Accentuating Illocutionary Forces: Emoticons as Speech Act Realization Strategies in a Multicultural Online Communication Environment

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ABSTRACT

The global acceptance of emoticons has acknowledged the development of digital symbols in a communication setting when language alone can become a barrier in expressing certain intentions and feelings. This paper discusses how emoticons help indicate the illocutionary forces in texts and serve as part of various conversation strategies in the online communication environment. To achieve the research objective, a documentation of naturally occurring conversations on Facebook was made over a 12-month period to compile daily updates and conversations posted by youngsters in Malaysia. 120 online users were identified using a purposive sampling technique. A corpus of 324 362 words was established and processed. This whole set of naturally occurring conversation was then analysed based on Searle's (1976) five categorisations of illocutionary acts using Content Analysis and Wordsmith Tools 5.0. The findings demonstrate some emoticons that accentuated illocutionary forces of speech acts in the online communication environment. Discussion of the findings also explores the purposes and functions of emoticons in Malaysian digital communication platform and the way users of a multicultural society employ emotion-symbols to achieve social cohesion and embrace cultural diversity.

Keywords: emoticon; speech act; illocutionary force; online communication; indirectness; multicultural society

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, popular social websites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram permit users to vent opinions on almost everything, at any time. In social media, emoticons are not exactly symbols, but digital icons that symbolize expressions and body language (Deacon 2011). World famous social media like Facebook and Twitter categorized emoji (with emoticons-or emotion icons being part of it) as symbols. These symbols are also characterized under several categorisations of people symbols, nature symbols, object symbols, place symbols and special symbols in fulfilling various needs and aspects of virtual communication. Emoticons are vibrant features in today's digital communication as substitutions for body language and facial expressions. The 'smiley face' :-) for instance, denotes a happy expression. Considering its arbitrary shape, the idea of combining several punctuation marks to represent human facial expression may not sound logical, but this combination has been mutually understood as an icon that refers to a smiling face.

Written language has always been ambiguous due to the lack of intonation and facial expression. In the online communication environment, symbols or emoticons fulfill the need for body language in delivering hidden meaning and intention (Deacon 2011; Dresner and Herring (2014). They convey meaningful messages without lengthy elaboration, thus fulfill the need for speed and the need to be concise in online communication (Ross 2006). Therefore, it is in the interest of this study to investigate and understand the usage and illocutionary functions of emoticons in a multicultural online communication environment.

CONVENTIONAL MEANINGS OF EMOTICONS

Online users employ emoticons to indicate specific emotions and voices (Negretti 1999; Baron 2008). Conventionally, emoticons are employed to replace facial expressions, feelings and body language. Ross (2006) believes that smileys (such as :) or :-); and :(or :-(which represent happy and sad faces as well as ;-) that indicates a wink) are internationally intelligible, regardless of users' language used in social media. Crystal (2006) put forward the importance of emoticons and symbols in online communication (which he termed as Netspeak) as he states,

> *Netspeak lacks the facial expressions, gestures and conventions of body posture and distance which are so critical in expressing personal opinions and attitudes in moderating social relationships. The limitation was noted early in the development of Netspeak and led to the introduction of smileys of emoticons.*
> *(Crystal 2006: 38-39)*

Together with Sanderson's (1993) findings, Crystal (2006: 40) gathered the following examples of emoticons and meaning:

TABLE 1. Examples of emoticons gathered by Crystal (2006:40)

Basic smileys	Meaning
:-)	Pleasure, humor
:-(	Sadness, dissatisfaction
;-)	Winking (in any of its meaning)
;-(:~-(	Crying
%-(%-)	Confused
:-o 8-o	Shocked, amazed
:-] :-[	Sarcastic

Joke smileys	Meaning
[:-)	User is wearing a Walkman
8-)	User is wearing sunglasses
:-{)	User has a mustache
:*)	User is drunk
:-[	User is a vampire
:-E	User is a bucktoothed vampire
:-F	User is a bucktoothed vampire with one tooth missing
:-~	User has a cold
:-@	User is screaming
-:-)	User is a punk
-:-(	Real punks don't smile
+-:-)	User holds a Christian religious office
0 :-)	User is an angel at heart

Despite their primary functions and purposes to reinforce messages, Crystal (2006) believes that emoticons can sometimes become ambiguous too, as they might also serve as a sign of senders' feelings of uncertainty and concern about the effect of his sentences or responses. A rapidly produced online message, for instance, "lacking the usual courtesies, can easily appear abrupt or rude. A smiley defuses the situation" (Crystal, 2006: 41-42).

STUDIES ON THE USE OF EMOTICONS IN SOCIAL MEDIA

In a normal face-to-face communication, body language intensifies or softens certain tones and intonations in expressing feelings (Lee and Wagner 2002). The expansion of information and communication technology into more aspects of social life challenges sociolinguists to account for the benefits and impacts of these technologies on human communication behavior. Online chat, for instance, is chock-full of texts. Lack of nonverbal cues might trigger conflicts and

misunderstanding, especially in online communication settings that congregate users of multiple cultures and linguistic background. Among sociolinguists, debate has raged for several years over defining and justifying the existence of digital emotion symbols. Some perceive emoticons as representative of human emotions (Thompson and Foulger 1996) while others view them as contrivances that hid cultural reality beneath artificiality (Zilic 1999; Walther and D'Addario's 2001)

In online communication, users are generally aware of their motives when using certain symbols and emoticons due to the luxury of time that they have in recognizing the right emotion icons to be included in their conversation. Derks, Bos, and von Grumbkow (2007) found that online users use more emoticons with friends or someone closely related to them in real life, compared to strangers. Their later study also found that the use of emoticons in online conversation carries specific motives such as "expressing emotion, strengthening the message, regulating the interaction, and putting into perspective" (Derks, Bos, and von Grumbkow, 2008: 386). Emoticons are also perceived as an indication of certain emotional information used for communicational ends, which substitute certain facial expressions in natural face-to-face conversation. They conclude that emoticons "do have a certain impact on message interpretation and that they can serve some of the same functions as actual nonverbal behaviour" (Derks, Bos, and von Grumbkow 2008: 386).

For some researchers, symbols are insufficient in justifying the complexity of human emotion. Zilic (1999) believes that people normally fake their feelings using emoticons. As people have enough time to contemplate on the suitable emoticons (especially in weblogs and e-mails), it thus makes this virtual face expressions invalid and unnatural. In certain situations, negative feelings such as hatred or sadness might be concealed and replaced with a wink-face emoticon. Similarly, Walther and D'Addario's (2001) study also found that emoticons do not function in strengthening a message, but rather act as a complement to one's online message. They also found that emoticons have minimum impact on one's interpretation of the online messages that he or she receives. As the impact of emoticons is perceived as incomparable to natural nonverbal expressions, Walther and D' Addarion (2001) conclude that emoticons function as a supplementary feature of online messages with no ability to enhance or convey any illocutionary act or meaning.

EMOTICONS AS MANIFESTATIONS OF SPEECH ACTS IN THE ONLINE COMMUNICATION ENVIRONMENT

Recently, the propositions of emoticons as manifestation of speech acts have gained renewed attention since these virtual emotion icon-symbols carry robust performance across online domains and texts. Previous researchers have constituted some important factors in establishing the interpretation of emoticons in enhancing or minimizing people's perceptions towards various events and situations (Hogenboom et al., 2013; Li, et al., 2018; Ernst and Huschens, 2019).

Previous researchers postulated symbols as cultural representations of social reality. Interpretation of virtual emotion symbols, for instance, is neither instinctive nor automatic. In a study on emoticons as communication devices to reinforce ideologies, Hogenboom et al. (2013) found that people's sentiment is not solely expressed through words since emoticons were also used to transmit motives and ideas. Their findings indicate three ways in which emoticons can be helpful in analysing people's sentiment. Firstly, emoticons are employed to express sentiment when it is in vague condition of neither positive nor negative. Next, emoticons support words and intensify sentiment. Finally, emoticons remove the uncertainty of meaning and provide clarity especially in cases of sentiment being associated with words

that need to be clarified (Hogenboom et al., 2013). Skovholt et al. (2014) found that emoticons in workplace e-mails do not signify people's emotions but provide supporting details and information about how words and phrases should be understood and interpreted. They proposed three functions of emoticons; to indicate a positive gesture (especially when it is placed next to a signature at the end of formal emails), to express a sense of humour as well as to strengthen messages and certain speech acts.

Dresner and Herring (2014) argued that there should not be any rigid interpretations concerning the function of emoticons and body language (specifically facial and body movements). They believe that the meanings expressed by gestures are not restricted to certain degree of emotion and always subject to change so as the ones illustrated through emoticons. Next, the speech acts represented by certain emoticons are not entirely formulaic, since there is no clear-cut description between any of the commonly employed emoticons with the illocutionary force involved in their observation.

> *It should be evident from our analysis that the functions of emoticons extend beyond substituting for facial and gestural "cues filtered out" in textual CMC; at the same time, technological factors influence the extent to which emoticons are used and which ones are used in different CMC modes.*
> *(Dresner and Herring, 2014: 88)*

Similarly, Glikson, Cheshin, and Kleef (2018) also found some unconventional roles of emoticons in virtual communication. After conducting three experiments that aimed to identify the effects of smiley in work-related online communication, Glikson et al. (2018) found that on the contrary to actual smiles, smiley emoticons not only failed to increase people's perceptions of warmth and friendliness but also decrease their perceptions towards one's competence. Glikson et al. (2018) believe that smiley (in particular) does not represent actual smile thus refuted many early findings (Negretti, 1999; Ross, 2006; Crystal, 2006; Baron, 2008; Derks, Bos and von Grumbkow, 2008) about the conventional role of basic emoticons such as smileys.

FACE CONCEPT AMONG THE MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY OF MALAYSIA

Malaysians employ indirectness strategies in speaking to protect others' face and maintain a good relationship among each other. To achieve harmony, indirectness strategy is seen as an integral part among the Malays (Jan & Wun, 2016; Maros & Rahim, 2013; Asma Abdullah 1996), Chinese (Chan and Rossiter, 1998) and Indians (Valentine, 1994) who observe traditional cultural values in their communication.

The 'face' principle is a common politeness strategy in the Malay culture. The concept of *air muka* in this culture could be similar with the 'face' concept proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). However, Asmah Hj Omar (1996) believed that the concept of *air muka* in the Malay context signifies a wider role and purpose in communication. If Brown and Levinson defined 'face' as a public self-image, the notion *air muka* in Malay conversation is established in a more comprehensive context that is cultural-oriented. Asmah Hj. Omar (1996) put forward the concept of *air muka* as a public self-image and a personal value connected to an individual's upbringing that comes with the self-respect of the individual himself/herself and his/her family. Since *air muka* is a prominent concept in the Malay culture, children from Malay families are trained to be well-behaved in their behaviours and the way they speak to others as it signifies their parents and families' value of self-respect.

The Malays, therefore, are expected to constantly appear polite and respectful in many situations, especially in conversation. When it comes to verbal interaction, it is important not to use expressions that could threaten both speaker's and hearer's face. The Malays are

expected to consider their choice of words and avoid direct communication strategy (Marlyna Maros and Nurul Syafawani Halim, 2018). These are among the diverse aspects of '*air muka*' (Asmah Hj Omar, 1996) that distinguished the concept from Brown and Levinson's (1987) notion of 'face'. If 'face' is rooted in one's desire to achieve something in the immediate context of interaction, *air muka*, on the other hand, encapsulates both cultural norms and values; representing one's self-respect and dignity. In other words, the definition of *air muka* incorporates a wider scope of face notion. In conversations, Malays are expected to communicate in decent manners and remain gentle with each other. A speaker who does not comply to these cultural rules might be perceived as culturally incompetence in identifying the content and ways of conversation (Asmah Hj. Omar 1996, Asmah Abdullah 1996, Teo 1996).

Like Malays, the Chinese culture also emphasizes on the value of harmony, respect and loyalty (Wu, 1980). Yang (1972) claimed that the relationship between Chinese superiors and subordinates in work and education is based on the Confucian's teachings of loyalty. Chan (1998) summarizes harmony and filial piety as among the most prominent basis in the Chinese culture. These values include reverence and paying respect towards the elders and early ancestors. "The keynote of existence is to reconcile divergent forces, principles, and points of view in an effort to maintain harmony. The individual must strive to achieve intrapsychic harmony, interpersonal harmony, and harmony with nature as well as time" (Chan, 1998: 293). With all the great values being taught in Confucian teachings, the Chinese always try to avoid argumentation and 'face' is highly protected in their conversation. Courtesy and kindness are among the underpinning aspects of Confusion social teachings (Chan, 1998).

Like Chinese and Malays, the Indians who observe traditional culture also preserve the same cultural values in their norms of interaction. Face saving and indirectness strategies are among the fundamental strategies embedded in their patterns of interaction (Valentine, 1994). In her study of agreeing and disagreeing in Indian English discourse, Valentine (1994) revealed that the aspects of politeness in the Indians' way of conversations are demonstrated through various strategies employed by speakers of several hierarchies. Language signifies particular positions and influence in the society as Valentine (1994) states, "certain patterns of language attribute to members of powerful or non-powerful group" (Valentine 1994: 3).

SPEECH ACT THEORY

Speech act theory (Searle, 1968; Searle and Searle, 1969; Searle, 1976) views human utterances not just as stating propositions but more of a way of getting things done with words. In other words, the theory is the concept of act that explains how speakers use language to achieve intended actions and how hearers comprehend intended meaning of what is being said. Speech act theory was initiated by J. L. Austin's (1962) idea of performative utterances that grounded on the following idea: The basic units of communication have locutionary meaning (the literal meaning of the utterance-linguistics), illocutionary meaning (the social function or the anticipated force of the utterance), and perlocutionary force (the actual effect produced by the utterance in each context-on the receiver). Searle (1976) classifies illocutionary acts into five categories. They are representatives (or assertives), directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations.

1. Representatives: refers to the act of expressing belief such as asserting, explaining, claiming and reporting.
2. Directives: refers to the act of expressing desire such as requesting, advising, suggesting, commanding, questioning and ordering.

3. Commissives: refers to the act of expressing intention such as promising, threatening, offering and refusing.
4. Expressives: refers to the act of expressing emotions such as apologizing, complimenting, thanking, blaming and praising.
5. Declarations: this illocutionary act does not express any emotional or psychological state but involves act such as declaring peace/war, hiring/ firing someone from a job or naming a candidate.

According to Austin (1975: 107) "perlocutionary acts always include some consequences"; they are "what we bring about or achieve by saying something" (p.109). Kissine (2013) explains the concept by giving the following examples, "by ordering you to leave, I cause your leaving; by telling you that there is spider on my lap, you frighten me; by saying that I am a friend of Chomsky's, I convince you that I am a pathological liar, and so on" (Kissine, 2013 :12).

Speech acts are universal pragmatic principles (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1968, 1975; Brown & Levinson, 1978) that vary across cultures and languages (Wierzbicka, 1985). Blum Kulka et al. (1989) believe that there is a need to balance theoretical studies of speech acts with empirical ones (derived from observations or experiments), based on speech acts produced by native speakers of individual languages in specific contexts. This is particularly important since native and non-native speakers of individual languages may use different semantic formulas when performing certain speech acts. Apart from that, the content of semantic formulas as well as the form of a speech act may also differ, even when speakers use the same semantic formulas. In a study of request, for instance, Takahashi (1996) found that learners of English favoured 'Would you… (do something)' or 'Could you… (do something)'. The English native speakers, on the other hand, preferred the following formula: 'Would it be possible for you to… (do something)' or 'I was wondering if you could… (do something)' (Takahashi, 1996: 190).

Drawing on the five categorisations of illocutionary acts (Searle, 1976) and the notion of speech acts as universal pragmatic principles that vary across languages and cultures (Wierzbicka, 1985), the present study aims not only to understand the functions of emoticons in indicating the illocutionary force of the texts, but also to critically respond to some of the previous studies (Dresner and Herring, 2014; Skovholt, Grønning and Kankaanranta, 2014; Glikson, Cheshin, and Kleef, 2018) by identifying the factors that conditioned the use of emoticons and the ways in which they are used in hypothesizing and theorizing on the social functionality of emotional icons in the online communication environment.

THE STUDY

A documentation of naturally occurring conversations on Facebook was made over a 12-month period to compile daily updates and conversations posted by the Malay, Chinese and Indian youngsters in Malaysia. 120 online users were identified using a purposive sampling technique. Among the criteria involved in the selection of research participants would be, (1) Malaysian Gen Z-those born between 1995-2000 (age 19-24). This age range was identified based on the personal characteristics and criteria of Gen Z (Twenge, 2017). (2) Malaysian youngsters who communicate in English on Facebook. Data was collected not by assigning the participants to act upon experimental assignments or under controlled situations, but through daily observations when these young online users were communicating on Facebook.

It is also important to note that access to one's Facebook account, consisting of users' walls (where all the conversations basically occur) is strictly based on the owner's permission and invitation. After more than ten years of being a member of Facebook, the researcher managed to have around 2,500 friends in her account with more than 1000 of them aged between 19 and 26. This acceptance of FB friends allowed full access into people's walls, profiles, pictures, daily status updates, links, private chat rooms and many more. As all participants are officially acknowledged as the researcher's FB friends, they are generally aware that the researcher is conducting a study on the role of emoticons in Malaysian online communication environment.

Data collection was carried out after getting consent from the participants through several ways such as by asking them directly on Facebook, e-mails, telephone conversations as well as volunteered participations. The data was enhanced by interviewing a group of respondents from the same sample. A corpus of 324 362 words were documented. This whole set of naturally occurring conversation was then analysed based on the five categorisations of illocutionary acts (Searle, 1976), using Content Analysis and Wordsmith Tools 5.0. The findings were also compared with the functions of emoticons forwarded by previous researchers (Baron 2008, Derks, Ross 2006, Lewin and Donner 2002, Crystal 2006, Derks, Bose, and Grumbkow 2007, 2008 and Winter and Katzman 1997).

Since textual analysis has its own limitations, particularly in terms of deciphering human emotions, a series of in-depth interviews with selected participants were conducted involving the same group of youngsters that was observed earlier. Semi-structured interviews were conducted after an initial analysis of the observational FB conversation texts, which led to the construction of interview variables and questions. A list of key themes, issues, and questions was prepared after analyzing the primary data. Semi-structured interviews have the advantage that the questions designed in performing this type of interview can be changed depending on the direction of the interview. The construction of interview questions revolved around the meaning of specific emoticons or symbols, participants' relationship and previous experiences when communicating online and how emoticons were employed as part of their communication strategies and behaviors.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

THE FUNCTIONS OF EMOTICONS IN THE MALAYSIAN ONLINE COMMUNICATION SETTING

One of the features that must emerge in users' online communication practice is the emoticon. As emoticons are among the inseparable features of online language that display users' communicative intentions ("an act of communication as an utterance act which manifests an underlying communicative intention" Recanati, 1986: 214) in online communication, the findings of the present study conform to the ideas proposed by many early researchers (Deacon, 2011; Baron, 2008; Negretti, 1999; Gao 2001; Ross, 2006; Derks, Bos, and Grumbkow, 2008; Walther and D' Addario, 2001; Uhlirova, 1994; Maynor, 1994; Cumming, 1995; Lewin and Donner, 2002) on the function of emoticons as a sign-vehicle designed for conveying human feelings and emotions. Apart from strengthening emotions and feelings in messages, the findings of the present study also indicate the use of emoticons in delivering illocutionary functions (the anticipated force of utterances) and purposes.

Emoticon is one important feature in online conversation among users in Malaysia. With the total number of 58,563 occurrences of emoticons recorded throughout the year, it is believed that emoticons carry some prominent functions in accentuating messages and highlighting meanings in online conversation. Emoticons are also seen as a complement to a

message as they appeared in almost every sentence produced online. The following table demonstrates 60 emoticons produced by young Malaysians on Facebook with number of occurrences range from 3 to 14,637 units.

TABLE 2. Emoticons produced by young Malaysians on Facebook

	Emoticon/Symbol	Meaning	Frequency (unit)
1.	; D	Smile	233
2.	: D	Big smile/ laugh	3762
3.	:DD	Big smile/ laugh out loud	73
4.	:-)	Smiling face	1143
5.	:-(	Sad-looking face	294
6.	;-)	Smile and wink	642
7.	:)	Smiling face	14,637
8.	;-(	Sad and wink	69
9.	;)	Smile and wink	2918
10.	(:	Smiling face	542
11.	:(	Sad-looking face	2710
12.	:))	Big smile	833
13.	;))	Big smile	454
14.	((:	Big smile	50
15.	:"(	Crying face	3
16.	:'(	Crying face	535
17.	=)	Smiling face	7379
18.	(=	Smiling face	28
19.	=(	Sad-looking face	700
20.	: /	Being cynical	2964
21.	:		A straight face	8
22.	-.-"	Sweating/ nervous	75
23.	-.-	Blur/angry	244
24.	=.=	Blur/angry	1103
25.	=,=	Blur/angry	20
26.	=.="	Angry and nervous	151
27.	="(	Crying	9
28.	=X	Kiss on the lips	46
29.	=S	Speechless	16
30.	=P	Tongue stick out	1758
31.	: P	Tongue stick out	6761
32.	; P	Wink and tongue stick out	632
33.	:S	Speechless	47
34.	;-S	Speechless and wink	11
35.	=D	Big smile	1191

36.	T.T	Crying face	410
37.	T_T	Crying face	366
38.	T T	Crying face	139
39.	XD	Big smile/ overjoyed	3536
40.	X3	Love	12
41.	XP	Tongue sticks out	332
42.	XO	shocking/ surprise/mouth wide open	8
43.	DX	Big smile/ overjoyed	14
44.	D:	Big smile/ overjoyed	43
45.	D;	Overjoyed and wink	16
46.	-____-"	Straight face/ angry but nervous	59
47.	-____-	Straight face/ angry	167
48.	8D	Sunglasses and smiling face	28
49.	:B	Buck teeth	32
50.	:?	Confuse	5
51.	:@	Screaming	49
52.	@@	Big round rolling eyes	356
53.	@_@	Big round rolling eyes with nose	72
54.	O___O	Big round eyes	110
55.	O.O	Big round eyes	168
56.	:O	Shock/ surprise/open mouth w	131
57.	:o)	Smiling clown face	19
58.	:L	Looser	3
59.	TwT	Crying	5
60.	>.<	Angry	442
	Total		58,563

Dresner and Herring (2014) argued that interpretation of emoticons should not conform to any prescription. I perceive their argument neither misleading nor entirely valid. The alternative analysis of emoticons proposed here consists of two notions. Firstly, most basic and popular emoticons such as smiley face :-) and sad face :-(carry a direct pragmatic meaning that is understood by almost all users. The traditional smiley :-), for instance, dominated the entire conversations with 14,637 occurrences; employed by all 120 users in almost all happy occasions. Based on many studies (Baron 2008, Derks, Ross 2006, Lewin and Donner 2002, Crystal 2006, Derks, Bose, and Grumbkow 2007, 2008), it is believed that some emoticons carry conventional meanings that are understood by many, regardless of language use or cultural setting.

As emoticons are internationally accepted as part of the online language, it indicates the development of symbols in communication, particularly in situations where words alone seem to be inadequate in conveying intentions thus create a barrier in expressing real emotions, feelings or messages. Next, it is learned that certain emoticons are more idiosyncratic and distinctive in terms of its function. Some emoticons also carry personal meanings and non-conventional interpretations that are only intelligible with a limited number of users from the same virtual community, or sometimes is only understandable by users who produce the symbols. This explained the usage of some unusual emoticons among small number of users.

In some cases, values remain the main connector between culture and action, thus emoticons play roles in transmitting these unspoken values and behaviours.

ACCENTUATING ILLOCUTIONARY FORCES THROUGH EMOTICONS

Derks, Bos and von Grumbkow (2007, 2008) believe that emoticons represent facial expressions and provide similar functions as nonverbal behavior shown in face-to-face communication. However, the use of emoticons in the Malaysian context carries more than just a depiction of facial expressions. It serves several purposes and inferential meanings that are culturally bound and highly influenced by various local elements. Indirectness strategy and the concept of face, for instance, were among the traces of local essence that came together with the use of emoticons in Malaysian online communication environment.

Some of the emoticons were utilized to strengthen messages, while others represented certain tones of voices such as excitement, irritation, disappointment, sadness and astonishment. The following excerpts demonstrate the use of emoticons in various situations:

Sample 1:

S: Honestly, it's sooooooooo draggy. I malas gila nak pegi class dah skrg (I am too lazy to go to class now) *:|*
H: why is A's old bmw is so fast! i dah pergi 160-180 km/h pun tak dapat kejar (I still lost after driving at the speed of 160-180 kilometre per hour) . *This is too much. i need a faster car :(*
S: black or white?

Sample 1 is part of a long conversation between two friends, S and H who were actively involved in street racing activity (an illegal type of auto racing normally occurs on public roads). S opened the conversation with a remark on his problem of laziness. He used words like draggy and *malas* (which means lazy) and supported his claim with an emoticon, [: |] to describe his feelings towards classes. Without eliciting an adequate reply to S, H on the other hand, complained about the speed of his car, which he felt not powerful enough if compared to his friend's old BMW. He supported his claim, "this is too much, I need a faster car" with a sad face emoticon [:-(], not to indicate how unhappy he was towards the situation, but to indirectly request for another car, to be used in the next racing activity. Participant S, however, understood his friend's motive (of an expressive illocutionary act that indicate the speaker's dissatisfaction) when he responded, "black or white?", and this referred to some other cars (black and white cars) owned by other members of the street racing society.

A comparison with previous findings has resulted in the following list (Table 3) of unique emoticons used by the participants of the present research. It is observed that some emoticons were used for various reasons, in contrast with the prescribed meaning given by previous researchers (Baron 2008, Derks, Ross 2006, Lewin and Donner 2002, Crystal 2006, Derks, Bose, and Grumbkow 2007, 2008). However, what makes the list (Table 3) different from the previous one (Table 2- Emoticons Produced by Young Malaysians on Facebook) would be the exemplification of emoticons betokening diverse meanings and functions. These anticipated communicative outcomes, however, vary according to users' intention and communication purposes. Therefore, it is not possible for the researcher to table a set of standard formula and systematic descriptions of illocutionary meanings behind the use of certain emoticons. This is line with Dresner and Herring's (2014) idea about flexible interpretations of emoticons' function due to diverse communication purposes and reasons.

TABLE 3. Meaning of Emoticons in Previous Studies Vs the Present Research

Emoticon	Meaning of emoticons (In Previous Studies)	Meaning of emoticons (The Present Research)	No. of occurrences	No. of user/120
:o)	-	Smiling clown face	19	3
:S		Speechless (I don't want to hear your opinion)	47	16
X3	Love	(Would you like to go out with me)	12	4
=X	Kiss on the lips		46	13
:@		Screaming	49	6
+_^		Puzzle face	3	2
:L	-	You are a looser	6	2
XO	-	I am surprised.	8	2
;-S		I don't know how to respond to your question	11	2
:?		I am confuse/ I demand an answer	5	2
=S		speechless	16	2
>.<	Angry	Extreme sadness	8	2
: D	Big smile/ overjoyed	I am angry/ I am being sarcastic/ I hate you	25	4

Sample 2:

L : hye there Kim, thanks for the add;) hows yr life?? still join bowling ye(+__^)
K: no problem dear=) life's great! yes yes, i still bowl.
L: sadly i tadapat join ;(
K: tape2, next time ade rezki kte jumpe ya!!keep it up wif the bowl gurl ;))

Sample 2 is a conversation between two long lost friends (L and K -two Malay girls) who seemed to be very excited catching up with each other after quite some time. L initiated the conversation by expressing her gratitude towards K for the friend- invitation on Facebook. After updating each other about their daily activities, L then indirectly expressed her interest to join the next bowling tournament by saying "still join bowling ye", followed by emoticon [(+__^)]- a puzzled face. K responded to her query by asserting that she is still actively involved in the game. L then expressed her frustration for not being able to join a bowling tournament that was held recently and this followed by K's assurance of inviting her to the next bowling event. The use of the emoticon [(+__^)] that accompanied the question represents an illocutionary force of a directive act (questioning and demanding for answers) appears to comprise both conventional and non-conventional aspects in this modern way of communication.

BRIDGING LANGUAGE AND NON-LANGUAGE BOUNDARY THROUGH EMOTICONS

All cultures, according to Swidler (1986) "contain diverse, often conflicting symbols, rituals, stories, and guides to action" (pg. 277). A culture, however, is not cohesive in the sense that it does not drive action in a consistent direction. Instead, culture serves a "tool kit for constructing strategies of action, rather than as a switchman directing an engine propelled by interests-turns our attention toward different causal issues than do traditional perspectives in the sociology of culture" (Swidler 1986: 277).

Emoticon, being a communication tool or agent that bridges language and non-language boundary, has become an integral part of the diverging cultural symbols in the online communication environment. In normal verbal communication, body language also functions as a tool in softening certain emotional expressions. The absence of nonverbal cues might lead to misinterpretation since online communication is merely loaded with words. Emoticons act

as an alternative for facial expressions and help online users to recognize the magnitudes and directions of emotion (Lo, 2008; Tossell et al., 2012). As certain communication events might contain a great deal of emotions, emoticons serve as a communication device that helps convey effective emotional information by providing additional social cues in one's lengthy text messages.

Functions of emoticons are not only limited to demonstrating users' intentions (as indicated in sample 1 and 2) but also to emphasize on certain feelings, to tone down some negative messages and to initiate and develop interaction, just as smiles and frowns do in face to face communication. Emoticons also help users to have more control in terms of the tone of the message they would like to convey. The following sample (Sample 3) shows the use of emoticon [:-p] to reduce the argument about a lying behaviour between a young man and a woman.

Sample 3:

A: a man forgives a woman's lie..
M: but we don't easily forgive a man who lies. :D
A: hahahaha...arrogant!it should be likewise..or i think u should just type 'same here'..its called manner..:P
M: erk.haha well, im just being honest. :-P
A: honesty truly is a good thing..but u should always forgive ppl lar..that is y men are better than women in this case..:P
*A=Male Malay participant; M=Female Malay participant

Sample 3 is an excerpt of a conversation between a young Malay (A) man and a Malay woman (M). A opened his conversation with what sounded like an opinion on how men normally forgive women who lied to them. M on the contrary, responded with an opposite idea, as she believed that women should never do the same. M used a smiley face [: D] (originally interpreted as overjoyed or a big smile) not to express her happiness or approval, but as a sign of sarcasm and warning (the emoticon carries an illocutionary act of commissive instead of expressive). Irritated by M's comment, A retorted with an advice, saying that she was supposed to show him a little respect by just agreeing with what he just said. A, who was literally not happy with M's response that did not meet his expectation used the emoticon [:-p] to subtle his argument and indirectly asking M to calm down (directive illocutionary act) after saying that she is arrogant and quite impolite. He also used the same emoticon to reduce his arguments on the different communication strategies between men and women. The girl, at the same time, also employed the same emoticon of [:-p] after she emphasised that she was just being honest with her opinion.

From cultural perspective, sample 3 also demonstrates the function of emoticons as part of users' politeness strategy. Symbols of facial expressions were utilized in communication events that require users to protect each other's face and to indirectly convey certain intention such as in making request, conflict management or withdraw of argument. "A negative message accompanied by a wink for instance, conveys less negativity than a negative pure message" (Derks, Bos, & von Grumbkow 2008: 380). This is in line with the concept of *air muka* (Asmah Hj Omar, 1996) that denotes a person's self-image that comes with the value of self-respect, pride and dignity. For many generations, the Malays are always expected to demonstrate courteous and kindness in conversataions (Asmah Hj Omar, 1996; Teo, 1996; Marlyna Maros and Nurul Syafawani Halim, 2018). Expressions that could bring dishonour to both the speaker's and hearer's face should be avoided, words should be carefully selected and ideas must be wisely articulated. *Air muka* embraces values, self-respect and pride.

The concept of "*budi bahasa*" is prominent in the Malay society, not only in spoken interaction but also in their general way of life. In language use, *budi* is defined as "behaviour which is not to be forthright and assertive, not being blunt or direct" (Asmah Hj Omar, 1992: 496). In conversations, one has to be conscious about the appropriateness of language use while constantly considering the consequences of what will be uttered. If one follows these rules of conduct, he or she is considered as "*berbudi bahasa*" or well-mannered and as someone who understands the customs; in other words, he or she is cultured (understood the customs). On the contrary, to act according to one's own way might cause discomfort and disharmony; for example, being direct when talking to others is considered to be 'not Malay' in conduct and could be regarded as "*tiada budi bahasa*" or 'lacking courtesy' (Marlyna Maros & Nurul Syafawani Halim, 2018).

Teo (1996) rationalized why the Malays perceive indirectness as crucial in their culture. In the Malay society, it is normal for a conversation to be made longer, before arriving to the real matters (Marlyna Maros & Nurul Syafawani Halim, 2018). The reason why indirectness is considered important is that conversations are made for the purpose of developing and preserving relationships (Teo, 1996). Therefore, any face-threatening act (FTA) that leads to provocation and disagreement will be avoided to retain peace and harmony. By avoiding any FTA such as disagreement, criticism and complaints, one has displayed morality and patience, which comply with the requirements of the Malay etiquette (Lim, 2003). In any potentially conflict-inviting situations, indirectness strategy is also very much encouraged as uttering direct responses might only indicate insolence, intolerance and lacking respect (Azianura Hani Shaari, 2017; Marlyna Maros & Liyana Rosli, 2017; Rashid et al., 2012). The modern Malay society, however, might have a different way of dealing with conflict-inviting situations. This can be seen in sample 4:

Sample 4:

M: Sorry I do not understand guys. And what do you acpct from me actually?
A: acpct?
D: huh? acpct???
A: accept? haha. aq org putih ni x pandai sgt... ;P [I am not good in English…;P]
D: expect? hahahaha. aku dari italy, baru belajar english ni.:P [I am from Italy. I just learned English :P]
M: expact lah, bodo! (it is expact, stupid!)
D: HAHAHA. acpct!!! expect? bkn expect? sure? :-))) [Expact? Are you sure it is not expect?]
A: Jgn marah... SENYUM :-) [Please don't be mad…SMILE :-]
*M= Female Malay participant; A=Male Malay participant 1; D=Male Malay participant 2

Sample 4 is an excerpt of a long conversation between three Malay students. M, a Malay girl, (in Sample 4) puzzled her friends with a short form '*acpct*' that she used in the conversation. The confusion triggered a discussion between the two Malay male participants on the possible meaning of short form '*acpct*'. A (male participant 1) made indirect criticism by requesting M for the meaning of the short form. This act was accompanied with a humble note of "*I am not good in English*", followed by a tongue-sticking-out emoticon [;P]. This strategy is common among the Malay speakers, especially when dealing with situations that require them to express disagreement, reproach or dissatisfaction. D (male participant 2), on the contrary, turned the situation into a joke as he said "*I am from Italy. I just learned English*"

followed by a tongue-sticking-out emoticon [:P]. Both male participants employed the same emoticon as part of their politeness strategy to save M's face. M then clarified the situation by giving the full word of '*acpct*' which is supposed to be-'expect', but accidently stated it in an incorrect spelling, which made the guys started to make fun of her and turned her genuine intention of clarifying a situation, into a joke.

Emoticons serve as a supplementary tool in face-threatening act and negative politeness strategy. As online users normally communicate at their own pace and time, they have an advantage of having ample time to consider suitable online facial expressions that should complement their messages. Online users usually have clear intentions or reasons of using certain emoticons in their conversations in both synchronous and asynchronous online conversations. "Overall, emoticons were mostly used for the expression of emotion, for strengthening the verbal part of the message (with a supporting emoticon), and for expressing humor" (Derks, Bos, & von Grumbkow 2008: 380).

Some of the reasons or what is described as motives would be "expressing emotion, strengthening the message, regulating the interaction, and putting ideas into perspective" (Derks, Bos, & von Grumbkow 2008: 386). The following excerpts describe the motives:

Sample 5:

M: feel wanna die
C: dying...><
M: kill me
C: kill me 2....T.T
*C=Chinese male participant; M=Malay male participant

Sample 5 demonstrates the use of emoticon to strengthen speech acts and describe feelings. The conversation involved C, a Chinese male participant who was sharing his depression with a friend, M. M expressed how much he wanted to die and jokingly asked C to end his life. Not eliciting an adequate reply, C then requested M to do the same towards him. With words such as 'die' and 'kill me' accompanied with emoticons [T.T] and [><] emoticons (mean a crying and a frowning face), both M and C were indirectly offering comfort to each other by sharing the same emotion.

In some other situations, emoticons help reinforce and convey online messages more effectively. The use of emoticons for this purpose is emotionally invested and manifest users' feelings in ways that sometimes not comprehensible by those who are not involved in the conversation. As excerpts in sample 1, 2, 3 and 4 illustrate, emoticons help addressees to understand speakers' feelings and intention. However, a standard usage of emoticons was also seen throughout the data. Birthday wishes and happy events for instance, were always complemented with a smiley whereas personal problems, sadness and depressions are normally accompanied with emoticons that indicate the same connotation and meaning. In contrast with Zilic (1999) who believes that people normally fake their feelings using emoticons since they have enough time to display intended emotions, one significant outcome discovered through the entire conversations is that most of the research participants employ emoticons to express their actual feelings, emotions and motives (Azianura Hani Shaari, 2017).

ACHIEVING SOCIAL COHESION IN A MULTICULTURAL ONLINE COMMUNICATION SETTING THROUGH WORDS AND EMOTION-SYMBOLS

Multiculturalism is often perceived favorably as possible avenues of opportunity for a person in terms of better access to cultural knowledge and social mobility. Malaysia is a melting pot

of different cultures. Harmony is established through mutual understanding and tolerance. In a nature of speech that hides gestures and body language, emoticons have become part of the cross-cultural communication tools that connect words with values. Elfenbein and Ambady, (2002a, 2003) believe that people can judge expressions of those belonging to the same culture more accurately as compared to others of different cultural groups and values. This premise implies that experience determines emotion recognition. Since emotions are culturally dependent (Takahashi et al., 2017), some emoticons might be culturally oriented too. "Emoticons are a relatively new communication channel, and there are several cultural groups where the emoticons are still not widely used. Thus, people who experience emoticons less frequently may hardly recognize the emotion of emoticons" (Takahashi et al., 2017:1579). Takahashi et al. (2017) believe that there are dialects in emoticon usage. If cultural diversity is the prime reason for conflicts and misunderstanding (Brew and Cairns 2004), mindful adjustment by speakers in cross-cultural communication is seen as a crucial strategy in achieving certain consensus. According to Ting-Toomey (1988), the act of face work, which Goffman (1978) put forward as the management of impression within an interaction, is a vital factor in conflict management among speakers of different cultures.

Sample 6:

D: u need to b taught a good lesson ...;-P
V: who is the 'u'?:-P
D: need any help?
V: haha dnt worry i cn hndle it..haha tnx 4 the offer neways
D: nowadays all ur comments are like luv failure only...:-(
V: hahahaha love??? wat is love la?? who is dat?? =P
D: oo i c ok ok hehehe =P tc aite, akka...
V: aite? akka?
D: aite = alright sister :-)
V: ooohhh... tak tido lg huh? ;-)
D: soon soon
V: good good
*D=Female Indian participant; V=Female Malay participant

Sample 6 is extracted from a set of naturally occurring instances of online chat between two friends; D (an Indian girl) and V (a Malay girl). Two communication styles were employed; direct conversation strategies (by participant D), and indirect communication style (by participant V). The sample demonstrates some communication adjustments made by these speakers in avoiding conflicts and achieving social cohesion. When speaker D cautioned speaker V to improve her attitude and work on her love-relationship issue, she complemented her advice (which was given in a direct manner) with a wink and tongue sticking out emoticon to lessen the tone and reduce the impact of the face-threatening act (FTA) imposed on the receiver. Participant V, being a person who grew up in a Malay society that observes traditional values of indirect communication behaviour, redressed her negative face by turning the friend's concern into a joke. Some random questions of 'who is the 'u'? :-P" (Who is the 'you'?) and "wat is love la?? who is dat?? =P" (What is love? Who is that?) were posted to avoid talking directly about the sensitive topic. While beating around the bush, participant V accompanied her remarks with several emoticons, probably aimed to conceal her own anxiety and displeasure while acknowledging her friend's noble intention. Regardless of the differences in communication styles, both speakers managed to avoid conflicts by lowering the tone and the intensity of the conversation using certain emotion-icons.

According to Drake (1995), in intercultural negotiations, speakers of different cultures did not necessarily obey to styles prescribed by their own traditional norms of interaction. The role of culture is minimized by situational concerns and personality factors (Brew and Cairns 2004). In achieving social harmony and multicultural competence, speakers are willing to adjust their communication styles and strategies. Asmah Haji Omar (1998) believes that "environment and situations of language use" (1998:21) shape people's linguistic behavior and identity.

> People do not build lines of action from scratch, choosing actions one at a time as efficient means to given ends. Instead, they construct chains of action beginning with at least some pre-fabricated links. Culture influences action through the shape and organization of those links, not by determining the ends to which they are put.　　　　　　　　　(Swidler 1986: 277)

In a multicultural online communication environment, emoticons not only serve as manifestations of body language, but as one of the primary vehicles towards understanding cultural diversity and knowledge. Emoticons are part of these strategies and actions. The term strategy here does not refer to the conventional behaviors prescribed in any culture. It is, instead, a way of performing actions based on given circumstances. Brown and Levinson (1987) suggested that when a person has a desire to maintain a hearer's face (or to keep relationship with them), he or she will avoid conflicts and moderate the speech. The hypothesis is that, most speech acts are face threatening in which both speakers' and hearers' faces can be threatened in random interactions. Some speech acts can even threaten both speaker's and hearer's face at the same time. Speech acts such as criticizing or giving instructions, for instance, may threaten the receiver's face (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Speakers, therefore, will employ various politeness strategies to neutralize or minimize conflicts.

Sample 7:

Female participant 1:
Very confusing but what to do =P

Female participant 2:
George show off haha =P

Female participant 3:
Hahaha its ok then, just ignore them =P

In online communication, emoticons help indicate the illocutionary force of the text (to which they are attached) and serve as part of these strategies. Female participant 1 (in Sample 7) for instance, was complaining about her friend's explanation, which she found very confusing. Another situation would be another participant (female participant 2) who was indirectly trying to advise her friend (George) not to show off his talent. The third excerpt was taken from a group discussion involving five people. Participant 3 was not satisfied with some of her friends' ideas and suggested the rest to just ignore the comments. All direct criticisms were accompanied by a tongue-sticking-out emoticon that served as a part of the conversation strategies to soften disagreement and direct criticisms.

In one of the interview sessions, one participant admitted that he uses a tongue-sticking-out emoticon to minimize conflicts in conversations involving casual (but not close) friends. The third excerpt (female participant 3), for instance, was extracted from a group discussion involving five members of a sport club who barely know each other. Social distance plays an important role in determining the way people treat each other in communication. Brown and

Levinson (1987:76) define distance as "a symmetric social dimension of similarity or difference within which speaker and hearer stand for the purpose of the act." Apart from that, distance is always associated to the degree of familiarity or the level intimacy between speakers and hearers. Wierzbicka (1991) believes that people's level of intimacy is very much related to their mutual knowledge and emotional attachment for each other.

Previous studies have proven that speakers with high social distance will modify their language and style of communication when communicating with each other, as compared to a casual conversation among family members or close friends (Buller and Aune, 1987; Hofstede, 1991). In communication, speakers are "situated within a social context that regulates or influences communication contact (who exchanges information with whom) and communication content (what information is communicated)" (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986: 1494). Social influence, therefore, is perceived as one of the factors that contribute to the various communication strategies used by the participants in this study.

CONCLUSION

Languages have their own system established by certain linguistic conventions, pragmatic rules and sociocultural norms. Motivated by these sociocultural norms, "speakers of a language unconsciously develop a sense of communicative competence which enables them interpret and produce comprehensible and appropriate utterances in their communication process" (Al-Ghamdi et al., 2019: 227). In the online communication environment, emoticons serve as an exemplification of illocutionary forces of virtual utterances that convey users' feelings and motives. Despite the conventional usage and purposes, emoticons also help indicate the illocutionary force of the texts and serve as part of various communication styles and attitudes. There is a huge acceptance of emoticons among Malaysian users. With 58,563 occurrences (60 different types) of emoticons employed by the participants on Facebook, it is learned that emoticons play a significant role in people's online communication strategies. The advantages of emoticons are that the interpretations are self-contained, simple and widely understood. Suffice to say that Malaysian online users are not just familiar with this feature, but also able to use their imagination and creativity in utilizing virtual symbols as part of speech act realization strategies.

Ross (2006) believes that traditional smileys and basic emoticons are understood by many online users regardless the different mother tongues and linguistic backgrounds. Dresner and Herring (2014), on the other hand, argued that there should not be any formula or specific interpretation of emoticons. Both ideas are neither invalid, not entirely acceptable. Firstly, basic and traditional emoticons such as smileys indicate direct meaning and interpretation, and this is understood by almost all users around the globe. However, it is also observed that the use of certain emoticons is contextually oriented, idiosyncratic and unique in terms of its functions and purposes.

Cultural influence is seen as among the factors that conditioned the use of emoticons as part of speech act realization patterns and strategies. For example, the use of emoticons as a politeness strategy to soften disagreement and negative comments. The use of emoticons as a face protection strategy indicates a different dimension of this concept (face), particularly in the online communication environment. In some cases, emoticons were used to accentuate hidden motives, such as in making indirect criticisms or requests. There are several indirect communication strategies that are usually not recognized as something negative or impolite. Among the strategies are making requests, giving opinions and offering suggestions (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

In Malaysian face-to-face conversation, for instance, things are mostly expressed in indirect manners in order to protect one's face and as a mark of respect to the other person (Asma Abdullah, 1996). Since Malaysians are not used to make direct negative remarks in conversation, virtual cues and symbols, therefore, serve as linguistic devices aim to minimize the impact of direct comments and criticisms in conversation. In conversation, Malaysians are expected to demonstrate courteous and kindness (Asmah Hj Omar, 1996; Teo, 1996). Expressions that show disrespect to both speakers' and receivers' face should be evaded, words should be carefully selected and ideas must be wisely articulated in order to avoid disputes or being labelled as impolite. This is particularly evident in the present findings that demonstrated some acts of moderating speech in avoiding or reducing conflicts demonstrated by three participants (in sample 7-see findings and discussion section). The findings have indicated emoticons as part of politeness strategies to neutralize or minimize conflicts in online conversation. A tongue-sticking emoticon that accompanied the act of making direct criticisms (performed by female participant 1-in sample 7) has reduced the intensity of the comment, thus protected the receiver's face from being humiliated. Another example would be a tongue-sticking emoticon that accompanied female participant 2's expressions (also in sample 7) who advised her friend not to brag about his talent. These direct criticisms were accompanied by a tongue-sticking-out emoticon that served as a part of the conversation strategies to soften disagreement and direct criticisms. For Malaysians who observed traditional values such as being indirect and polite in communication (Asma Abdullah, 1996), making direct criticism is seen as impolite, especially when comments are posted online and accessible for everyone to view (Zahid & Hashim, 2018). By accompanying direct criticisms with emoticons that demonstrate humorous facial expressions or funny looks, these participants managed to reduce negative consequences and the price they might have to pay for making such comments.

The present study has proven the various attitudes in performing different speech acts among young Malaysians on Facebook. Apart from that, the findings also reveal a new trend in the communication patterns and behaviour of youngsters in Malaysia, which further suggests the possibility of change from their own traditional cultural values and norms of interaction. This could be a positive sign of a reshaping and a remoulding process of identity among the new generation in adapting themselves to the international community that accepts different languages, identities and cultures in their lifestyle. The cultural values transpired in the language use of today's generation could certainly be a projection of values that would be common in the future.

In the absence of face-to-face communication that embraces body language, symbols play an important role in enhancing the emotions that words are not able to express. Maintaining social harmony can be a challenge in a multicultural online communication environment (specifically in chat rooms), simply because there is no vocal inflection to add context. A simple smiley emoticon provides a clear message to the recipient that there is no negativity intended and a tongue sticking out emoji clears tension and reduces conflicts in an instance. Increasing users' familiarity with the nuances of various online facial symbols, therefore, will improve the quality of users' communication and achieve social harmony.

Globalization has invited people from different cultural backgrounds to join forces and transform into a society that is receptive toward foreign cultures, blending some favourable foreign values with their own, and producing positively new cultural beliefs, systems and communication patterns. The move may be needed for a nation to become stronger and more relevant to international societies. Looking at the positive side of this phenomenon, these changes most likely bring some advantages to the society. In multicultural ecologies, shift of values and linguistic identity is common social phenomena, where the language choice of a multilingual speaker is not always static and pre-decided. Living in this era of information and communication technology (ICT) where intercultural communications are no longer happening

across physical borders, the young Malaysians, with their traditional rules of speaking, need to adapt accordingly in order to be culturally competent with these new challenges. However, it is still very critical for the new generation of this country to preserve their traditional values and norms of interaction as these are the unique features that make Malaysians different from other speech communities around the world. Thus, it is still relevant for them to uphold at least part of the traditional values in communication, so that the new Malaysians will not lose entirely their unique identities to this modern civilization.

The claims made by the present researcher could be further substantiated or challenged with more rigorous research involving various generations of speakers, various contexts of interaction, methodology and speech acts. The field of enquiry could benefit significantly from much more rigorous efforts and substantial discoveries, especially on developing the theory for Malaysian online communication values and behaviours. This may be due to the great exposure that people have received through the borderless world made possible by technology.

The findings of the present research have several implications. Firstly, it is hoped that the findings will help increase online users' awareness on the use of emoticons in various contexts and purposes. Next, the findings of the present research will contribute to the development of an online database that helps people to recognize the importance of symbols and emoticons, specifically in diasporic online communities. Finally, the present research will provide a basis for the development of more future studies pertaining to the same topic such as a correlational research that explores the relationship between an individual's pattern of language, culture and online symbols.

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