# Words, Emojis and Stickers Used in Academic Context: An Analysis of Social Media Comments of Modern English Letters Students at Dschang University

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**Abstract**

Social media platforms such as WhatsApp have increasingly become central to everyday communication through instant text messaging (Akhmadi et al., 2021). The widespread use of emojis and stickers reflects their diverse pragmatic and affective functions in digital interaction (Danesi, 2017; Novak et al., 2015). These visual resources intensify messages (Dresner & Herring, 2010), express emotions (Al-Jindal, 2023) and reflect human sentiments (Novak et al., 2015). So, it is vital to outline the modes of this online communication within an academic WhatsApp interactional context, specifically among university students, where emojis and stickers function as semiotic resources shaping meaning-making. Accordingly, this study adopts a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design (Creswell, 2015) to collect WhatsApp posts of Modern English Letters students at Dschang University. Speech acts and visual semiotics help interpret the posts' nuanced meanings. Results indicate that curricular and most especially extracurricular activities motivate students to use emojis and stickers. These include exam publications, sensitisation campaigns, condoling messages and celebrations. 97.61% of forty-two students use emojis and stickers to simplify language and complement written words. The study establishes that the meaning of emojis and stickers are interpreted by context, sender-receiver relationship and subject matter. These insights into emojis and stickers'

socio-cultural and linguistic properties add to the understanding of virtual communication.

**Keywords**
Academic context, emoji, pragmatics, visual language, semiotics, sticker

## Introduction

Studies have shown that emojis play a key role in digital communication. Emojis express emotions (Al-Jahdali, 2023; Hougaard & Rathje, 2018); convey complex ideas, (Chairunnisa & Benedictus, 2017) and reflect human sentiments (Novak et al. 2015). Nonetheless, these studies only dealt with the semantics (meaning) and the syntactic (ordering) of emojis and stickers. Contextual and communicative usages of these signs in real scenarios need accountability (Gibson et al. 2018). The socio-cultural and linguistic implications of emojis and stickers used in an academic WhatsApp group have not been sufficiently established. Given that billions of emojis are used on mobile messages daily, it seems worthwhile to parse visual language production on WhatsApp posts of Modern English Letters students at Dschang University in West Cameroon. This is driven by the claim that the overuse of symbols causes written language to decay (Jones, 2015; McIntyre, 2016). Searle's Speech Acts (1969) and Barthe's (1967) Visual Semiotics help us understand how emojis and stickers widen the scope of written language online. A word refers to a singular unit within the field of lexicography (Pushpinder, 2008). This implies that it can either be spoken or written to express thought. An emoji is a pictorial character that can be used with text. The term originates from two Japanese words (e-絵) signifying picture and (moji-文字) character (Clark, 2015; Skiba, 2016). Meanwhile, a sticker is a fabrication of a character that represents an emotion or action. It reflects real human personalities, behaviours, social codes, etc. Like emojis, stickers portray body language. These definitions accentuate Saussure's view of language that,

> Language is a system of signs that expresses ideas and is therefore comparable to a system of writing, the alphabet of deaf-mutes, symbolic rites, polite formulas, military signals… (Saussure, 1916, p. 16)

In light of his view, emojis and stickers are rich expressive components of language because people use them as a code to represent ideas about themselves and the world.

**Speech Acts and Visual Semiotics**

There are explicit theoretical advancements in how linguistic utterances are used to perform actions in context (Austin, 1962; Ehlich, 2010; Fritz & Hundsnurscher, 1994; Searle, 1969; Dijk, 1977). Wittgenstein (1953) claims that rules, circumstances and situations in which communication takes place motivate action in language usage. The claim is fundamental to Searle (1969) and Austin (1975) who consider utterances as linguistic actions or speech acts that express information and perform specific actions through language, such as wishes, commands, promises, requests, or warnings. Such pragmatic functions of speech acts and dialogue structures are distinct at the level of linguistic signs (Alston, 1964; Grice, 1975; Horn & Ward, 2008; Clark, 1996; Fritz, 2013; Horn & Ward, 2008; Meibauer, 1999). So, the meaning of linguistic expressions can be explained by rules governing their use in performing various speech acts (Tomasello, 2023). The theory is applied in this study to check the implicit socio-cultural implications of emojis and stickers in the context of academics.

Semiotics is useful in media studies for the analysis of non-verbal communication and visual images. Visual semiotics has been used to examine denotative and connotative meanings embedded in visual texts (Li & Shi, 2022). The approach offers an interpretation of signs within different multicultural contexts. Ferdinand de Saussure was the first scholar to find that verbal language can be studied as a semiotic system and not only linguistic signs (Mengoni, 2021). Roland Barthes was motivated by Saussure's early contributions to pioneer visual semiotics. The discipline studies meaning beyond the level of language to visual images. It suggests that an image has two layers: what it represents and how it is represented. In this view, the terms denotation and connotation should be complementarily used in studying photographic images. He notes that denotation is a concrete concept of meaning while connotation is a more complex and abstract concept of meaning (Jensen, 2002 as cited in Bouzida, 2014, p. 2). With the aid of the signifier (physical form) and the signified (associated meaning), the approach can facilitate the analysis of media text.

This study draws on the Speech Act Theory and Visual Semiotics as complementary analytical frameworks to explain how emojis and stickers function meaningfully in academic WhatsApp interactions.

While Speech Act Theory accounts for the pragmatic actions performed through language, Visual Semiotics explains how visual signs encode and communicate meaning within specific socio-cultural contexts. The integration of these frameworks enables a holistic interpretation of emojis and stickers as both actions and signs in digital communication.

**Literature Review**

There is extant knowledge of how emojis have developed, its uses and functions (Bai et al., 2019). Earlier scholars have discussed the functional aspect of emojis: Ekman and Friesen (1967) and Kelly and Watts (2015) showed that human sentiments like disgust, fear, anger, contempt, sadness, surprise and happiness can be represented by the facial features of emojis. Further, Thompson and Foulger (1996) affirm that emojis can determine the degree of hostility in a message. They point out that there is a common expression pattern underlying the emotions of human beings worldwide influenced by factors such as age, location, or nationality which are statistically predictable. Similarly, Lu et al. (2016) and Chairunnisa and Benedictus (2017) argue that emojis are not only used to express feelings and thoughts but also to complete the meaning of words with their rich semantics. They add that the cultural insights of users can be determined by the types and patterns of emojis people use. All these revelations lead to the conclusion that cultural background plays a key role in the choice of emojis people make. Before the advent of emojis, emotions were expressed through natural language, internet slang or emoticons. Emojis render online conversations interactive and fun, and help to build interpersonal relationships as posited by Liebman and Gergle (2016). Alshenqeeti (2016) forwards a debate on whether emojis are creating a new language or devaluing existing written language. His premise is that emojis are an evolution of older visual language systems rather than a new invention: as such, emojis can enhance written language with visual vocabulary even though they cannot replace words entirely.

Hougaard and Rathje (2018) explore the functions of emojis as markers of modality, mood, navigation and expressing emotions and aesthetics among the Danes. The study involves both adolescents and adults with an analysis of naturally occurring emojis on Facebook and Instagram. They observe that young and adult people in Denmark use emojis for different purposes. For instance, the former view and use emojis as a natural way to express their moods, while adults view and use them as a secondary

language that acts like non-verbal features in written online interaction. The survey results indicate that 86% of all informants use emojis at least once a day. The study also establishes the importance of emojis for adolescents in facilitating interactional navigation. Nonetheless, this importance was only inferred in the actual use of emojis without the opinions of the users.

Pele (2016), Dresner and Herring (2010) and Markman and Oshima (2007) have studied the sentence-ending role of emoticons and emojis. They contemplate whether emojis can be considered a universal language or not and conclude that the chances are low because emojis, by their simple nature, cannot convey complex matters. Adding to this debate, Pele (2016) further reveals the same pattern of emoji usage on Instagram. He notes that they are used at the end of written messages or as punctuations in case of longer phrases and anticipates a possible return to pictorial language. Tyler Schnoebelen, in his thesis identifies a pattern in emoji usage by analysing a million tweets and found out that emojis are mostly used at the end of text messages as a thematic or short linear narrative (Schnoebelen, 2014 as cited in Pele, 2016, p. 398). It is necessary to compare this pattern of emojis already studied on Twitter and Instagram with those uncovered on WhatsApp.

Studies by Church and Oliveira (2013); O'Hara et al., 2014 and Devi & Tevera (2014), have uncovered the interactive function and significance of WhatsApp. They point out that verbal and non-verbal cues enhance this interaction. Novak et al. (2015) see emojis as successors of emoticons and active non-verbal cues in digital communication. Such studies confirm that online language is evolving and that people adapt to these changes in daily online conversations. But then, the interpretation of the full meaning of an emoji is not context-free but context-bound. This is corroborated by Al-Jahdali (2023), who explores the communicative functions of emojis used on WhatsApp groups by females in Saudi Arabia aged between 35-55. The study pinpoints the significance of studying emojis within the context of naturally occurring online interactions. Its findings suggest that emojis play a significant role in representing emotions and approximating face-to-face situations in the absence of non-verbal cues. Also, he argues that age and gender influence the usage of emojis and posits that it is necessary to study WhatsApp group interactions in a specific context.

The above studies analysed emojis and stickers based on semantics and syntax and there is a lack of depth on the context, situation or users of emojis and stickers. As such, this study seeks to examine WhatsApp posts of Modern English Letters students at Dschang University.

**Methods and Data**

The study used mixed methods to collect WhatsApp posts of Modern English letters students at Dschang University. This comprised non-participatory observation methods and screenshots of posts in the academic year 2019-20. The posts were analysed to determine the socio-cultural and linguistic implications of emojis and stickers blended with written words. An online questionnaire was administered to forty-two students to inquire about the use, intentions and choices for emojis and stickers. The questionnaire was administered online because of two reasons:

1. The period of administering the questionnaire coincided with the lockdown measures against Covid-19. Academic institutions were closed in Cameroon from 16 March to 31 May 2020. So, meeting the students would not have been law-abiding, healthy and/or ethical.
2. The study aimed to describe how students use language on WhatsApp. Hence, designing an online questionnaire and sending it on WhatsApp was deemed practical.

With structured open and close-ended questions, the study was based on a sequential exploratory strategy with qualitative and quantitative insights (Creswell, 2015). Qualitative and quantitative methods were used to understand the visual language in use.

**Ethical Considerations**

The researchers were authorised by the coordinator and student delegate of Modern English Letters at Dschang University. Access was given with the provision of group links. Posts collected from these WhatsApp groups were handled according to the ethical framework for qualitative research online by Mann and Stewart (2000a).

1. Personal data should be collected for one specific and legitimate purpose.
2. People should have access to the data collected about themselves.

3. Personal data should be reasonably guarded against risks such as loss, unauthorised access, modification, or disclosure.
4. Data should be collected in the content of free speech.
5. Personal data are not to be communicated externally without the consent of the subjects who supplied the data.

So information revealing students' identities was withheld. Screenshots were made anonymous and contact numbers were covered with a rectangular box with only the date of the post. Posts with numbers were edited and left only with the three initial digits: Cameroon's national code +237.

To ensure confidentiality and ethical compliance, all participants were anonymised using alphanumeric codes such as *1MEL3, 11MEL3,* and *2MEL3*, where *MEL* denotes the Modern English Letters programme and *3* indicates the level of study. These identifiers were used consistently throughout the analysis to reference individual posts without revealing personal identities.

**Participants**

Participants in this study comprised students specialising in Modern English Letters at Dschang University and were selected through **purposive sampling** based on their regular participation in academic WhatsApp groups of the aforesaid programme of the university which constituted the primary data source for this study. The aim was to know the type of language they used in their academic WhatsApp groups. The students had Android and smartphones provided by their parents and guardians. Demographic information of the participants is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1:** *Age Range and Sex of Students*

| *No.* | *Age Group* | *Frequency* |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | 10-19 | 1 |
| 2 | 20-29 | 39 |
| 3 | 30-39 | 2 |
| | Total | 42 |
| | | |

| *No.* | *Sex* | *Number of Students* |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Female | 34 |
| 2 | Male | 8 |
| 3 | Neuter | 0 |
| | Total | 42 |

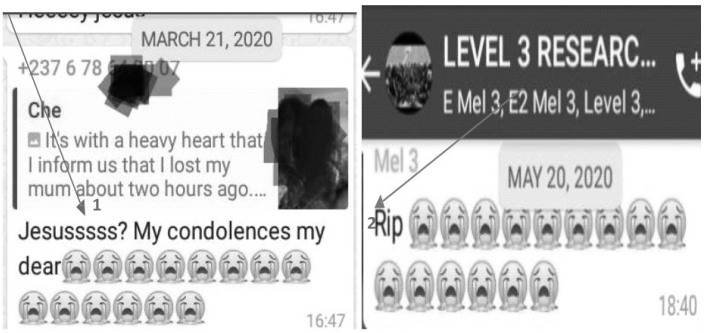
**Results and Discussion**

This section using qualitative data presents the socio-cultural and communicative properties of visual language which implies making sense of illocutionary inferences from the type of language Modern English letters students use online.

*Expressing Condolence*

The word condolence is used to convey a profound message. Etymologically, the word originated from Latin, "Comdolere", which translates into, "grieve together," (Zunin and Zunin, 2007). Condolence is understood to be formal expressions of sorrow for people who experienced the death of someone (Smith, 2003). In this respect, students' WhatsApp posts were examined to reveal the type of language they use to mourn.

**Figure 1**: *Expressing Condolence Through Emojis in Students' WhatsApp Posts*




As shown in Figure 1 above, students frequently used crying-face and prayer emojis to express condolence as an expression of shock by a student sympathiser to a fellow bereaved classmate. The repetition of the letter "s" in the word, "Jesusssss" (indicated by arrow 1) vividly portrays shock, a sentiment shared in such a sad circumstance. Beyond

its denotative meaning, the expression functions as an implicit emotive query directed towards a higher power. While such usage may reflect religious socialisation among some students, it can also be understood as a linguistic resource employed to express shock, grief and helplessness in moments of adversity. These tears not only symbolise empathy for the grieving classmate but also align with the notion presented by Searle and Vanderveken (1985) that condolences extend beyond mere sympathy to serve as a source of encouragement and Muihaki (2004) who claims condolences can alleviate the pain of those in grief.

**Figure 2**: *Positive Emotional Resonance in Students' WhatsApp Posts*

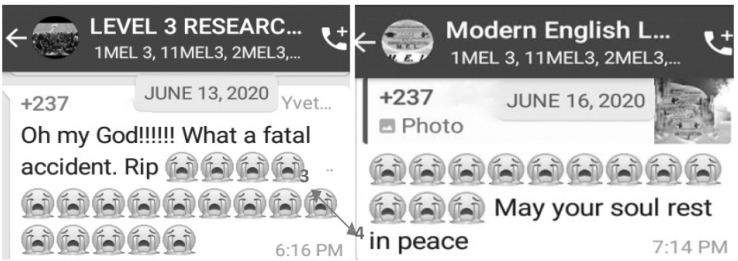
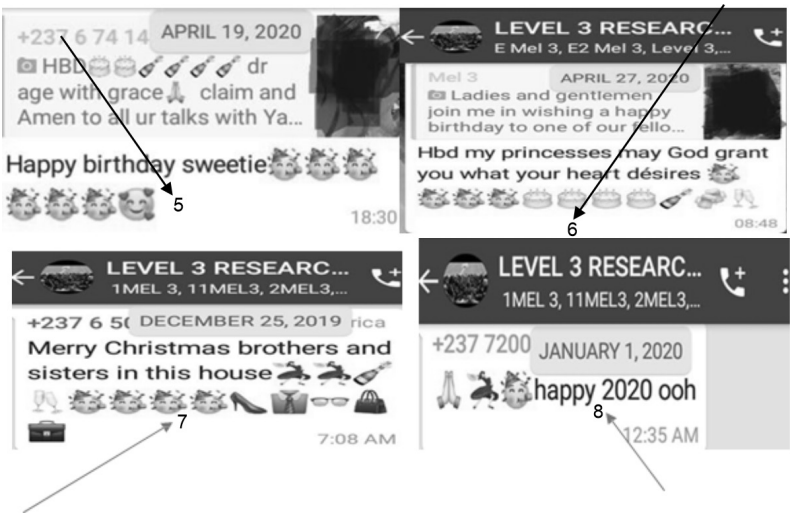



Figure 2 above illustrates positive emotional resonance through repeated use of affective emojis. They are effectively used to wish the departed soul a safe journey and rest. The text adds to express the degree of sympathy which confirms that emojis enhance emotions (Gül Şen, 2016). Similarly, the arrows 3 and 4 capture the order of emojis used to express condolence. Unlike Schnoebelen observed the pattern on Twitter (Schnoebelen as cited in Pele, 2016, p. 398), emojis are used on WhatsApp in the initial, middle, and final positions of text messages. The number of emojis outnumbers that of written words which is an indication that people use more emojis when they are speechless. Like words, emojis also express one's state of mind (Austin, Searle, 1969; Searle & Vanderveken, 1985) because these signs concretely denote sympathy and other sentiments. Apart from mourning, students also use emojis to celebrate.

***Birthday Wishes***

Birthdays are celebrated in numerous cultures with gifts, cards, parties, ride of a passage, or simply by a text on social media. The post, "Hbd my princesses may God grant you what your heart desires…" is a commissive because it is a wish to the birthday celebrant.

**Figure 3:** *Text Messages on Birthdays and Festivals*




As revealed in Figure 3 above, students employ emojis and stickers alongside written text (arrows 5 and 6) to perform declarative speech acts of celebration, such as birthday wishes and festive greetings, thereby enhancing affective meaning and visual appeal in WhatsApp-mediated academic interactions. Celebrations such as birthdays, Christmas and New Year motivate students to use emojis and stickers as indicated by arrows 7 and arrows 8. These students find it joyous to attach an emoji or a sticker to embellish their message thereby adding aesthetics to online language. The visual features in the posts are blended to effectively depict festive seasons. In the digital era, families and friends exchange wishes online with the aid of emojis and stickers.

Given that the sincerity condition of an expressive act is effective when the recipient reacts to its sender (Searle, 1976), it is important to consider the reactions of recipient students. This involves the perlocutionary act which addresses the effect or impact of previous WhatsApp posts.

**Figure 4:** *Perlocutionary Force of Emojis and Stickers in WhatsApp Academic Interactions*

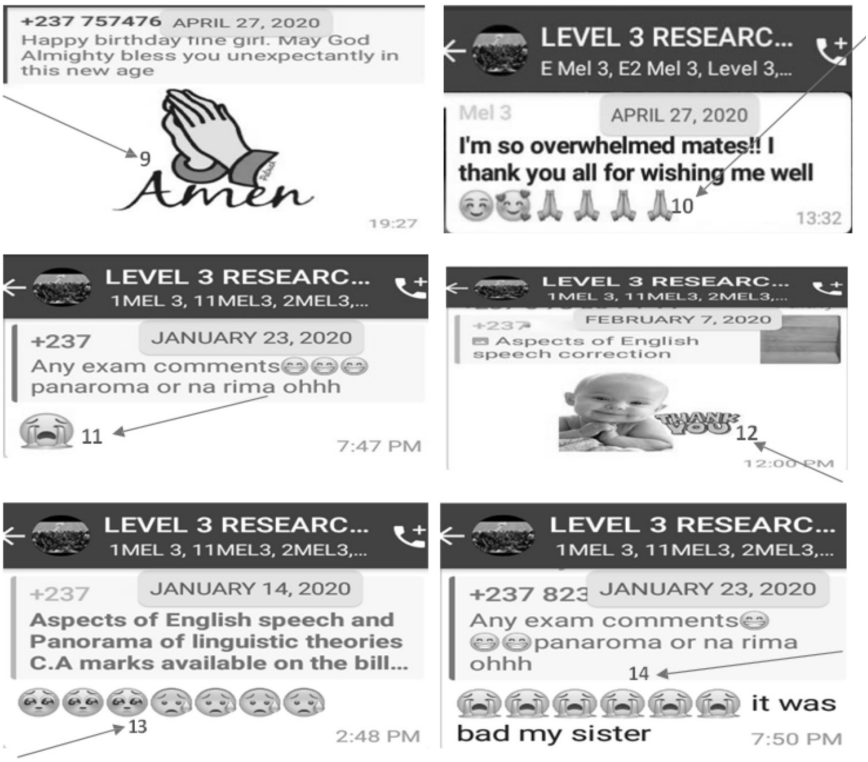



Figure 4 above demonstrates how emojis and stickers function as visual semiotic resources that extend beyond illocutionary intent to produce perlocutionary effects, including emotional resonance, acknowledgment and interpersonal alignment among participants in academic WhatsApp groups. Arrow 9, is an acknowledgement of the previous birthday wishes. It shows that the student celebrant is grateful. At the denotative level, the semiotic representative of the sticker displays hands that are raised as a sign of appreciation. This cements interpersonal relationships between the student celebrant and the classmates. This is in line with Liebman and Gergle (2016) who uphold that emojis can effectively maintain cordial relationships. Arrow 10 is an address to the group members, ***"I'm so overwhelmed mates!! I thank you all for wishing me well…"*** The text message is in bold with two interjection marks (!!). This expresses the shared affection students have offline and online.

Another event that motivates students to use emojis and stickers is exam publication. Students' performance is expressed through non-verbal cues. Arrows 11, 12, 13 and 14 depict students' reactions following the publication of results. For instance, arrow 11, is a reply to the publication of one of the courses, entitled *Panorama*. It is a reaction to the interrogatory statement, *"Any exam comments panorama or na rima ohhh."* In the statement, the word 'panorama' is introduced by the conjunction *"or"* combined with other unusual words. This usage and the three emojis portraying white teeth can be interpreted as an irony that suggests poor results. Arrows 13 and 14 transmit a message of failure as expressed by emoji of tears. Contrary to these, arrow 12 is a sticker used to react to the publication of the correction of a course, entitled Aspects of English. Students use emojis differently when results are published.

**Sensitisation Campaigns**

Modern English Students use emojis and stickers to represent the mitigation of diseases. Representatives are speech acts that state what the speaker or the sender of a message believes to be the case or not. This involves assertions, conclusions and descriptions (Searle, 1976). The WhatsApp posts are sent in the context of the ravaging coronavirus.

**Figure 5:** *Visual and Verbal Representations of Covid-19 in WhatsApp Academic Discourse*

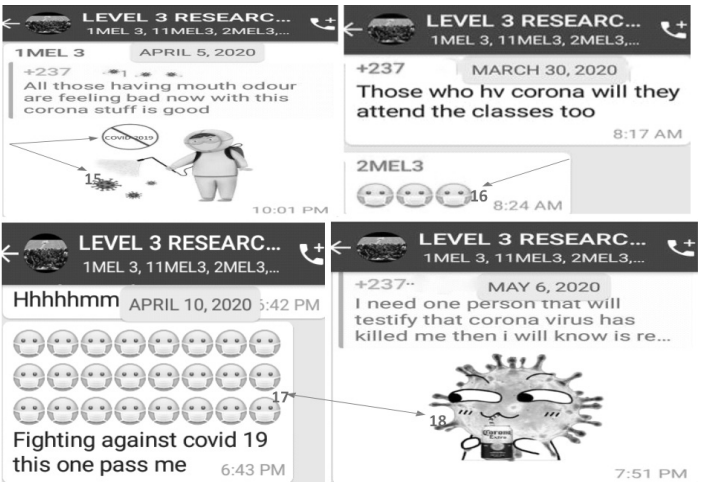



Figure 5 above demonstrates how visual and verbal resources jointly realise expressive and representative speech acts, producing

perlocutionary effects such as humour, distancing, and emotional coping strategies in discussions surrounding Covid-19. Before arrow 15, is a sarcastic comment on health, *"All those having mouth odour are feeling bad now with corona stuff is good"*. This statement has an indexical referential meaning given that its signification is fully dependent on the stability of the demonstrative pronoun *"those"*, used to refer to people who have mouth odour. This use corroborates (Austin, 1962) when he states that representatives are speaker's affirmations, beliefs, conclusions, and denials or reports on something or an event. Arrow 15 is a sticker that represents the portrait of a medical agent who is sanitising the environment. This is a motive to eradicate any trace of coronavirus. The sprayer points in the direction of visible traces of the virus. Another semiotic feature is the red circle with a narrow line dividing it in half with the caption 'Covid-19'. Drawing on Peirce Sanders' trigonometry, the circle is an index placed beside the medical agent to indicate his role and objective.

In relation, the next post is initiated by an indirect interrogative statement which reads, *"Those who have corona will they attend the classes too?"* The verb 'to have' is reduced to *"hv"*. This is a style of writing messages with letter homophones. The statement is a declaration that infers fear behind the sender. The corresponding post is a repeated set of three emojis of the same category whose appearance portrays that of someone with a face mask. This is an implied way to show the significance of a face mask for protection.

Arrows 16 and 17 are used in a complementary manner to reveal one of the measures prescribed against the disease. The written expression in pidgin is used to ironically reaffirm the need to stay safe. Due to doubt expressed by a student on the existence of the disease, another student replies to the post with the virus itself, arrow 18. The post insinuates that the virus has become a contagion because of people's disbelief. Students use emojis and stickers as alternative ways to express sympathy, information and wishes.

***Quantitative Analysis***

Following the qualitative analysis of WhatsApp posts, a quantitative survey was conducted to determine the frequency with which students use emojis and stickers in academic interactions, as well as the distribution of usage across responses. Survey responses indicated that

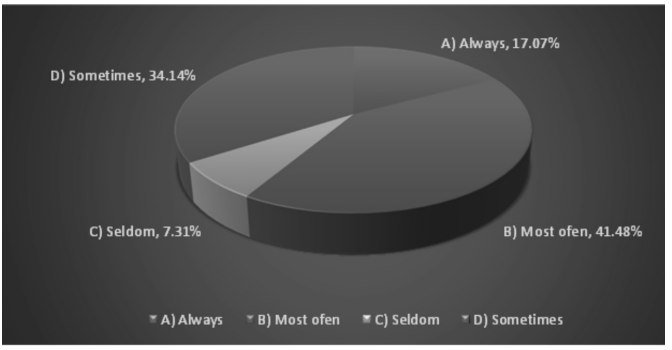
emoji and sticker use was nearly universal among participants, with only one respondent reporting non-use.

97.61% (n = 40) of the respondents reported using emojis and stickers in academic WhatsApp interactions, while only 2.39% (n = 1) indicated non-use, suggesting near-universal adoption of visual semiotic resources among the students.

Although the total sample comprised 42 students, one questionnaire response was incomplete for this item and was therefore excluded from the analysis, resulting in a valid response count of 41 for this question.

Given this minimal variation, subsequent analysis focuses on frequency of use to capture more nuanced patterns of engagement.

**Figure 6:** *Frequency of Emoji and Sticker Use in the Academic WhatsApp Interactions*



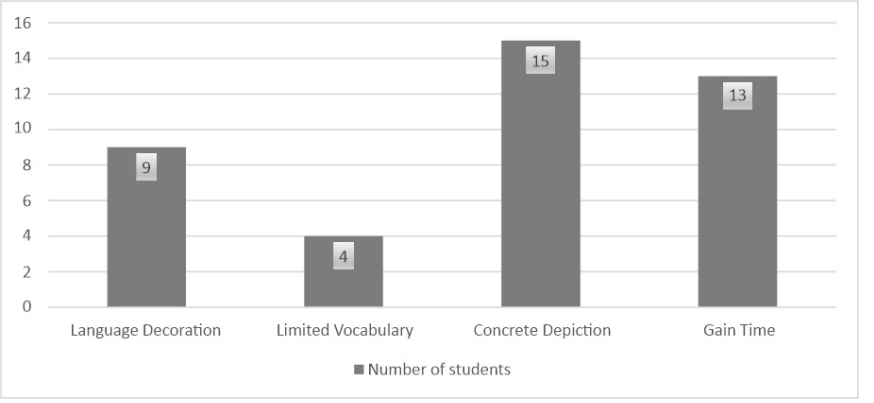

As shown in Figure 6 above , the majority of respondents report frequent use of emojis and stickers in academic WhatsApp communication, with 41.48% indicating 'most often' and 34.14% 'sometimes', suggesting that visual elements constitute a regular, though context-sensitive, component of students' digital academic discourse.

Figure 5 above shows the proportion of students who use symbols and those who do not. Among the forty-two (42) students who were consulted, forty-one (41) chose "Yes" and 1 student chose "No". This implies a user and non-user distribution of 97.61% and 2.39% respectively. The majority of students use emojis and stickers for reasons that are indicated in Figure 7. Meanwhile, the students who responded negatively to the use of the emojis and stickers stated the following reasons:

1. "I feel it is not necessary because I can write and secondly am not versed with it".
2. "... Also, emojis are just used by the youths to be more explicit not that they will forget the writing part because it can affect them syntactically as they do not mostly use them. So, me, am against the use of emoji".
3. "And lastly because they are too ambiguous".

The above reasons suggest that ambiguity and competence in writing can motivate students to use emojis and stickers. Figure 7 below shows that students are more likely to use emojis and stickers to transform abstract concepts into tangible representations. This is suggested by 15 students. Meanwhile lesser number of students, 13 use emojis and stickers to gain time; 9 use them to decorate language and 4 use them because of limited language. This implies that there is a deliberate choice behind every symbolic text message.

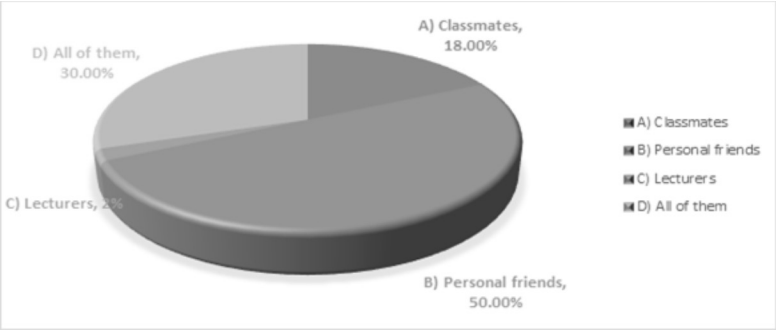
**Figure 7:** *Reasons for the Use of Emojis and Stickers in Academic WhatsApp Communication*




It is interesting to note that the lack of linguistic competence is not the main reason for the use of symbols but the need for emotional, semantic and pragmatic expression. To know exactly with whom these students use emojis and stickers, questions related to intimacy, formal, informal and the possibility of the three were made optional. Options included classmates, personal friends and lecturers. Specifically, Figure 8 below shows that 50% of the students use emojis and stickers with personal friends; 18% with classmates, 2% with lecturers and 30% in all cases.

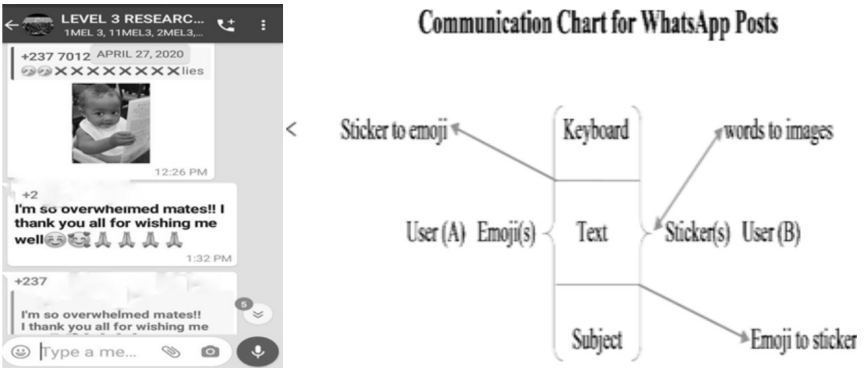
This distribution shows that these cues are mostly used in informal situations rather than formal ones.

**Figure 8:** *Persons with Whom Emojis and Stickers are Used.*




Insights drawn from the analysis of language used in the posts led to an attempt to develop a model that represents visual language on a social media platform such as WhatsApp.

**Figure 9:** *Linguistic Model for WhatsApp Posts*




The model illustrates different communicative modes used on WhatsApp posts. It indicates that verbal and non-verbal forms of language are used complementarily and separately. These forms involve the incorporation of emojis and words, words and stickers, and stickers and emojis. The order is undefined because a user can decide to use any of the modes in their text message. Verbal and non-verbal signs are compatible with each other and play a vital role in communication. This confirms Hargie et al.'s (2003) claim state that non-verbal cues are useful when verbal cues are less expressive. Modern English Letters Students invariably

use various modes to communicate by blending words with emojis and stickers to simplify the language. Emojis, stickers and words have equal chances to be used on a WhatsApp post.

## Conclusion

The need to communicate with people is indispensable. As already pinpointed in the preliminary section, media organs like WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter are all platforms where this need has been stretched. The platforms are used in many countries in North and South America, the Indian subcontinent, Europe, large parts of Africa, the Cameroonian nation, and the Dschang locality (where the sample for this was taken). It was found that users employ words but mainly emojis and stickers in their informal online posts. The study provides insights into the communicative properties of emojis and stickers and establishes a chart for the pattern of visual language on WhatsApp. The chart suggests that words, emojis, and stickers have the same proportion of expression and a common degree of occurrence online. This model can serve as a framework for future research on online communication.

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