

## Trends and Impact of WhatsApp as a Mode of Communication among Abu Dhabi Students

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Online communication platforms have enabled millions of users to easily communicate with one another. WhatsApp is one of the most popular communication platforms in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), especially among university students. To better understand the effectiveness of WhatsApp, this research examines the trends and impact of WhatsApp usage among undergraduate university students in Abu Dhabi. The study also investigates the use of emoji and text messages as a replacement to the interpersonal communication that conventionally occurs in the process of face-to-face interaction. By means of a survey, this study found that Abu Dhabi University students consider WhatsApp to be an effective interpersonal communication medium. Although miscommunications often occur while using WhatsApp, the perceptions of the respondents varied greatly due to their own experiences and feelings regarding its use.

**Keywords:** WhatsApp, interpersonal communication, medium, miscommunication, university students

The function of WhatsApp goes beyond normal texting. It provides a space wherein people can send photos, voice messages, and even make calls to one another just by connecting to a wireless internet connection or through data usage. Today, young adults communicate with their peers constantly. While online communication seems to be gaining popularity, the ability to effectively communicate interpersonally may be negatively affected. As a result, face-to-face conversations are not as valued as they once were. Previous research regarding the effects that technological advancement has on face-to-face communication has shown that there are negative results in today's face-to-face interactions (Drago, 2015). Although the millennial generation today perceive the Internet as a necessity, if you are to go back a few decades earlier, the Internet was nothing more than a luxury. In today's generation, being provided with one's own wireless mobile data connection is a basic need.

United Arab Emirates is a fast-growing nation that heavily relies on technology and the skill of its residents. Because WhatsApp is such a globally used tool and there is an ever-present importance among university students, who are future generation world leaders, the study of the relationship between the two variables is essential. Therefore, this research will identify and examine the impact and trends of WhatsApp application on

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communication in the context of undergraduate students in Abu Dhabi, UAE. Given here are specific research objectives that have been explored in this study: (i) to identify and examine how WhatsApp has changed the way in which the undergraduate students in Abu Dhabi communicate, and (ii) to investigate the WhatsApp usage patterns among the undergraduate students in Abu Dhabi.

## Literature Review

Communication trend in the UAE is heavily affected by culture and technological advancement. Arabs are a group-oriented culture with emphasis on personal relationships. Since the rise of technology and social media; however, value for face-to-face interaction has decreased. In a study conducted by Przybylski and Weinstein, they have found evidence showing "...negative effects on closeness, connection, and conversation quality" whenever mobile devices were nearby in social settings (Drago, 2015). This can be a sign demonstrating the relevance of technological determinism, as Marshall McLuhan quoted in *Key Themes in Media Theory* "...the introduction of any new medium will shape how people live their lives" (Laughey, 2007). A cross-cultural study among UAE and UK university students has been conducted to observe the differences and similarities of the two groups' use of Facebook. The study concluded that UK students use Facebook more as a communication tool, whereas Arab students use it more interactively (Barry & Bouvier, 2011). 62 per cent of the UAE students answered that they write on each other's "walls" while only 33 per cent of the UK students said the same. Furthermore, the number of Arab students who upload photos (20 per cent) was almost twice the number of the UK students (11 per cent). This is an indication as to how Arabs use the medium in an outward manner of "... mass public performance" (Barry & Bouvier, 2011).

David Bulla and James Buie at Zayed University surveyed university students for research regarding social media usage in the UAE. The results of the study have shown that 180 students out of the 250 respondents spend at least 21 hours a week on social media (Mepra.org, 2014). 60 per cent of the respondents also reported posting photos at least once a week, with 30 per cent of them posting once a day (Mepra.org, 2014). The most popular form of communication by university students today is social media especially since students think that email is "... too slow compared to texting" (Rubin, 2013). Thus, the best way for faculty or others to reach and communicate with university students is through direct communication mediums such as texting or social media (WhatsApp, Facebook etc.).

### College Students and WhatsApp Usage

Developing mobile devices into e-learning opportunities has been previously explored; however, the introduction of instant messaging learning is still new. According to a study in *the International Journal of Mobile Learning and Organisation*, results show that when WhatsApp was used in the classroom there was an increase in spelling, grammar, and vocabulary credited to the instant messaging spell checker as well as an increase in student's motivation to write (Allagui, 2014). Online classrooms have been further promoted by universities such as Princess Nourah University in Saudi Arabia (Nassar, 2016). The online classroom would promote using the technology as a learning tool to share news and ideas etc. and has proven to result in higher scores and saving time used to study (Nassar, 2016). As further expressed by Hossain (2015), "... this kind of technology has

been embraced by a variety of professions to increase communication between colleagues", and they are trying to develop instant messaging communication between teachers and students. Thus, the study of using WhatsApp technologies between students and teachers are becoming more widespread. A recent pilot study explains that college students can use WhatsApp to communicate with instructors in order to improve class communication (Najafi & Tridane, 2015).

"Blanket emails" which are sent to many receivers at once, is commonly received by college students. In a blog post from 2009, the blogger shared that the information sent in blanket emails are often only needed by a select number of receivers and is therefore disregarded once considered irrelevant by all the other students (OrgSync, 2009). Therefore, after a while students would consider all mail sent by the college administration or faculty as "irrelevant", and in turn another form of communication would have to be resorted to such as: direct communication (OrgSync, 2009). This is further illustrated by college students lack of interest in checking emails and only do it when absolutely required of them. The most popular form of communication by college students today is social media especially since students think that email is "... too slow compared to texting" (Rubin, 2013).

### Impact of WhatsApp on College Students' Communication

WhatsApp includes text messaging, emoticons (picture messages), voice messages, sharing pictures etc. but does not include face-to-face communication which is typically required during interpersonal communication. According to a popular blog called Brandandmortar.com, advances in technological communication methods has changed the world's communication culture. It has done so by altering how we choose to communicate with other people e.g. through text messages even when they are in the same room as us (Brandandmortar, 2014). The author of the blog continues to express that, "The true way genuine relationships are made is from face-to-face contact. Verbal instead of written. Expressing and feeling someone else's emotions is nothing like reading it on your cell phone." (Brandandmortar, 2014). With this being said, WhatsApp and similar messaging applications may be transforming what the world would generally consider to be interpersonal communication.

### Reasons for Social Media Use

People in the UAE use social media for various reasons. It includes communicating with peers is one of the biggest reasons for the use of social media in the UAE (Allagui & Breslow, 2014). Whether it is to discuss about course works or simply catch up on life, college students utilize social media to the fullest extent. The desire to socialize with people without the pressures of face-to-face conversation is a major factor for teens in the UAE to use social media platforms.

The age of adolescence is where an individual goes out to explore and discover more about their identity alongside their growing curiosity about how the world works may it be in politics, economy, religion, or any other taboo topics. Moreover, college students turn to the Internet and their online community to help them discover a world of knowledge that is within their reach. A popular event that occurred in the Arab region that has triggered the craving for political information that college students have was the Arab Spring. Activists utilized Facebook to spread the information about what was happening behind the closed doors of their country that the world is not aware of. According to Barry and Bouvier, "...one can envision Facebook as a virtual launch pad for social movements in

the Middle East” (2011). This indicates how social media, including WhatsApp, could allow for interconnectivity or reaching beyond previously closed barriers to communicate the happenings of one’s surrounding environment to those far away, especially seen in young adults.

As any businessman knows, making a sale is not the end game; the ultimate success is achieved when the customers keep coming back for more. This also applies to social media applications. They cannot remain as they are for months without adding something new or changing something old. WhatsApp is an example of this, with the introduction of features such as “Last Seen” showing when the user was last online on the application, “Read Receipts” showing when a user has seen and read your message, or a constant update of WhatsApp “Versions” that introduces new details to the application such as more smiling faces on the ‘emojicons’ list.

## Methodology

This article is based on a survey conducted in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, with students of Abu Dhabi University making up the population of the study. The UAE boasts a total of 29 higher educational institutions, with thousands of students within each university. The research participants partaking in this study have been chosen using a Two-Stage Cluster Random Sampling. The first stage included choosing a random university from an existing group of universities within the UAE, and Abu Dhabi University was selected. Thereafter, 100 students were selected at random from the University, with each student within the university having an equal chance of being selected.

Concept	Variable	Measurement	Scale
WhatsApp effectiveness	Messages	Does your message come across as intended?	Semantic differentials
Interpersonal communication	Transferring information	How often WhatsApp is used to communicate	Multiple choice
Face-to-face communication	Talking to people in real life	How often vs. messaging	Open-ended question
Miscommunications	Misinterpreting messages	What are most common misinterpretations on WhatsApp?	Rating scale
Future trends	Increase of WhatsApp usage	Would you recommend WhatsApp to others?	Open-ended question
Current WhatsApp trends	Social problems found in relation to WhatsApp	Eg. How do you feel when someone takes long to reply to your message?	Matrix questions
Opinions/attitudes	Views on WhatsApp	Can WhatsApp replace face-to-face communication?	Open-ended question

Information has been gathered regarding the research topic by reviewing previous studies (secondary research) to discover what they have concluded in order to help the current research make improvements and to fill the research gaps. Books, journal articles, statistics, and periodicals have been utilized to gather secondary data for this research. In addition, data was gathered in the form of questionnaires (primary research) and it was analyzed to understand and see relationships between variables.

## Findings and Analysis

One of the most important elements in this study was to investigate whether WhatsApp usage patterns can indicate a strong regard for the medium as an effective form of interpersonal communication. This study incorporates university students of various demographic and social factors to identify any differences in the medium's usage. The findings and results presented below are drawn from the close-ended questions, which represent the students' perception towards the medium.

For both genders, the average number of hours spent on WhatsApp ranges between 1 and 7 hours. A more narrowly defined result indicates that more female students spend an average of 4 to 7 hours on WhatsApp whereas most male students spend an average of 1 to 3 hours on WhatsApp per day.

The analysis of data also revealed the distributed perceptions of what female students consider the most important miscommunication issue while communicating on WhatsApp. From the findings, 40 per cent of the female respondents mentioned that the lack of facial expressions through the usage of WhatsApp is the leading cause of miscommunications, followed by insufficient information (25 per cent), misinterpreting tone (20 per cent) and finally the undetectable sarcasm (15 per cent). However, for the male students the most problematic miscommunication on WhatsApp is to understand the tone of the sender in text messages. Lack of facial expressions was rated second by the male respondents. Insufficient information and undetectable sarcasm was chosen by only 17 per cent of the male respondents.

With regards to the question on the usage of emoji to replace facial expression, 85 per cent of the female students claim that they make use of the WhatsApp emoji feature. Five per cent of the female samples only use emoji sometimes, and the remaining 10 per cent never use emoji at all. The male sample use the emoji at 70 per cent saying they do, and 5 per cent claiming that they only use it sometimes and the rest do not use emoji. When comparing the male and female WhatsApp emoji usage, it is clear that females use emoji more at a 10 per cent higher rate than males.

Survey results also indicate that 63 per cent of the respondents prefer face-to-face communication rather than WhatsApp. However, the remaining 37 per cent of the respondents differed in their view by choosing WhatsApp as their preferred way of communication.

The questionnaire also investigated the usage patterns of WhatsApp among the respondents specifically to whether or not the respondents liked to use WhatsApp to send files and whether or not they liked to join WhatsApp group-chats. The results showed that the majority of them (74 per cent) disagreed that the WhatsApp is used for sending files while the remaining 24 per cent choose neutral. At the same time, majority of them (84 per cent) agreed that they use it for group chats.

To further understand their WhatsApp usage patterns the respondents were asked three questions related to whether WhatsApp is used to avoid real-life situations, do you update WhatsApp profile regularly and whether the WhatsApp is used with privacy settings enabled.

The results showed that majority of them (60 per cent) choose the option 'No' to express that they do not like to use WhatsApp to avoid real life situations. In response to the question on updating the WhatsApp profile regularly, only 25 per cent of them selected the option 'No', it suggests that most of them do update the WhatsApp profile regularly. Similarly, majority of them (65 per cent) stated that they use the WhatsApp with privacy settings enabled.

Along with the closed-ended questions on the survey were two open-ended questions. These held more freedom with the responses as there were no limitations put on the answers. Given below are the analyses of the responses.

#### *Q1. Give your view on WhatsApp replacing face-to-face communication*

The perceptions of the respondents varied greatly due to their own experiences and feelings regarding the use of WhatsApp and their continuous or lacking face-to-face communication patterns. The male respondent's opinions displayed a 55 per cent disagreement on WhatsApp even being a replacement for face-to-face interactions. They argued with the statement claiming many things, including: "Face-to-face communication is eternal and cannot be replaced by social media", "WhatsApp is not a way to eliminate face-to-face communication, we can still do both", and "nobody can avoid face-to-face interactions when you're out doing life". The opinions also included that WhatsApp is a different communication medium on its own. WhatsApp allows for interactions and communication with people who are far away from you and when face-to-face communication is impossible. This would fall under the 63 per cent of respondents who still prefer face-to-face communication; however, there are 37 per cent who would prefer WhatsApp communication. With regards to the male students, social media including WhatsApp was described as "ending real life social life because we don't need to see each other to talk to each other anymore". It was further elaborated that "shy or introverted people now have the opportunity to speak to people online that they wouldn't have the courage to talk to in real life or had the courage to say certain things that needed to be said". Accordingly, 35 per cent of the male respondents agreed that WhatsApp would be a good replacement of face-to-face interpersonal communication especially with regards to confidence, urgency in sending a quick message, and with regards to long distances. Some males (the remaining 10 per cent) however remained neutral and stated that they had no opinions about the possibility of WhatsApp replacing face-to-face communication.

With regards to the female respondents, 35 per cent of them disagreed with WhatsApp replacing face-to-face communication. Among the responses included, "WhatsApp is not a good replacement as it does not replace the socialization that would take place when people are together face-to-face", "there may be less communication due to the ability to contact via WhatsApp; however, it does not eliminate other forms of communication", and "WhatsApp is simply a helpful tool to improve the communication between people, not eliminate anything". The next 40 per cent of the respondents agreed with WhatsApp affecting the communication that individuals would usually have face-to-face. Among the statements were: "WhatsApp is a great supplement for communicating with others and makes it less necessary to go to see someone face-to-face", "WhatsApp decreases face-to-face communication and relationships as communication is now changing to becoming more apparent online", "WhatsApp is convenient, effective, and easy to use for communicating or arranging meetings with other people. Lots of people love texting". The remaining 25 per cent of the female respondents felt neutral towards this question.

*Q2. If WhatsApp has changed the way in which you communicate, elaborate on how*

For this question, 63.5 per cent of the respondents agreed that WhatsApp has in fact changed the way that they communicate with one another. Of these respondents, 72 per cent are female and only 55 per cent are males. With regards to females, there are many things that WhatsApp has changed in their communication including; "I can now talk to many friends at once even if they are not friends with each other. I can keep in contact with all of my friends", "I can have an increased confidence in telling someone when they are wrong over the phone, so I can express myself more freely when I communicate now", "I save a lot of time and effort by sending a text, so I talk to people more now than I previously would have", "I can message my parents who live abroad very easily so it has helped the communication between us", and "I don't have to make lots of conversation on WhatsApp. I can be direct and to the point. Conversations are shorter now". However, the remaining 28 per cent of the female respondents felt that communication patterns remained the same.

For the male respondents, 55 per cent of respondents who claimed to have changed communication patterns due to WhatsApp mostly had the same comments as the female replies. This included the ease of sending a message or files across distances as well as it being easier and cost-effective to reach individuals than it was before. Some added thoughts by the male students included; "WhatsApp helps my studies as I can now easily reach my campus friends who I can voice note when I need to know information about a course", "It is easier for me to make plans with people now because I can send someone a message and they can go back to it and be reminded about event details later. Whereas if you communicate with someone face-to-face they could forget the words you've said" and "WhatsApp helps me to improve my English language skills because it corrects my spelling of words and I need to type clearly so that my friends or family can understand what I am saying". The remaining 45 per cent of male respondents felt that WhatsApp has not changed the way in which they communicate with others.

## **Conclusion**

There has been a thorough examination of research accumulated through various sources in order to answer the research objectives. Ultimately these research objectives have been answered as: Yes, WhatsApp is in fact an effective form of interpersonal communication among university students in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. It does not however replace face-to-face communication, for majority of the sample students still recognize the importance of real-life conversations and interactions. There are also many miscommunications that these students face when sending WhatsApp messages; however, it majorly contributes only to those with certain characteristics e.g. age, gender, marital status etc. Most individuals have different ideas of what the biggest miscommunication form is, but misinterpreting the tone of the person's message remains in the lead of miscommunication sources (mainly voted for by the male ratings), followed by the lack of facial expressions when communicating via WhatsApp Messaging (mainly voted for by the female ratings). As per the research findings, there are many factors to be considered when investigating patterns of university students' communication patterns. Thus, there is evidently a need for further research on the topic of effectiveness of online communication medium, especially considering the advancing communication technology that alters the way one interacts with another, on a global level.

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