

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Beyond Words: Investigating the Semiotic Role of Emojis in WhatsApp Chats among Private University Students in the Klang Valley, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT - This study investigates the semiotic significance of emojis in WhatsApp conversations among private tertiary students in the Klang Valley, Malaysia. As emojis have become a core component of digital communication, this research aims to understand how students interpret and use them to convey meaning beyond written words. A quantitative approach was employed, with data collected through a structured questionnaire distributed to a sample of students. The analysis focused on patterns of emoji usage, frequency, and the perceived meanings attached to different emojis in various contexts. The findings indicate that emojis play a crucial role in expressing emotions, reinforcing messages, and clarifying intentions in digital interactions. Many students reported that emojis help prevent misunderstandings and enhance the emotional tone of their messages. The study concludes that emojis function as important semiotic tools that contribute to more effective and meaningful communication in online settings. These insights highlight the evolving nature of language and the growing influence of visual symbols in digital conversations.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Emojis have become an essential part of everyday digital communication, particularly among university students, as they play a key role in social media interactions (Kukreti & Patel, 2020). This study explores the dynamic environment of modern English communication in the academic setting, paying particular attention to the ubiquitous usage of emojis in the context of WhatsApp, a popular messaging app among students. Emojis are a type of symbol used in communication that can be found on practically all social networking sites and practicality may have an impact on how it is used in digital communication (Sabri et al., 2021). Emojis are miniature visual symbols that are used in text messages. They are no longer just decorations; now, they can be used to express a wide range of feelings, nuance, and social cues. Appreciating the varied implications of emoji usage becomes essential for appreciating the nuances inherent in modern communication, especially as tertiary students use digital platforms for a variety of academic and social talks. The advancement of communication technology, and changes in how we symbolize or visualize our messages, have led to the birth of emojis (Sabri et al., 2021). With the advancement of technology and easy access to the internet, emojis have become a communicative tool in social interaction. Abdullah et al. (2022) also mentioned that there has been a rise in the utilization of social media and the internet among Malaysians in their social setting. This research seeks to understand the nuances of emoji use among university students, and it is positioned at the nexus of linguistics, technology, and social behavior. This study uses a quantitative analysis of emoji patterns with questionnaires to investigate the reasons people use emojis, how different cultural and linguistic groups understand emojis differently, and how emojis generally affect the effectiveness and clarity of communication. Emojis are a common example of visual language that is used to transmit messages on social media, where it has taken over internet users' communication. Emojis are a type of visual language that are used to represent various emotions and thoughts, according to a number of research findings (Arafah & Hasyim, 2019). Although emojis have become a natural part of how students express themselves online, it is still unclear how their use affects the way English messages are understood in academic conversations. In casual chats, emojis help make messages friendlier or more expressive, but in academic settings, they might sometimes blur the intended meaning or reduce linguistic clarity. For instance, when students rely too much on emojis, their written communication may lose precision or be interpreted differently by others. This uncertainty shows that more research is needed to understand how university students actually use emojis when communicating in English on WhatsApp, and whether this visual language supports or hinders effective academic communication.

This research is situated within the broader framework of sociolinguistics, digital communication studies, and language evolution. Social media platforms have fostered linguistic experimentation, word creation, and transformation, allowing individuals to be unconventional, creative, and defying English language conventions while fostering creativity and innovation (Jebaselvi et al., 2023). With the advancement of technology, language itself has changed throughout human history to become more than just a means of spoken communication. With the use of technology, people now have ready access to language, which facilitates quicker and easier spoken or written communication. Social media has completely changed how individuals communicate with one another and provides unfettered access to people everywhere (Shihan & Talukder 2025). Social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok provide a powerful medium to communicate with secondary students, fostering meaningful interactions. Technology enables these influencers to connect with students, offering opportunities to engage in creative activities and expand their learning beyond traditional settings

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(Elyildirim, 2021). Language Emojis have been the subject of numerous studies that have examined their use in a variety of linguistic contexts, emphasizing their cultural significance, communicative abilities, and the dynamic character of language. Nonetheless, there is still a paucity of study that particularly looks at the function of emojis in the context of English communication among university students using WhatsApp. Over the last decade, the use of emojis in written communication has increased tremendously, overcoming the boundaries of traditional text-based expression. Paralinguistic cues, such as emoticons and emojis, are visual images used in text-based Electronic-Mediated Communication (EMC) to convey or reinforce the sender's emotional state, often representing facial expressions and feelings (Prada et al., 2018). The rise of digital communication platforms like WhatsApp has exacerbated this tendency by offering users with a plethora of visual signals to augment and enhance their written messages. Understanding the various ways in which emojis are used within this group is critical for unravelling the present linguistic environment, since tertiary students are at the forefront of adopting and defining digital communication standards.

1.1 The Evolution of Emojis

Emojis have their roots in Japan, where Shigetaka Kurita originally popularized a set of 176 pixelated symbols in the late 1990s to improve communication in the rapidly developing field of mobile technology. These little icons, which were initially meant to succinctly convey feelings, quickly gained global popularity. Bai et al. (2019) mentioned that emoji evolved from the concept of smiley faces, which subsequently developed into emoticons. In recent times, both emojis and stickers have become popular forms of visual communication. The smiley face first emerged in the 1960s and is considered to be the earliest representation of emoticons. Since the inception of language over one hundred thousand years ago, enabling individuals to convey complex ideas to one another, every subsequent technological advancement has expanded its influence Seargeant (2019). Upadhyay et al. (2023) further elaborated that a contemporary area of study in the field of text messaging research pertains to the understanding of emoticons and its contemporary substitute, emoji. Distinct from the period, these cues were specifically designed for a computer-mediated communication (CMC) setting and can serve multiple functions. For instance, emojis can fulfil both a semantic and syntactic role. Emojis have become a standard feature of digital communication with the development of messaging apps and the surge in smartphone use. One of the most widely used messaging apps worldwide, WhatsApp, was crucial in the spread of emojis. Emojis have become indispensable tools for text-based communications, as university students have been early adopters of cell phones and messaging apps, allowing them to communicate emotions, emphasize tone, and add humor. In recent decades, there has been a significant acceleration in technology advancements, particularly in the areas of computers, the internet, and mobile devices. These advancements have greatly facilitated and reduced the cost of long-distance communication.

However, these innovations have also posed difficulties in our communication, particularly with the crucial matter of empathy and emotional detachment. A range of innovations, including punctuation marks and emoticons, have been employed in an effort to address these issues (Seargeant, 2019). Emojis are now more than just symbols for emotions on a screen; they have cultural meaning. Particularly tertiary students have amassed a distinctive emoji lexicon that embodies inside jokes, common experiences, and cultural allusions. Beyond the constraints of written text, peers may connect and understand at a deeper level because to this common visual language. According to Bandara (2021), Emojis are little symbols that are used in text messages to represent sentiments and thoughts. They are generated from computer-mediated communication and help to improve social ties in this digital age. Schweiger (2023) further added that Emoji are commonly employed to convey moods or gestures, to enhance or conceal meaning, and to amplify the impact of a message, so significantly broadening our range of communication possibilities. In the context of WhatsApp conversations among tertiary students, emojis serve as communication enhancers. They add layers of meaning, convey emotions that may be challenging to express in words alone, and contribute to a more engaging and dynamic exchange. This is especially important in a digital age where face-to-face communication is often replaced by screens. Zhou et al. (2022) stated that due to the rise of social media, individuals have become more reliant on mobile phones for online communication. Emojis have shown to be essential and effective instruments in daily social media contact. Y et al. (2023) mentioned that an emoji is a miniature digital image or symbol employed in electronic communication to convey an emotion, concept, or notion. Emoticons are commonly used in written communication, such as text messaging, social networking platforms, and other digital mediums, to convey emotions or add depth to a remark. Emojis serve as a versatile means for teenagers to demonstrate their proficiency in language usage, and they fulfil several interactive roles for adolescents. They possess the knowledge of when to utilize them and in the company of whom (Hougaard & Rathje, 2018).

The progress in technology and digital communication has resulted in the emergence of digital semiotics, which is defined by its use of multiple modes of expression and includes various paralinguistic aspects like emojis, emoticons, memes, and so on (Koltsova & Kartashkova, 2022). Communications that contain emojis are seen as having a higher emotional intensity and a more severe emotional value compared to communications that do not include emojis. Moreover, the impact of emojis on the perception of emotional positivity was influenced by the perception of emotional strength and these findings indicate that emoticons serve as efficient quasi-nonverbal cues in digital communication (Erle et al., 2022).

1.1.1 Emojis in Digital Communication

The widespread use of mobile phones has created new opportunities for communication advances. Many messaging apps, such as WhatsApp, Line, Instagram, WeChat, Snapchat, and Facebook Messenger, are popular and have improved communication efficiency and convenience (Ghazanfar et al., 2022). Emojis have transformed how individuals express emotions, set the tone, and deepen the meaning of text-based discussions, becoming an essential component of modern digital communication. Originally made popular in Japanese electronic messaging in the late 1990s, these little pictograms are now widely used in almost all online communication channels, including email and social media as well as professional settings. Emojis supported their functional equivalency by producing patterns that resembled those seen for facial expressions of emotion in face-to-face conversation. This shows that emojis are useful

quasi-nonverbal cues for digital communication (Erle et al., 2022). Emojis' ability to provide subtlety and clarity to communications that could otherwise be unclear or readily misunderstood is one of its main uses. Emojis are employed in communication to convey semantic meanings in addition to emotions (Basak & Dutta, 2023). Emojis can enhance communication; for example, a simple thumbs-up emoji might indicate agreement or acceptance, while a sobbing face emoji can indicate sadness or empathy. Emojis, according to Salas and Méndez (2018), are another means of communicating a message that is more subtly conveyed, understandable, and typically kind. Similarly, it's critical to claim that people who use emojis in conversation do so to shorten their communications; in other words, they occasionally replace the emoticon with a word.

Emojis are also essential for filling the communication gap that arises from digital communications lacking nonverbal clues. Emojis "compensate for the lack of facial expressions and intonation in written communication, helping to convey emotions and intentions more effectively," according to linguist Gretchen McCulloch (Bernhard, 2020). Emojis are visual indicators in a medium where tone can be readily misinterpreted that help decipher the underlying sentiment of a message. Emojis help to build a common digital language that cuts over boundaries of language and culture. Emojis are a useful tool for cross-cultural communication since they are instantly recognizable symbols that work across language barriers. Whether it's a heart, a smiling face, or a thumbs-up, these symbols can effectively communicate ideas and feelings in a variety of cultural situations. Language, whether spoken or written, functions in a way that is largely susceptible to interpretation (Amalina, 2020). Amalina (2022) also proceeded on to say that while they are not exactly the same, emoji and language function more or less in the same way, and that users' cultural quirks have an impact on how they utilize emoji in conversation.

1.1.2 *Emojis in WhatsApp*

Emojis, which are visual representations of emotions, objects, and ideas, have become an essential component of digital communication, enhancing text-based conversations. An emoji is a form of symbol in communication that is available on practically all social media platforms. Its convenience has potential ramifications for its use in digital communication (Bayindir, 2017). Emojis' rise in popularity and the ways in which they are utilized have been greatly influenced by WhatsApp, one of the most popular messaging apps in the world. In order to better understand emojis on WhatsApp, this literature study will examine their many applications, cultural importance, and changing role in digital expression. Emojis improve the emotional expressiveness of text-based communication by acting as nonverbal indicators in digital conversations. Hasan (2018) mentions that the usage of emoji and emoticon is needed in interpersonal communication to strengthen the message meaning so that it can be easily understood. Emojis are a more efficient way to express emotions than plain words, according to studies, which makes interpretations simpler and reduces miscommunication. Emojis contain a capability to convey feelings and intentions, which improves mutual understanding and comprehension between sender and recipient and enhances WhatsApp conversation (Sabri et al., 2021). Furthermore, Rashdi (2018) mentions that Emojis are used in representative extracts to show that they have many other uses in communication outside just being used as emotional indicators.

Research on communication patterns on messaging apps like WhatsApp and others has shown interest in the gender variations in emoji usage. In addition, the study of emojis has become an attractive new subject for scientific research (Chen et al., 2018). The topic of gender inequalities in language is becoming widely discussed in linguistics and sociolinguistics since it is seen as both a linguistic and a social issue. According to studies, women create emoticons and emojis more often than men do, and they also view the use of emojis more favorably (Prada et al., 2018). Men and women differ in a wide range of aspects because they adhere to distinct standards and roles. Based on a study conducted in Indonesia by Wirza et al. (2020), there is no substantial variation in emoji intensity or function between men and women. However, gender differences exist in both the selection and usage of emoji to convey the degree of meaning and emotions conveyed in a communication.

Although previous studies have widely explored the use of emojis in social and digital communication, few have focused on their specific function in English academic interactions among university students on WhatsApp. Most existing research has concentrated on general communication patterns or gender differences, leaving a gap in understanding how emojis influence message clarity, tone, and interpretation in academic settings. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by examining the patterns, purposes, and implications of emoji use among university students in WhatsApp-based English communication.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

Emojis have become an essential part of language expression, especially among tertiary students, in the constantly changing world of digital communication. WhatsApp is a notable communication tool that plays a significant role in shaping how people interact and share information. This study explores the intricate domain of English communication among college students using WhatsApp. It notably examines the complex use of emojis in expressing emotions, enriching textual significance, and developing a distinct kind of linguistic expression. This study's methodology is designed to provide a clear and detailed understanding of how emojis function within the dynamic context of English communication. A quantitative survey method was chosen because it allows for the systematic collection of measurable data on emoji usage across a large group of students, enabling the identification of general trends in digital communication, which aligns with the study's objectives. This study adopts a quantitative research design to systematically investigate the role of emojis in conveying emotions, enriching messages, and shaping digital communication styles among university students. The quantitative approach is chosen because it allows for the collection of measurable data from a large group of participants, enabling statistical analysis of emoji usage patterns, preferences, and perceptions. Such an approach is suitable for identifying trends and general behaviors in communication, rather than individual interpretations. University students were selected as respondents because of their high engagement with WhatsApp and frequent use of emojis in both social and academic contexts, making them an ideal group for studying patterns of digital language use.

2.1 Participants

The participants in this study comprise of 357 undergraduate students from various academic disciplines and backgrounds in a Malaysian private university. This population was selected because tertiary students are active users of WhatsApp for both academic and social communication, making them a relevant group for studying digital language practices. A stratified sampling technique was initially intended to ensure representation across different faculties and programs. However, due to practical constraints, a combination of stratified and convenience sampling was employed; this approach was considered reasonable as it ensured diversity among respondents while remaining practical for recruitment and data collection. Recruitment was conducted through departmental mailing lists, university communication platforms, and official student social media groups. This approach ensured diversity among respondents while maintaining accessibility and practicality in data collection. A standardized questionnaire was created to gather data on three key areas: demographic information, patterns of emoji use on WhatsApp, and the perceived effectiveness of emojis in conveying emotions and clarifying messages.

2.2 Procedure

The survey was conducted using Google Forms, which offered a user-friendly and easily accessible platform for participants. The online survey was distributed through various channels, including email, departmental announcements, and university-affiliated social media pages. Participants will be given a designated timeframe to complete the survey, and gentle reminders will be sent to ensure a high response rate. The survey was made available for a specific duration of two to three weeks, ensuring that participants had ample time to provide their responses. The timeframe for the survey was stated explicitly in the invitation, and gentle reminders were sent periodically to encourage participation. Prior to the launch of the main survey, a pilot test was carried out with a small subset of participants who were not included in the main sample. The purpose of this test was to identify and address any difficulties that may have arisen in the survey instrument, whether they were related to clarity, language, or technical glitches. All data collected was securely stored on a password-protected server. Google Forms were configured to automatically organize and compile responses.

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The data analysis will include descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, and means using SPSS version 27. The quantitative data analysis for this study aims to thoroughly explore the impact of emojis in modern communication among undergraduates through WhatsApp. The findings from the demographic profile, emoji usage patterns, perceived effectiveness, and WhatsApp chat analysis will contribute valuable insights into the dynamics of emoji usage within this specific context. Overall, this methodology is appropriate for capturing general patterns and trends in emoji use, and the selected participant group provides practical and meaningful insights due to their active engagement with WhatsApp in both academic and social communication.

3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Reliability Analysis

The reliability of the test scores was examined by running the reliability statistics analysis for this study. The reliability analysis procedure indicated how well the items in a set were positively correlated to one another. Table 1 shows Cronbach's Alpha at the value of 0.920. The high Cronbach's Alpha value indicates that the survey items were internally consistent, which supports the reliability of the collected data and strengthens the credibility of subsequent findings.

Table 1

Reliability statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.920	20

3.2 The Usage of Emoji in Texting Via WhatsApp

The descriptive statistics in Table 2 shows the usage of emoji in texting via WhatsApp. The item, 'I frequently use emojis in WhatsApp conversations.' indicated a mean=3.99 (SD=1.08). The mean value of 3.99 indicates moderate to high emoji usage frequency, with a standard deviation of 1.08 indicating variability among participants. In addition, the item, 'I rely on emojis to convey non-verbal cues in WhatsApp conversations' showed a mean=3.53, indicating moderate agreement among respondents about the frequency of using emojis in WhatsApp conversations, with a low standard deviation (SD=1.08) indicating moderate agreement. While the descriptive statistics mean score for 'I am likely to use emojis in professional or academic settings on WhatsApp' revealed a mean=2.82 (SD=1.23). The study found moderate likelihood of using emojis in professional or academic contexts on WhatsApp, with variability in attitudes, suggesting varying preferences among respondents. As for the item, 'Using emojis in my messages makes it easier for others to understand my emotions', it showed a mean=3.86 (SD=1.14). The majority of respondents agree that using emojis in messages improves emotional expression clarity, but there is variability in opinions, with some individuals having more diverse views. The descriptive statistics for 'Emojis enhance the expressiveness of my written communication.' showed a mean=3.63 (SD=1.11). The data shows moderate to positive agreement among participants that emojis enhance expressive written communication, with higher scores indicating stronger endorsement. However, the standard deviation of 1.11 indicates variability in responses.

Table 2*The usage of emoji in texting via WhatsApp*

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
I frequently use emojis in WhatsApp conversations.	3.99	1.08
I rely on emojis to convey non-verbal cues in WhatsApp conversations.	3.53	1.08
I am likely to use emojis in professional or academic settings on WhatsApp.	2.82	1.23
Using emojis in my messages makes it easier for others to understand my emotions.	3.86	1.14
Emojis enhance the expressiveness of my written communication.	3.63	1.11
I often use emojis to add humor or playfulness to my messages.	4.17	1.14
I believe that emojis have become a standardized form of expression in digital communication.	3.79	1.07
I feel that emojis have become a necessary component of effective communication.	3.50	1.05

The item "I often use emojis to add humor or playfulness to my messages" garnered a mean score of 4.17 with a standard deviation of 1.14, indicating a generally high agreement among respondents that emojis serve as a common tool for injecting humor or playfulness into their messages. In a related context, "I believe that emojis have become a standardized form of expression in digital communication" received a mean score of 3.79, with a standard deviation of 1.07, suggesting a moderate consensus on the idea that emojis have evolved into a standardized mode of expression within the digital communication landscape. Meanwhile, the item "I feel that emojis have become a necessary component of effective communication" generated a mean score of 3.50, with a standard deviation of 1.05, indicating a slightly lower but still notable level of agreement that emojis are considered a somewhat essential element for effective communication by the surveyed individuals. These findings suggest that university students actively use emojis to enhance communication clarity, express emotions, and convey tone, particularly in informal conversations. The lower usage in professional or academic contexts aligns with previous research (Kukreti & Patel, 2020; Sabri et al., 2021), indicating that students differentiate between casual and formal digital communication. Overall, the results highlight the nuanced role of emojis in modern digital interactions.

3.3 The Disadvantages of using Emoji in Texting Via WhatsApp

The descriptive statistics in Table 3 show the disadvantages of using Emojis in texting via WhatsApp. The first item, "Using emojis excessively in texting can lead to misunderstandings," received an average mean score of 3.43 with a standard deviation of 1.05. This suggests a moderate agreement among participants that excessive use of emojis in texting may contribute to misunderstandings. The second item, "Emojis can be misinterpreted, causing unintended emotional reactions in text conversations," garnered a mean score of 3.48 with a standard deviation of 0.92, indicating a similar sentiment that the potential for misinterpretation leading to unintended emotional reactions is acknowledged.

Table 3*The disadvantages of using emojis in texting via WhatsApp*

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
Using emojis excessively in texting can lead to misunderstandings.	3.43	1.05
Emojis can be misinterpreted, causing unintended emotional reactions in text conversations	3.48	0.92
Excessive use of emojis may convey a lack of professionalism in written communication.	3.56	0.97
Relying on emojis might discourage users from engaging in deeper, more meaningful conversations.	3.43	0.93
Emojis can be distracting and divert attention away from the main content of a message.	3.31	0.97
Overusing emojis can create a casual tone even in formal or professional conversations.	3.51	1.04

The third statement, "Excessive use of emojis may convey a lack of professionalism in written communication," received a mean score of 3.56 with a standard deviation of 0.97, suggesting a consensus that an abundance of emojis might be perceived as unprofessional. The fourth item, "Relying on emojis might discourage users from engaging in deeper, more meaningful conversations," obtained a mean score of 3.43 and a standard deviation of 0.93, indicating a moderate agreement that heavy reliance on emojis may

hinder meaningful discourse. The fifth statement, "Emojis can be distracting and divert attention away from the main content of a message," yielded a mean score of 3.31 with a standard deviation of 0.97, pointing to a tendency among participants to view emojis as potential distractions. Finally, the sixth item, "Overusing emojis can create a casual tone even in formal or professional conversations," received a mean score of 3.51 with a standard deviation of 1.04, indicating a moderate consensus that excessive emoji usage might inadvertently introduce informality into formal communication settings. These results indicate that while emojis enhance expressiveness, their excessive use can reduce clarity or professionalism, highlighting the need for balanced usage. This is consistent with previous research emphasizing potential misinterpretations and contextual limitations of emoji communication (Prada et al., 2018; Erle et al., 2022).

3.4 The Advantages of using Emoji in Texting Via WhatsApp

The descriptive statistics in Table 4 shows the advantages of using Emojis in texting via WhatsApp. The first item, "Using emojis in texting enhances the emotional expression and tone of the message," received an average mean score of 3.66 with a standard deviation of 0.95, indicating a generally positive agreement among participants that emojis contribute to heightened emotional expression and tone in text messages. The second item, "Emojis help to convey non-verbal cues more effectively in text messages," garnered a mean score of 3.59 with a standard deviation of 0.94, suggesting a consensus that emojis are perceived as effective tools for conveying non-verbal cues in a textual format.

Table 4

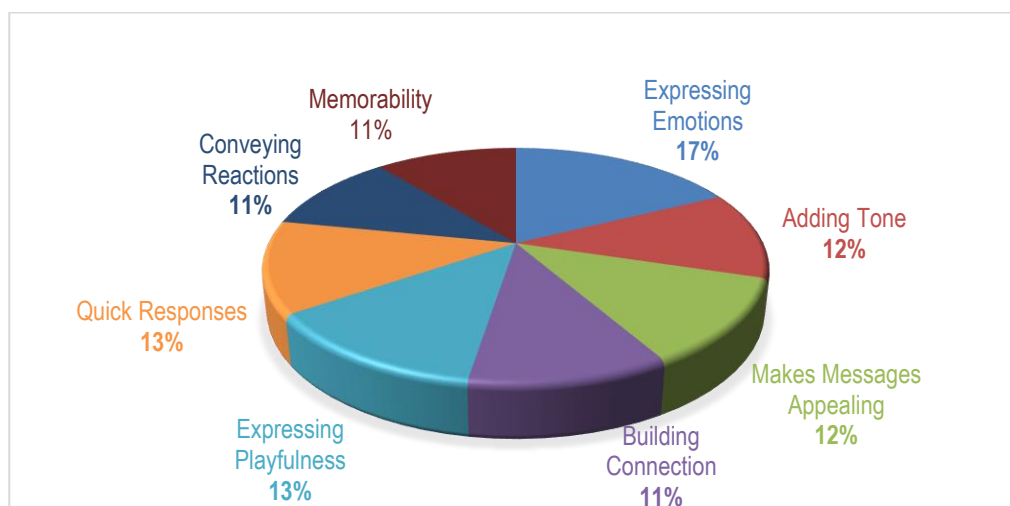
The Advantages of Using Emojis in Texting Via WhatsApp

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
Using emojis in texting enhances the emotional expression and tone of the message.	3.66	0.95
Emojis help to convey non-verbal cues more effectively in text messages.	3.59	0.94
Emojis make text messages more engaging and visually appealing.	3.65	0.96
Emojis contribute to building a positive atmosphere in text conversations.	3.75	0.94
Emojis contribute to building a friendlier atmosphere in text conversations.	3.72	0.92
The use of emojis in texting aids in conveying complex or abstract emotions.	3.57	0.91

The third statement, "Emojis make text messages more engaging and visually appealing," obtained a mean score of 3.65 with a standard deviation of 0.96, highlighting a shared sentiment that emojis enhance the engagement and visual appeal of text communication. The fourth and fifth items, "Emojis contribute to building a positive atmosphere in text conversations" (mean=3.75, SD=0.94) and "Emojis contribute to building a friendlier atmosphere in text conversations" (mean=3.72, SD=0.92), both received high mean scores, indicating a strong agreement that emojis play a role in fostering positive and friendly atmospheres in text exchanges. The sixth statement, "The use of emojis in texting aids in conveying complex or abstract emotions," yielded a mean score of 3.57 with a standard deviation of 0.91, suggesting a moderate agreement that emojis are helpful in expressing complex or abstract emotions in a textual medium. These findings emphasize that emojis not only enhance emotional clarity but also foster a positive and engaging communication environment. The results align with prior studies highlighting the communicative and social functions of emojis in digital interactions (Bandara, 2019; Hougaard & Rathje, 2018).

3.5 Reasons for using emoji in texting via WhatsApp

The results in Figure 1 displays the reasons for using emoji in texting via WhatsApp. Participants, with a mean score of 17%, widely recognized emojis as efficient tools for visually expressing emotions. Additionally, there was a significant consensus, marked by a mean score of 12%, acknowledging the role of emojis in clarifying message tone and reducing misunderstandings. Another aspect, emphasized by a mean score of 12%, highlighted the aesthetic function of emojis, contributing to the visual appeal of text messages. Furthermore, participants indicated, with a mean score of 11%, that emojis play a role in building connections in digital conversations, highlighting their social significance. Users also utilize emojis to infuse playfulness into communication, as evidenced by a mean score of 13%. The acknowledgment of emojis offering a quick and efficient means of response, with a mean score of 13%, underscores their functional aspect. Additionally, emojis were recognized, with a mean score of 11%, for their value in conveying nuanced reactions to messages or events. The idea that emojis can make messages more memorable, with a mean score of 11%, further highlights their potential mnemonic value. In conclusion, participants attributed varied functions to emojis, revealing their versatility and integral role in contemporary digital communication. Overall, these results show that emojis serve multiple communicative, social, and aesthetic purposes, supporting previous findings that highlight their multifunctional role in digital messaging (Sabri et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2022). Understanding these reasons helps to contextualize emoji use within broader digital communication practices among university students.

Figure 1*Checklist for the use of emojis*

4.0 CONCLUSION

In summary, the comprehensive analysis of the descriptive statistics presented in Tables 2, 3, and 4, along with the insights derived from Figure 1, offers a nuanced understanding of the usage, advantages, and disadvantages of emojis in texting via WhatsApp. The data indicates a moderate to high frequency of emoji usage, with variability among participants. Participants generally agree on the positive impact of emojis in enhancing emotional expression, conveying non-verbal cues effectively, and making messages engaging and visually appealing. However, there is variability in attitudes towards using emojis in professional or academic settings, suggesting diverse preferences among respondents. On the downside, concerns about potential misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and perceptions of unprofessionalism due to excessive emoji use are evident. Nevertheless, respondents highly value emojis for quick responses, conveying reactions, and adding humor or playfulness to messages. These findings highlight not only the functional role of emojis but also their broader significance in shaping contemporary digital communication, reflecting how students navigate and adapt language in virtual spaces. The findings highlight the multifaceted nature of emojis, serving various communication purposes and reflecting their integral role in contemporary digital communication. The study on the semiotic importance of emojis in WhatsApp chats among private tertiary students in the Klang Valley may have drawbacks such as sample size and a narrow geographical focus, which could restrict the applicability of the results. Furthermore, the study may fail to include the cultural heterogeneity within the Klang Valley or the differences in how individuals understand emojis. Moreover, the dependence on self-reported data may lead to response bias or mistakes in quantifying the real usage of emojis. Despite these limitations, the results contribute valuable insights into how digital symbols mediate social interaction and emotional expression, offering a foundation for educators, researchers, and technology developers to better understand student communication practices. Possible avenues for future research may include increasing the sample size to encompass a wider range of individuals, utilizing qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups to explore the cultural subtleties of emoji usage in greater detail, and employing natural language processing techniques to analyze extensive chat data for a more thorough comprehension of the meaning and interpretation of emojis in digital communication among college students. Additionally, future studies could explore the practical applications of these findings, such as guiding effective online communication strategies and promoting awareness of context-appropriate emoji use in both academic and professional settings.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Khairul Firdaus Ne'matullah (Conceptualization; Formal analysis; Visualisation; Supervision)

Adiba Zailan (Methodology; Data curation; Writing - Original draft; Resources)

Lim Seong Pek Lim (Validation; Software; Writing - Review & editing; Project administration)

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