



Understanding Emoticons: Perception and Usage of Emoticons in WhatsApp

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Abstract

The use of emoticons in different forms such as text-based, computer-mediated and Instant Messaging services is ever increasing. Emoticons which evolved decades ago, was basically used to represent emotion. With the advent of technology, emoticons have been graphically/digitally transformed and evolved in the way people look and for what they are used for. With a wide array of emoticons at disposal, these emoticons are used for expressing emotions and also numerous activities and phrases. The usage of emoticons, their perception and interpretation varies from person to person. The study reveals that majority believe that emoticons make conversations more interactive, enhance online message communication and generate the required response from the receiver. The study also showed that over majority of the respondents look at both eye and mouth of emoticons for facial emotion recognition.

Keywords: Emoticons, Instant Messaging, WhatsApp, Understanding, Perception.

1. Introduction

Expression is one of the most basic forms of communication. Humans as a race have the capacity to produce with high complexity and different forms of expression with complex

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meanings. Facial expressions and gestures form a major part of non-verbal communication in humans. These cues are absent in text-based and Computer Mediated Communications (CMC). CMC or Computer Mediate Communication refers to “human communication via computers and includes many different forms of synchronous, asynchronous or real-time interaction that humans have with each other using computers as tools to exchange text, images, audio and video.” CMC includes e-mail, network communication, instant messaging, text messaging, hypertext, distance learning, Internet forums, USENET newsgroups, bulletin boards, online shopping, distribution lists and videoconferencing (CMC, 2015). Thus, to overcome this lack emoticons aid in providing non-verbal cues in online message communications.

Emoticon is a combination of two words - “Emotion + Icon.” (MacAlpine, 2014). Initially emoticons were created with a combination of symbols and punctuations. The first instance of mentioning the use of emoticons dates back to 1881, in the Puck Magazine. An article in this magazine spoke about how symbols and characters when placed vertically created typographical art, which could be used to represent emotional feelings.

When it comes to CMC, the first documented use of the *smilie* on the internet was used in the year 1887 by Scott Falhman. The purpose of the usage of the following emoticons:

: -) to indicate joke in the message.

:-(to indicate that user is sad/unhappy.

This was mainly to indicate sarcasm as through CMC it was difficult to judge the emotional state of the sender as there is a lack of Non-verbal cues (MacAlpine, 2014).

Emoticons visually represent facial expressions and may indicate the self-reported mood or emotional state of a user within CMC. There are innumerable Emoticons dominate in online communication space such as WhatsApp. With every update of this online messaging app new emoticons are added to the existing list, thereby creating a databank of emoticons for users to use.

1.1 Instant-Messaging Apps

Instant messaging also known as IM is a type of online chat. It offers real-time text transmission over the Internet (Instant Messaging, 2015). Short messages are usually exchanged between the sender and the receiver. As the name suggests messages via internet get delivered instantly and a reply to the message too is instantaneous. Instant messaging application of the present time enables the user to exchange a wide range of information in the form of textual, audio and visuals like videos and photographs. With the advent of smartphone technology the face of IM has transformed globally and works more efficiently and effectively than e-mail world-wide. A number of IM Apps have been developed over the years. Few popular IM apps would be:

- WhatsApp
- Facebook Messenger
- WeChat
- Google Hangouts
- Snap Chat

WhatsApp is an instant messaging app for smart phones which works on the basis of subscription. Being a cross-platform app helps users to use the Internet to virtually communicate. In addition to text messaging, WhatsApp can be used to send images, video and audio media messages. This instant messaging app is constantly striving to bridge the gap of distance and make virtual communication as realistic as possible and has also included voice calling and integrated mapping features in its latest update.

1.2 Non-verbal communication

Non- verbal communication is the process of sending messages without the use of words. It is a kind of behaviour or movements that conveys meaning without the usage of any spoken or written communication. Non-verbal communication in humans includes various body movements and facial expressions. Non-verbal communication includes all forms of haptic communication. The non-verbal communication can be classified into two types mainly – Body language and gestures (Cherry, 2015). Body language includes the manner in which people walk, stand, in short how they carry out themselves. On the other hand gestures include all

the fine motor forms of body language such as eye contact, facial expressions and hand movements. The main characteristic of non-verbal communications is that they have the ability to convey emotions and attitudes more effectively. They emphasize, contradict or substantiate or even regulate verbal communication.

1.3 Emoticons

Emoticon is a facial expression pictorially represented. Traditional emoticons make use of punctuations, letters and symbols to express certain kinds of moods and emotions. The modern emoticons are highly graphitized and are in-built in the messaging app and various chatting platforms. Like mentioned above emoticon literally means an icon that represents emotion. The term emoticon appeared in print for the first time in the 1990 in "The New York Times." Later on in the year 2001 the word was entered in the Oxford Dictionary and in the year it became official internet lingo in the year 2002 (MacAlpine, 2014).

Emoticons evolved as a means to express emotions on the two-dimensional, virtual, online, written world of communication. In face-to-face communication the lack of ways so expressing emotions never occurred because the people involved in the communication process were visible and what the emotions and expressions were clearly expressed through their body language and facial expression. But when people began to use the virtual world of written communication often there were times when the right emotion and the right expression of the sender were not interpreted by the receiver. Emoticons thus attempt to substitute these nuances of face-to-face communication in online communication to depict facial expressions, mood and words.

The origin and development of emoticons can be dated back to 1976. But the first instance of emoticons being used on purpose in print was in the 1881 issue of Puck magazine and the article in this magazine referred to emoticons as a 'typographical art' which could be used for representing moods and emotions. The first documented online use of the happy :-) and sad :- (emoticons were by Scott Fahlman. In his mail dated 19 September 1982, Scott Fahlman said:

“I propose that the following character sequence for Joke markers: :-). Read it sideways. Actually, it is probably more economical to mark things that are NOT jokes, given current trends. For this use, :-(.“

Emoticons were used in literary criticism extensively. In this context, not only humans have feeling, but icons also have feelings. The following icons in the glossary will explain about their meanings(Bloom, 2010).

Positive	Neutral	Negative
[:^)] I like it; yes!	[:^~] But on the other hand	[:^(] Bad
[:^+] Has some good points	[:^I] Noncommittal	[:^6] Worse
[:^\$] Rich		[\^o] Boring
[:^O] Iconic		[@^+] Confusing

Fahlman’s main intention behind using emoticons was to identify sarcasm in online verbal communication. Over the years the purpose of emoticons has gone beyond just this purpose. There are two styles of emoticons. The manner in which one reads and writes in most Western cultures is from the left to the right, the emoticons in the western style is traditionally written and read in the same direction. The Japanese have, however, popularized another style of emotions which does not require people to tilt their heads to the left in order to understand them.

The research aims to understand the use of emoticons on WhatsApp. It also looks at whether emoticons stimulate significant nonverbal facial expressions and analyse the impact and also the capabilities of emoticons in WhatsApp mode of communication.

2. Review of Literature

Non-verbal communication is one of the primary and the most basic ways of expressing one’s moods, feelings emotions and attitudes. Considerable amount of communication between humans happens through the process of non-verbal communication. Knowingly or unknowingly we respond to numerous non-verbal cues and behaviours. “Non-verbal cues are communication signals without the use of vocabulary“ (Nonverbal Cues, 2015). Thus, non-verbal communication can be defined as

“communication by other means than by using words, e.g. through facial expressions, hand gestures and tone of voice.”

Nonverbal communication includes Paralinguistics, which deals with vocal communication that is distinct from the actual spoken language. The factors that determine the characteristics of paralinguistics is tone of voice, loudness, inflection and pitch. Paralinguistics are very powerful and help us to understand instantly what is the attitude, mood and emotion of a person instantly. Body language and postures form a large portion of non-verbal communication. Proxemics, gestures, eye gaze and haptics too form a part of non-verbal communication.

Non-verbal interaction is affected by a number of factors such as cultural background, socio-economic background, education, gender, age, personal preferences etc. Culture plays an important role in shaping one’s understanding and the use of the non-verbal cues in them. A cultural background of a person determines how he or she expresses emotions, perceives them and interprets them. “The verbal and non-verbal behaviours that individuals display in conversation are a product of their culture” (Lipi Akhter Aifa, 2010). Culture also helps to shape non-verbal communication and also influence individual character and styles of communication.

In an article, author Max S Kirch says that, “There are many facets to non-verbal communication in different cultures. Societies vary in their clothing and the special kinds which are used for activities such as school, church, hiking, etc. People indicate their occupations by wearing badges or uniforms. There are differences in rituals and ceremonies, the kinds of gifts, the occasions on which they are given, and the manner of presentation (Kirch, 1979).”

For this research study the key focus is on ‘facial expressions.’ Facial Expressions form an integral part of non-verbal communication. Facial expressions are responsible for a huge proportion of non-verbal communication. Tremendous amount of information can be conveyed with a smile or a frown. The look on the face is often the first thing we see, even before what they have to say. The thing with facial expressions across the globe and across cultures is that they are all similar unlike body language and gestures (Cherry, 2015).

The need to understand facial expression becomes important in this research because emoticons are graphic icons which determine the emotion or mood as seen on a person's face. Just with wrinkles showing up on the face just where the skin was smooth or when eyebrows, eyelids or even the mouth change its shape momentarily are enough to convey emotions? Paul Ekman says in a chapter on Facial expressions that it is not enough to determine what emotions are read from facial expressions. It is also crucial to discover whether the interpretations of the observers are correct or not. This kind of understanding is required while textually communicating on the online platform since nothing but words and emoticons can be used to convey messages and moods.

Culture has a significant impact on facial and non-verbal expressions and emotions. Ekman and many other researchers theorize that there are a basic set of at least six facial expressions that are innate, universal and carry the same basic meaning throughout the world. But at the same time we can see clear cut distinctions based on culture on how emotions are expressed. There are norms that most often dictate when where and how and to whom facial expressions are displayed. In conclusion, Rosenblatt rightly said that "what emotions are felt, how they are expressed and how they are understood are matters of culture" (Samovar, Porter, Mcdaniel, & Roy, 2013).

Yuki Masaki et.al, hypothesized that "depending on an individual's cultural background, facial cues in different parts of the face are weighted differently when interpreting emotions" (Yuki, Maddux, & Masuda, 2007). Western cultures and Eastern cultures view "expressing oneself" and showing/ expressing emotions" differently. Their approach towards expressing emotions too is very different. Thus the researchers feel that this may influence the way emoticons are viewed. This research concluded that cultural norms for expression of emoticons will impact the predominant facial cues individual use to recognize emotions. The Japanese emphasize more on the eyes to express emotions while the Americans look at the mouth. (Yuki, Maddux, & Masuda, 2007).

What are emoticons? Emoticons are nothing but graphical icons which depict human emotions and expressions in an animated

way. The portmanteau word Emoticons is a product of the combination of Emotions and icons. When looking at the iconicity i.e. the symbolic nature of emoticons we can say that emoticons visually resemble facial expressions. Traditional emoticons were created using symbols like punctuation marks and sellers. But now we graphitized emoticons which are automatically created. Defining emoticons Aubrie Adams says that they are “emotional icons: they visually represent facial expressions and may indicate the self-reported mood or emotional state of a user within CMC. These cartoon like symbols represented sideways - :-) are characteristic feature of Western style of emoticons. On the other hand straight-on facial depictions like - ^ _^ are characteristic feature of Eastern or the Japanese style of emoticons commonly known as ‘emojis’ (Wheeler, 2017).

In a Bibliographical essay on ‘Exploring Emoticons” Aubrie Adams says that twenty five years after the mention of the use of emoticons by Scott Flahman in the year 1982; the use of emoticons in CMC has multiplied to an extent that is unimaginable. The popularity of emoticons too has increased. In a survey conducted by Yahoo in the year 2007 found that around 82% of people who use instant-messaging used emoticons.

Amy Ip, in her research study, tries to look on the effectiveness of emoticons in Instant Messaging conversations and analyse how emoticons influence receiver’s interpretations of the affect intensity of instant messages. The results of the study show that, despite the simplicity and conciseness of IM messages, emoticons and punctuation marks can make a significant difference in how people interpret the message (Ip, 2001). Another paper investigated the influence of social context on the use of emoticons in the internet communication (Derks, Bos & Grumbkow, 2007), proved that emoticons were an important means of online communication. Many studies also have shown that the presence of emoticons in CMC has an impact on how the message is perceived. It is often proved that the message is more effective than message with only text.

3. Research Objectives

1. To study the computer mediated communication changed the existing model of face-to-face communication.
2. Aims to understand the use of emoticons on WhatsApp.
3. To identify whether emoticons simulate significant nonverbal facial expressions and analyse the impact of emoticons in used in WhatsApp.

3.1 Theoretical Frameworks

The uses and gratifications approach provides a framework for “understanding when and how different media consumers become more or less active and what the consequences of that increased or decreased involvement might be.” It is a psychological communication perspective that explores how media is used by individuals. This theory can be widely used for the studies based on the internet use because the theory also suggests that people consciously choose the medium that could satisfy their needs and that audiences are able to recognize their reasons for making media choices (Communication Theory/Uses and Gratifications, 2015).

The uses and gratification theory aims to explain how people use media for their need and gratification. This theory states what people do with media rather than what media does to people. This theory has a more audience centric approach and suggests people’s needs influence what media they would choose. There are several needs and gratification for people and they are categorized into five categories namely cognitive needs and affective needs, personal integrative needs, social integrative needs and tension free needs (Uses and Gratification Theory, 2015). This theory would ideally help to understand the use of graphic emoticons in internet textual communication.

Media richness theory or information richness theory was developed by Daft and Lengel. Online text-based communication is said to be less rich than other media on a number of important levels. For practitioners hoping to replace face-to-face mediation with an online tool, text-based approaches may seem to lack the immediacy and nuanced communication that face-to-face communication permits.

Media richness theory explains that the theory provides a framework for describing a communication medium's ability to reproduce the information sent over it without loss or distortion. Specifically, media richness theory states that the more ambiguous and uncertain a task is, the richer format of media suits it.

According to Daft and Lengel's theory, media richness is a function of (1) the medium's capacity for immediate feedback, (2) the number of cues and channels available, (3) language variety; and (4) the degree to which intent is focused on the recipient. The greater social presence of a medium creates a greater immediacy and warmth of the communication, because of the greater number of channels (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Francisco Yus uses the funnel effect to explain the usage of emoticons and graphical images during textual communication. He says that, "One's treasure chest of words gets limited while communicating via text on the net and thus people resort to using de-formatted text and emoticons for effective Internet Media Communication (Yus, 2014)."

This way a person can achieve success in expressing a range of feelings, emotions and attitudes. Albert H. Huang, et.al conducted a research on "exploring the potential effects of emoticons" and aimed at finding out whether the usage of emoticons mainly in the student community had a positive or a negative effect on them on instant messaging. In the research the researchers reasoned out why people use emoticons based on media richness theory. The media richness theory assumes that, "Richness of the communication medium affects its ability to carry information and thus change users' perception. "Rich medium enhances a recipient's understanding more rapidly" (Huang & Yen, 2008).

4. Methodology

This research aims to understand and analyse the use of emoticons by WhatsApp users. This research also aims to examine and understand Information Richness in WhatsApp when using emoticons and degree of emotion expressed through selected emoticons on WhatsApp an IM application.

The research is a quantitative type of research. In natural sciences and social sciences quantitative research is the systematic empirical

investigation of observable phenomena via statistical, mathematical or computational techniques (Given, 2008). In simple terms the researcher asks a specific question or a set of questions from study participants to answer the questions. The researcher then analyses the data with the help of statistics. The researcher hopes that numbers will yield an unbiased result that can be generalised to some larger population (Quantitative Research, 2015).

Survey method was employed in this research, for primary data collection. A structured questionnaire was prepared and was circulated amongst 150 students Undergraduate and Postgraduate of the Media Studies department in Christ University during January and February 2015.

The questions were specifically administered to the users of WhatsApp. The questionnaire was designed to explore the usage of emoticons by WhatsApp users, the ability of emoticons to replace the non-verbal cues in Instant Messaging Applications. The questionnaire also consisted of questions wherein the study participants had to grade emoticons based on the degree of happiness or sadness they felt while looking at the emoticons. The questionnaire consisted direct questions for which the participant had to choose either 'yes' or 'no' option for the posed statement or question.

The questionnaire included another section, wherein the study participant was shown a set of 14 emoticons (7 happy and 7 depressing/sad); the study participant had to mark the degree of emotion they felt looking at the emoticons presented.

The question contained a picture of an emoticon and the study participant had to choose the most suitable option varying from Very Happy, Happy, Normal and Least Happy and Very Sad, Sad, Normal and Least Sad. The data that was collected was coded and tabulated. Percentages and means were computed. Based on the results of the analysis interpretations were made and the conclusions were arrived at.

4.1 Data Analysis and Interpretation

An analysis of the data threw light upon the issues that the researcher wanted to look into. The percentages and the means of

the variables helped in understanding the perceptions that study participants had about emoticons. The study also helped the researcher understand whether the study participants looked at the eyes or the mouth for emotion recognition and whether emoticons can transform the instant-messaging communication on WhatsApp and make them as authentic, rich and realistic as face-to-face interactions.

150 questionnaires were circulated amongst media students of Christ University. The researcher got 131 responses and the responses were all computed. Percentages were computed to arrive at conclusions.

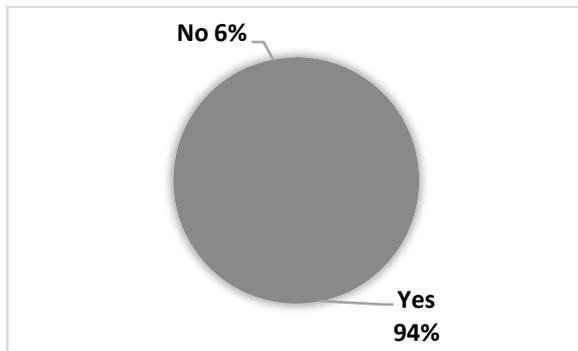


Fig1 Percentage of WhatsApp users who use emoticons

While 96% percent use WhatsApp, 94% used emoticons. Only 6% of people said that they do not use emoticons for communication (Fig 1).

80% of the respondents believed that usage of emoticons enhanced textual communication. (Fig 2) This means majority of the population agreed with the statement. As the media richness theory states that, "Richness of the communication medium affects its ability to carry information and thus change users' perception" (Huang & Yen, 2008).

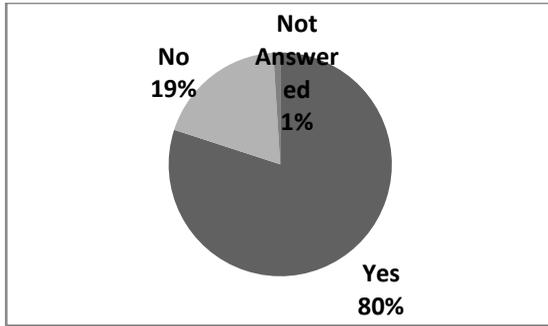


Fig 2 Percentage of emoticon users who believe emoticons enhances textual communication

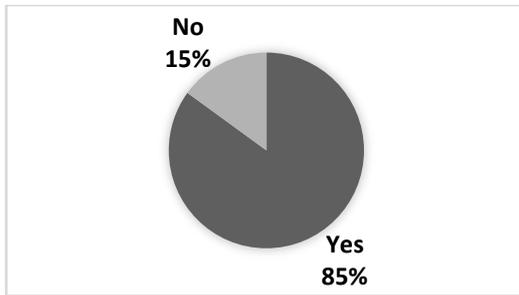


Fig 3 Percentage of emoticon users who believe emoticons make conversations more interactive

From Fig. 2 and Fig. 3 it is observed that 85% of respondents find emoticons to make textual messaging very interactive while 15% believe that emoticons have no impact on making conversations more interactive.

73% of the respondents feel that usage of emoticons help in building the required impressions on the receiver whereas 27% of the respondents disagree with the statement. (Fig. 4)

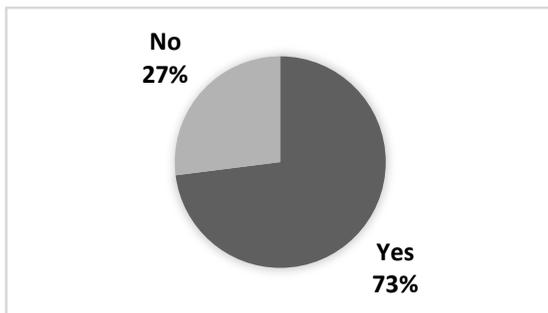


Fig 4 Percentage of users who believe emoticons helps in building required impressions.

Users and gratification theory explains how people use media for their need and gratification. This theory states what people do with media rather than what media does to people. Based on this theory it is clear that majority of the respondents of the study use emoticons because it makes the conversation more interactive and also helps in creating the right kind of impression on the receiver. The usage of emoticons is to gratify the need of communicating accurate communication and this is achieved through the use of emoticons. Data received from the respondents helps the researcher to prove the hypothesis that information richness is directly proportional to the usage of emoticons. The second part of the survey questionnaire focused upon select emoticons which are universal on all IM applications and the study respondents were asked to rate the emoticons how happy or sad they perceived them to be.

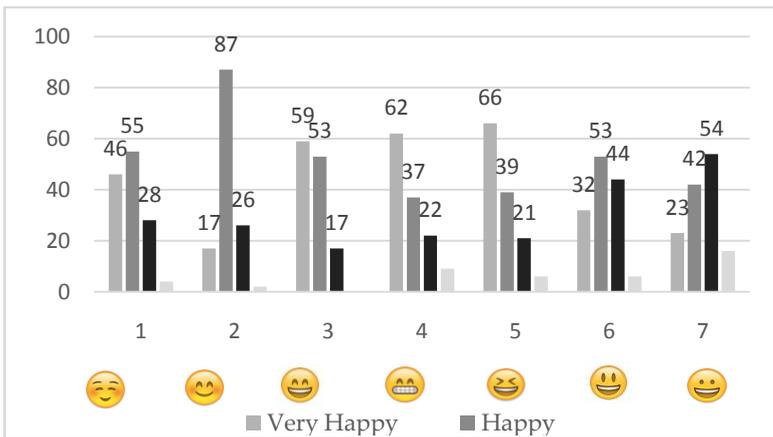


Fig 5 Perception of happiness via emoticon by respondents

On observing Fig. 5 it is inferred that “ 😊 ” (Smiling face with open mouth and tightly closed eyes) emoticon is perceived by the respondents to be a “very happy” emoticon. This emoticon evokes emotional expression from both the eyes and the mouth. This means that majority of the respondents perceive happiness to be expressed using both eyes and the mouth.

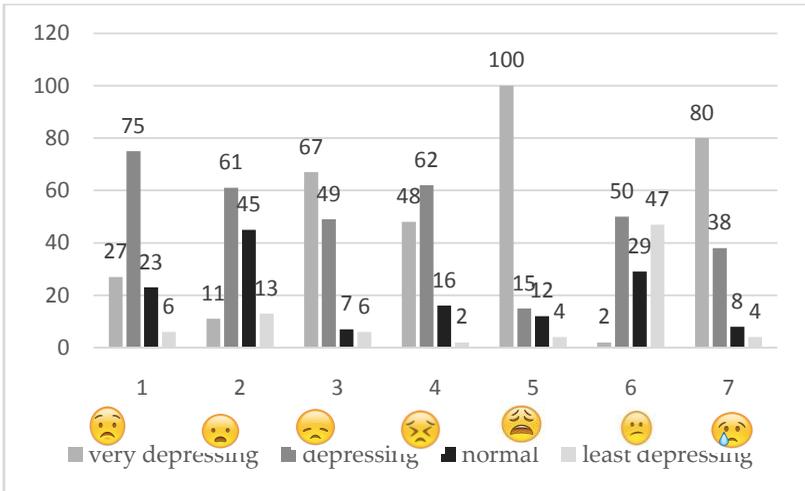


Fig 6 Perception of sadness via emoticons by respondents

On observing the Fig. 6 it is inferred that “😞” (Weary face) emoticon is perceived by the respondents to be a “very sad/depressing” emoticon. This is a distraught-looking emoticon with an open mouth, and crescent shaped eyes. Appears to have given up, which indeed is very depressing. This emoticon evokes emotional expression from both the eyes and the mouth. This means that majority of the respondents perceive sadness to be expressed using both eyes and the mouth.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of the data collected provided the researcher with a widespread understanding of emoticon usage and helped arrive at a desired conclusion. On the basis of the data collected, analysed and interpreted, the researcher has come to understand that emoticons play a significant role in textual communication, makes textual communication in WhatsApp more interactive, meaningful and enhances the message being communicated. Emoticons make Computer Mediated Communication in WhatsApp authentic and as rich as face to face conversations. Though it is found through the research that emoticons enhance communication, makes communication more interactive and also conveys a lot of emotions it does not completely act as cues which can replace non-verbal

cues that are present in face to face interactions. The researcher also understood that study respondents looked in the eye and the mouth for facial emotion recognition.

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Appendix

Table 1 Indicating the results based on the questions asked in the survey

Question	Yes	No	Not answered
Do you use WhatsApp for communication?	96%	4%	
Do you use emoticons?	94%	6%	
Are you aware of emoticons?	98%	2%	
Do you use emoticons frequently?	78%	20%	2%
Do you think it is useful to use emoticons while communicating on WhatsApp?	875%	13%	
Do you think emoticons convey more information than textual matter?	65%	35%	
Do you think usage of emoticons enhances the textual communication?	80%	19%	1%
Do you think the use of emoticons makes conversation more interactive?	85%	15%	
Do you think usage of emoticon lead to build required impressions	73%	27%	
Do you think an emoticon alone without any text conveys a message	65%	35%	
Do you think emoticons can change the meaning of the text being	89%	11%	

communicated?

Do you think emoticons help to compensate for the absence of physical context?	57%	43%
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Table 2 Description of the emoticons used for stud

Sl. No	Emoticon / emoji	Emoticon name	Description	Also known as
1.		Smiling face with open mouth and smiling eyes	A happy and smiling face with big open mouth, showing teeth	Smiley face emoji Grinning face emoji Happy face emoji
2.		Smiling face with open mouth	Classic smiley face emoji. Big open mouth, showing teeth , with large open eyes	Happy emoji Happy face emoji Smiley face emoji Grinning face emoji
3.		Grinning face	A face with a big open (grinning) mouth, showing teeth	Smiley face emoji Happy face emoji
4.		Smiling face with smiling eyes	A smiling face, with smiling eyes and rosy cheeks. Showing a true sense of inner happiness	Smile emoji Smiley face emoji Happy face emoji Content emoji
5.		White smiling face	Smiling face predates emoji. This is a modern version of the original	Smiling emoji Smiley face emoji Grinning face emoji Happy face emoji
6.		Grinning face with smiling eyes	This is commonly used as a grimacing face, instead of its intended purpose as a grinning (smiling) face with smiling eyes.	Frustrated emoji Freezing emoji Cold emoji

Sl. No	Emoticon / emoji	Emoticon name	Description	Also known as
7.		Smiling face with open mouth and tightly closed eyes	A face with a big smiling mouth, and scrunched-closed eyes	Big grin emoji Closed- eyes emoji
8.		Disappointed face	A sad face with a frowning mouth and disappointed eyes	Sad emoji Sadface emoji White frowning face
9.		Crying face	A face with a single tear running from one eye, down the cheek.	Crying emoji Tear emoji Teary emoji
10.		Weary face	Hurt, upset, but not hysterically crying. A distraught-looking Emoji with an open mouth, and crescent shaped eyes. Appears to have given up.	Distraught face emoji Wailing emoji
11.		Worried face	Face with a sad mouth, and worried-looking eyebrows.	Sadface emoji Sad emoji
12.		Frowning face with open mouth	Face with open eyes and open mouth. The Apple artwork for this emoji looks like a person yawning.	Yawning emoji
13.		Persevering face	Face with scrunched up and closed eyes, frowning. Used to show helplessness in a situation. May be on the verge of tears.	Scrunched eyes emoji Helpless face emoji

Sl. No	Emoticon / emoji	Emoticon name	Description	Also known as
14.		Confused Face	On the spectrum of displeasure, confused face sits between neutral face and unamused face.	

Source: emojiopedia.org