



## **Influence of Emojis and Emoticons in Enhancing Digital Interpersonal Communication: A Study of WhatsApp Application Users**

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### **Abstract**

This research intends to focus on the influence of emojis and emoticons in enhancing digital interpersonal communication of WhatsApp application users. The study is supported in the light of Media Richness Theory and survey method has also conducted as part of quantitative research design. A total of 200 students from different universities of Lahore have been selected to understand the impact of emojis and emoticons in their interpersonal communication on daily basis. The findings show that emojis and emoticons enhance digital interpersonal communication as it fulfills the criteria of conveying facial expressions, personal emotions and variety of sign languages. Findings of the survey illustrated that an emoji helps in supporting a message's meaning. Sometimes, emojis and emoticons seem more effective and easy to respond on a matter instead of writing long texts. The study also demonstrated that emojis and emoticons also help in understanding other person's mood and the level of interest during digital interpersonal communication.

**Keyword:** *Emojis, Emoticons, Digital Interpersonal Communication, WhatsApp*

### **Introduction**

Man is known as a social animal who needs to communicate with his fellow human beings in order to live as social creature.

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Humans use different type of communication styles that mainly comprise of verbal and non-verbal communication. Matter of the fact is that the effective communication is an important element of an individual's life either he/she is communicating with family, friends or supervisor at work (Chairunnisa & A.S., 2017). In the past, communication was mostly limited to letters, symbols, art work and e.tc. But in the present era, communication has transformed into a powerful medium due to the advancements in the internet and technologies. Messages are now conveyed in a fraction of seconds that has reduced the distance and new technological innovations can be observed every day (Chairunnisa & A.S., 2017).

With reference to communication in the era of new technologies, social media has brought many changes. The communication that started from letters, calls, emails, text messages has now reached to its shortest form, which is known as emoji. An emoji is a latest form of communication that influences the ways by which people communicate with each other. Emoji is basically defined as a 'pictograph' and 'facial expressions formed by various combinations of keyboard characters and used in electronic communications to convey the writer's feelings or intended tone (Suresh, 2018)'. Emojis and emoticons represent almost every aspect of daily life due to which they are getting popular among users. Emojis are now used by the 90% of the population who use internet technology for the daily conversations (Racoma, 2018). Researchers like Shao-Kang Lo, Steven Heller and many others characterized emojis and emoticons as nonverbal cues and universally-recognized forms of

communication and Steinmetz highlighted their importance by suggesting that they have a potential to become a new universal language (Bliss-Carroll, 2016).

Instead of typing long messages, a single emoji helps in communicating much more. At present time, communication is supported by new technologies such as smartphones, tablets, computers, iPad and different other tools.

Social media applications such as Whatsapp and Facebook Messenger are providing a variety of attractive emojis and emoticons to its users so that they can express their mood and feelings (Suresh, 2018). Facebook revealed in 2017 on World Emoji Day that approximately five billion emojis are sent daily on Messenger (Racoma, 2018). The major operating systems in smartphones such as Android and IOS contains multiple supporting applications to make communication easy in the form of WhatsApp and Messenger. There are approximately one billion monthly users of WhatsApp worldwide and 1.3 billion monthly users of Facebook Messenger across the globe (Hasan, 2018). The reason behind billions of users of both applications is the ease that they have given to the people for their personal and professional communication. The form of communication in which technology plays a role of a mediator in interpersonal communication is known as mediated or digital interpersonal communication. By definition, interpersonal communication should be done face to face and it is a way of exchanging information through non-verbal and verbal messages. However, now technology has involved in this type of communication and people hope that others should understand their feelings and messages when they are

communicating with them by the help of technology (Hasan, 2018).

The study examines the role of emojis and emoticons in showing the conditions and feelings of people without using words and long sentences. Emojis and emoticons are helpful in showing the condition of a person. For example, if a person is sending a sad face emoji, the receiver will definitely get an idea about the feelings of the sender. Emojis and emoticons are the facilities available in WhatsApp in the form of icons and images that express different moods such as happy, sad, scared, and e.tc. Emojis can also be called as facial emotions that depicts sender's mood. Walther and Addario (2001) defined emoticon as, "symbol typography or the combination of symbols which shows the mood, resembling facial expression, or in form of particular activity (Hasan, 2018 p.116)." This research is also examining the types of conversation such as personal or professional in which people use emojis and emoticons as it will help in understanding the mood of the sender, his/her interest and the nature of the conversation occurring between sender and the receiver. The study will play a significant role in understanding that how emojis and emoticons are becoming universal language and have a potential to depict the mood of the sender. The research is supported by Media Richness Theory that reveals that emojis and emoticons have a major role in strengthening the meanings of interpersonal communication. It will also help in exploring the interpretations of different emojis and emoticons for WhatsApp application users on a limited scale because when it comes to the

artwork, images, emojis and emoticons, people perceive different meanings of a same thing.

**Literature Review**

Talking about the effects of emoticons in simple and complex communication system, Luor et. al., (2010) explained that many studies have been conducted on instant messaging, emoticons but very less is known with reference to the influence of emoticons in task-oriented instant messaging communication at workplace. Researchers examined the mostly used emoticons in expressing positive or negative emotions, and the intention to use the, in instant messaging at workplace. The study found out that positive emoticons created positive effect in case of complex communication. A similar study was conducted by Park, Kim and Lee (2014) who argued that instant messaging (IM) is one of the popular modes of communication and a unique feature available on it is the choice of animated emoticons. Researchers explored the variety of emoticons, their usage and relationship with their users. This particular study was conducted to understand the use of emoticons in IM and provided suggestions that would help in designing future emoticons. Shovholt, Gronning and Kankaanranta (2014) analyzed the functions of emoticons in emails at workplace. Researchers argued that emoticons provide information about how a word can be interpreted in case of workplace emails rather than depicting writer's own feelings and emotions.

Emojis can count as new generation of emoticons and their use has been increased due to social media and advancement in mobile technologies. Researches show that during 2013-2015,

around ten billion emojis were used by the Twitter users (Novak, Smailovic, Sluban and Mozetic, 2015). Filik et. al., (2016) discussed sarcasm and emoticons in their research and explained that sarcasm served communicative function and this type of language help in enhancing or muting the positive and negative message nature. Ljubescic and Fiser (2016) explained in their study that emojis are spreading quickly and sometimes, they even receive attention from the mainstream press but they often fail to get the attention of social scientists for the investigations. An analysis was performed on the dataset of 17 million tweets comprising emojis. Results showed that emojis depict the realistic situation of people living in different parts of the world. Shovholt, Gronning and Kankaanranta (2014) explained three communicative functions of emoticons. First of all, emoticons sever as markers of positivity. Secondly, they are joke markers and lastly they help in expressing speech acts such as thanks, welcome and e.tc.

This study is supported in the light of Media Richness Theory which was given by Richard L. Daft and Robert H. Lengel in 1986. It is also known as Information Richness Theory and referred as a framework to describe the ability of a communication medium to replicate the information sent over it ("Media Richness Theory", 2019). This theory evaluates the richness of certain medium such as video conferencing, calls and emails because in case of phone call, a person cannot reproduce the gestures of the other individual but with reference to video conferencing, transmission of gestures can be easily observed. Therefore, it can be said that one medium is less rich than the other and the theory stressed that the richer interpersonal

communication media are better for the communication. Furthermore, the Media Richness Theory determines that four factors that define good delivery of a message. First of all, there must be enough ability in a particular communication channel to convey the message via facial expression, gestures, postures and e.tc. Secondly, feedbacks are quickly given by the receiver. Thirdly, there is a presence of variety of languages such as symbols. Lastly, a message must have an ability to show personal emotions. Chao et. al., (2020) explored the creativity of mediated interpersonal communication and face to face communication in the light of Media Richness. The researchers found out that formats of mediated interpersonal communication such as use of various cues had a greater level of richness as compared to face to face communication.

The literature review revealed that that scholars and researchers worked on emojis and emoticons and their use in personal or professional communication but none of these studies have been conducted in Pakistan. With reference to this particular study, the Media Richness theory provides a support in understanding the influence of emojis and emoticons in enriching the mediated interpersonal communication. The designed research questions are as follows:

RQ 1. Whether emojis and emoticons influence interpersonal communication on daily basis or not?

RQ 2. In what kind of communications, people use emojis and emoticons?

RQ 3. How different emojis and emoticons usually interpreted among WhatsApp application users?

**Methodology**

The quantitative research methodology has been applied in this research and the survey method has used to examine the impact of using emojis and emoticons in their interpersonal communication on daily basis. For this purpose, a sample of 200 participants has been selected from different universities of Lahore by using purposive sampling technique. In purposive sampling technique, the sample is chosen based upon the judgment of the researcher to save time and money. In order to save the time, this sampling technique has been applied for this research because though almost every university student in Lahore use WhatsApp for the conversation but not all of them take the research seriously.

Findings

**Table 1: Demographics Questions**

<b>Questions</b>	<b>Results</b>
<b>Gender</b>	Female= 50% Male= 50%
<b>Age</b>	Less than 15 years= Nil 15 to 20 years= 24% 21 to 25 years= 64% 26 to 30 years=12%
<b>Do you use Smartphone, tablet, or device equipped with an Emoji keyboard?</b>	Above than 30 years= Nil Yes= 96% No= Nil
<b>Do you use Emojis to communicate a message to someone?</b>	Sometimes= 4% Yes= 86% No= Nil
<b>Do you feel that you understand the meanings of Emojis?</b>	Sometimes= 14% Yes= 84% No= 2% Maybe = 14%
<b>Do you think that an Emoji or Emoticons is intended to represent an actual facial expression or gesture of the sender?</b>	Yes= 72% No= 8% Maybe= 20%

Table 1 of the study is based on the demographics and it consists of the questions related to the gender, age and use of emojis and emoticons by the users. Table 1 shows that equal number of males and females participated in this survey whereas dominant age group was 21 to 25 years. Results also demonstrated that most of the people use emoji keyboards and

understand the meanings of the emojis provided to them by the service providers.

**Table 2:** *Kinds of communication in which people use emojis and emoticons*

Questions (You can select multiple options)	Results
<b>In what type of communication would you use an Emoji?</b>	Casual situations= 50% Formal or professional situations= 6% Close relational situations= 58%
<b>With whom you mostly use Emojis while chatting?</b>	Friends= 64% Close friends= 74% Family members= 50% Colleagues= 20% Manager/supervisor= 0% Partner= 18%

Table 2 shows the types of conversations in which people use emojis and emoticons. Most of the participants revealed that they use emojis and emoticons in conversation to their friends, closed ones and family members. Participants also told that they use emojis in casual situations and avoid them in professional situations.

Table 3: Interpretation of different emojis/emoticons

Interpretation of different emojis/emoticons	Results
	Laughing hard= 78% Tears of joy= 15% Extremely happy= 6.5% Fake, ignore= 0.5%
	Cool= 68% Smart= 20% Attitude= 8% Like a boss=4%
	Sleepy= 25% Sad=45% Crying= 19% Emotional= 4% Hopeless= 3% Feeling down= 4%
	Someone does not understand= 34% Oh S***= 43% What the hell= 12% Fed up/tired= 5% Frustration= 4% Others= 2%

Table 3 depicts the interpretation of different emojis and emoticons. Researchers provided different emojis and emoticons to the participants and asked them to interpret them. Talking about the first emoji in the table, most of the participants explained it as 'lots of laugh or laughing hard'. Some of the participants also interpreted it as extremely happy and tears of joys. However, few of the participants also interpreted it as being fake. With reference to second emoji in this table, most of the

participants interpreted it as being cool or smart. Few of them also explained it 'like a boss'. The third emoji was mostly interpreted it as being sad, emotional and sleepy. The last emoticon in this table was interpreted in many ways. Most of the participants described it as a symbol of 'Oh Shit' followed by 'someone who does not understand anything'. According to few participants however they were less in numbers, this icon shows being tired, frustrated, exhausted and fed up. Though this research mainly focusses on the reception of emojis and emoticons but this table helps in providing the new dimensions of the research in future. It is based on the interpretation of emojis and emoticons and only few options were given to the participants just to explore the differences a bit.

### **Role of Emojis and Emoticons in Enhancing Digital Interpersonal Communication**

In WhatsApp, different categories of emojis and emoticons are available such as smileys and people, animals & nature, food & drinks, activities, travel & places, objects, symbols and flags. As per the recent version of WhatsApp (2.19.80) in IOS, following emojis and emoticons are available for the users.

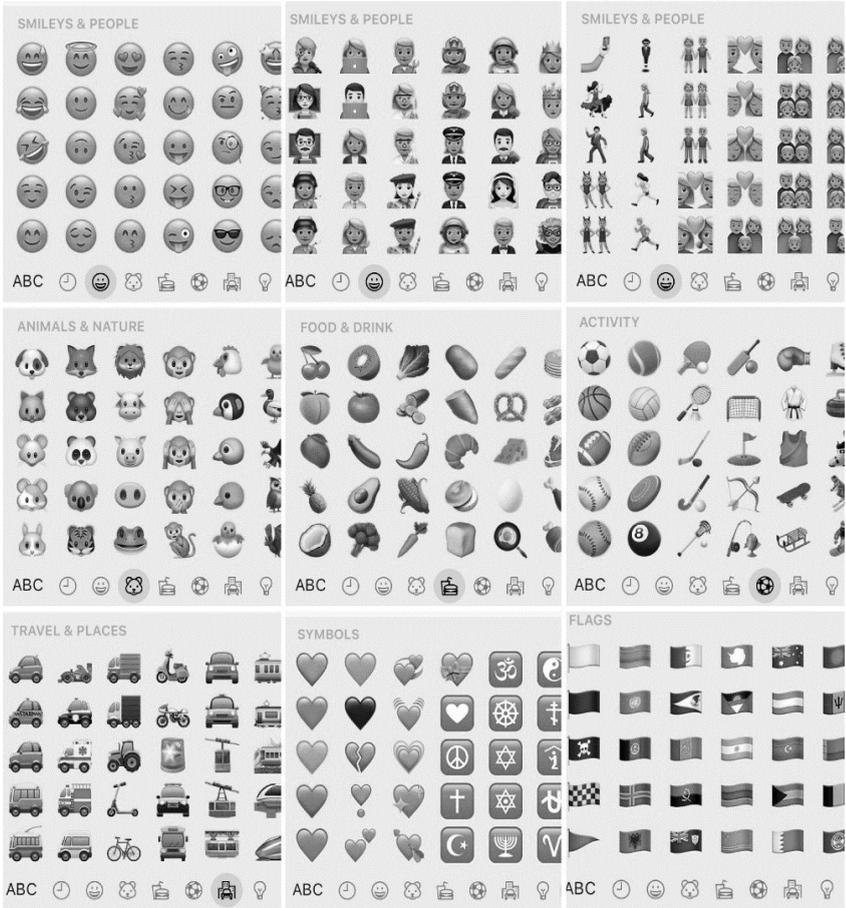


Figure 1: *Emojis and Emoticons in WhatsApp*

There are many other emojis and emoticons are available but here, only few of them have been pasted. It can be shown in Figure no. 1 that users are given many options in each category and almost every expression and maximum objects have been covered. Emojis and emoticons are used to strengthen the communication and supports the feedback process in digital interpersonal conversation. For example, if a person is praising the sender via text messages, he or she can add emojis and emoticons to

strengthen the message. In this way, the receiver will feel the effect of that particular emoji.

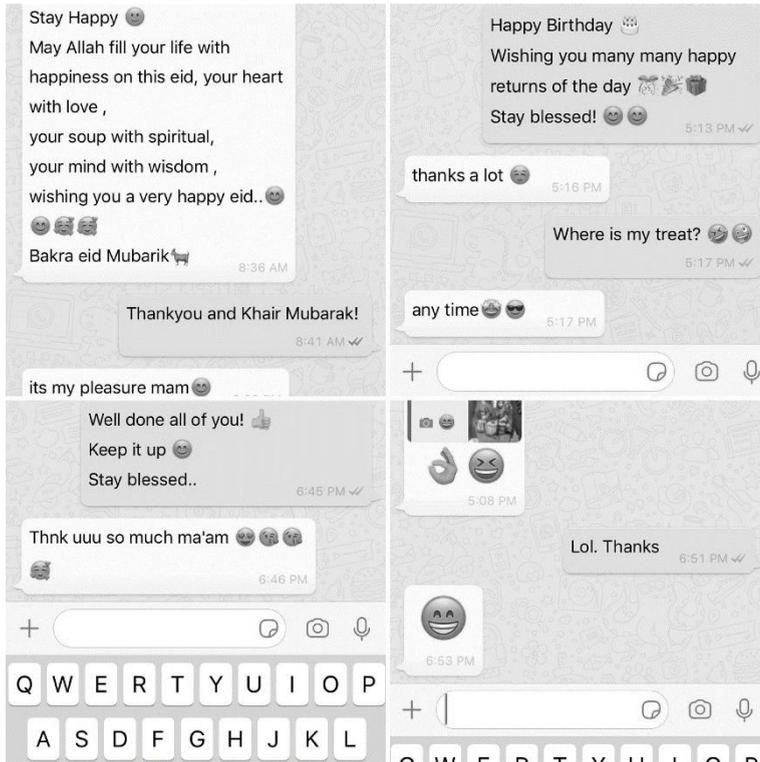


Figure 2: Use of Emojis in different conversations

In the above mentioned conversation, it can be noticed that different types of emojis and emoticons were used in order to support the meaning of the messages. For example, in a birthday wish, sender used the emoticons of celebrations, cake and gifts. In order conversations symbols of thumbs up, well done and loved were used as well. It can be noticed as well that not only sender used emojis or emoticons, receiver also gave feedback in the same manner which depicts the feelings of both person who are involved in interpersonal communication. There are variety of emojis and emoticons are available in WhatsApp application and

they are even updated after regular intervals. In conversations, face with happiness, smile, tears, sadness, cry and angry is used to imply certain situation and also depends on the nature of the conversation. The tongue-sticking out icon is used to tease someone or making light jokes. There are many icons that depicts the gesture of thanks or appreciation. Moreover, emojis based on love, flirting or feeling heartbroken are also present.

### **Discussion**

The first research question of this study is based on the influence of emojis and emoticons in interpersonal communication on daily basis. By the help of Media Richness Theory, it can be said that WhatsApp emojis and emoticons fulfill the criteria of instant feedback by the receiver, communication through signals such as facial expressions, variety of symbols and personal emotions. The basic essence of Media Richness theory is symbol and language. By using supporting symbol and clear language, interpersonal communication can be improved in a particular medium. Hasan (2018) also identified different functions for which emojis are used. First of emojis serves the function of sentiment expression. Sometimes, a sentence can be written in a neutral emotional state but an addition of an emoji adds a polarity to that sentence. For example, 'Okay, I am coming' compared to 'Okay, I am coming 😊.' The later one show the emotional state of a person. Secondly, an emoji serves the function of sentiment modification. In case of informal communication, emojis are used to express complex phenomena such as irony, humor, sarcasm and e.tc. Emojis are also used as notifier. Sometimes, in order to get the attention of person, (?) is used in the conversation to keep it going on. Another

function of emojis is convenience. They can be replaced by lengthy sentences and words. Lastly, emojis are used to add fun in the conversation. It was found in this research that by using emojis and emoticons, sender expresses the feelings of fear, jealousy, shyness, sadness, happiness, loneliness and e.tc and he/she does not need to write long sentences. Some of the emojis and emoticons such as the expression of happiness, sorrow, joy, anger are quite straight and easily interpreted due to which they help in supporting the meanings of the messages and receiver understands the feelings of sender. But at the same time, the survey revealed that people interpret some emojis and emoticons as per their own exposure. However, it has been observed that most of the people interpret an emoji in a same manner. There are only few people who interpreted an emoji or emoticon in a different manner. Results of the study also revealed that people use emojis in casual relationships while talking to their friends and family and they try to avoid using emojis during formal conversation.

**Conclusion**

It can be concluded that emojis and emoticons are helpful in enhancing digital interpersonal communication. Emojis help in strengthening conversations and support the meaning of messages. However, meanings of some emojis or emoticons can be varied depending upon the users. The value of emojis and emoticons as communication tools has been increased in digital world. Computer-based conversation has become the part of both personal and professional lives and emojis/emoticons help in supporting these digital interactions. Results of the study

revealed that emojis serve different functions and people use them due to their convenience. Whether laughing, crying, winking, loving, surprised, or upset, hundreds of sentiments are available in WhatsApp application and can be conveyed in digital environment. It can be summarized that in a world of technological dependency for daily interactions, emojis are accessible and functional. They are the iconic ambassador of meaningful connections among users in mediated interpersonal communications. In this research, only few emojis have selected to briefly examine the difference in their interpretation. However, in future studies, researchers can work on the interpretation of all emojis/emoticons available in WhatsApp to determine the similarities or differences in the interpretation. Moreover, studies can be conducted on the perception of emojis in different cultures.

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**Appendix**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender:

1. Female                      2. Male                      3. Other

Age:

1. Less than 15 years      2. 15 to 20 years  
3. 21 to 25 years          4. 26 to 30 years  
5. Above than 30 years

Education Level:

1. Matric                      2. Intermediate              3. Bachelors  
4. Masters                    5. M.Phil./PhD              6. Other

Question 1: Do you use Smartphone, tablet, or device equipped with an Emoji keyboard?

- a. Yes                      b. No                      c. Sometimes

Question 2: Do you use Emojis to communicate a message to someone?

- a. Yes                      b. No                      c. Sometimes

Question no.3: In what type of communication would you use an Emoji?

- a. Casual situations      b. Formal or professional situations  
c. Close relational situations      d. Other

Question 4: With whom you mostly use Emojis while chatting?  
(Select multiple options)

- a. Friends                      b. Close friends  
c. Family members              d. Colleagues  
e. Manager/Supervisor          f. Partner

Question.5: Do you feel that you understand the meanings of Emojis?

- a. Yes                      b. No                      c. Maybe

Question 6: Do you think that an Emoji or Emoticons is intended to represent an actual facial expression or gesture of the sender?

- a. Yes                      b. No                      c. Maybe

Question 7: How would you interpret the following emojis/emoticons?

1.



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2.



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3.



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4.

