

## Emoji as Nonverbal Communication among Lecturer-Student Communication in Whatsapp Social Media Academic Group

Alisha Ulfah Firdiani

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia,  
81310 UTM Johor Bahru, Johor, Malaysia

Rohayah Kahar

Language Academy, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia,  
81310 UTM Johor Bahru, Johor, Malaysia

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### ABSTRACT

The increasing use of emoji in digital communication should benefit people who actually utilize them, especially when it comes to maintaining efficient communication between lecturers and students. Several studies on the use of WhatsApp emoji have been conducted, but little is known about the use of emoji by lecturers and students in their communication through WhatsApp conversation group. Using the Media Richness Theory proposed by Daft *et al.* (1987), this study aimed to explore the use of emoji between three lecturers and five students of the Master of Language in Digital Communication and Culture (MLCDC) program at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). By performing Thematic Analysis, the findings of the study revealed that the majority of participants favored using emoji over words since it helped to communicate and deepen feelings in the WhatsApp social media academic group. Furthermore, participants perceived emoji as nonverbal communication to replace words or sentences because it was easier, faster (saving time), and minimized ambiguity while talking with lecturers/students in WhatsApp social media academic groups. However, there are some drawbacks to emoji, such as the fact that it may have varied meanings depending on who sends the message and may not be appropriate for the WhatsApp social media academic group.

*Keywords:* Emoji, Nonverbal Communication, Lecturers and Students' Communication, WhatsApp, Social Media Academic Group, Media Richness Theory

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Human survival is unquestionably dependent on communication. As human beings, people transmitted ideas, views, facts, and thoughts through communication. The most crucial aspects of communication are the message sender and recipient. During daily interactions with others, people use nonverbal communication (NVC). People use nonverbal cues like tone of voice, body language, and facial expression to help them interpret and understand a message (Knapp *et al.*, 2013). Nonetheless, technology evolves and shifts people's communication styles as time goes on. People nowadays use a number of social media platforms to communicate. Social media serves as a platform for establishing and maintaining communication, particularly in education context. The internet and social media have become one of the most important kinds of communication technology, opening up new avenues and

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\*Correspondence to: Rohayah Kahar (email: [rohayahkahar@utm.my](mailto:rohayahkahar@utm.my))

possibilities for accessing education from anywhere and at any time (Soni, 2020). Social media empowers students to generate, co-create, and exchange information with audiences all over the world outside of the classroom, facilitating a more meaningful approach to teaching and learning (Seo, 2013). As a result, the existence of social media has totally altered the dynamics of the global educational system.

Furthermore, how students engage with their lecturers is influenced by the social media platforms they prefer to use. WhatsApp is one of the most popular social networking platforms among students and lecturers. WhatsApp, according to Giordano *et al.* (2017), is one of the most commonly used applications in the world, allowing users to communicate via text, audio, photos, and videos. It is a good platform for social interaction because it only requires a mobile internet connection and there is no extra price for distributing an unlimited amount of data. Furthermore, this social media platform makes emoji available as a popular feature in internet-text chatting. Emoji is a sort of visual and emotional expression that has become a common sight in the digital world. Emoji helps people to express themselves more fully when texting (Elder, 2018). In addition, emoji usage is largely reliant on context as well as the emoji's intended audience (Barbieri *et al.*, 2016). As a result, misinterpretation is a possibility while using emoji as NVC in digital discussions.

The use of emoji and its evolution appears to be linked to advancements in communication technologies. This study focused on lecturers and Master students of the MLCDC program at a university in Malaysia. This study provided answers to the following research questions:

- RQ1 What emoji as NVC is the most commonly used by lecturers and students in their communication through WhatsApp conversation groups?
- RQ2 How is emoji as NVC used between lecturers and students in their communication through WhatsApp conversation groups?
- RQ3 What advantages and disadvantages do emoji as NVC bring while communicating in these WhatsApp groups conversations?




In WhatsApp, the emoji is a built-in feature. Emoji is regarded as a new type of language that allows users to contribute expressions to their conversations. As a result, it is safe to presume that lecturers and students are aware of and comfortable with the trend of utilizing emoji in private or group WhatsApp conversations. The goal of this study was to learn more about how emoji as NVC was utilized in WhatsApp conversation groups between lecturers and students. The use of emoji by lecturers and students, as well as the benefits and drawbacks of emoji as NVC in WhatsApp group conversations were examined in this study.

In this regard, Media Richness Theory by Daft *et al.* (1987) was considered as a cohesive theory to be adopted in this study. The Media Richness Theory was used to investigate how emoji usage as NVC between lecturers and students interacted on WhatsApp. Aside from that, this research determined which emoji as NVC was used the most by lecturers and students in their WhatsApp conversation groups. Because the number of emoji available varies, it is thought necessary to know the most often used emoji, particularly in the context of academic engagement between lecturers and students in their WhatsApp conversation groups. Thus, the aim of this paper is to report the findings pertaining to the study.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditional communications have been challenged in recent years by the widespread adoption of mass media and information technology. It has changed the way individuals communicate with one another tremendously (Chen *et al.*, 2011). Today's remarkable advancements and innovations in science and technology affect, develop, and modify education, just like they do in every other field. With the emergence of the internet and Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), every aspect of social presence has been regulated (e.g., use of emoji instead of facial expressions). According to Sherblom (2010), traditional learning environments have benefited from the internet and CMC because CMC changes how instructors and students communicate, are impacted by others, build relationships, and manage decreased social cues. One of the most common forms of CMC, e-mail interchange, is a good example of how it manifests.

For the past two decades, Judd (2010) claimed that e-mail has become the preferred online communication channel for both formal and informal discussions in professional contexts such as universities. Chase and Clegg (2011) believed that adding email into learning environments allowed to improve communication between the academic community to be simpler and faster, for example, the use of online and electronic methods for the admission, registration, and key-in process for courses. This could be a less scary communication tool for students who have problems interacting in groups. Nonetheless, Judd (2010) showed that the use of e-mail was deteriorating in academic contexts due to the rapid expansion of Social Networking Sites (SNS).

WhatsApp was chosen for this study because at present, it is one of the most widely utilized social networking platforms. In March 2020, it was announced that there were two billion monthly active users in 180 countries and 60 languages, up from over one billion in February 2016 (Statista, 2021). WhatsApp's emoji templates are available on both the Android and web versions of the app. In early December 2020, one of the most recent versions, 2.20.206.24, was added. The revised version contained 115 new emoji from the upcoming version 13.0 emoji collection. Among new emoji, the smiling face with tear emoji , pinched fingers emoji , and transgender symbol emoji  were included. Thus, emoji can be seen as a powerful tool as they express persons and aims, as well as gestures, emotions, sensations, and moods, which later ease us to create powerful visual messages engaged in WhatsApp conversations (De Angeli *et al.*, 2020; Du Plessis, 2020).

Due to the lack of NVC in CMC, internet users have begun to employ emoji to supplement their communication. Emoji's feature is thought to substitute the missing signs in computer-written discourses. In terms of message transmission, perception, and connection formation, emoji and emoticons have been intensively explored. Dunlap *et al.* (2016) claimed emoji aid to improve communication efficiency. Individuals, for example, utilize emoticons in business e-mails to convey a kind mood and softeners when delivering an order or request (Skovholt *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, Elder (2018) emphasized the emotional effect of text-based messages while focusing on employing emoji to eliminate communication uncertainty. Thompson *et al.* (2016) also discovered that emoji can help clarify intentions in ambiguous situations. Seargeant (2019) also pointed out that the use of emoji has advanced to the point where it has become a significant indication in almost all computer-mediated interaction modalities.

Researchers have also looked into emoji in a variety of fields, such as education. Fane *et al.* (2018) aimed to investigate the use and potential of emoji as a visual study tool for eliciting sensations and perceptions of well-being among young children. Emoji could help young children understand abstract ideas like safety, interpersonal management, and emotions, as well as improve their ability to

communicate, according to the findings. Furthermore, Brody and Caldwell (2019) developed a classroom activity in which students were challenged to text message complex and straightforward messages using only emoji. Brody and Caldwell (2019) discovered various types of emoji are able to help people understand what they have learnt when they are used in classroom exercises.

Based on the preceding statements, it can be concluded that emoji has enabled NVC to transmit the nuances and intent of words that would otherwise be missed. Emoji is therefore much more than emoticons because they are pre-made representations of characters with distinct facial expressions. Emoji, according to Kelly and Watts (2015), extends the capabilities of emoji by adding an expressive signal to a text message. However, because of the large number of emoji accessible, there is a chance that the recipient will misunderstand the message. Kelly and Watts (2015) thought that the meaning varies from person to person, depending on the context, prior information, references, characterization of the issue, and our level of confidence in the people we communicate with, whether friends, family, co-workers, other groups members, authorities, partners, or collaborators.

This study's theoretical framework is based on the Media Richness Theory. The Media Richness Theory was first established by Daft and Lengel (1986), and it creates a framework for determining how well different communication mediums can reproduce the information sent over them. There are four significant standards used to assess medium richness in the Media Richness Theory as discussed by Daft *et al.* (1987):

1. Fast feedback: The speed at which responses are made accessible and how to get information quickly.
2. Multiple Information cues: The ability to deal with various information cues available and accessible at the same time.
3. Linguistic diversity: Concerned with how much meaning or information can be sent and derived from symbols.
4. Personal focus: Referred to how personalized messages can be created for the intended recipients.

Concerning this, the Media Richness Theory proposed by Daft *et al.* (1987) was seen as a unified theory to be applied in this study. Further, by using the Media Richness Theory as a basis, this study looked at how lecturers and students interact on WhatsApp using emoji. Emoji may be considered better than text-only conditions by users, referring to emoji's enrichment of the Media Richness Theory's four critical criteria for assessing medium richness. Emoji is available in a number of different types, including facial emotions, animals, objects, symbols, activity, and so on, to convey a variety of messages (Emoji, 2021). It increases the language diversity and personal emphasis requirements by bringing a broader range of thoughts and concepts, as various people might use emoji to get different meanings. Emoji may improve feedback by sending out more detailed nonverbal messages that can be interpreted or understood more quickly than spoken messages alone.

The use of emoji as NVC on social media among Malaysians is on the rise, along with the growth of social media and emojis users in Malaysia. According to the most recent figures, 87.61 percent of Malaysians own smartphones, with the number of users anticipated to rise over time (Müller, 2021). Müller (2021) compiled the data for the report by using SwiftKey Cloud data collected between October 2014 and January 2015, and the data included both Android and iOS devices. The results found that Malaysian users speak the languages with the most emoji, making them the most emoji-addicted (Sabri *et*

*al.*, 2021). In addition, several social media applications for instant messaging have grown popular as a learning tool in reaction to the development of learning (Mistar & Embi, 2016). WhatsApp is the most popular app in Malaysia, with 97 percent of Malaysians using it (Telenor Research, 2016). Many studies in Malaysia have looked into the role of WhatsApp, particularly in the educational context (Morsidi *et al.*, 2021; Mistar & Embi, 2016; Man, 2014; Ahad & Lim, 2014; Ganasegaran, 2017; Indiran *et al.* 2022). However, very few studies have addressed the use of emoji by lecturers and students in WhatsApp social media academic groups, particularly for post-graduate level in the Malaysian institutions. To bridge the gap, this study looked into how lecturers and students used emoji as NVC in their WhatsApp groups, specifically at a university in Malaysia. It is worth considering how prevalent this mode of communication is employed in the context of lecturers-students' interaction in WhatsApp social media academic groups.

### 3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To obtain answers to the research questions listed previously, this study used Creswell and Plano Clark's (2007) mixed method methodology. Mixed method research, as described by Creswell (2007), is the use of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to tackle a specific research problem within a single study. The mixed method approach is considered necessary in this study since it aims to investigate the use of emoji, as well as its benefits and drawbacks, among lecturers and students in their WhatsApp conversation groups. This research was carried out among lecturers and students of MLCDC program in a university in Malaysia.

This study involved five Master's students and three lecturers as participants. Because they were the only students in the class, all five participants were females (100 percent). The number of participants by age was four (80 percent) with ages ranging from 23 to 28 years old and one (20 percent) with ages ranging from 29 to 34 years old, according to the results of socio-demographic data. Three participants (60 percent) were from the year 2020, and two (40 percent) were from the year 2021, according to the enrollment year. In terms of semester, four of the participants (80 percent) were in semester 3 and one (20 percent) was in semester 2. Finally, two Malaysians (40 percent), two Chinese (40 percent), and one Iraqi (20 percent) were among the participants. Three students and three lecturers were willing to be interviewed for additional inquiry among the eight participants.

Documentation, questionnaires, and interviews were used to gather data for this study. The research was based on a collection of WhatsApp discussions between lecturers and students in seven academic groups. The goal of the chats documentation was to find out which emoji as NVC was used the most by lecturers and students in their WhatsApp groups (RQ1). The dialogues lasted between two semesters of academic study (October 2020 – July 2021). The data were acquired through screen-casting and documenting specific exchanges involving emoji, which served as the study's criterion. The collected interactions were then analyzed using Microsoft Excel, a spreadsheet program.

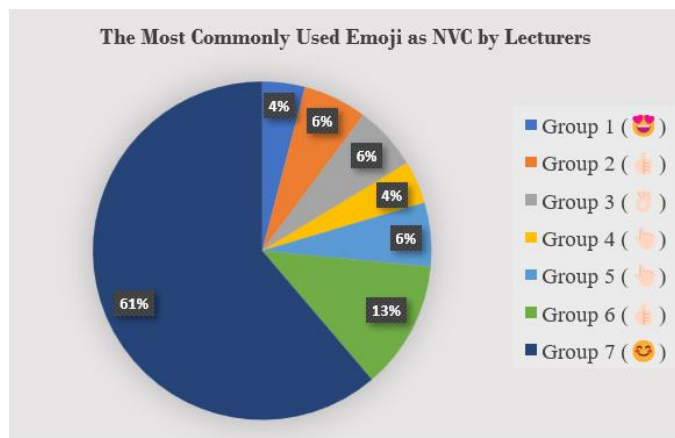
RQ2 and RQ3 were addressed in this study using a questionnaire and an interview. The questionnaire was adapted from Persson's (2019) survey questionnaires. The researcher sent the questionnaire which consisted of fifteen questions (Google Form) to each participant separately over WhatsApp in this study. This solution was needed in response to questions regarding how emoji as NVC was used in WhatsApp groups between lecturers and students (RQ2). The interview was conducted to investigate how lecturers and students used emoji in their WhatsApp conversation groups, as well as to gather responses to the benefits and drawbacks of using emoji as NVC in a WhatsApp conversation groups between lecturers and students, in order to support the data from the questionnaire (RQ3).

The data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed through descriptive analysis (frequency). Further, thematic analysis was used to analyze the data collected through the interview. According to Braun and Clarke (2012), thematic analysis (TA) is a technique for manually finding, organizing, providing insight, and making sense of meaning patterns in shared or reciprocal meanings and experiences (themes). This is consistent with the study's purpose of examining the use of emoji in WhatsApp group discussions between lecturers and students and identifying the benefits and drawbacks of doing so. This work is believed to be valuable for future research in this field as a result of including these elements.

## 4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 The Most Commonly Used Emoji as NVC by Lecturers and Students in Their Communication through WhatsApp Conversation Groups

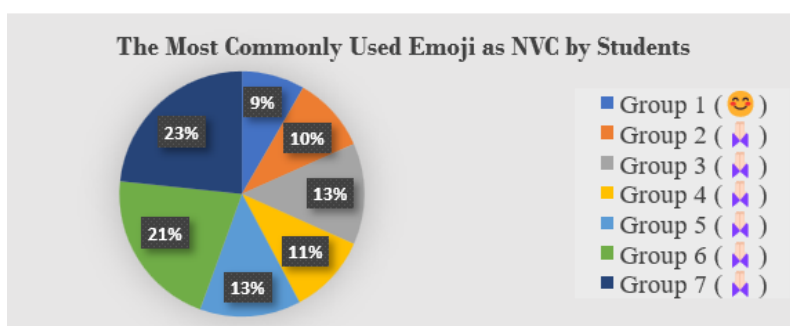
The researcher gathered data from conversations between lecturers and students in WhatsApp social media academic groups in order to answer RQ1 about the most regularly used emoji as NVC by lecturers and students. Seven WhatsApp social media academic groups interactions were discovered throughout the course of two semesters of academic studies (October 2020 – July 2021). The participants' exchanges or chats in the seven WhatsApp social media academic groups were deemed valid since they embodied emoji. The study's findings revealed that lecturers and students utilized a variety of emoji in their WhatsApp conversation groups. 109 different emoji were discovered in seven WhatsApp social media academic groups. The researcher used the *max* function in Excel to determine which emoji was most frequently used by lecturers and students in their WhatsApp conversation groups. The *max* function returns the biggest value from any numeric data (Microsoft Support, n.d.). The *max* function is thought to be the best for determining the highest/largest numeric value in the data provided.



**Figure 4.1** The Most Commonly Used Emoji as NVC by Lecturers

In terms of emoji used by lecturers from seven groups, the smiling face with heart-eyes emoji (😍) and backhand index pointing up emoji (👉) showed the lowest percentage (4 percent) in Figure 4.1.

During interactions in WhatsApp conversation groups, the lecturers used thumbs up emoji (👍) and OK hand emoji (👌) on average. The three hand motion emoji (👉, 👍, and 👌) were all widely used by lecturers in digital communication to indicate agreement or encouragement. This assertion is in line with Kousar *et al.* (2020), who found that lecturers employ hand sign emoji to answer with affirmation messages by imitating nonverbal emoji emotions. As a result, the hand gesture emoji allows users to transmit not only information, but also a nonverbal gesture that has emotional significance. Based on 109 emoji, lecturers used the smiling face with smiling eyes emoji (😊) the most with a 61 percent usage rate. Figure 4.2, on the other hand, shows the smiling face with smiling eyes emoji (😊), which had the lowest percentage of 9 percent, indicating that it is a less popular emoji among students. On the other hand, the results found that students in WhatsApp social media academic groups used the folded hands emoji (🙏) the most, with a proportion of 23 percent.



**Figure 4.2** The Most Commonly Used Emoji as NCV by Students

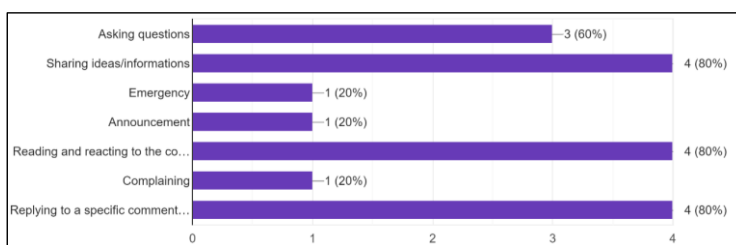
As seen in Figure 4.2, students in their WhatsApp conversation groups frequently utilized the folded hands emoji (🙏). In WhatsApp conversation groups, students were found to constantly use the folded hands emoji (🙏) in response to thanking, apologizing, or seeking something from their lecturers. The folded hands emoji is appropriate because it may be used to communicate such emotions as hope, appreciation, gratitude, reverence, and respect. It was observed that students regularly utilized the folded hands emoji (🙏) to replace the cultural gesture while appreciating, apologizing, and requesting as if in face-to-face encounters. This assertion is consistent with Muzzaky's (2021) prior discovery that the folded hands emoji (🙏) has a pleasant message tone that helps emoji users build healthy relationships through written communication. Because the interaction between students and lecturers is regarded official, the folded hands emoji (🙏) was used in WhatsApp conversation groups to foster or preserve positive relationships between students and lecturers.

#### 4.2 Emoji as NVC Between Lecturers and Students in Their Communication through WhatsApp Conversation Groups

This section displays the findings that aid in answering RQ2 and RQ3 about the use of emoji by lecturers and students, as well as its benefits and drawbacks in their WhatsApp conversation groups. The opinions of the participants were acquired using an online questionnaire and an interview to answer these questions.

#### 4.2.1 Most Appropriate Communication Context for Using Emoji as NVC in WhatsApp Social Media Academic Groups

Participants were given options for determining the best communication context for utilizing emoji in WhatsApp Academic Groups. According to the findings (Figure 4.3), 20 percent of participants believed emoji is suitable in an emergency, an announcement, or a complaint. Furthermore, 60 percent of participants said that emoji was appropriate for expressing questions in context. The majority of participants thought emoji should be used in three types of communication situations: sharing ideas/information (80 percent), reading and reacting to content posted by other members of the group (80 percent), and responding to a specific comment from a person (80 percent).



**Figure 4.3** Most Appropriate Communication Context for Using Emoji as NVC in WhatsApp Social Media Academic Groups

Based on the findings, the participants agreed that emoji was appropriate to be used in specific situations when interacting in WhatsApp social media academic groups. When interacting in WhatsApp social media academic groups, the majority of the participants claimed that emoji was best utilized for sharing ideas/information, reading and reacting to content posted by other group members, and responding to specific comments from someone.

Emoji is considered significant to the concept of phatic expression since they relate to these three sorts of communication contexts. A phatic expression is a style of communication used to develop or maintain social relationships in everyday discourse (Malinowski, 1923, as cited in Ogden & Richards, 1923). In WhatsApp social media academic groups, participants have been seen using embedded emoji in response to particular information, remarks, or topics shared by other users. The participants felt obligated to maintain social links with other members in WhatsApp social media academic groups by embedding the emoji while responding to specific communication settings/contexts.

Emoji can also be used for phatic functions including starting a conversation, concluding a conversation, and avoiding textual silence in instant messaging (Danesi, 2017). One member of the WhatsApp Academic Groups, for example, posted YouTube video footage as a study help in their classes. According to Danesi (2017), emoji is appropriate for use when the sender of the message does not want to provide the recipient with any extra information on a subject but still wants to avoid the awkward silence that may occur if the receiver expects more information. Emoji with the phatic function can be used to add a positive tone to a message while also preventing textual silence.

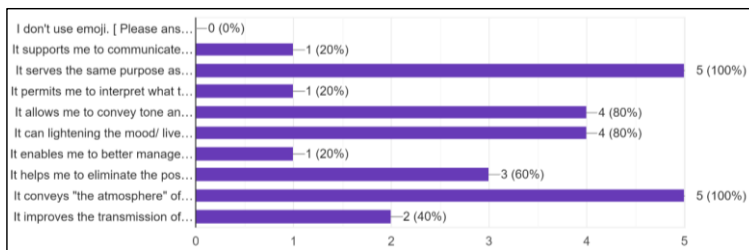
At the same time, the recipient was accountable for not being a "silent reader," but rather responding to or reacting to messages from other members. It was also deemed a respectful gesture as a strategy to



establish social relationships between lecturers and students on WhatsApp Academic Groups social media, aside from avoiding textual silence. Phatic communication is regarded to be connected to emoji, according to Malinowski (1923) and Danesi (2017), because emoji can perform social tasks analogous to words or speech.

#### 4.2.2 *Emoji as Supplementary Help Tool in WhatsApp Social Media Academic Groups*

The participants were also asked to identify their reason for using or not using emoji while interacting in WhatsApp social media academic groups.



**Figure 4.4** The Usage of Emoji as NVC in WhatsApp Social Media Academic Groups

As demonstrated in the results (Figure 4.4), five participants (100 percent) used emoji because they believed they provided the same role in verbal communication as gesture, body language, and tone. Similarly, five participants (100 percent) found that using emoji when communicating in WhatsApp social media academic groups helped them convey a friendly, welcoming, and polite attitude. Furthermore, four persons (80 percent) said that emoji helped them transmit tone and emotional cues more effectively, as well as lighten the mood/liven up a monotonous conversation. As a result, it can be concluded that the emoji is useful and vital for both lecturers and students while interacting in WhatsApp academic groups.

Furthermore, the use of emoji as a supplemental aid is in line with the Media Richness Theory. According to Media Richness Theory, the ability of all communication media to enable users to communicate varies. This ability is described by the richness of a medium. To send the desired message, the sender should select a medium with the appropriate level of richness (Daft *et al.*, 1987). Emoji is recognized as a rich medium in real-time communication systems such as WhatsApp social media academic groups and other similar platforms. Emoji is thought to be capable of generating visual social cues. Because it is capable of transmitting gestures and body language, it is considered a rich medium of communication. When picking a communication medium for a message, avoiding ambiguity or misinterpretations is one of the most important factors (Suler, 2011). Emoji can thus be used before or after the written component of a message to improve communication. During the interview, the participants provided evidence to support the statement by citing the following reasons for their preference for using emoji in WhatsApp social media academic groups:

#### **Communication Tone Tool**

Emoji was chosen over text by the majority of participants since it aided them in their communication while communicating in WhatsApp social media academic groups. Emoji can create an emotional

response in most people when used as a supplement. In lecturer-student communication via WhatsApp social media academic groups, emoji could assist them in illustrating expression and feeling. The results (Figure 4.4) were likewise seen as emoji benefits. When they utilized emoji to describe their feelings, it was discovered that the emoji helped to improve the tone of their messages and indicate friendliness.

Emoji, for example, can be used to communicate a request context. Adding the emoji folded hands (🙏) before or after the text message might express more clearly that the students truly hoped their request would be granted by the lecturer in the specific context of communication, such as asking the teacher if they could postpone the deadline of assignments. As a result, the participants preferred to use emoji because it allowed them to express and reinforce the tone of their emotions and moods. The benefits of using emoji as a communication tone tool were also supported by the extracts below:

Participant A: “I think the use of emoji can actually help me to improve the tone of my messages and show my friendliness. Most importantly, it would be helpful when there's an emotion that I couldn't turn it into words. I'll pick an emoji that nearest to the expression or emotion that I want to show.”

Participant B: “Emoji governs the mood of the conversation and how topics are to be addressed according to my personality and related thereafter. I use specific emoji to position my message within a sequence of conversational events that occur during that particular moment.”

Participant C: “For me, emoji can also give the sender positive feedback indicating we are open for more or longer conversation.”

It can be seen from the examples above that emoji helped shorten text and alter the tone of the conversation. Academic groups are also referred to as formal groups since they are made up of a lecturer and their students who meet on a regular basis to discuss general and specific ideas about teaching and learning. As a result, the “vibe” in WhatsApp academic groups can be a little too serious or uninteresting at times. Furthermore, when talking with lecturer/students in WhatsApp groups, emoji was thought important to be employed.

When talking with lecturer/student in WhatsApp groups, emoji helped create and deepen relationships around shared meanings. They utilized emoji to demonstrate the range of emotions that a sentence could elicit in real life. At the same time, it contributed to a more welcoming atmosphere, which can help students and lecturers form stronger bonds. This finding is similar to that of Brody and Caldwell (2019), who found that emoji has made it possible to communicate the nuances and intent of words that would otherwise be lost in non-verbal communication. As a result, both lecturers and students thought emoji in WhatsApp groups would benefit them by improving communication with other students and the lecturers, facilitating collaborative learning, and allowing them to access and share educational information.

In conclusion, emoji can be a useful emotional cue in lecturer-student communication via WhatsApp social media academic groups. The findings of this study support The Media Richness Theory, which claims that one of the most important communication goals is to reduce ambiguity and uncertainty (Daft *et al.*, 1987). Emoji is seen as a useful tool to illustrate vividly on the tone of the messages intended to be conveyed when there is an emotion that cannot be expressed in words. Emoji can thus be used to convey expression and emotion in lecturer-student communication through WhatsApp social media academic groups. It can also help to deepen the dialogue and maintain friendliness in specific communication

situations. Emoji was found to be quite helpful in quickly expressing how the participants felt. While communicating in WhatsApp social media academic groups, both students and lecturers used emoji that closely reflected the mood or sentiment they wanted to convey.

### **Ambiguity-Reduction Tool**

Emoji is a useful tool because they can be used to create visual messages for WhatsApp conversations. Participants (60 percent) thought emoji may help minimize and reduce ambiguity when talking with lecturers/students in WhatsApp social media academic groups, according to the findings (Figure 4.4). Furthermore, as the excerpt below shows, emoji can be used to emphasize a text message and, in some situations, to avoid misunderstandings when communicating in WhatsApp academic groups. When words were used in online conversations, it was sometimes difficult to tell what the tone was. When engaging with lecturer/student via WhatsApp social media academic groups, using emoji within the text message helped to complement the lack of body language (e.g., gestures, facial emotions).

Participant F: “I think emoji is important to emphasize the textual message and in some contexts to avoid misunderstanding.”

It is important to realize that various people perceive emoji in different ways. According to Miller *et al.* (2016), the wide range of emoji interpretations they identified could be damaging to the successful use of emoji in communication. As a result, when the recipient’s comprehension differs from the sender’s intended meaning, a misunderstanding may occur. Furthermore, Tigwell and Flatla (2016) also point out that an attempt to avoid any unfavorable misunderstanding or misinterpretation is that people should interpret emoji characters in their communications in the same way they read text messages. Despite the fact that emoji is not highly effective, it can still help to eliminate ambiguity and bad misinterpretation. Emoji is effective in reducing ambiguity when both parties (sender and receiver) understand what is being said.

As a result, employing emoji in WhatsApp social media academic groups when connecting with lecturer/student would increase the clarity of information communicated while reducing ambiguity. The findings of this study support The Media Richness Theory. It claims that minimizing ambiguity and uncertainty should be one of the key communication goals (Daft *et al.*, 1987). Because the goal of communication is to eliminate uncertainty and ambiguity in order to improve communication efficiency, the emoji is seen as providing sufficient levels of detail and reducing potential ambiguity when communicating with lecturer/student in WhatsApp social media academic groups.

### **Text-Reduction Tool**

Due to its ability to deliver real-time response and infuse emotion through emoji, WhatsApp Messenger is currently widely considered as one of the most popular social messenger software. Emoji can replace words or phrases, according to the participants, because it is simple and quick to use (saves time). It was discovered that the participants solely utilized emoji to replace words in WhatsApp social media academic groups as though it were to provide rapid feedback. For example, instead of saying “Okay” or “Good,” a lecturer used a thumbs up emoji (👍) to communicate approval or encouragement in WhatsApp Academic Groups.

The Media Richness Theory is compatible with the use of emoji as a text-reduction method. Emoji is a versatile method of communication, according to Media Richness Theory, since it allows for quick responses and information availability (Daft *et al.*, 1987). Emoji can be considered a more advanced type of text-based communication in which both the sender and the recipient are actively involved, according to the statement. In WhatsApp social media academic groups, both the sender and the receiver might receive quick feedback in the form of emoji, allowing several cues to be present and accessible at the same time. In WhatsApp social media academic groups, both the reader and the sender would find it easier and faster to deliver the message using emoji.

Participant A: “For me, emoji helps to add tone which is missing in text messages and help us to respond to messages with little effort and maintain solidarity with others.”

Participant E: “I think it's significant. Because sometimes it's hard to elaborate your every single expression, so here's the emoji can help to shorten the text. Otherwise, the text is too long-winded and maybe people can't respond you immediately with long type message.”

The participants thought emoji added more variety to the language, based on the excerpts above. Emoji might not only make talks more entertaining, but it could also recognize when physical cues were missing. At the same time, this finding resembles The Media Richness Theory to some extent. It is concerned with the amount of information or meaning that may be sent and deduced from symbols (Daft *et al.*, 1987). Emoji is considered a rich medium since it can detect physiological signs and emotion, according to Daft *et al.* (1987). Emoji is useful for expressing emotions that are difficult to explain in words. Emoji is an impressive way to communicate a wide range of emotions in a way that words cannot always do because the alternatives are unlimited. While communicating in WhatsApp social media academic groups, it was discovered that emoji frequently included lecturers and students. There was no need for lecturers and students to explain too much of themselves in a text because emoji may help simplify language and communicate the tone of a communication in a better way. As a result, emoji can be claimed to boost the ability of both lecturers and students to communicate in WhatsApp social media academic groups.

#### **4.2.3 Disadvantages of Emoji as NVC in WhatsApp Social Media Academic Groups**

This section displays the findings that aid in responding to RQ3 on the drawbacks of using emoji as NVC in WhatsApp group talks between lecturers and students. According to the participants in the interview, there are certain disadvantages to utilizing emoji while talking with lecturer/student in WhatsApp social media academic groups.

##### **Ambiguous/ Unclear Meaning**

According to the extracts below, the majority of the participants were aware that emoji could result in varied interpretations between the sender and the receiver, with the receiver not always interpreting in the same way as the sender intended.

Participant D: "I think, for example, there was a kind of emoji shows "smile". Sometimes if it is used in communication, may cause misunderstanding, and the other person may think that you are expressing dissatisfaction."

Participant F: "Some emoji which are less popular may have different meaning to different people. Especially, those from different generational groups. For example, emoji like hugging face (🤗) or smirking face (😏) may be vague for some older users. And this may also cause miscommunication."

According to the preceding statements, there was a risk of miscommunication since emoji might cause ambiguity because the meanings of emoji vary depending on culture. In comparison to text, which may provide critical information, the emoji was considered to add nothing. It was sometimes impossible to identify what tone was being used when words were spoken in an online conversation. Emoji is interpreted by people according to their own personal experiences (Samovar, 2016). Someone, for example, may use an emoji with gushing tears after witnessing something amusing, while others may be perplexed as to why that person is upset.

People misunderstand emoji for two reasons: (1) People have diverse opinions on how emoji should be used and what emoji represent, and (2) emoji designs vary depending on the platform (Bosker, 2014; Logan, 2015; Miller, 2016). It is clear from the remarks that a misconception would occur if someone couldn't "calculate" or interpret what an emoji should mean. As a result, misreading of communications due to conflicting emoji interpretations can lead to communication breakdowns and, in some cases, damage to relationships.

Written communication, according to some participants, may aid in the avoidance of misconceptions. The message itself, on the other hand, could be emotionally ambiguous, and the sender wanted the emoji to indicate the sentiment without having to type a longer message. Furthermore, even when sending a written message, if the message is sent across mobile platforms, confusion or misunderstanding may occur, especially if an emoji that is noticeably different is used (Miller, 2016). According to the discussions above, emoji might cause conflicting interpretations between sender and receiver, with the receiver not always understanding what the sender meant. Because a group is likely to contain a diverse range of personalities, there may be a cultural variation in the way emoji is used and interpreted, which might lead to miscommunication.

### **Informal Manner**

Emoji is a form of communication, and like any other form, there are occasions when it should be used and times when it should not be used. Emoji might not suit with the serious character of a WhatsApp social media academic community, according to the passage below. It is inappropriate to use while talking serious matters with lecturer/student in WhatsApp social media academic groups, thus it may be deemed a little informal.

Participant C: "Could be a little informal if the academic convo is getting serious."

The relationship should always be taken into consideration in any interpersonal engagement. Because emoji is context-dependent, it is critical to determine the communication context in order to establish a strong relationship (Eisner et.al, 2016). Emoji, for example, was deemed improper when replying to a serious complaint or concern. According to the text above, emoji is not quite right for conveying serious or solemn messages. Wibowo *et al.* (2017) found that emoji has the ability to devalue content that people want to take seriously. Thus, messaging using emoji can lead to misinterpretation when nonverbal cues differ between cultures in terms of usage and interpretation. As a result, when speaking with lecturer or student in WhatsApp social media academic groups, it is thought vital for students to reflect on their connection with lecturers and how they have negotiated a specific communication style between both sides.

Before employing an emoji, it is important to understand the audience's demographics. Lecturers and other senior persons in WhatsApp academic groups may be wary of emoji or have no clues or ideas of what they mean. If the students were unaware of the problem, the ethics of communicating with higher-ranking individuals (lecturers) might be taken for granted. Emoji was found to be more acceptable, particularly if both lecturers and students used them frequently in WhatsApp academic groups. However, because not everyone can compute or interpret the meaning of emoji in the same way, emoji should be utilized carefully and judiciously.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

This study revealed that lecturers and students employed a variety of emoji in their WhatsApp communication groups. Among seven WhatsApp social media academic groups and 109 types of emoji observed, the smiling face with smiling eyes emoji (😊) was dominantly used by lecturers while the folded hands emoji (🙏) was predominantly utilized by students when communicating in WhatsApp social media academic groups. When interacting in WhatsApp social media academic groups, majority of the participants claimed that emoji is best utilized for sharing ideas or information, reading and reacting to content posted by other group members, and responding to specific comments from someone. Moreover, emoji is regarded to be connected to phatic communication as a respectful gesture as a strategy to establish social relationships between lecturers and students on WhatsApp social media academic groups, aside from avoiding textual silence. The study also found that emoji is useful and vital for both lecturers and students while interacting in WhatsApp social media academic groups. Some benefits of emoji were declared by participants such as; (1) communication tone tool, (2) ambiguity-reduction tool, and (3) text-reduction tool.

The use of emoji as a supplemental aid is in line with the Media Richness Theory. Emoji as NVC is considered a rich medium of communication because it is illustrating more lively and vividly on the tone of the messages intended to be conveyed when there is an emotion that cannot be expressed in words, increasing the clarity of information while reducing ambiguity, and enabling for quick reactions and the availability of information. Besides the advantages, the participants also perceived some disadvantages emoji may impact to their WhatsApp communication groups. Messaging using emoji can lead to misinterpretation when nonverbal cues differ between cultures in terms of usage and interpretation. Besides that, emoji might not be suitable for the serious character of a WhatsApp social media academic community. As a result, when speaking with a lecturer or student in WhatsApp social media academic

groups, it is vital for students to reflect on their connection with lecturers and how they have negotiated a specific communication style between both sides.

Given the current increase in WhatsApp emoji studies, it will be particularly interesting for both lecturers and students to learn how emoji usage has grown more engaging and what emoji-related issues are garnering more study efforts. As a result, UTM lecturers and students can use this knowledge to determine which criteria in terms of maintaining effective communication should be improved, so that both lecturers and students have a better understanding of communication skills and can contribute to the development of digital literacy. The researcher also suggests that future research should include a bigger number of individuals and a range of postsecondary levels. Only a modest number of people took part in this study (lecturers and students). All of the participants in this study were women because they were the only students and lecturers in the class. As a result, the findings may not reflect the entire community. Furthermore, the social media used in this study was limited to WhatsApp, but others such as Telegram, Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook are all major social media platforms that offer emoji as common elements in internet-text chatting.

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