WhatsApp Conversations and Relationships: A Focus on Digital Communication Between Parent-Teacher Engagement in a Secondary School in Putrajaya

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ABSTRACT

Long before Covid-19 transitioned in our lifestyle and the 'New Normal' began, digital communication through instant messaging application in smartphones has been used over the conventional way of communicating in Malaysia. WhatsApp is the most preferred application when it comes to communicating with peers, friends and family and that is also true for schools in Malaysia, especially in the Klang Valley. The present study aims to investigate the use of digital communication focusing on parent-teacher engagement in a public school in Putrajaya, Malaysia that uses WhatsApp as the application of choice. This qualitative research employs in-depth interviews to collect data to describe the themes that have emerged in the discussion between parents and teachers on WhatsApp as a medium of communication in parent-teacher engagement process. This study incorporates theories such as Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and Epstein's Theory of Overlapping Sphere's of Influences (TOSI) in describing the data. The results suggest that both parents and teachers agree on the importance of using digital platform for communication and engagement between them. The versatility of digital communication, convenience, speed and cost effectiveness are the reasons for using digital communication. However, the challenges for teachers that have been identified in the use of digital communication are increase of stress, distractions of messages and abuse of working time. Theoretical and practical implications for academics, parents, teachers and students were also included in the study.

Keywords: *Parent, teacher, digital communication, WhatsApp, engagement*.

INTRODUCTION

The engagement of parents and teachers has long been demonstrated to have a positive influence on students. Improved teacher-parent communication has positive effects and increases children's academic performance (Epstein, 2018; Hornby & Blackwell, 2018; Topor et al., 2010). Communication between parents, teachers and the community also have a significant role in the academic progress and the development of social skills of students in primary and secondary school (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Jennings & Wartella, 2003; Telem & Pinto, 2006). In addition, research indicates that the involvement of parents in education of their children could be improved through social networks between parents (Curry & Holter, 2019; Ee, 2017). In other words, when parents have opportunities for interaction, they can help each other and strengthen their involvement in home and school education. However, parental participation is contingent on good parent–teacher partnerships and teacher support for engagement (Goodall, 2018).

Kuusimäki et al. (2019) and Juniu (2009) suggested four components to encourage a successful parent-teacher engagement:
(a) constructive contact through encouraging notes from teachers to parents;
(b) customised correspondence, letters or input on the work of pupils;

(c) supportive contact; and
(d) parent-teacher cooperation and coordination.

Typically, in Malaysia, traditional parent-teacher communication takes the form of verbal and written communication. Verbal communication occurs often at the pick-up of children from school, parent-teacher conferences, and telephone calls. On the other hand, written communication includes reports, contact records, and message boards (Knopf & Swick, 2008). This kind of communication is very constrained, restricted, and often one-way, resulting in fewer contacts between parents and instructors. Frequently, information intended for parents does not reach them. There are difficulties in determining if the message is properly conveyed and understood by the parents, as well as obtaining feedback from them. However, in response to the COVID-19 epidemic, in order to disrupt and curtail the virus chain, the Malaysian government, was forced to apply a movement control order (MCO) with several phases (Koskela et al., 2020). The MCO begins with four phases in which all businesses, enterprises, and social activities are temporarily halted, including educational activities in which schools and colleges are not permitted to operate (Zheng et al., 2020). As a result, all of these activities have moved online and all parent-teachers communication are conducted through digital platforms.

As a result of fast technological development, the usage of smartphones has altered the way people connect. Everyone can now interact easily via digital communication. Smartphones are utilised by Malaysians at all socioeconomic levels. According to a study performed by Statista Research Department (Statista), Malaysia now has about 29 million smartphone users, which will grow to 30.7 million by 2025 (Müller, 2021). These results indicate that Malaysians have already made the transition from conventional modes of communication to digital modes of communication in their everyday lives. As a result of this development, digital communication through instant messaging applications on smartphones has surpassed traditional methods of communication between individuals, including teachers and parents. Numerous schools across Malaysia, particularly in the Klang Valley, have used digital communication between teachers and parents. In Malaysian schools, the common practise in digital communication is usually accomplished via the creation of a classroom chat group comprised of parents and teachers.

The digital channels used in Malaysia include Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and many more. However, according to the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC, 2020), WhatsApp is the number one frequently used application for instant messaging in Malaysia, with 98.1% of all smartphone users in Malaysia being active users of WhatsApp (MCMC, 2020). WhatsApp is also the most popular social media messenger application and as of July 2019, there are approximately 1600 million active users of WhatsApp (MCMC, 2020). This also signifies that WhatsApp will continue to be used for many years to come.

This study is important research in digital communication in Malaysia especially looking at the communication between parents and teachers still being in the infancy stage. This study will describe the communication in parent-teacher engagement at a secondary school in Putrajaya. The general purpose of this research is to explore the use of digital communication on parent-teacher engagement in SMK Putrajaya Presint 11(1). Secondly, it is about exploring the themes that emerge from the WhatsApp discussion between teachers and parents and to

explicate the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) and the Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence (TOSI) in the analysed data.

Digital communication has been identified as an essential skill set for the 21st century, encompassing both technical and communication abilities (Van Laar et al., 2017). As a result, it is critical for teachers to have opportunities to provide helpful feedback to students and parents in order to maximise kids' support for learning. Parents can also benefit by having access in supporting one another, understand how apps and digital platforms can be used to channel parent contributions to the entire class rather than just their specific child, and how schools can leverage social networks (religious, cultural, and non-governmental) outside of school. By adopting this mindset, teachers may be able to build and extend more diverse and inclusive ideas of 'good parenting' (Erdreich, 2021).

LITERATURE REVIEW OR RESEARCH BACKGROUND
Parent-Teacher Engagement in Malaysia
In Malaysia, the policy on parental participation is largely confined to what is laid down in the Malaysia Education Act 1996 on compulsory primary education, driven by the democratisation of education, which relies on parents' obligations to enrol their child in school when the child turns 6. The legislation also stipulates the penalties for parents who do not adhere to this legislation. Furthermore, Section 130 (2) (i) of the same Act provision schools to set up a committee of the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) in which all parents or guardians of children are automatically members of the school and to be fully engaged in all events coordinated by the PTA. A sub-regulation established in 1998 under this provision stipulates that the formation of the PTA is to assist schools in the advancement of children's welfare and education (Malaysian Education Act 1996, 1998). The implementation of the PTA law was in 1979 and the regulation of children's health was realigned to oversee children's welfare (Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE)., 2013b).

Currently, aligned with the MOE initiatives, the recent programmes for parental involvement in Malaysia which is "*Sarana Ibu Bapa*" are driven by the need of Malaysia's Education Ministry in the Malaysian Education Blueprint for a school parent partnership to be concluded by 2025 (MOE, 2013b). The "*Sarana Ibu bapa*" is a national initiative to promote the participation of parents/guardians in the learning of students to improve the overall quality of education. It acts as a tool to build, strengthen and empower the participation of parents in the learning of children in and outside the school. "*Sarana Ibu Bapa*" has three stages of implementation which are Wave 1 for year 2013-2015, Wave 2 for year 2016-2020 and Wave 3 for year 2021-2025 (MOE, 2013b).

Wave 1 is structured to promote the participation of parents and private initiatives and sectors in which the Ministry can help to boost achievement and sustain strong collaboration with parents and the community through a national education campaign. This initiative seeks to attract more parental participation as well as a sense of collective responsibility for the development of students. Financial support would also be given to underprivileged students that will be used as a way to enable low-income families to engage their children in education. However, this grant will be awarded to students who meet the goals set (MOE, 2013b).

Wave 2 seeks to increase the participation of parents, communities and private businesses by further extending the role of the Parents and Teachers Association. They require the provision of a support network, namely the Parents Support Group (PSG). This community was founded to make it easier for parents to discuss the practice of assisting children in the

learning and development process. The greater participation of the group can be achieved by carrying out certain events. For example, mentoring services, student visits and industrial back-up training. Additionally, a study will be conducted at *Sekolah Amanah* to determine the feasibility of establishing 90 Trust Schools around the country by 2020 (MOE, 2013a).

Wave 3 would further promote more private sector innovation by making *Sekolah Amanah* a pilot school in Malaysia. More than 500 trust schools are expected to start running by 2025, with the structure to be strengthened. In addition, the Ministry will also provide assistance to the private sector that in, initiates special education initiatives by researching the creation of alternative approaches for accessing specialised education services (MOE, 2013a).

Parental involvement in assisting children's education have sparked great study interest on a global scale and in Malaysia. Furthermore, parental participation, regardless of amount of involvement, has been found to benefit children's learning (Al-Fadley et al., 2018; Hosseinpour et al., 2015; Siti Soraya & Nor Hashimah, 2021). When parents volunteer at school or attend school activities, they can develop strong communication with teachers (Grolnick & Raftery-Helmer, 2015). Researchers believe that regular communication leads to a more successful home-based participation such as homework assistance and monitoring of the child's learning process (Rubach & Bonanati, 2021).

This research will provide insights that may help the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) to strengthen parent-teacher engagement via digital communication. The results of this research may be utilised to educate teachers and educators on how to enhance parent-teacher engagement through the proper use of digital communication. This is congruent with the MOE efforts described in "*Sarana Ibu Bapa*" and with the recognition of communication as a needed skill set for the 21st century, which includes both technical and communication skills (Van Laar et al., 2017). As a result, it is critical for teachers to have chances to provide helpful feedback to students and parents in order to maximise students' support for learning.

The Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT)
The Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) examines the effects of media on people. UGT examines how users willingly choose media to meet specific needs such as knowledge, relaxation, social interactions, entertainment, or escape (Severin & Tankard, 2001; McQuail, 2010). In other words, the idea is frequently stated to argue what people do with media rather than what media does to people (Katz, 1959). This theory takes a user-centered/audience-centered approach. Even for interpersonal communication, people turn to the media for a topic to debate among themselves. They gain more knowledge and exposure to the world beyond their limited eyesight by referring to the media.

The assumptions of UGT according to West, Turner and Zhao (2010) are distinct; first, the user/audience is active, and its media use is goal-oriented. Second, the initiative to link needs gratification to a specific medium choice is primarily the responsibility of members of the user/audience. Third, in order to meet the needs of the user/audience, the media must compete with other resources. Fourth, users/audience are self-aware enough about their media use, interests, and motivations to provide researchers with an accurate picture of their use. Finally, only the user/audience can make value judgments about media content (West, Turner, & Zhao, 2010).

The user/audience in UGT has specific needs and desires. They are divided into five categories. Cognitive needs, affective needs, personal integrative needs, social integrative needs, and tension-free needs are all important (Katz et al., 1973). WhatsApp therefore fulfils all of this sense of gratification since parents and teachers may learn about the present situation in school. Digital communications also boosts social connection between the parent and the instructor. This is because digital communication may be used not only for one communication, but for many communications, and through the development of private and group chats, for many to many communication. Parents and teachers sometimes offer additional info or anecdotes within a group chat that will make the group lively and offer a way out of stress.

UGT 2.0 can also explain why WhatsApp, a digital communication tool, is used as a medium of communication between teachers and parents. People actively seek out a specific media to meet their specific needs. According to Sundar and Limperos (2013), media technology can impact audience gratification. Previously, media solely referred to mass communication tools like newspapers, radio, television, and movies, but today developing media technologies like social messenger application are more interactive, mobile, and intelligent. This gives a sense of pleasure to the users and therefore became more popular. Katz et al. (1973) concluded from their investigation that individuals pick their own media as a result of their need to know or learn about things, to identify with media characteristics, to provide an amusement for them, to increase social contact and to avoid daily pressures. The use of digital communication as a means of contact between teachers and parents also encourages the Ministry of Education to fully involve parents, the community and the private sector in education as partners. This is essential, because the parents are community members with various social backgrounds. Any information or assistance that is obtained through the digital communication channel in the classroom is likely successful in getting the response and engagement of parents.

Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence
The idea of overlapping spheres of influence has been established by Epstein and colleagues (2018) to show how kids learn better when parents and educators work together in support of student education and development. Epstein et al. (2018) provide their findings on successful parent-teacher collaboration in Epstein's Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence. In this approach, three settings, home, school and community, overlap with distinct and joint impacts on children through the interactions of parents, educators, community partners and students across contexts.

The school, family, and community engagement approach places the student at the centre. The undeniable fact is that children are the primary players in their school education, development, and performance. Relationships between schools, families, and the community may not always result in productive pupils. Collaboration exercises, on the other hand, may be structured to engage, guide, motivate, and inspire students to attain their own goals. According to the idea, if children feel cared for and encouraged to work hard in the position of student, they are more likely to try their best to learn to read, write, measure, and develop other skills and abilities while remaining in school.

The approach divides parent-teacher collaboration into six categories: parenting, communication, volunteering, home learning, decision-making, and community collaboration. The theory's central concept is the value of multiple experiences in assisting students with

their overall schooling and academic accomplishment (Epstein et al., 2018). Epstein et al. (2018) explains that (1) Parenting - assisting all families in developing positive home settings for children and assisting the school in understanding their families; (2) Interacting — facilitating two-way talks about school programmes and children's achievement utilising various technology; (3) Volunteering entails recruiting and coordinating parent assistance at school, at home, or elsewhere, including audiences for school programmes; (4) Learning at home entails providing families with information and suggestions on how to assist students with homework and other curriculum-related materials; and (5) Decision making entails having family members act as representatives and stakeholders in school communications.

Communication is a critical component of the theory because effective communication may bring parents, teachers, and the community together. Epstein et al. (2018) discovered that the main difference between parents is their knowledge of how to help their children at home, as well as the sharing of information between teachers and parents, as well as the community, which would encourage them to be more active at home and collaborate with the teachers and community. Finding the most convenient method of communication is especially crucial when attempting to create effective working relationships with culturally and linguistically diverse families. As a result, the more convenient and accessible the communication channel, the better the collaboration between school and home.

METHODOLOGY

The overall purpose of this research is to gain in depth view on how WhatsApp as a digital communication tool is used on the parent-teacher engagement from the viewpoint of parents and teachers. For a number of compelling reasons, the study adopts a qualitative case study approach for this study. Creswell (2003) defines case study as "researcher explores in depth a programme, an event, an activity, a process, or one or more individuals". The study took place at SMK Putrajaya Presint 11(1), a government public secondary school in Putrajaya, Malaysia. This school was selected because each class teacher is required to establish a WhatsApp group for parents of students and teachers for all the classrooms in the school. The participants were chosen from a snowball sampling method and the participants are selected based on the criteria of using WhatsApp as medium of interaction between parents and teachers. Five classroom teachers are recommended by the school administrator and 5 parents from the respective classroom volunteered to be interviewed using semi structured interview questions. Each interview, which lasted on average of 30 minutes, was conducted using recording gear such as google meet and WhatsApp due to restrictions of gathering in Covid 19 pandemic. The interviews were conducted individually in a private room with only the participants to ensure the participants' privacy and that they would not be interrupted. The data is recorded in its current state and later formatted to audio recording and transcribed verbatim. Additionally, data transcripts are given in the order in which they were recorded during the interviews.

The interview transcripts are analysed using thematic analysis using NViVo 12, a qualitative analysis tool. The tool assisted in arranging pertinent code layouts and visualised essential aspects using a variety of built-in features. Braun and Clarke (2006) define the phases of theme analysis as allowing for a systematic manner of perceiving and processing qualitative data via "coding." Various stages of theme analysis such as data familiarisation, generating initial code, searching for themes across the data, reviewing themes and producing the report were applied in this study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Meanwhile, triangulation is a strategy that

allows the research to use multiple methods to gather research data that could help strengthen the findings. The triangulation technique utilised in this case is source triangulation, which entails interviewing multiple participants until the result reaches saturation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are presented in sections, each based on the emerging themes of interview data analysis which are; a. The views that parents and teachers have about digital communication on parent-teacher engagement; b. The dynamics of digital communication in terms of properties or characteristics that stimulate parent-teacher engagement and relationships; and c. The challenges that teachers face while using WhatsApp to communicate with the parents.

a. The views that parents and teachers have about digital communication on parent-teacher engagement.

All respondents, teachers and parents, believe that digital communication is a critical tool for increasing parent and teacher engagement. It seems as if the use of digital communication, especially WhatsApp groups, has become so entrenched in the everyday routines of secondary schools that parents would consider it peculiar if a WhatsApp group was not established. In this specific school, the classroom teacher initiates a combined parents-teachers group for the classroom, which also includes the other subject teachers and the school administrator. Some even refer to this as the "official" method of communicating with instructors and parents.

Several parents and teachers express their perspectives on the use of digital communication for parent-teacher interaction in the following comments:

> If there is no WhatsApp Group between teacher and parents, it would be odd, isn't? How can we communicate about our children's performance? (Parent 2)

> I think overall it (digital communication) is better because social media is a technology that we can use and makes our work more efficient and easier, compared to the traditional method of writing letter and others, but it also depends on the way we use it. So, it can bring benefits and disadvantages, but I feel it will bring better, more benefits. (Parent 1)

> I think digital communication is important, especially now that we have this pandemic. It makes it easier for me to share information to all parents in just one group. (Teacher 1)

> WhatsApp is no doubt the fastest and the safest medium of communication. I have evidence when I communicate digitally. That is important for me. (Teacher 5)

b. The dynamics of digital communication in terms of properties or characteristics that stimulate parent-teacher engagement and relationships.
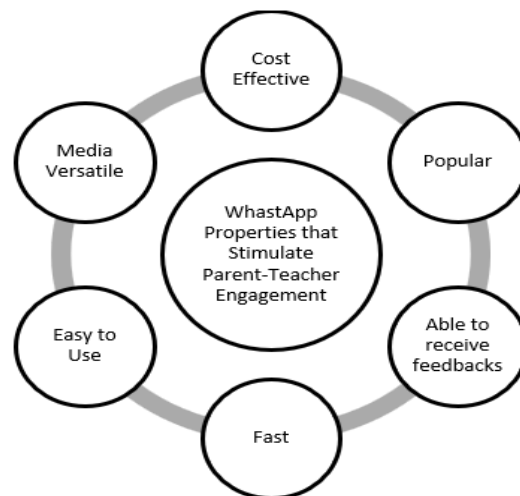

Figure 1: WhatsApp properties that stimulate parent-teacher engagement

Figure 1 highlights some of themes that emerged in the interview analysis on the properties and characteristics that made WhatsApp the application of choice for parent-teacher engagements. According to the interview reports, the grounds for utilising WhatsApp for parent-teacher engagement include the application's popularity, the range of media accessible via the application, the application's simplicity of use, its speed, cost-effectiveness, and ability to receive feedback.

Numerous schools throughout Malaysia, particularly in Putrajaya, have implemented digital communication between teachers and parents. This is accomplished through the formation of a classroom chat group comprised of parents and teachers. In Malaysia, digital channels such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp are widely used. However, according to the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC, 2020), WhatsApp is the most frequently used instant messaging application in Malaysia, accounting for 98.1 percent of all smartphone users in the country (MCMC, 2020). As of May 2020, approximately 98.7 percent of respondents in Malaysia indicated that WhatsApp was their preferred communication application (Müller, 2021). This factor contributes to the decision to use WhatsApp for teacher-parent engagement.

Teachers and administrators use WhatsApp because it is a widely utilised application in their daily lives and the majority of individuals in their society use it for communication purposes, as opposed to other applications:

> Frankly speaking, the most famous application is WhatsApp, that's why we prefer to connect with parents using WhatsApp, even school administrators also communicate with parents using WhatsApp compared to other application like Telegram because only certain people use it, whereas WhatsApp is available to everyone, it's easier. (Teacher 2)

Another appealing reason to use WhatsApp is its versatility. This application is extremely useful because it serves as an all in one tool for delivering and sharing information. This is because the application is capable of delivering and receiving text, image, audio, video,

and document. Teachers prefer WhatsApp because it allows for the linking of multiple types of documents and allows parents to download or navigate to the link provided. This is shown in the following example:

> To me WhatsApp is easy to use because we can send all types of file like videos, letters, any infographic documents, therefore it is easier to download or read and the information can be delivered in many forms, so I feel it (WhatsApp) is the best compared to other application. (Teacher 1)

> I like teachers to send me information through WhatsApp because it's easy. I straightaway can see the photo or anything that the teacher needs. I can also fill in the the forms directly in WhatsApp. I remember hating to fill the printed form and having my children losing it many times. (Parent 4)

WhatsApp classroom groups are also utilised for classroom information exchange purposes, both by teachers and by parents. WhatsApp enabled parents to respond to the information shared and parents and teachers can communicate immediately or at a time that was convenient for each individual. All teachers agree that the WhatsApp group enables them to solicit parental assistance in reminding students of homework and assignments, sharing answers and solutions, and consulting with their children. Additionally, teachers reported receiving improved feedback and cooperation from students following parental intervention. Among the remarks made by teachers on this subject are the following:

> Before this I used the approach of communicating with the students only to remind them about the things they need to bring for practical's (cooking), but what I can see from digital (digital communication) with parents is that parents would give very good feedback; even students who rarely brought materials to cook brought them the next day because we informed the parents in the group (WhatsApp). (Teacher 3)

> For the time being, I can see increase in parents participation maybe because the past form of communication was weak and the communication we use now (digital communication) increased the participation of parents and they became more aware because they are included in the communication. (Teacher 1)

Another advantage of utilising WhatsApp is that it is widely available and free to virtually all Malaysian smartphone users. Additionally, the school claimed that every home now has access to smartphones and the Internet, courtesy of the government's project, '*Jaringan Prihatin'*, which provides free smartphones and internet access to all low-income households. This scheme was approved in the 2021 Budget with an initial spending commitment of RM1.5 billion to help around 8.4 million *Bantuan Prihatin Rakyat* (BPR) beneficiaries by providing subsidies for telecommunications service subscriptions and the purchase of mobile devices (Ministry of Finance Malaysia (MOF), 2021). As a result, it is extremely cost effective and incurs no additional expenditures for teachers or parents. Additionally, the school saves money by not having to print copies of letters, invitations, or

posters to distribute to parents. Furthermore, WhatsApp is a highly quick and easy way to communicate. Parents have instant access to information and may respond to any situation within seconds of getting it. This is seen in the teacher and parent's remarks about the cost-effectiveness and easiness of utilising the WhatsApp application:

> We do not need to pay to use WhatsApp and we already have it installed. So yeah, I think WhatsApp is the best. (Parent 4)

> We can save a lot because we do not need to print a lot now. So, save cost for the school and teachers. We also use google forms sent through WhatsApp. So, it is free and easier. (Teacher 4)

We may infer from the results of this study that WhatsApp is the application of choice owing to its features that meet the requirements of users, exactly as stated in the UGT. UGT examines how consumers voluntarily choose media to fulfil certain needs such as education, leisure, social connection, amusement, or escape (Severin & Tankard, 2001; McQuail, 2010). The WhatsApp classroom chat group for parents and teachers in this study facilitates interaction and social gatherings via the digital platform. This relates to UGT, which states that users select media that satisfy their need for social interaction. Additionally, the variety of media available via WhatsApp satisfies the need to be informed or educated. This is because WhatsApp users can send and receive pictures, audio, videos, and other rich material, which simplifies and enriches information exchange.

Another significant finding of this research is that when parents intervene, children perform better in tasks and activities. This is consistent with the TOSI, which asserts that when parents, educators, and other members of the community collaborate to guide and support children's learning and development, students learn more (Epstein et al., 2018). These findings provide compelling evidence in favour of using digital communication platforms such as WhatsApp to facilitate parent-teacher engagement.

c. The challenges that teachers face while using WhatsApp to communicate with the parents.

Figure 2: Challenges faced by teachers while using WhatsApp for parent-teacher engagement

Figure 2 highlights the themes that emerged in the challenges faced by teachers while using WhatsApp for parent-teacher engagement. From the interview data, we can deduce a few difficulties encountered by teachers while communicating with parents via WhatsApp. The most frequently mentioned subject is the infringement on one's personal time. Teachers face additional stress when they are required to respond to messages from parents at all hours of the night or early morning. Additionally, interacting digitally may result in misunderstandings since text and messages lack body language and facial expressions. Additionally, digital communication loses the human element of personal touch and warmth.

The following are some instances of situations in which teachers are compelled to work longer hours, including their personal time, and are under the constant pressure to reply promptly to messages:

Teachers are being chased by parents 24 hours a day, be it morning, early morning, late night, so we had to work 24 hours. (Teacher 3)

Sometimes parents, they do not understand that teachers have other matters to attend to, but the parents will keep on pushing and urging for immediate response. (Teacher 5)

If there is a problem or an issue, when it is through digital, it becomes uncomfortable because parents will keep asking is it okay? No matter the time. (Teacher 3)

Easy and fast but the downside of it is, it can cause misunderstanding. Tones while talking through the phone, and texting can lead to misunderstandings. (Teacher 4)

I think teachers are really affected in this pandemic because we must do our duty to deliver lessons but at the same time, we are also parents, and we too have problems at home. If it is at school, I only need to manage my students but now during ODL at home, I need to be a teacher, a wife, and a mother at the same time. So, parents need to be more understanding of the teachers. (Teacher 3)

Another issue that teachers face is the diversions caused by parents' irrelevant messages. Certain parents use this group as opportunity for connection to other teachers and parents to advertise their businesses and discuss other topics. Consequently, important information and messages from teachers and school officials were disregarded or overlooked. Occasionally, this outpouring of comments causes unease, and some teachers and parents become uncomfortable. There are several instances of the problem teachers confront in the WhatsApp group because of parents' inappropriate messages:

The negative side that I experience myself in the WhatsApp group is that some parents they like to discuss menial things that are unrelated to their children or school. (Teacher 5)

Matters that I feel should not be discussed in this group are matters that are not related to school. It is a trend that parents use this group to promote businesses and items for sale. (Teacher 1)

In Malaysia, the transition of communication from traditional to digital is still in its beginnings and is constantly developing. Parents and teachers are still novice users and may not be fully aware of the consequences of their actions during their interactions using WhatsApp. Therefore, some new issues have evolved as a result of the widespread usage of digital communication in recent years as addressed in the findings of this study. This is similar to the research by Wasserman and Zwebner (2017) that while the use of digital communication platforms such as WhatsApp expands communication opportunities between parents and teachers, it also introduces risks of miscommunication, teacher loss of control, and conflict among group chat members. Additionally, given teachers' limited expertise with digital communication, their limited time during the school day, and the possibility of miscommunication, other issues may arise. Digital communication lacks precise boundaries, is time-consuming, and is pursued by teachers from school to home, blurring the border between instruction and recreation (Agger, 2011; Palts & Kalmus, 2015). Constant accessibility and reachability will also have a detrimental effect on teacher time management, job-related stress, and, ultimately, teacher well-being (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011).

The findings in this research are also supported by a research conducted by Palts and Kalmus (2015) that discovered that certain issues develop as a result of parents' and teachers' uneven digital competency and others as a result of prejudiced attitudes and anxieties. Therefore, it is critical to provide teachers and parents with evidence-based knowledge about the strengths and limitations of all accessible modes of communication, including digital ones, in order to alleviate communication anxieties, build mutual trust, and develop common communication customs.

The UGT may help explain some of the results in this research regarding the difficulties teachers experience while utilising WhatsApp. According to UGT, consumers choose their own media to meet their tension-free needs and for sense of amusement (Katz et al., 1973). One of the difficulties instructors confront is the distractions caused by irrelevant messages such as advertisements, jokes, and religious sermons. Some parents may have posted such irrelevant messages to the WhatsApp group in order to meet their personal needs, such as coping with stress or as a form of entertainment.

Additionally, teachers may encounter additional difficulties such as time misuse, misunderstandings, and increased stress as a result of a lack of guidance about the use of digital communication. Guidelines may include time limits for interaction, language use, the kind of messages that are permitted, and mutual respect for all group members. These guidelines should be implemented to ensure that teachers and parents are able to mitigate the detrimental impacts of WhatsApp on parent-teacher interactions. With these guidelines in place, we can monitor and enhance the school's and parents' usage of digital communication. It is anticipated that by establishing these standards, teachers would feel more at ease working with parents and both sides will be able to respect their own boundaries.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In many schools, digital communication is becoming increasingly prominent. Due to WhatsApp's ubiquity, media flexibility, ease of use, and low cost, this study demonstrated how schools use it as an 'all-in-one' digital communication tool for parent-teacher engagement. The study found that when teachers and parents use WhatsApp to discuss and share information about their children, teachers can involve parents in monitoring and supporting their children's learning at home, thus strengthening the school-family relationship. Inevitably, teachers' use of WhatsApp created major issues, including the requirement to react promptly to WhatsApp messages, exposure to irrelevant and distracting material and messages, and increased teacher stress. However, this study found that teachers are adamant about continuing to use WhatsApp and attempting to overcome the application's shortcomings or drawbacks for the better good of their pupils.

Nevertheless, this study poses several limitations. First, this study evaluates the influence of digital communication on parent-teacher engagement at a Government Secondary School in Putrajaya, Malaysia. As a result, this study is limited to a single school and may not reflect the situation in private schools and the results cannot be extrapolated to other institutions. Second, this study's respondents include parents, and teachers who engage in active digital communication to communicate with one another, but does not include the parents that choose to abstain from using digital communication with the school. Third, because this research employs a qualitative case study technique, the sample size is limited in comparison to quantitative study.

The researcher suggests that with further research and in-depth information, teachers would be able to collect more information that would aid in the development of more effective and helpful communication tools for teachers and parents in different settings and communities. Additional studies may be done in primary and tertiary classes to determine which digital tool is most successful in communicating with parents of children of different ages. The researcher also recommends that further studies be conducted on the challenges teachers experience while using WhatsApp, since these challenges may have an effect on teachers' motivation and morale. Teachers and parents should be required to follow certain rules to minimise negative impacts of WhatsApp usage on parent-teacher engagement.

Finally, given the rapid advancement of digital technology in the current age, the researcher of this study believes it is essential for teachers to get training on how to utilise these tools. Teachers should continue to seek professional development opportunities that keep them informed about the newest digital tools available for classroom teaching, learning and management. Digital technologies offer the potential to continue improving teacher-parent engagement by facilitating individual and group communication between school and home—as long as users understand how to maximise the tool's advantages while avoiding its disadvantages.

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