (2019) mentioned the lack of emojis as a sign of insincerity and P5 (2019) explained that emojis benefitted him through visualizing the friendliness in his message, stating that communication with words may offend or seem too serious to the receiver. As mentioned by P3 (2019), messaging without emojis can offend people due to the meaning of the sender not fully expressed or seen by the receiver. This value correlates with research done on *"Knowledge Sharing as a Culture among Malaysian Online"* by Noorriati and Shireen (2012), which elaborated on the Malaysian culture in Facebook communication. Malaysians are known to care about one's feelings. They discovered that Malaysians share anything common or having compatible interests but are still very reserved on issues that touch on personal or sensitive issues. This parallels with emoji usage mentioned by P2, P3, P4, P5. These informants elaborated over usage of emoji can cause confusion, misinterpretation, and the portrayal of the sender not taking the communication process seriously. This finding relates to Freeman (2018), stating that emoji alone is "unreadable." His study of emojis was related to emoji usage based on eastern culture (Japan), mentioning emoji usage together with established modes of expression to avoid misunderstandings. Thus, informants avoid using too many emojis reflecting on the Malaysian culture of "Budi" (EVISON, 2016). Budi is a traditional Malay concept, the attitude has influenced the broader Malaysian social culture and is reflected in the behavior of people from most backgrounds (EVISON, 2016; RAMLI, 2013).

Malaysian culture is largely a high context culture. High-context communication involves emotions, close relationships, and is collectivism in nature. (EVISON, 2016; LAILAWATI, 2005). Malays are often indirect in expressing their views and opinion which are embedded in the nonverbal behaviors as an attempt to secure a close relationship or to maintain solidarity and harmony within a social engagement. With this context established, the correlation with this study was from P5. The informant stated that emojis help in visualizing the friendliness in his message, stating that communication with words may offend or seem too serious to the receiver. For example, emojis such as a smiling face, it gives a friendly impression to the receiver. Individuals from a high-context culture would particularly emphasize another's feeling in the communication process and so care to be less direct, use more analogous language, be more personal, and prefer nonverbal to verbal communication (LAILAWATI, 2005). This influences most of the informants to rely on emojis showing correlations to the high context

culture argument. Another instance of high context culture influencing emoji usage is the context of the "Who" the emoji is used with. All informants mentioned and viewed their usage of emojis in communication as mostly in an informal context. This meant that usage of emojis in informal communication between lecturers and superiors is minimal, with most usages are towards friends and family. For example, P6 limits his usage of emojis with superiors and parents, saying only using a limited amount of emojis due to respect of higher-ranking individuals. Other participants also mentioned having limited usage of emojis with lecturers. In Malaysian culture, elders are presumed to have great wisdom and be very deserving of authority (EVISON, 2016). Thus, this correlation can be seen as culture influencing the way this modern tool of communication is utilized. In general, this high context culture sheds light on the when, how, and why emojis are used the way they are by these Malaysian undergraduates.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the use of emojis as viable cultural tools in WhatsApp communication among undergraduates in Malaysia. The findings showed that emojis positively impact communication in WhatsApp of undergraduates by increasing communication effectiveness, maintaining social relations in communications, and increasing communication efficiency. Five informants agreed that emojis can deliver the sender's emotions and intention which increases the meaning of the message. Besides that, emojis impact communication in WhatsApp in the sense that it maintains social relations in communication. In the second research question, attitudes of informants towards emoji usage in digital written communication nowadays are leaning towards nothing but positive. All stated that emojis are important for multiple reasons including creating social relations, building identity, as a tool to describe emotions, and avoiding communication from going bland. The lack of and the overabundance of emoji usage also carries a different impact on the perception of communication. All informants mentioned using emojis mostly in an informal context with friends and rarely in formal contexts due to courtesy. In the aspect of Malaysian culture influences, it initiated emoji users to utilize emojis to maintain harmony and relationships and instill high context values through emoji usage with specific people for specific purposes.

This research also added to the growing body of works regarding undergraduate social media communication trends in the context of Malaysia. The limited duration of time to complete this study has restricted the researcher to only conduct a basic qualitative design with semi-structured interviews among undergraduates in UniSZA. The researcher also suggests a future approach on expanding the sample size with different races and cultural backgrounds to gain more varied data for a better insight into the emoji usage cultural impacts towards emoji usage. More varied data can also be obtained through the employment of mixed-method research that utilizes both qualitative and quantitative data. Through this method, the research can offer both statistical numbers and generalizations of the findings and elaboration of facts and experiences. Recommendations are proposed for future research examining the cultural impacts towards emoji usage with a more varied sample from different races to fill the gap of different Malaysian cultures such as Chinese and Indian culture experiences on emoji communication. Other ways to tackle the issue of emojis are examining emoji usage within different contexts and creating a guide on how to properly use these visual tools in online messaging. The informal nature of emojis should also be noted by avid users of emojis including young adults especially when communicating with a superior of higher ranking or in a formal space due to the risk of the bad image towards the emoji sender to avoid misuse of the tool and ensure the process of communication in WhatsApp are clear. Cultural boundaries should also be noted by emoji users to ensure the positive cultural value of Malaysia is preserved even through digital communication.

REFERENCES

ABDULLAH, N. H., HASSAN, I., AHMAD, M. F., OMAR, F. I., & AZMI, M. N. L. (2021). YouTube usage and youth netizens' behaviors: A correlational study. *Quantum Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 2(2), 56-64.

ANNAMALAI, S.; SALAM, S. N. A. Undergraduates Interpretation of WhatsApp Smiley Emoji. *Jurnal Komunikasi, Malaysian Journal of Communicat*, p. 89-103.

ATEK, E. S. E., HASSAN, I., AZMI, M. N. L., YAH, M. H., AZMI, N. J. (2021). Approaches to the teaching of English literature preferred by students in selected Malaysian secondary schools. *Journal of Siberian Federal University. Humanities & Social Sciences*, 14(3): 396-407

BERE, A. Using mobile instant messaging to leverage learner participation and transform pedagogy at a South African University of Technology. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 2013, 44 (4), p. 544-561.

BLISS-CARROLL, N. L. *The Nature, Function, and Value of Emojis as Contemporary Tools of Digital Interpersonal Communication*, 2016. Retrieved April 1, 2019. Available at: https://digitalcommons.gardner-webb.edu/english_etd/15/. Access: August 26, 2021.

BOSCH JOVER, O.; REVILLA, M. A. The use of emojis by Millennials. *RECSM Working Paper Number 57*, 2018, p.1-25.

BOUHNİK, D.; DESHEN, M. WhatsApp goes to school: Mobile instant messaging between teachers and students. *Journal of Information Technology Education: Research*, 2014, 13, p. 217-231.

CLAIRE-MARIE BRISSON, C. B. *Hieroglyphs at Our Fingertips: Language, Semiotics, and Communication through Emoji*, 2018. Available at : https://www.academia.edu/12568625/Hieroglyphs_at_Our_Fingertips_Language. Access: April 7, 2019.

DANIEL, T. A.; CAMP, A. L. Emojis affect processing fluency on social media. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture. Advance online publication*, 2018. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000219>. Access: August 26, 2021.

DIN, N.; HARON, S. Knowledge Sharing as a Culture among Malaysian Online Social Networking Users. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 2012, 50, p. 1043-1050.

DUERSCHIED, C.; SIEVER, C. M. Beyond the Alphabet-Communication of Emojis. *Kurzfassung eines (auf Deutsch) zur Publikation eingereichten Manuskripts*, 2017.

EVISON, N. *Malaysian Culture - References*, 2016. Available at: <https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/malaysian-culture/malaysian-culturereferences#malaysian-culture-references>. Access: June 7, 2020.

FOUKA, G.; MANTZOROU, M. What are the major ethical issues in conducting research? Is there a conflict between the research ethics and the nature of nursing? *Health Science Journal*, 2011, 5 (1).

FREEDMAN, A. Cultural literacy in the empire of emoji signs: Who is crying with joy? *First Monday*, 2018, 23 (9). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v23i9.9395>. Access: August 26, 2021.

GLIKSON, E.; CHESHIN, A.; VAN KLEEF, G. A. *The Dark Side of a Smiley. Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 2017, 194855061772026.

GOODMAN, J. R. Reliance on emoji may push us back towards cave drawings. *BMJ*, 2019, 1264.

GRAND CANYON UNIVERSITY, CENTER FOR INNOVATION IN RESEARCH AND TEACHING. (2016). Case Study Method. Available at: https://cirt.gcu.edu/research/developmentresources/research_ready/descriptive/cas_study. Access: April 7, 2019.

GUNTUKU, S. C., LI, M.; TAY, L.; UNGAR, L. H. (). Studying Cultural differences in emoji usage across the east and the West. *In Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on web and social media*, 2019, July Vol. 13, No. 01, p. 226 235.

HASSAN, I., AZMI, M. N. L., & ABDULLAHI, A. M. (2020). Evaluating the spread of fake news and its detection techniques on Social Networking Sites. *Romanian Journal of Communication and Public Relations*, 22(1), 111-125.

HSIEH, S. H.; TSENG, T. H. Playfulness in mobile instant messaging: Examining the influence of emoticons and text messaging on social interaction. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 2017, 69, p. 405-414.

KEYTON, J. Case studies for organizational communication: *Understanding communication processes*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010.

KEYTON, J. Communication and organizational culture: *A key to understanding work experience*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2011.

LEE, J. Y.; HONG, N.; KIM, S.; OH, J.; LEE, J. Smiley face: why we use emoticon stickers in mobile messaging. In *Proceedings of the 18th International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction with Mobile Devices and Services Adjunct*, 2016, p. 760-766. ACM.

LI, L.; YANG, Y. Pragmatic functions of emoji in internet-based communication a corpus based study. *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, 2018, 3 (1).

LJUBEŠIĆ, N.; FIŠER, D. A global analysis of emoji usage. In *Proceedings of the 10th Web as Corpus Workshop*, 2016, p. 82-89.

LUONGO, T. Evolution of Emoticons/Emoji and their Functions in Digital Communications, 2017. Available at: http://www.academia.edu/35808175/Evolution_of_Emoticons_Emoji_and_their_unctions_in_Digital_Communications. Access: February 7, 2019.

MAGUIRE, M.; DELAHUNT, B. Doing a thematic analysis: A practical, step by-step guide for learning and teaching scholars. *AISHE-J: The all-Ireland journal of teaching and learning in higher education*, 2017, 9 (3).

MILLER, H.; KLUVER, D.; THEBAULT-SPIEKER, J.; TERVEEN, L.; HECHT, B. (). Understanding emoji ambiguity in context: The role of text in emoji-related miscommunication. In *Eleventh International AAAI Conference on Web and social media*, May 2017.

MOHD ZAIN, N.; ISAM, H. (). Emoji dan ekspresi emosi dalam kalangan komuniti siber. *PENDETA: Journal of Malay Language, Education and Literature*, 2019, 10, p. 13-23. Available at: <http://ejournal.upsi.edu.my/index.php/PENDETA/article/view/2092>. Access: August 26, 2021.

MÜLLER, J. February 22, 2019. Malaysia smartphone penetration 2019-2023. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/625418/smartphone-user-penetration-inmalaysia/>. Access: May 16, 2020,

PELE, A. From English to Emojis: A New, Simpler, Digital Language? *Proceedings of the 11th International Conference on Virtual Learning*, 2016, p. 396-401.

PRADA, M.; RODRIGUES, D. L.; GARRIDO, M. V.; LOPES, D.; CAVALHEIRO, B.; GASPAR, R. Motives, Frequency and Attitudes toward Emoji and Emoticon Use. *Telematics and Informatics*, 2018.

RAMLI, R. Culturally appropriate communication in Malaysia: Budi Bahasa as warranty component in Malaysian discourse. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 2013, 8 (1), p. 65-78. Available at: doi: 10.1080/17447143.2012.753895. Access: August 26, 2021.

SALLEH, L. M. High/low context communication: The Malaysian Malay style. In *Proceedings of the 2005 Association for Business Communication Annual Convention*, 2005, p. 1-11). Irvine, CA: Association for Business Communication, October.

SELVALAKSHMI, M. Probing: An effective tool of communication. *IUP Journal of Soft Skills*, 2012, 6 (3), p. 55.

SKOVHOLT, K.; GRØNNING, A.; KANKAANRANTA, A. The communicative functions of emoticons in workplace e-mails. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 2014, 19 (4), p. 780-797.

STARK, L.; CRAWFORD, K. The Conservatism of Emoji: Work, Affect, and Communication. *Social Media Society*, 2015, 1(2), 205630511560485. Available at: doi: 10.1177/2056305115604853. Access: August 26, 2021.

SURESH, S. The influence of Emoji on Communication using social media a quantitative study among college students of Mysuru. *Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2018, 9 (1), p. 158-162.

TANG, Y.; HEW, K. Emoticon, Emoji, and Sticker Use in Computer Mediated Communication: A Review of Theories and Research Findings. *International Journal of Communication*, 2019, 13, 27. Available at: <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/10966>. Access: August 26, 2021.

TEEGAVARAPU, S.; SUMMERS, J. D.; MOCKO, G. M. Case study method for design research: a justification. *Volume 4: 20th International Conference on Design Theory and Methodology; Second International Conference on Micro- and Nanosystems*, 2008, p. 1-9. Available at: Adoi:10.1115/detc2008-49980. Access: August 26, 2021.

UNISZA. *Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin*. Available at: <https://www.unisza.edu.my/index.php?lang=ms>. Access: May 9, 2020.

WIBOWO, M. R. F.; ATS-TSIQOH, R.; SANGADAH, S.; KOMALA, E. S.; UTOMO, A. B. The Effect of Emoji on Person Perception. *UI Proceedings on Social Science and Humanities*, 2017, 1.

ZAREEN, N. U. S. R. A. T.; KARIM, N.; KHAN, U. A. Psycho emotional impact of social media emojis. *Isra Medical Journal*, 2016, 8 (4), p. 257.

Exploring emoji as a viable cultural tool in WhatsApp communications among Malaysian undergraduates

Explorando emoji como uma ferramenta cultural viável nas comunicações do WhatsApp entre graduandos malaios

Explorando el emoji como una herramienta cultural viable en las comunicaciones de WhatsApp entre los estudiantes universitarios de Malasia

Resumo

Um emoji é uma forma de símbolo na comunicação disponível em quase todas as plataformas de mídia social. Sua conveniência traz potenciais implicações para seu uso na comunicação digital. Este estudo tem como objetivo explorar a eficácia dos emojis na comunicação do WhatsApp e a influência da cultura no uso de emojis entre os graduandos na Malásia. O estudo utilizou uma abordagem qualitativa na qual foram realizadas entrevistas semiestruturadas com oito graduandos da Universidade Sultão Zainal Abidin (UniSZA). Os dados foram analisados por meio de análise temática indutiva. No geral, os achados revelaram que os emojis aumentam a eficiência da comunicação. Os participantes têm atitudes positivas em relação ao uso de emojis. Eles descrevem os emojis como símbolos viáveis que os ajudam a manter as relações sociais e expressar sentimentos. Além disso, os achados mostraram que a cultura malaia influencia a comunicação com emojis, promovendo harmonia e relacionamentos, bem como instilando altos valores de contexto no uso de emojis. Esta pesquisa conclui que os emojis podem influenciar positivamente o WhatsApp Communication se utilizados corretamente.

Palavras-chave: Cultura. Emoji. Malásia. Mídias sociais. WhatsApp.

Abstract

An emoji is a form of a symbol in communication available on almost all social media platforms. Its convenience brings potential implications for its usage in digital communication. This study aims to explore the effectiveness of emojis in WhatsApp communication and the influence of culture on emoji usage among undergraduates in Malaysia. The study employed a qualitative approach in which semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight undergraduates of Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA). The data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. Overall, the findings revealed that emojis increase communication efficiency. The participants have positive attitudes towards emoji usage. They describe emojis as viable symbols that help them to maintain social relations and express feelings. Additionally, the findings showed that Malaysian culture influences emoji communication by promoting harmony and relationships as well as instilling high context values in emoji usage. This research concludes that emojis can influence WhatsApp Communication positively if utilized correctly.

Keywords: Culture. Emoji. Malaysia. Social media. WhatsApp.

Resumen

Un emoji es una forma de símbolo en la comunicación disponible en casi todas las plataformas de redes sociales. Su conveniencia trae implicaciones potenciales para su uso en la comunicación digital. Este estudio tiene como objetivo explorar la efectividad de los emojis en la comunicación de WhatsApp y la influencia de la cultura en el uso de emojis entre los estudiantes universitarios en Malasia. El estudio empleó un enfoque cualitativo en el que se realizaron entrevistas semiestruturadas con ocho estudiantes universitarios de la Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA). Los datos fueron analizados mediante análisis temático inductivo. En general, los hallazgos revelaron que los emojis aumentan la eficiencia de la comunicación. Los participantes tienen actitudes positivas hacia el uso de emojis. Describen los emojis como símbolos viables que les ayudan a mantener relaciones sociales y expresar sentimientos. Además, los hallazgos mostraron que la cultura de Malasia influye en la comunicación de emojis al promover la armonía y las relaciones, así como al inculcar altos valores de contexto en el uso de emojis. Esta investigación concluye que los emojis pueden influir positivamente en la comunicación de WhatsApp si se utilizan correctamente.

Palabras-clave: Cultura. Emoji. Malasia. Redes sociales. WhatsApp.