Tonal Voice Nuances and Effective Higher Education Leadership Communication: The Case of WhatsApp Messages

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ABSTRACT

Effective leadership is crucial in higher education as it promotes innovation, drives institutional growth, and shapes the future of academia. Effective leadership is achieved through effective communication of information of what needs to be done when, where and by whom. The tone of the communication determines how the information being communicated is received, perceived and acted upon by the recipients. However, it is often overlooked as an aspect of communication. Tonal voice nuances can be easily and clearly marked and discerned in spoken discourse through suprasegmental features. But in higher education leadership, most communications are done through emails, memos and most recently through WhatsApp messages, which are written. These, as forms of communication, also express tonal voice nuances. But how? Adopting a descriptive design and basing on Moran (2016) tone of voice dimensions framework, this paper describes tonal voice nuances in written communications originated by university leaders to members of staff in the form of WhatsApp messages. The findings show intricate patterns of tonal voice nuances and their correlation with leadership effectiveness, decision-making processes and organizational dynamics that contribute to an understanding of the complexities surrounding effective leadership communication and organizational performance in academia.

Keywords: Effective Communication; Tonal Voice Nuances; Higher Education Leadership; WhatsApp messages.

INTRODUCTION

Effective leadership is crucial in higher education as it promotes innovation, drives institutional growth, and shapes the future of academia (Anyanugo, Ololube & Okuru, 2024; Dhiman, 2023; Jerab & Mabrouk 2023; Kessi, Pananrang, Muchsidin, Rizal & Ramlah, 2025; Mubarak & Yusoff 2019; Putri, 2018; Walk, 2023). It is the communication skills of a leader that motivate and inspire teammates to work hard and achieve team targets and organizational goals (Addimando, 2024; Arora, 2023; Bukhari, Ali, Faruqui &Imran, 2025; Fatih, Fauzi & Norman, 2025; Musheke & Phiri 2001; Ololube, 2024; Zaripour, 2024). Given that leaders spent 70 to 90 percent of their time every day communicating with their teams and others at the work place (Zaripour, 2024), effective communication in leadership is critical. Good communication is, therefore, a fundamental leadership skill in achieving results through others. How leaders inform and inspire others through verbal, nonverbal, and written messages ranging from giving instructions and feedback to direct reports, sharing the vision with employees, mediating conflict with teams, providing updates to stakeholders constitute leadership communication that allows leaders to deepen connections, build trust, and drive creativity and innovation through and with others (Addimando, 2024; Dhiman, 2023; Walk, 2023; Zaripour, 2024). Leadership communication also helps during change or disruption (Addimando, 2024; Dhiman, 2023; Walk, 2023; Zaripour, 2024). This is because communication is one of the critical competencies essential for successful change leadership.

Effective communication is, therefore, an advantage for a leader to lead effectively. Nonetheless, effective communication can be affected by many factors one of them being tone of voice (Alshorman & Shanahan, 2022; Chullieva, 2025; Doe, 2020). Tone of voice plays a crucial role in effective communication. It can greatly impact how a message is perceived, understood and acted upon by the recipients of the communication (Alshorman & Shanahan, 2022; Chullieva, 2025; Doe, 2020). The tone of voice influences how the recipient feels about the

message, greatly impacting the effectiveness of the communication (Alshorman & Shanahan, 2022; Chullieva, 2025; Doe, 2020). Tone of voice reflects emotions and attitudes, allowing others to gauge how we feel about a particular topic or situation (Alshorman & Shanahan, 2022; Chullieva, 2025; Doe, 2020). How the listener perceives our emotions can influence their response and the overall dynamics of the interaction. The same words spoken with different tones can evoke entirely different reactions (Alshorman & Shanahan, 2022; Chullieva, 2025; Doe, 2020). Therefore, being mindful of our tone can help ensure that our intended message aligns with how we want it to be received.

Appropriate tone of voice is essential for conveying meaning and ensuring clarity in our communication. Additionally, tone of voice can influence how our message is interpreted. Being mindful of how our tone may be perceived can help us communicate more effectively and avoid misunderstandings (Kwanjai & Nettayanun, 2025; Smith, 2019). Our tone of voice has a profound effect on our interpersonal connections. Tone of voice also plays a crucial role in fostering empathy and understanding (Kwanjai & Nettayanun, 2025; Smith, 2019). This can help create a safe and supportive environment for open and honest communication. Being aware of our own tone of voice is, also, essential for developing self-awareness and self-regulation (Kwanjai & Nettayanun, 2025; Smith, 2019). This can help us build stronger emotional intelligence and improve our ability to navigate social interactions (Kwanjai & Nettayanun, 2025; Smith, 2019). Speaking in a calm and soothing tone, for example, can help us manage our own stress and anxiety. By practicing self-regulation of our tone, we can create a more positive and supportive internal dialogue (Kwanjai & Nettayanun, 2025; Smith, 2019). This paper, therefore, investigates the tonal voice nuances in written communications originated by university leaders to members of staff in the form of WhatsApp messages as the predominant form of written communication in higher education settings today.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In organizations, of which higher education institutions are, conversations are the foundation upon which the majority of communication happens, as people communicate every day through the formal and informal discussions they have with colleagues and leaders. The more effective these conversations are, the stronger the organizations become because better conversations drive better culture (Addimando, 2024; Arora, 2023; Cortez et al. 2024). In this case, effective leadership and effective communication are closely intertwined (Dhiman, 2023; Smith & Lee, 2021; Zaripour, 2024) because effective leadership is achieved through effective communication of information of what needs to be done when, where and by whom. An effective leader is someone who inspires positive, incremental change by empowering those around them to work toward common objectives (Jerab & Mabrouk, 2023; Putri, 2028) and a leader's most powerful tool for doing so is communication (Smith & Lee, 2021; Zaripour, 2024). Effective communication is vital to gain trust, align efforts in the pursuit of goals, and inspire positive change (Walk, 2023). To communicate effectively, a leader should be authentic, consistent, impartial, visible, feedback oriented, honest, forgiving, listening, concise and adaptable (Doe, 2020; Smith & Lee, 2021; Zaripour, 2024).

Effective leadership and effective communication are widely recognized as fundamental pillars of organizational success (Dhiman, 2023; Smith & Lee, 2021; Zaripour, 2024). Leadership, defined as the ability to influence others towards achieving common goals, relies heavily on communication to articulate vision, build relationships, and motivate teams (Northouse, 2021). Various communication theories, such as relational leadership and leader-member exchange (LMX) theory (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014), underscore the importance of communication quality in leader-follower relationships. These theories emphasize how effective communication fosters trust, facilitates shared understanding, and enhances organizational commitment. Effective leaders adeptly switch between communication styles (e.g., authoritative, democratic, coaching) based on situational demands, thereby enhancing team performance and satisfaction (Goleman, 2000). Creating a culture of open communication and transparency is essential for aligning individual efforts with organizational objectives (Denning, 2004). Leaders who prioritize communication as a strategic asset nurture an environment where innovation thrives and employee engagement flourishes. Ethical leadership, characterized by integrity, honesty, and ethical decision-making, relies on effective communication to build trust and maintain organizational integrity (Brown & Treviño, 2006).

The advent of digital communication tools has transformed leadership communication practices, enabling remote collaboration, rapid information dissemination, and global reach (Duarte & Snyder, 2006). However, balancing technological efficiency with interpersonal communication remains crucial to sustaining effective leadership and effective communication (Koponen, Laajalahti, Turunen, Julkunen & Spitzberg, 2025; Kim & Park, 2023; Lee & Meng, 2021; Puyda & Dvorianyn, 2024; Yashan, 2024). In effect, effective leadership and effective communication are symbiotic elements that underpin organizational effectiveness and sustainability (Dhiman, 2023; Zaripour, 2024). Leaders who master communication strategies tailored to their leadership style and organizational context, amidst technological advancement, can inspire, empower, and mobilize teams towards achieving shared goals (Doe, 2020; Dhiman, 2023; Zaripour, 2024).

In modern times, technological communication, including social media and learning management systems, is increasingly used in higher education leadership, enhancing accessibility and efficiency (Koponen, Laajalahti, Turunen, Julkunen & Spitzberg, 2025; Kim & Park, 2023; Lee & Meng, 2021; Puyda & Dvorianyn, 2024; Yashan, 2024). Furthermore, interpersonal communication, including active listening and empathy, is vital in higher education leadership, building strong relationships and resolving conflicts. Organizational communication, including official announcements and reports, is essential in higher education leadership, disseminating information and promoting transparency (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Therefore, higher education leaders employ various forms of communication to effectively lead and manage academic institutions. Understanding these forms is crucial for promoting effective communication, leadership success, and institutional excellence.

There are many forms of communication in higher education leadership contexts including face-to-face and written communication. Verbal communication, including phone calls and video conferencing, is witnessed in higher education leadership, enabling real-time feedback and discussion (Rai, Gupta & Parewa, 2024; Yashan, 2024). Again, nonverbal communication, including body language and facial expressions abound in higher education leadership, playing a significant role in conveying emotions and attitudes (Smith & Lee, 2021; Zaripour, 2024). Even though face-to-face communication is a fundamental form of communication in higher education leadership, fostering personal connections and trust (Bryman, 2007), currently, most communications, in higher education leadership, are done through emails, memos and most recently through WhatsApp platforms and all require clarity and concision (Gill, 2011).

Even though effective communication is crucial in higher education leadership, where leaders are required to navigate complex academic and administrative tasks, amidst technological advancement, one of the factors that affect effective communication in such environments is the tone of voice (Chullieva, 2025; Doe, 2020). Tone of voice is the way we speak. It is not what we say, but how we say it. Our tone of voice expresses how we feel about what we are trying to say. How we feel and how we talk has a strong influence on how people perceive us. Whether in written or verbal communication, the words we choose and the way we say them can make a world of difference in what we are attempting to communicate (Rai, Gupta & Parewa, 2024).

Despite the fact that tone of voice is only a tiny part of communication, it is vital to successful communication. The tone of the communication determines how the information being communicated is received, perceived and acted upon by the recipients (Doe, 2020; Smith, 2019). Tone of voice has a significant impact on workplace productivity (Doe, 2020; Smith, 2019). A manager or coworker who sounds enthusiastic or excited when offering advice displays a positive tone. This influences how employees perceive their management, improving overall engagement (Chullieva, 2025; Doe, 2020; Smith, 2019). Effective leadership development programs, therefore, strive to incorporate communication skills, including tone of voice, in training to enhance leaders' ability to convey vision, provide constructive feedback, and foster a supportive organizational climate (Mhatre, Riggio & Riggio, 2012). Therefore, as a leader, improving your tone of voice contributes to a more positive work atmosphere, enhances understanding and admiration for your team and leads to greater communication and teamwork.

As argued by Doe (2020), Smith (2019) and Zaripour (2024), tone of voice is crucial in communication due to the following reasons. First, it enables the conveying of emotion. Tone adds emotional context, letting listeners understand feelings behind the words. The tone of voice helps convey the emotional context of a message. It lets

others know whether a speaker is happy, sad, excited, or angry, which can significantly alter the meaning of the words a speaker utters. The tone of voice significantly influences the emotion behind the words. Related to this are emotional Cues. The importance of tone of voice becomes even more evident when the emotional cues it provides are considered. Often, a speaker's emotions are subtly woven into the delivery of his/her words. A gentle and soothing tone can convey empathy and comfort, while a sharp or forceful tone may indicate frustration or urgency. Recognizing these emotional cues enables the listeners to better understand the nuances of the conversation and respond appropriately, thereby fostering effective and empathetic communication.

Second, tone of voice aids in clarifying intentions. A well-modulated tone prevents misunderstandings and clarifies the true intention of a speaker's message. If a speaker's tone of voice is not right, there is a high chance for the listener to misinterpret the speaker's message. To avoid confusion and misunderstandings, speakers should use the right tone to add clarity to their message. The key is to emphasize what truly matters.

Third, tone of voice influences relationships. The right tone fosters trust and rapport, while a poor tone can create tension or conflict. The tone of voice is the secret sauce of human connections. A pleasant and respectful tone helps a speaker build relationships with others. It adds flavour to a speaker's words, making his/her communication more engaging. If a speaker's tone is bland, listeners will not connect well with the speaker. A confident tone can make a speaker's message more compelling and listeners will take it seriously. The tone of a speaker's voice also contributes to his/her credibility more than the words they use. Using a confident and authoritative tone makes the audience listen to you as a speaker and trust what you are passing across as a speaker.

Fourth, tone of voice helps improve communication effectiveness. A positive and appropriate tone makes conversations smoother and more productive. A speaker's tone of voice is a powerful instrument in his/her communication repertoire. It can either enhance or hinder the effectiveness of a speaker's message. Delivering information with a positive and positive tone, captivate the listener, evoke interest, and foster a sense of warmth and rapport. On the contrary, a negative or harsh tone has the potential to alienate the listener, evoke stress, and sow discord. Therefore, a speaker's tone significantly influences how his/her communication is received and interpreted.

Fifth, tone of voice may help in resolving conflicts. The tone of voice a speaker uses during a conflict can make or break the conflict. A calm and empathetic tone can put an end to disputes, while an authoritative tone may escalate the issue instead of bringing it to an end. Note that the tone of voice can differ based on culture. Adapting a tone that aligns with contextual cultural norms can avoid misunderstanding and promote cross-cultural communication.

Tone of voice is, therefore, crucial in communication because: it conveys emotions, thoughts, and intentions; it helps to establish trust and understanding; ensures effective delivery of information and enhances the overall impact of communication; influences the audience's emotions and engagement, shaping their perception of a speaker's message. However, it is worth noting that tone of voice can also have negative effects including miscommunication, offending others, creating tension, and damaging relationships.

Given that tone of voice is the feeling that connects people to language, it is important to note the tone difference between writing and speaking. People make sense of tone of voice in speech through pitch, intonation, volume, cadence, pace, emphasis, facial expressions, mannerisms, and gestures. With writing, people work this out through word choice, punctuation, sentence structure, and the overall context. This, however, is a bit difficult in written communication, because those cues are not as obvious as they are in spoken messages. Therefore, senders need to be deliberate in their written messages to ensure that they are choosing the right words and placing the proper emphasis on specific phrases in order to communication effectively. Written communication, therefore, employs various tones to convey messages effectively. Each type of tone serves a unique purpose and appeals to different audience needs. For instance, formal tones are characterized by a structured and professional approach. They often include complex vocabulary, adhere strictly to grammar rules, and maintain a respectful and courteous style aimed at conveying seriousness and authority.

Therefore, understanding the different types of tone of voice, in communications, is essential for effective communication. Broadly speaking, communication tone is primarily of three types (Sen, 2025): **formal tone,** which conveys professionalism and is commonly used in business and academic meetings; **informal tone,** which is relaxed and conversational and is suitable for casual communication; **authoritative tone,** which establishes the speaker as a credible and knowledgeable figure and is commonly used in leadership roles and public speaking. Note that selecting the right tone for various contexts is essential for successful and effective communication.

The tones of voice outlined above encompass a number of tonal voice nuances including but not limited to the following (Sen, 2025): 1. Informative tone, a tone that is: used when the speaker wishes to communicate a knowledge of something that comes from research or expertise; not based on personal opinion; impartial and factual, with no expression of emotion. 2. Humorous tone, a tone that: is amusing; is used to boost retention and help the audience remember the speaker; is used to uplift the atmosphere and enhance interactions; is used in casual situations with friends or during workplace team-building events; ought to be employed carefully to prevent misinterpretations or upsetting anyone. 3. Respectful tone, a tone that: is warm, polite and inoffensive to the majority of audiences; is unobtrusive and attempts to appeal to the broadest possible audience; when used well expresses sincerity and authenticity, leaving, people trusting the speaker and feeling comfortable; should be used appropriately to avoid leaving the audience with the impression that the speaker is striving too hard to appeal to the audience. 4. Formal tone, a tone that: is courteous; uses longer words with no substitutions or other shorter phrases; does not include colloquial jargon, is grammatically correct and focuses on facts rather than opinions; is used in academic or professional settings. 5. Informal tone, is a tone that: is the flip-side of formal tone; is conversational; is casual; includes colloquial or slang expressions and shorter words; expresses more feelings and personal thoughts. 6. Friendly tone, a tone that: is warm; is defined by friendliness, openness, and approachableness, is frequently utilized in informal chats between friends or coworkers to foster a laid-back environment; fosters connection and enhance experiences. 7. Professional tone, a tone that: is serious and respectful; is appropriate for business correspondence, meetings, or presentations; communicates skill and power while preserving courtesy; builds credibility and seriousness regarding a topic. 8. Empathetic tone, a tone that: conveys awareness and kindness regarding others' emotions or circumstances; used in delicate discussions addressing personal struggles or offering assistance in tough situations; offers support and solace; shows understanding, compassion, and consideration for others' emotions and experiences; involves active listening, acknowledging feelings, and responding in a supportive manner; fosters trust and strengthens relationships in challenging situations. 9. Confident tone, a tone that: is assertive; expresses assurance without hostility; establishes limits and articulates needs clearly; conveys stances while valuing the perspectives of others. 10. Assertive tone, a tone that: is confident, clear, and direct; shows self-assurance while respecting the opinions and boundaries of others; allows the expression of thoughts and ideas effectively while maintaining a respectful and understanding approach. 11. Passive tone, a tone that: often lacks assertiveness and confidence; tends to be meek and submissive, sometimes leading to misinterpretation or assumptions of indecisiveness; avoids expressing needs and opinions, potentially hindering effective communication and leaving room for misunderstandings. 12. Aggressive tone, a tone that: is forceful and confrontational; often involves dominating or controlling the conversation, disregarding the opinions and feelings of others: can create a hostile environment and hinder open and constructive communication.

Tone of voice can be best demonstrated through examples. Below is an illustration of a common request for files to a coworker rewritten 15 times, each with a different tone of voice applied (Cable, 2024).

Table 1: Tone of Voice Nuances Example

	Tone of Voice	Message	Characteristic
1	Authoritative	I need those files in my inbox before the end of the day.	Direct, confident, and deliberate with word choice. The authoritative tone is easy to understand, though it is sometimes criticized for being too abrupt.
2	Edgy	Files today? Thanks.	Cool and experimental
3	Casual	Hey, can you shoot me those files by EOD?	This tone of voice is laid-back, informal, personable, and conversational, like how you would talk to a friend rather than a boss.
4	Confident	Send me the files by the end of the day. Then, we can begin the first step in the project process.	The confident tone is similar to the authoritative tone, but it isn't necessarily coming from a place of higher rank. It is just sure of itself.
5	Straightforward	Send me the files by the end of the day.	This tone of voice does not mince words. It gets straight to the point, using the active rather than passive voice. There is no room for guessing when using a straightforward tone, but it can feel a little rough around the edges.
6	Inspirational	Please send me the files before the end of the day, so we can continue to work toward progress!	Encouraging, reassuring, and passionate, this tone urges its audience to act through uplifting word choice instead of demands.
7	Friendly	Howdy! I'd love it if you could send me those files by the end of the day.	This tone is clear, relatable, and positive without being overly bubbly, which can steer into condescending territory if not used carefully.
8	Formal	Good morning. Please send me the files that we discussed before the end of the day.	The formal tone is clear and thorough yet respectful. It implements proper writing and grammar, while steering clear of slang and exclamation points.
9	Quirky	O files, files, wherefore art thou files? Looking forward to reviewing them tomorrow.	Eccentric and out of the box, the quirky style is fun and outrageous. It might even include an emoji or two.
10	Optimistic	Thanks for all the hard work on this project. I'm eagerly awaiting the files today.	Similar to the inspirational tone, the optimistic style is hopeful and positive. It's all about looking forward to the future.
11	Humorous	You're the Mulder to my Scully, so please send those (X) files before EOD. Thanks for doing an awesome job!	Humour in writing can be a challenge since humour is subjective, but this tone of voice is usually playful and light-hearted.

12	Trendy	Just checking in about the files—low-key, if you could send them by EOD, that'd be great.	Modern and fresh, this style makes use of language that's popular at the moment. It's closely associated with a friendly or quirky tone in many cases.
13	Informative	Please send the files before the end of the day. We need them to make important headway on this case	An informative tone is instructive. It imparts wisdom and gets to the point.
14	Questioning	Not sure if we confirmed the deadline, but are you good to send those files by EOD?	Often unsure of itself, you can almost hear the inflection at the end of a sentence with this tone of voice. That is the case even if you are writing a statement, not a question. In this case, it is the opposite of a confident tone.
15	Joyful	Hope you are having a wonderful morning! When you get the chance, can you please send me the files before the end of the day? I will be here if you have any questions.	Exuberant and focused on positive emotions, this tone elicits warm, fuzzy feelings. Enthusiasm is encouraged!

Tone of Voice Dimensions Framework

The study was based on Moran (2016) tone of voice dimensions framework. This framework highlights four tone of voice dimensions represented on a binary scale, thus: Formal vs Casual; Serious vs Funny; Respectful vs Irreverent and Matter-of-fact vs Enthusiastic. In this way a specific tone of voice can fall anywhere on each of the four dimensions and one message can have many possible tones as illustrated in the figure 1.
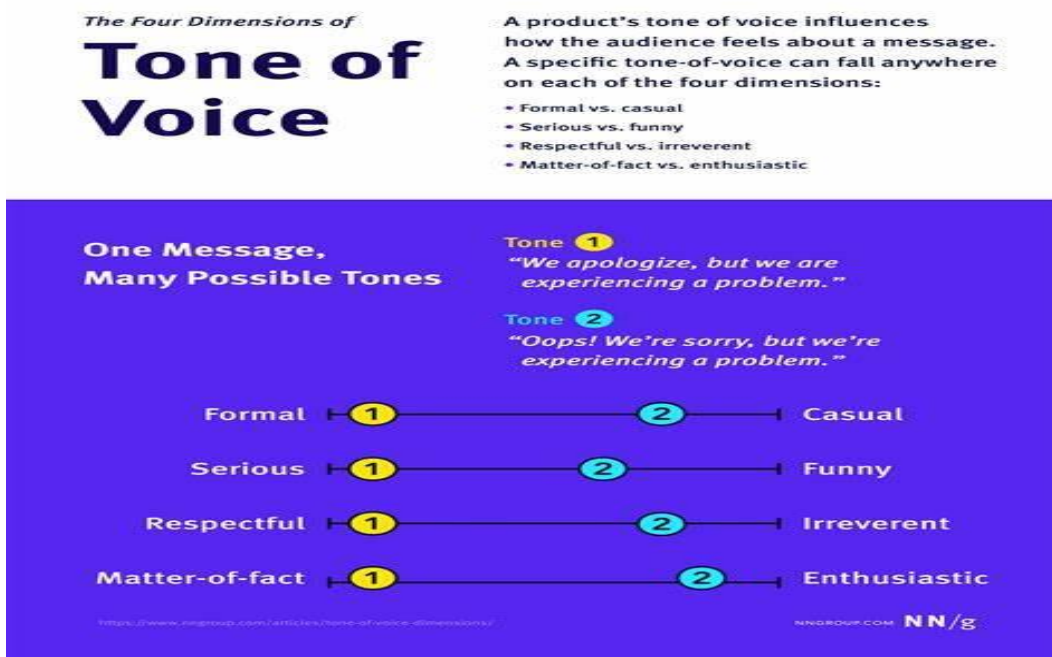

Figure 1: Moran 2016 Tone of Voice Dimensions

METHODOLOGY

The study used a descriptive design (Creswell & Creswell 2017; Denzin & Lincoln 2003) to explain tonal voice nuances in communications originated by leaders to members of staff in the form of WhatsApp messages. The different tonal voice nuances were identified and described. They were then explained in the tenets of tone of voice dimensions framework by Moran (2016). WhatsApp messages were chosen as the formats of analysis in this study because they are the most used forms of written communications at the university intended to reach many people in different places at the same time for quick communication. The study dealt with communications from different cadres of leaders both administrative and academic including: Heads of Departments, Deans of Schools, Directors, Registrars, Deputy Vice chancellors and the Vice chancellor. A total of 15 WhatsApp messages were analysed. The messages were purposefully and randomly sampled from departmental, School/faculty, Deans, Senate and Staff WhatsApp platforms as originated by officers from the cadres identified above during the period January 2025 to May 2025. Only messages that did not overtly mention names of addressers, addressees, departments, schools/faculties, and the university were selected. For anonymity messages that had information leading to the identification of the addresser, addressee, the department, the school/faculty, and the university were omitted as well as messages having any information that would infringe on the rights of the participants in the communication. The linguistic features highlighting the tonal voice nuances used in the selected communications were identified manually from each communication according to the different types of tone of voice they encode. The resultant tonal voice nuances were then described in the tenets of Moran (2016) tone of voice dimensions framework through rigorous contextual analysis.

The Data

The fifteen WhatsApp messages, that constituted the data for the study, collected from different official WhatsApp platforms are as indicated below:

a) Dear colleagues, throughout the exam period, no member of the school academic staff is on leave. All those currently on leave, are immediately recalled with immediate effect.

b) Communication from above! All members of this department to turn up for invigilation of any department related courses.

c) Members of the school's CBC committee are reminded of a meeting on Tuesday at 10am. The venue will be communicated later.

d) Check out this call for action, by anyone interested. Thank you.

e) Good morning colleagues, we have postgraduate presentation at the assembly hall. It is looking very bad. Let us attend this important session.

f) We have a serious leadership problem in this university.

g) Until this moment, the good Dean hasn't uttered a word. How come?

h) Deans and CoDs please take note of the contents of this memo and act accordingly.

i) Colleagues, this is to inform you of the school online proposal presentations scheduled for Thursday 2nd November, 2023 from 9am. You are all required to attend and participate in the exercise.

j) Good morning, colleagues. As you are aware, the VC will be visiting our school today at 3pm. Let us all meet at the school offices at 3pm.

k) All CoDs: Kindly check your emails, Finance office is in need of your departmental budget for financial year 2024/2025. It is urgent.

l) Dear colleagues, am sharing with you a document for your feedback. Many eyes are better. Am looking forward to learning from your perspectives. Thank you.

m) Is it possible that we discuss these bills or at least one and submit memorandum as a university?

n) Honestly speaking, is this something so hard to fix for the University? Can't we learn from past mistakes? Should this continue happening?

o) Good jambo colleagues. I trust we're all well. Sadly, I am not. I am feeling by alone (almost) in the assembly hall where your graduate students are supposed to present their research. There are two of them here already so we shall get started to be sure the week doesn't spill over into next week. I request that you come. Thank you.

Data Analysis

The fifteen messages collected were grouped according to whether they conveyed authority or approachability. That is whether the tone conveyed formal command or an inviting, collaborative stance. They were then described, on the one hand, according to whether they were clear or ambiguous, that is the extent to which the message is precise or open to interpretation. And, on other hand, according to whether the message was encouraging or neutral, that is how supportive or detached the message appears in motivating action. The messages were then assessed according to the four tones of voice dimensions expressed in the tenets of Moran's 2016 framework.

Eight messages were seen to be expressing authority, six to be expressing approachability and one to be encompassing both authority and approachability.

Messages Conveying Authority

The following eight messages were seen to be expressing authority. They conveyed formal commands as opposed to an inviting collaborative stance. They were direct, confident and deliberate.

"**Dear colleagues**, throughout the exam period, **no member** of the school academic staff **is on leave**. All those **currently on leave**, are **immediately recalled with immediate effect.**"

Considering the words in bold from this message, the message is clear in that it is precise and open to one interpretation of the main message being communicated. It is straightforward, because it does not mince words, it is straight to the point, uses active voice and gives no room for guessing. However, it is not encouraging in the sense that it is not supportive in motivating desired action due to its aggressive nature. It sounds forceful, commanding, confrontational, dominating, controlling and disregarding of the feelings and opinions of the recipients. Though the message gives information hence informative, it is not impartial. It expresses commandeering and consequential emotions. Though serious, the message is not respectful and courteous through the commanding nature seen in the words 'no member, and 'are immediately recalled with immediate effect' hence unprofessional. It is thus hostile and rough. In this case the recipients may feel threatened and hence develop defensiveness hindering effective communication and action in the direction desired by the sender/speaker. According to Morans' tone of voice dimensions, the message is formal, serious, irreverent and matter of fact.

"**Communication from above! All members** of this department **to turn up** for invigilation of any department related courses."

The bolded words in this message make it clear, precise and open to one interpretation. The message does not mince words, hence straightforward and to the point and gives no room for guessing. The use of an exclamation mark at the end of the first statement shows how commanding the message is. The use of the words 'communication from above' in the first statement shows that the sender does not want to be seen as the one originating the command. But at the same time, the sender wants to instil fear in the receiver that the message has come from a higher authority and must be obeyed. If not, there will be consequences. The receiver seems to have no choice but to comply. The problem with the choice of these words in the message is that they foster resistance in the sense that the receiver sees the sender as not assertive and authoritative enough and wants to escape taking responsibility of the weight of the message by riding on the fact that the communication is from a higher office than his/hers. The receiver may resist acting in the direction the message is intended to see how the sender of the message will implore the higher office to level punishment on the receiver. In this way, the message is not encouraging in the sense that it is not supportive in motivating action due to its aggressive nature. It sounds forceful, confrontational, dominating, controlling and disregarding of the feelings and opinions of the recipients. Though the message gives information hence informative, it is not impartial. It expresses emotions of 'you have to comply because it is a communication from above, but do not hold me accountable since I am not the one saying this; I am just passing down information'. The message is serious in nature seen from the use of the to-infinitive form of the verb in 'to turn up', but this makes it not respectful and courteous hence unprofessional

making it hostile and rough- another aspect that hinders effective communication. According to Morans' tone of voice dimensions, the message is formal, serious, irreverent and matter of fact.

"**Members** of the school's CBC committee **are reminded** of a meeting on Tuesday at 10am. The venue **will be communicated later."**

This message is authoritative. It is direct, confident and deliberate seen from the words used. The sender seems to have authority over the members of the committee, and the members of the committee know themselves as a presupposition. The message, therefore comes out as a directive to the members of the committee by probably the chair of the committee who is the sender of the message. Though the message is easy to understand, it comes out as abrupt seen from how it starts "members of …' The message is clear, polite, respectful and encouraging seen in the words '…are reminded…' which sounds appealing and imploring rather than commanding and demanding. Nonetheless, the use of the passive voice makes the message to lack assertiveness and confidence, making it meek and submissive. This is also seen in the use of the future tense 'will be communicated later' which shows that the sender is not certain about and in possession of all the information that needs to be communicate at the point in time the message is sent. In this way, the receiver of the message may not take it seriously and gear towards acting in the direction the message is directing, as they will be waiting for more information, which has not been communicated but will be communicated, to compel them to act. According to Morans' tone of voice dimensions, the message is formal, serious, respectful and matter of fact.

"**Check out this call for action,** by anyone interested. **Thank you**."

This message employs an inspirational tone. The first sentence is an imperative and in the active voice. Though an exclamation mark is not overtly used at the end of the sentence, the fact that it lacks the subject that should express who is addressed directly, shows that it is an imperative. The message would have come out as a command but this is not the case due to the phrase that follows, which brings in some elements of the passive voice. This is what makes the message sound inspirational, joyful and enthusiastic. The phrase 'by anyone interested', that brings in the essence of the passive voice, is used here tactfully and intentionally to play down the would-be commanding nature of the imperative clause preceding it. The message is not directed as a command to anyone in particular but to whoever is interested, expressed in the passive as opposed to the active voice. Therefore, the passive voice as used here does not make the message to lack assertiveness and confidence. Neither does it make the message meek and submissive. The use of the phrase 'thank you' at the end of the message shows how encouraging, reassuring, and, respectful the message is. This persuades the receiver and invites them to act in the direction of the message at their own volition. According to Morans' tone of voice dimensions, the message is formal, serious, respectful and matter of fact.

"**Good morning colleagues**, **we** have postgraduate presentation at the assembly hall. It is **looking very bad**. **Let us attend** this important session."

This message takes on a professional, informative and respectful tone. The sender begins the message by formally greeting the receiver and acknowledging that they are colleagues and not that the sender is superior to the receiver. In the word 'we' the sender is inclusive and not isolative in the situation with the receiver. These show professionalism and respect for the receiver. In as much as the sender informs the receiver of how the situation is like in the words 'looking very bad' the sender also expresses his/her emotions of the situation in the words 'very bad'. The message is also assertive and authoritative. When the sender says that 'let us attend', he/she is confident, clear, and direct on how he/she is expecting the receiver to act, hence expressing assertiveness and authority. But in doing so, the sender does not command the receiver to act instead he/she implores them to in the words 'let us' when he/she includes him/herself. This shows self-assurance while respecting the opinions and boundaries of others, enabling the sender to express his/her thoughts and ideas effectively while maintaining a respectful and understanding approach. The receiver will indeed be persuaded to act in line with the direction of the message. According to Morans' tone of voice dimensions, the message is formal, serious, respectful and matter of fact.

"We have a **serious** leadership problem **in this** university."

The tone of voice in this message is informative, assertive, direct, confident and respects opinions and boundaries of others. The message is straightforward, does not mince words, is straight to the point, uses active voice and leaves no room for guessing. The sender is serious about the gravity of what is said in the message. There is the use of the word 'serious', which at the same time expresses the sender's emotions about the subject matter communicated in the message. In using the pronoun 'we' the sender does not remove himself/herself from the situation, but accommodates others instead, showing respect. The use of active voice demonstrates the assertiveness, directness and confident nature of the message and at the same time shows some form of authority that the sender of the message possesses. The inclusiveness nature of the message expressed in the use of 'we' makes the message encouraging with regard to the direction of the communication. According to Morans' tone of voice dimensions, the message is formal, serious, respectful and matter of fact.

"Until this moment, **the good Dean hasn't** uttered a word. **How come**?"

The tone of voice expressed in this message is informative, assertive, humorous and questioning. The sender is giving information with regard to the Dean having not said anything so far, something that the sender and the receiver were expecting that he/she should have done. The message is clear, straight to the point and confidently communicated by the sender using the active voice, showing an assertive tone. When the sender uses the word 'good' in reference to the Dean who has not said anything despite the fact that he/she was expected to have said something, sounds humorous and sarcastic in the sense that it seems to contradict what the sender and the receiver believe should be the case, that is the Dean being good. And this is further emphasised by the questioning tone that is presented in the construction that follow: 'How come?' This, as used in this context, does not imply that the sender is unsure of something. As a rhetorical question, it expresses the sender's emotions and sarcasm with regard to the behaviour of the Dean, that is contrary to expectations. The message is therefore clear and encouraging, enabling the receiver act in line with the directive of the message. According to Morans' tone of voice dimensions, the message is formal, serious, respectful and sort of funny and enthusiastic as opposed to matter of fact.

"Deans and CoDs please take note of the contents of this memo and **act accordingly."**

This message has an authoritative, informative, respectful tone. By communicating the intended information directly, confidently and deliberately in a warm, polite, inoffensive way, seen in the clear direction of the message to the 'Deans and CoDs' but at the same time preferring to use the word 'please' in the address, shows that the sender has an authority over the Deans and CoDs but respects them. That is why he/she uses the warm and friendly word 'please'. The sender goes further to demonstrate his/her authority by demanding that the Deans and CoDs should 'take note and act accordingly'. This is not a request, but a directive which needs to be followed. This message is clear and encouraging to the receiver. Coming from an authority, the receiver of the message is persuaded to act in line with the communication given the respectful but demanding tone employed. According to Morans' tone of voice dimensions, the message is formal, serious, respectful and matter of fact.

Messages Conveying Approachability

The following six messages were seen to be expressing approachability. They conveyed an inviting; collaborative stance as opposed to formal commands.

"Colleagues, this is to **inform** you of the school online proposal presentations scheduled for Thursday 2ⁿᵈ November, 2023 from 9am. **You are all required to attend and participate in the exercise."**

The message is informative seen in the use of the word 'inform'. It is giving information. It is also formal, seen in the structure of the sentences, the language and the active voice used in the message. It is respectful, inviting, and warm. This is shown by the sender beginning the message by the word "colleagues". This also shows the approachability nature of the message, where the sender sees and wants the receiver to see themselves at the same status of colleague with the sender. In this way, neither the sender nor the receiver is seen as either superior or inferior to the other. However, the message also has an assertive tone, seen in the last sentence, in the message,

which requires the receiver to attend the meeting. This does not command but the word 'required' is deliberately used to show the directness and clarity in the sender's tone for the receiver to act as directed. The approachability nature of the message compels and persuades the receiver to act accordingly as the communication requires. According to Morans' tone of voice dimensions, the message is formal, serious, respectful and matter of fact.

"**Good morning, colleagues**. **As you are aware**, the VC will be visiting our school today at 3pm. **Let us all meet** at the school offices at 3pm."

This message is inviting and conveys approachability. The sender begins by greeting the receiver and referring to them as colleagues, indicating that they are at par in terms of status and that their take in the encounter is welcomed. The message also gives information hence informative but in an accommodating way. The sender begins by saying 'as you are aware' this implies that the message is not all over new and requiring the receiver to act on a short notice, but that the information has been with them and hence this comes as a reminder and not new information. Without stating overtly that 'this is to remind you' implying that the receiver may have forgotten about it, the sender sends a reminder in a warm polite way in the words 'as you are aware'. The message is also impartial and factual. We do not see any expression of personal and attitudinal emotions in the words used. Instead, the message is instructive to the point, seen in the words 'let us all meet' which show wisdom, professionalism, seriousness but respectful skills and power, while at the same time presenting courtesy. The message thus conveys an inviting collaborative stance as opposed to a formal command. According to Morans' tone of voice dimensions, the message is formal, serious, respectful and matter of fact.

"All CoDs: **Kindly** check your emails, Finance office **is in need** of your departmental budget for financial year 2024/2025. **It is urgent**."

This message is informative. It is giving the Chairs of Departments (CoDs) information on what is needed from them by the finance department which they need to provide urgently. The use of the full colon after 'CoDs:' shows that there are many of them. The sender intended to list them but due to the limited space, this was not possible, but implicitly the communication is that it is meant for each one of them as they know. In the use of the word 'kindly', the sender is respectful to the receiver. This shows that the sender is kindly requesting the receiver to act. This persuades the receiver to act in the direction of the sender's message. It also shows that this is inviting collaboration as opposed to commanding and demanding action from the receiver. The use of the words 'is in need' shows that what the receiver is being requested to provide is something that the finance department cannot do without at the point in time. Without it, the finance department cannot proceed on effectively with its mandate. And the addition of the words 'it is urgent' points to the urgency of the receiver's action in the direction of the sender's message. Despite the urgency, the sender does not command the receiver to act. Instead, the sender kindly requests the receiver to act. The message is thus instructive to the point, shows wisdom and professionalism, but at the same time shows serious respectful skills and power while presenting courtesy. According to Morans' tone of voice dimensions, the message is formal, serious, respectful and matter of fact.

"**Dear colleagues**, **am sharing with you** a document for **your feedback**. **Many eyes are better**. Am **looking forward to learning from your perspectives**. **Thank you**."

This message is inviting and shows a collaborative stance. In the use of the words 'dear colleagues' the sender is acknowledging the fact that the receiver is a colleague and not a superior or an inferior entity in the communicative encounter. The message is clearly instructive seen in the words 'I am sharing…for your feedback'. In these words, the sender states clearly that he/she is sharing and not imposing or demanding or commanding. The sender also states clearly that he/she is requesting for the feedback of the receiver on the document. He/she is not demanding for it. This persuades the receiver to collaborate with the sender on the message expressed in the communicative event. The message is optimistic, positive, hopeful, positive and friendly persuading the receiver to act in the direction the message intends. This is seen in the words 'many eyes are better'. This shows that the sender already acknowledges the fact that the document is not free of flaws being that it is from one perspective, the sender's perspective, and therefore invites the receiver to provide his/her perspective on the document, which the sender will accept because he/she is requesting for it form the receiver

voluntarily. In the words looking forward to learning from you' the sender is hopeful, positive and optimistic. And this brings out the friendliness of the message from the sender to the receiver. All these motivate the receiver to act in the direction of the message. According to Morans' tone of voice dimensions, the message is formal, serious, respectful and matter of fact.

"Is it possible that **we discuss** these bills or at least one and submit memorandum **as a school or university?"**

This message adopts a questioning tone of voice seen in the subject auxiliary inversion in 'is it possible…'. Besides the use of the question mark at the end of the sentence also shows the questioning nature of the message. One can almost hear the inflection/intonation at the end of the sentence. Questioning tone often expresses the sense of being unsure and this is also seen in the message by the use of the word 'possible' asking for a possibility, indicating not being sure about it. But it can also be seen to expresses other tonal voice nuances such as informative (there are bills that may need to be discussed and submitted for consideration), professional (seen from the choice of words and structure and grammaticality of the sentence, no slang used), respectful, friendly (expresses thoughts with respect and in s friendly way seen in the words 'is it possible' these do not demand), , confident and optimistic (seems to be sure of what he/she is talking about and the belief that what he/she is talking about is achievable. These tonal voice nuances make the message take an approachability, inviting, collaborative stance and encourages the receiver to consider what the communication is passing across. According to Morans' tone of voice dimensions, the message is formal, serious, respectful and matter of fact.

Honestly speaking, is this something so hard to fix for the University? Can't we learn from past mistakes? Should this continue happening?

This message takes on a questioning tone, as well. But differs from the preceding in that it uses rhetorical questions. We see three rhetorical questions posed in the message. We can clearly see the subject auxiliary inversion in the sentences: '...is this something…, …cant' we…, …should this…'. And as one reads it, they can hear the inflection/intonation at the end of each sentence. The use of rhetorical questions here, as opposed to questions that require direct answers, makes the message take on a confident tone that is sure of itself. The sender does not mince words, the words used are strong, straightforward, straight to the point, in the active voice and pregnant with emotions. The message may sound a little bit aggressive in the sense that it can be seen as being forceful, confrontational, dominating and disregarding the opinions and feelings of others. In this way, such a tone can create a hostile environment and hinder open and constructive communication. However, the use of rhetorical questions makes it a bit more of assertive than aggressive. This is seen in its confident, clear and direct stance which allows the sender to express his/her thoughts and ideas effectively while maintaining a respectful and understanding approach. According to Morans' tone of voice dimensions, the message is casual (a communication between colleagues), but serious (talking about a serious issue that is affecting their university). It is respectful as opposed to being irreverent (the sender is just expressing his/her thoughts on the matter observing boundaries). And is enthusiastic as opposed to matter of fact, seen in the choice of words and the rhetorical questions.

Messages Conveying a Mixture of Authority and Approachability

One message was seen to encapsulate aspects of both, that is, authority and approachability. The following 1 message was seen to be expressing both authority and approachability. It conveyed both a formal command and an inviting collaborative stance.

"**Good jambo colleagues**. I trust **we're all well**. **Sadly,** I am not. I **am feeling by** alone (almost) in the assembly hall where **your graduate students** are supposed to present their research. There are two of them here already so **we shall get started to be sure the week doesn't spill over into next week. I request that you come**. **Thank you**."

The message starts with a greeting 'good jambo colleagues', which mixes codes, seen in the use of the English words 'good, colleagues' and the Kiswahili word 'jambo'. This message coming from a senior administrator at the university to members of staff has all the authoritative force and seriousness that it requires. But to ease this authority and show collaboration hence persuasion to act, the sender mixes codes as stated above. The message

is informative, friendly but straightforward. The sender trusts that all are well, and includes/him/her self in the group, but straightforwardly states that he/she is not and this makes him/her sad. The sender goes further to state what is making him/her sad 'that he/she is all alone'. The use of the words 'your graduate students' expresses disappointment in the sender with regard to the fact that the receiver is not present at the event where their graduate students, not the sender's, are gathered. The exclusion of the sender in this case is pointing at the irresponsibility of the receiver, in which case it is a polite, respectful command for action on the part of the receiver as intended by the sender. The commanding but respectful and polite nature of the message is seen in the words 'I request that you come. The active voice here and the use of the word 'request' indicate this. The message is also optimistic seen in the words 'we shall get started'. Despite the absence of the receiver at the venue, the sender is optimistic that the presentation shall still continue and that is why he/she says that they shall get started. The sender gives the reason why they shall get started, which is information to the receiver of the consequences of their not being present at the venue and hence the more reason that they should get to the venue for the presentations to commence and proceed as planned. All these make the message authoritative, straightforward, friendly, optimistic, inspirational, informative, joyful, respectful, professional, confident, assertive, and humorous. According to Morans' tone of voice dimensions, the message is formal, serious, respectful and matter of fact and at the same time with some degree of being causal, funny, irreverent and enthusiastic.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This analysis provides a nuanced examination of the multifaceted nature of tone in leadership communication, particularly within the context of academic institutions. The findings suggest that a single message can embody multiple tonal dimensions, each serving distinct communicative functions that significantly impact the reception and interpretation of directives. A critical examination of WhatsApp communications among university leaders reveals consistent tonal patterns, characterized by a broader tonal spectrum that encompasses elements of approachability, encouragement, and conversational ease. The findings indicate that WhatsApp messages facilitate enhanced conversational fluidity, thereby contributing positively to staff morale and relational dynamics.

Additionally, the study highlights the pivotal role of tone in shaping leadership effectiveness, suggesting that communication styles that incorporate supportive and engaging tones tend to foster collaborative environments conducive to participatory decision-making. Contrariwise, excessively formal or rigid tones may reinforce hierarchical structures, potentially impeding open dialogue and innovation. This dichotomy accentuates the importance of tonal modulation as a strategic tool in enhancing organizational performance and leadership acceptability. The effective use of tone can mitigate the risks associated with misinterpretation, foster a sense of community, and promote a culture of inclusivity.

However, the study also reveals that many leaders in academic settings underestimate the impact of tone in written discourse, often due to the challenges of reconciling authoritative expression with relational approachability in formal correspondence. The absence of non-verbal cues in textual communication can lead to misinterpretation of intent, while the pressure to maintain authority can result in tones that are perceived as aloof or unapproachable. These challenges present opportunities for strategic tone calibration, whereby leaders can deliberately adjust tonal elements to enhance clarity, foster motivation, and cultivate a more inclusive communicative environment.

A critical analysis of the findings suggests that the relationship between tone and leadership perception is complex and multifaceted. The spectrum between clarity and ambiguity, and between encouragement and neutrality, underscores the need for leaders to develop a sophisticated awareness of tonal modulation in their communication strategies. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of contextual awareness, suggesting that leaders must be attuned to the nuances of their audience and the specific communicative context in which they are operating. Ultimately, the effective deployment of tone can contribute to a more inclusive, collaborative, and productive academic environment, underscoring the need for leaders to prioritize tonal awareness in their communication strategies.

The findings of the study have significant implications for leadership development programs, highlighting the need for training initiatives that focus on developing leaders' tonal awareness and modulation skills. By incorporating tonal analysis and strategic tone calibration into leadership development programs, institutions can empower leaders to communicate more effectively, foster a positive organizational culture, and enhance leadership legitimacy. Ultimately, the study contributes to a nuanced understanding of the role of tone in leadership communication, highlighting the need for leaders to approach tone as a strategic resource that can be leveraged to achieve organizational objectives.

CONCLUSION

The role of tone in communication is a crucial determinant of the effectiveness of the communicative process, influencing not only the propagation of information but also the emotional and cognitive responses of the audience. Strategic use of tone can facilitate comprehension, foster interpersonal rapport, and promote productive interaction. Conversely, tonal inappropriateness can lead to communicative breakdown, emotional disengagement, and institutional dysfunction. Within the realm of higher education leadership, effective communication transcends the mere transmission of factual information, necessitating a deliberate and reflexive approach to tonal expression, particularly in the context of digital communication platforms such as WhatsApp, which are increasingly integral to institutional discourse. The findings of this study highlight the significance of tonal nuance in augmenting engagement, informing decision-making processes, and shaping organizational culture.

Therefore, the strategic integration of tone awareness into leadership development curricula is essential for cultivating communicators who are reflexive, empathetic, and contextually attuned to the demands of digital discourse in higher education. Through targeted interventions, including calibration workshops, empathy-authority balancing frameworks, reflective communication audits, and cross-cultural competency training, institutions can enhance the communicative efficacy of their leaders. These efforts could not only mitigate the risks of tonal misalignment but also foster inclusive, transparent, and psychologically safe organizational cultures conducive to collaborative resilience and institutional excellence.

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