

CURRENT SOCIAL MEDIA TRENDS AMONG UAE STUDENTS: A STUDY OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF WHATSAPP AS AN INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION MEDIUM AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS IN ABU DHABI

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Abstract

Human communication has dramatically evolved by means of the internet and other technological advancements, which significantly impacts all individuals on a global scale. WhatsApp is currently one of the world's leading instant messaging applications and has become a communication medium commonly used among college students in the UAE. To better understand the UAE's current social media trends; namely WhatsApp, it is important to study the effectiveness of the application with regards to it being a tool for interpersonal communication among college students. This study investigates the perceptions and trends of Abu Dhabi College students when considering WhatsApp as an effective interpersonal communication medium. The study also investigates whether "emoji's, voice-notes, text messaging etc." could be a replacement of the key face-to-face element during an interpersonal communication process. Lastly, the study evaluates the likelihood of college students experiencing miscommunication during WhatsApp conversations.

A survey was conducted in Abu Dhabi among University students of both genders, using a questionnaire to evaluate their perceptions and activity on the application in order to effectively answer the research questions. Ultimately, this study found a positive reaction from the students, and WhatsApp has been considered an effective interpersonal communication medium among Abu Dhabi college students. There are miscommunications found when using the application, but the result varies mainly between genders.

Keywords: WhatsApp, Interpersonal Communication, College Students, Social Media Trends

1. INTRODUCTION

The increased rate of Mobile Messaging (MM) (or IM-Instant Messaging) through social media messaging sites has increased significantly over the past few years. This has led to many studies of social media trends and the effects it has on its users. According to Digital marketing site eMarketer.com, a forecast report shows that by 2018 there will be two billion MM users, which represents 80% of smartphone users (eMarketer, 2011). This dramatic change in communication has a significant impact on all individuals because it alters the standards of a message that an individual would deem acceptable. Whether it be face-to-face communication, telephone calls, emails, text messages, or a tweet to another person, these interactions affect the way in which one communicates.

Currently, WhatsApp is the leading instant messaging application globally after they hit the target of 1 billion

people in their user base, especially among young adults (Sutikno, Handayani, Stiawan, Riyadi, Riyadi, & Subroto, 2016). Thus, the effect that this medium has on an individual's interpersonal interaction with others is important and will be further explored in this study. Communication among young adults has shifted from traditional interpersonal communication that includes face to face conversations to various websites and applications limited to online communication. Because of the efficiency and convenience that online social media platforms provide, it is a preferred means by which people can communicate with others whenever they please (Sponcil & Gitimu, 2013).

WhatsApp is the 5th most downloadable application in the world, can be downloaded to one's mobile phones, and has 4.69 million users in the UAE alone – indicating the relevance of the study (Global Media Insight, 2015). WhatsApp is now even more popular in the UAE after the subscription fee was abandoned and it became free to its users in the beginning of 2016 (George, 2016). With more than 56% of the UAE population being active on social media and more than 3.5 hours spent online a day, the study of social media trends is highly significant to the social trends in the country (GMI Blogger, 2015). The function of WhatsApp goes beyond normal texting. It also 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 conditioned to being negatively affected. Face to face conversations are not as valued as they once were. Previous Research studying technological advancement's effect on face to face communication resulted in negative results in terms of both the quality and quantity of present day face to face communication (Drago, 2015).

Therefore, this study will address the effectiveness of WhatsApp on interpersonal communication amongst college students in the UAE as well as whether WhatsApp leaves room for misconceptions and miscommunication during the communication process. Although there have been studies conducted regarding the effects of social media on its users, studies have yet to focus on college students in the UAE and their avid use of WhatsApp. Given below are specific questions that were explored within this study:

1. Is WhatsApp an effective interpersonal communication medium?
2. Can WhatsApp replace face-to-face communication?
3. Does WhatsApp lead to miscommunications, and what are they?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW & CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Current Social Media Trends among UAE College Students

In 2015, the total population of the UAE amounted to 9.58 million people, with more than half of the population (52%) active on social media applications (Global Media Insight, 2015). According to Global Media Insight, Skype is the number one social chat application in the UAE with 4.88 million users, followed by WhatsApp with 4.69 million users in the year 2015. Instagram and Snapchat are some of the latest applications that have witnessed a rise in popularity over the last two years. A study by Kantar TNS, a global research firm, discovered that usage of both Instagram and Snapchat in the UAE has grown from 15% in 2014 to 53% in 2016; thus, indicating an increase in social media trends within the last few years (Nelson, 2016).

Communication is heavily affected by culture. Arabs are a group-oriented culture with emphasis on personal relationships (Riel). 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 college students has been conducted to observe the differences and similarities of the two groups' use of Facebook. The study concluded that Welsh students use Facebook more as a communication tool, whereas Arab students use it more interactively (Barry & Bouvier, 2011). 62% of the UAE students answered that they write on each other's "walls" while only 33% of the UK students said the same. Furthermore, the number of Arab students who upload photos (20%) was almost twice the number of the Welsh students (11%). 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, who are professors at Zayed University, surveyed UAE 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% of the respondents also reported posting photos at least once a week, with 30% of them posting once a day (Mepra.org, 2014). 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). Thus, the best way for Faculty or others to reach and communicate with college students is through direct communication mediums such as texting or social media (WhatsApp, Facebook etc.).

2.2 WhatsApp's Impact on Relationships and Interpersonal Communication among College Students

Based mainly on features, usability, functions, and convenience, instant messaging (IM) sites have become increasingly popular, but they could also encompass issues regarding social intimacy and negative feelings (Si, 2012). Instant messaging services such as WhatsApp allow for easy communication with people over long distances. The method has become quick, easy, and inexpensive. Contrasting studies to Riel and Drago, Lin Si found that instant messaging rather increased the amount of social intimacy as well as the desire to want to communicate face to face (Si, 2002). Si further indicated that the more you IM someone, the closer the person is to you.

However, IM'ing sites such as WhatsApp cause seven negative emotions in users; including anxiety, guilt, pressure, distraction, embarrassment, suspicion, and confusion (Si, 2012). Symptoms of these emotions include worrying and a decreased self-esteem when faced with long replies, pressure to respond to messages immediately, relationship mistrust with who another person is contacting, confusion with regards to what the intended meaning of the message is, and more. Thus, although there are positive aspects of WhatsApp during interpersonal communication including quick communication with loved ones far away; it could also create communication barriers with different interpretations of a message that may result in a wide array of negative emotions (Si, 2012).

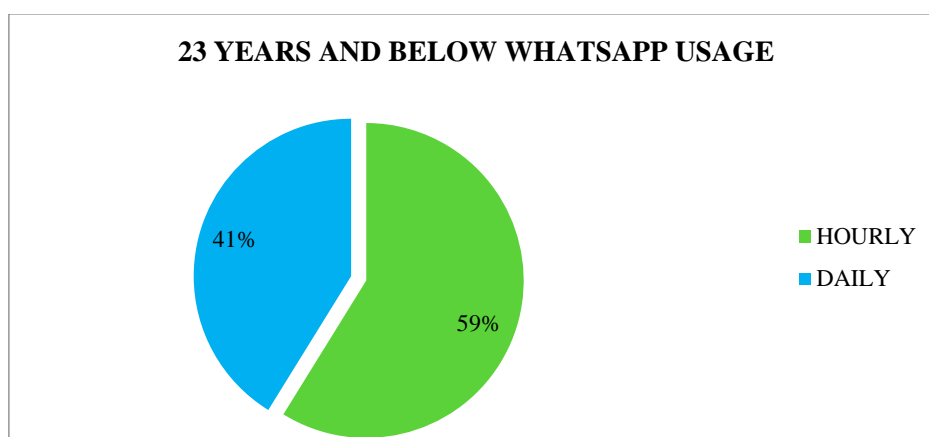
3. METHODOLOGY

This article is based on a survey conducted in Abu Dhabi, UAE. The population for this study is University Students in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. With a total of 29 Higher Educational Institutions in Abu Dhabi, a random sample selected from one chosen University. After a two-stage random sampling process, Abu Dhabi University was selected from which 100 randomly selected college students participated in the study.

4. FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS

One of the most important elements in this research 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 College Students of various demographic and social factors in order 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.

- **FIGURE 1**



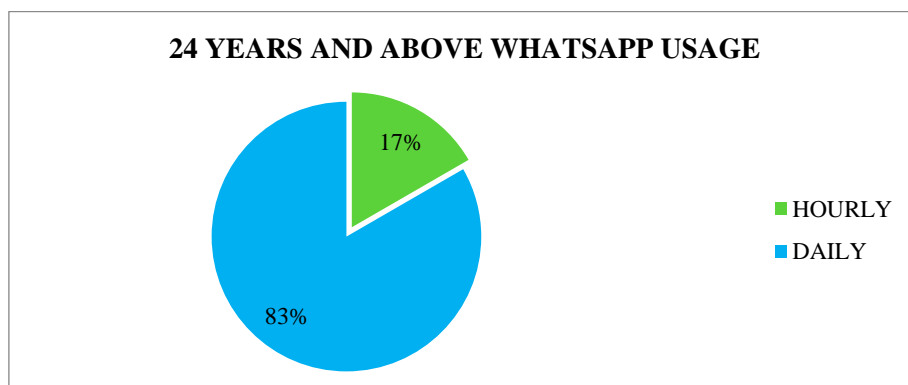


Fig. 1 Frequency of WhatsApp Messenger usage– Age Comparison

The pie charts above in figure 1 illustrates how often college students use or send messages on the WhatsApp Application, either hourly or daily. The researcher made use of the age comparison in order to see any significant patterns when younger or older. With regards to the students who are 23 years old or younger, they use the application more hourly (59%) than the 41% who only use it daily. This could indicate that 59% of this aged group sample, (more than half) checks the application every hour of the day. The opposite is apparent for those students who are older than 23 years old, who use the application more daily than they do hourly. 83% of College students who are 24 years or older, use WhatsApp daily, but do not check the application every hour – which may indicate that in the beginning stages of college, students utilize WhatsApp more frequently.

• **TABLE 1 – College students’ awareness and use of WhatsApp messaging**

MALE	FEMALE	WHATSAPP MESSAGING AWARENESS/USE
-	-	I NEVER USE WHATSAPP TO TEXT
5%	-	I HARDLY EVER USE WHATSAPP TO TEXT
10%	-	NEUTRAL
10%	20%	I OFTEN USE WHATSAPP TO TEXT
75%	80%	I ALWAYS USE WHATSAPP TO TEXT

According to the above table, 100% of female College Students use WhatsApp, with 80% of them ‘always’ using it. This contrasts with Males where 5% of them hardly ever use WhatsApp and only 75% of male students ‘always’ use WhatsApp when they message.

• **TABLE 2 –Perceptions of whether WhatsApp has changed communication patterns or style**

HAS WHATSAPP CHANGED THE WAY YOU COMMUNICATE	
FEMALE	MALE
YES -72 %	YES – 55 %
NO – 28 %	NO – 45 %

After Respondents were asked whether or not WhatsApp has changed the way in which they now communicate, 65% of respondents said that it did, with more females (72% of female respondents) than males (55% of male respondents). Only 28% of female students claimed that WhatsApp has not changed their communication patterns whereas almost half (45%) of males responded that WhatsApp made no difference to their communication.

• **FIGURE 2**

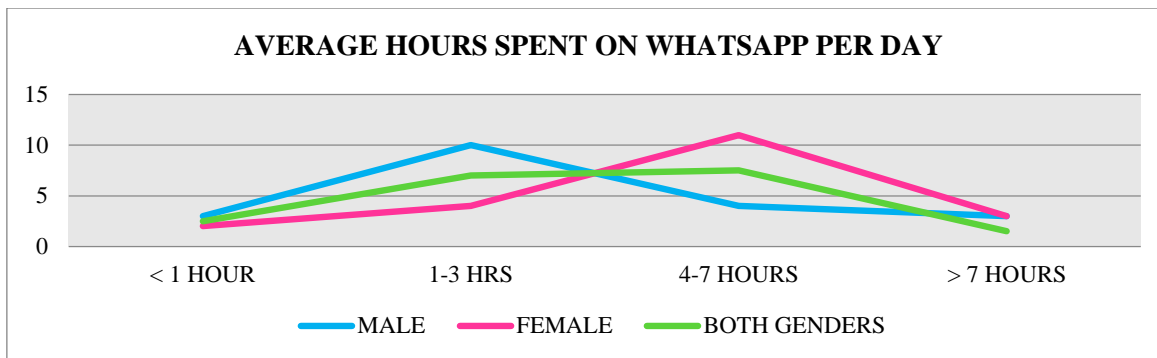


Fig. 2 Average Hours spent on WhatsApp – Gender Comparison

In the line graph above, there is a graphic representation of the average number of hours a College student spends online on WhatsApp. For both genders, the average amount of hours spent online ranges between 1 and 7 hours. A more narrowly defined result indicates that more Female college students spend an average of 4-7 hours on WhatsApp whereas most Male college students spend an average of 1-3 hours on WhatsApp per day.

• **FIGURE 3**

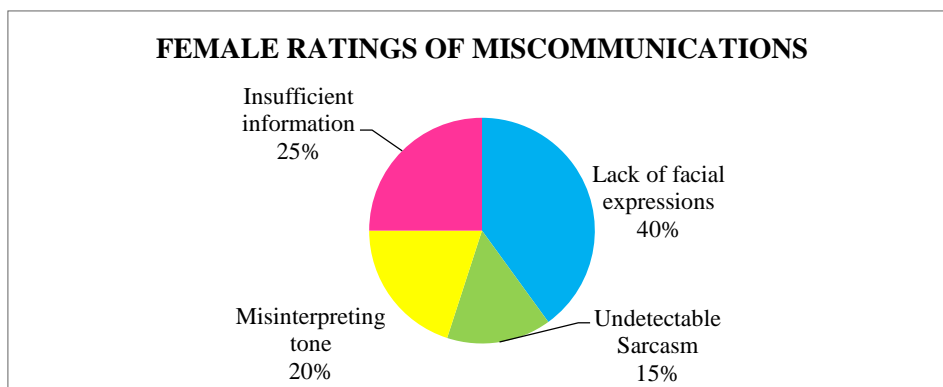


Fig.3 Rating of the biggest miscommunications found when using WhatsApp messenger

The pie chart above shows the distributed perceptions of what Female college students think is the biggest miscommunication problem found when communicating on WhatsApp. Almost half of the females (40%) state that Lack of facial expressions on WhatsApp is the biggest cause of miscommunications, and undetectable sarcasm is the least favored rating option with only 15%.

• **FIGURE 4**

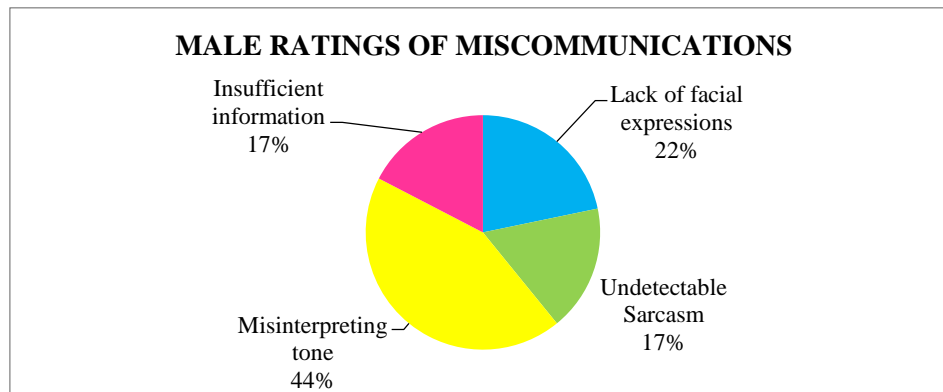


Fig. 4 Male ratings of miscommunications

However, according to the male ratings in the pie chart above, the biggest miscommunication on WhatsApp involves the interpretation of the user's tone when typing a message (44%). This is followed by the lack of

facial expressions that was rated highest by the girls. The lowest ranking miscommunication cause included a draw between insufficient information and undetectable sarcasm, both at 17%.

- **FIGURE 5**

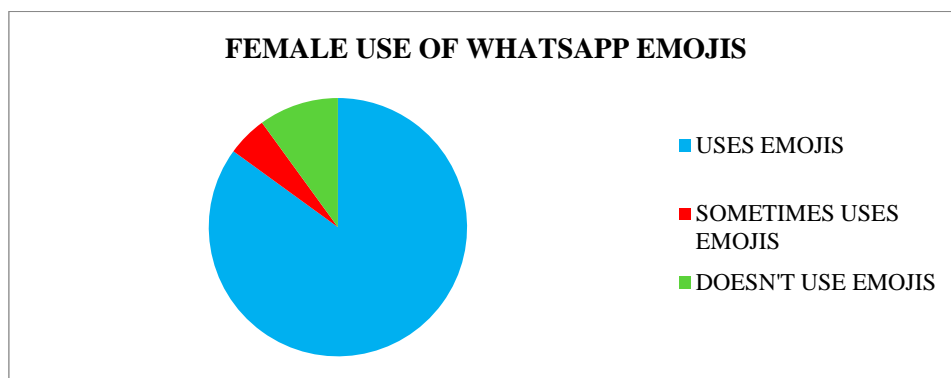


Fig.5 The usage of WhatsApp 'Emoji's' to replace facial expression

As is evident from the distributive chart above, female college students are 85% inclined to make use of the WhatsApp emoji feature. There is however 10% of the sample who never use emoji's and 5% who only use it 'sometimes'.

- **FIGURE 6**

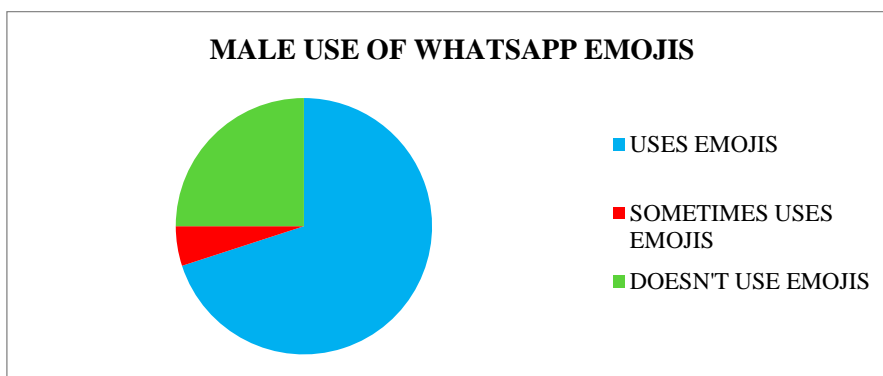


Fig.6 Male use of WhatsApp Emojis

The male sample use of emojis when chatting on WhatsApp involves 70% saying that they do, and 5% claiming that they only use it sometimes. The remaining 25% state that they do not use emoji's when using WhatsApp.

- **FIGURE 7**

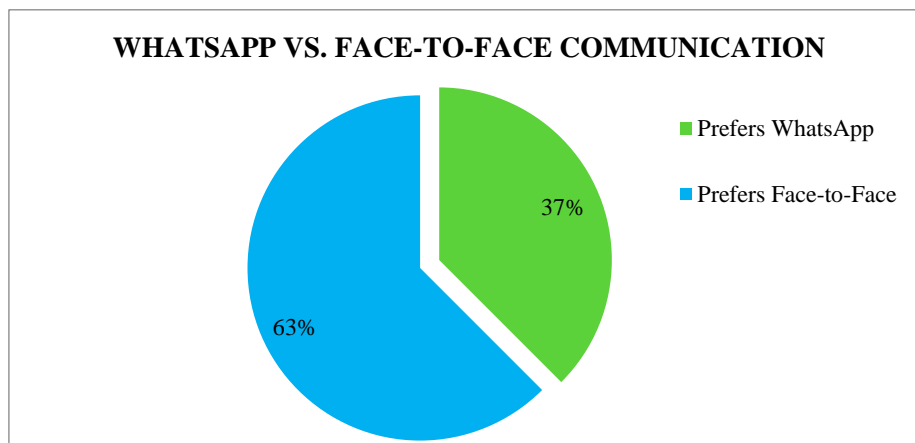


Fig.7 Percentage of students who prefer WhatsApp to face-to- face Communication

When comparing WhatsApp to face-to-face (real life) communication, the respondents were asked which of the two they preferred. The reason for the preference was not noted at this point. Shown in the pie chart above, 63% of respondents indicated that even though they use WhatsApp, they still prefer face-to-face communication. 37% of the respondents disagreed and claimed that they choose WhatsApp as a better way to communicate.

- **FIGURE 8**

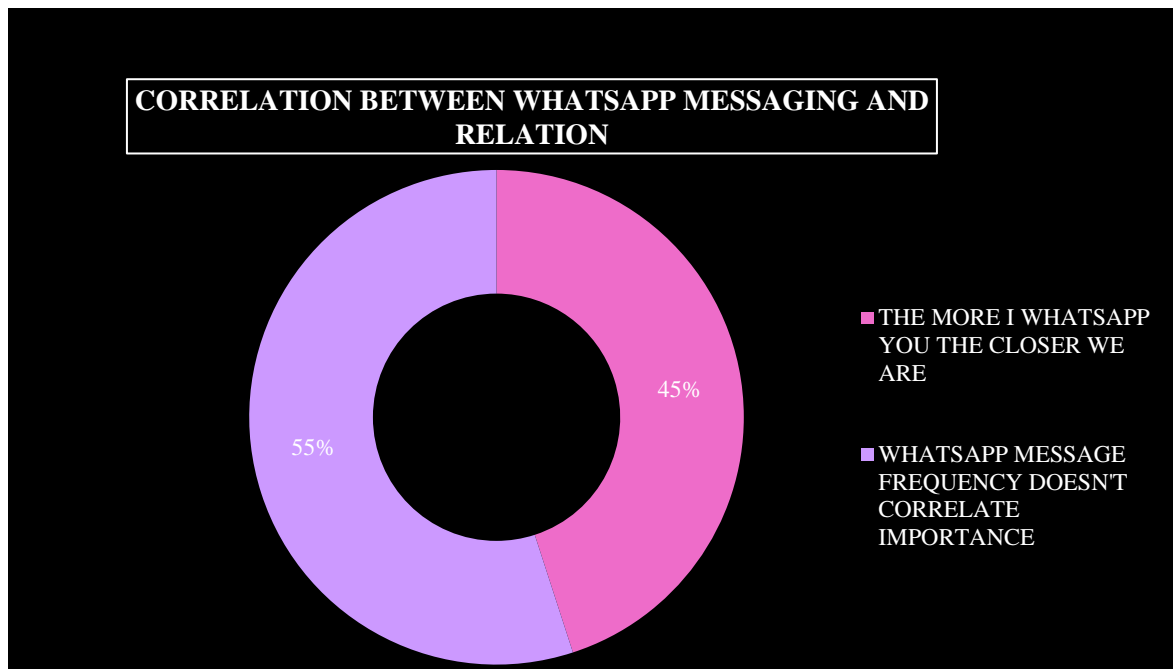


Fig. 8 Correlation between WhatsApp Messaging frequency and closeness of relationship

According to the results in the illustration above, more than half (55%) of the population sample do not correlate the frequency of WhatsApp message sending to the importance or closeness of relations with that person. However, 45%, almost half of the study does relate the two variables.

5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

According to the survey conducted, college students in Abu Dhabi are very aware of WhatsApp and it is a part of everyone's daily lives. It is however apparent that the younger students, being younger than 24 years old, spend more time on WhatsApp than those 24 years and older. This is indicated through 59% of the younger respondents claiming that they check their WhatsApp every hour every day. WhatsApp is used primarily as a messenger, to communicate with one another through text messages. Only 5% of the total population (all males) claimed that they hardly ever use the Application to message. Competitive Applications include iPhone's i messaging application which may even be a key source as to why Android phones showed a stronger indication of WhatsApp daily use (55%), with iPhones coming in second with 40% of the population share using WhatsApp daily.

It is further indicated in the study that WhatsApp has in fact changed the way in which college students communicate with one another. This is more apparent in females, with 72% of them claiming the change is due to WhatsApp, whereas 45% of males do not agree with WhatsApp having any effect on their communication patterns. This may even be a result of the fact that females on average spend more time on WhatsApp than males do. Females who spend up to a maximum of 7 hours and a minimum of 4 hours per day on their phones and on WhatsApp compared to males who spend a maximum of 3 hours and a minimum of 1 hour per day. Another huge comparison with regards to gender is the use of emojis on WhatsApp. Because there is a lack of face-to-face communication online, WhatsApp has 'smiley faces' which can be used to depict a person's emotions when there is no tone or expression displayed during texting (except for a voice notes). The results of the study found that females are more inclined to using emojis when chatting on WhatsApp (75% always use it and only 10% never use it). Most males do use emojis too with 70% claiming 'always'. However, there is a much larger percentage of males (25%) who don't use WhatsApp emojis ever, compared to females who are 15% less likely never use emojis.

Miscommunications could occur during any type of communication or interaction. During WhatsApp interactions, it was narrowed down to the top two causes for miscommunications; including misinterpreting the other person's tone when texting (32%) followed by lack of facial expressions causing miscommunications with a 31% rating. These miscommunications could affect the outcome of the conversation and may cause many negative factors to be associated with WhatsApp. However, WhatsApp has been seen by majority i.e. 60% of respondents as a medium that is not used to avoid real life situations or encounters. It is in turn seen as an additional tool that helps communicate with other people. Although we are in the age of technology and innovation, WhatsApp cannot be a replacement for face-to-face communication (63% still prefer being face-to-face). This study has also found that there is no correlation between the amount of time you spend messaging a person and how close the relation is to the person (55% of respondents rated against the closeness and frequency of WhatsApp messaging). Occasionally one messages someone daily simply because there is a reason for not being able to see them face-to-face. This does not however decrease the value or closeness put on those who are not messaged as often.

Overall, 80% of college students agree or strongly agree with WhatsApp being an effective form of interpersonal communication, 10% are neutral to the statement, and only 10% disagree with it.

6. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to answer three Research Questions; namely whether WhatsApp is an effective interpersonal communication medium, whether it can replace face-to-face communication, and whether it could lead to miscommunications – and if so what they are. There has been a thorough examination of research accumulated through various sources in order to answer these questions as accurately as possible. Ultimately these research questions have been answered as: Yes, WhatsApp is in fact an effective form of interpersonal communication among college 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). According to the research results, there are many factors to be considered when investigating patterns of college students' communication patterns. Thus, there is evidently a need for further research on the topic of effectiveness of online communication mediums, especially considering the advancing communication technology that alters the way one interacts with another, on a global level.

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