

THE USEFULNESS OF WHATSAPP GIF AND SYMBOLS IN DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

The rapid growth of digital communication has changed the way people interact, especially through instant messaging platforms like WhatsApp. The use of GIFs and symbols (Emojis) in conversation has introduced new ways of expressing thoughts and emotions beyond ordinary text messages. Despite the widespread and wide usage of these features, some people do not fully understand their purpose or usefulness. There are also concerns about whether GIFs and symbols truly improve communication or sometimes cause misunderstandings because of differences in interpretation and personal perception. This study examines the usefulness of WhatsApp GIFs and symbols in communication and to unravel how GIF and symbols help in expressing emotions, improving message clarity and enhancing overall interaction among users. The study adopts a qualitative research method reliant on interrogating empirical data. The study is hinged on Media Richness Theory by Richard Daft and Robert Lengel in 1986 which explains that communication effectiveness depends on the ability of a medium to convey multiple cues and reduce ambiguity. It also suggests that lean media such as text messaging can be enhanced through the addition of visuals and emotional cues hence increasing their richness. The findings reveal that most users believe GIFs and symbols help in expressing feelings, emphasizing tone, reducing ambiguity and making conversations more interesting. It also discovers that misinterpretation can occur due to cultural differences, personal perception and improper usage especially when the GIF or symbols sent contradicts the intended message. This study concludes that WhatsApp GIFs and symbols greatly improve digital communication by serving as substitute for non verbal cues present in

face to face interactions. The study therefore recommends that users apply them carefully and that digital communication literacy be encouraged to reduce misunderstanding.

Keywords: Usefulness, Whatsapp, GIF, Symbols Digital Communication

Introduction

Communication has become an important part of everyday human interaction, especially with the growth of mobile messaging applications. According to Ochulor, Atiu and Adebayo, “Communication is the birthright of all societies, regardless of geographical location” (83). Communication remains the life blood of every relationship because without it even the strongest relationship can become strained. It is the process of sending and receiving information, ideas, feelings or messages between two or more people in order to achieve understanding- the core essence of every communication. It is a fundamental part of human interaction because people rely on communication to share knowledge, express emotions, build relationships and coordinate activities. Without communication, cooperation and social organizations would be difficult to achieve,

Over the years, the process of communication has been greatly influenced by technological advancement. The emergence of the internet and digital devices has transformed the way people share information and interact with one another. As a result, communication has gradually shifted from traditional forms to digital communication, which allows individuals to exchange messages through online platforms and electronic media.

Digital communication refers to the process of sending and receiving information through electronic or internet-based technologies. It involves the use of digital devices and platforms to exchange messages, ideas, images, videos, and other forms of information between individuals or groups. Unlike traditional communication methods such as letters or face-to-face interaction, digital communication relies on digital signals and electronic networks to transmit information quickly across long distances.

Among the many digital communication platforms available today, WhatsApp has emerged as one of the most widely used which allows users to exchange instant messages, voice notes, images, videos and other multimedia contents through smartphones and internet connectivity. Lantaron, Yolanda and Perales submit that “WhatsApp is widely used because it enables users to communicate quickly and share multimedia information easily across different digital environment” (10). With millions of users worldwide, WhatsApp has changed the way people communicate by making conversations faster, more interactive and less dependent on physical presence as Ochulor et al opines, “one does not have to be in the same geographical location to communicate”.....(83). Bakare, Abdurraham and Owusu agree that, “WhatsApp facilitates easy communication as users can send messages, images, videos, and participate in group conversations instantly, making it a widely used medium for interpersonal and group communication” (269).

This makes WhatsApp an effective platform for both personal and professional interactions. According to Jan Koum and Brian Acton “WhatsApp Messenger has rapidly become one of the most popular mobile messaging applications, enabling users to exchange text messages, images, videos and audio messages instantly across the globe” (qtd. in Miller et.al , 9). This explains one of the major features that makes WhatsApp an effective medium of communication and expounds its ability to support real-time messaging. Messages sent through the platform are delivered almost instantly when there is internet

connectivity. This allows users to engage in immediate conversations and receive quick feedback, which enhances the efficiency of communication.

Another important aspect of WhatsApp as a medium is its multimedia communication capability. Unlike traditional text-based communication, WhatsApp enables users to communicate using various digital elements such as pictures, voice recordings, videos, emojis, GIFs, and symbols. In support of the statement above, Sherry Turkle asserts that, “Mobile messaging applications such as WhatsApp have become integral to digital interaction because they allow users to communicate through texts, images, emojis and multimedia content” (211). This shows that WhatsApp has become an important medium for instant communication, allowing users to share not only text messages but also multimedia elements such as emojis, GIFs and images which enrich digital interaction. These features help to enrich conversations and allow users to express emotions, reactions, and intentions more clearly. It also supports group communication, which allows multiple users to interact within the same conversation space like family group chat, students group chat e.t.c. Through group chats, individuals can share ideas, discuss topics, coordinate activities, and exchange information simultaneously. This feature is commonly used in social groups, educational settings, workplaces, and community organizations.

Furthermore, WhatsApp has become an important tool for maintaining social relationships and facilitating communication across long distances. Families, friends, colleagues, and organizations rely on the platform to stay connected and share information easily. To this end, Anuggerah and Nurfalalah posit, “WhatsApp plays an important role in facilitating the dissemination of information and strengthening social bonds among users through frequent digital interaction”(38). The application also provides features such as voice calls and video calls, which allow users to communicate in a more personal and interactive manner.

Statement of the Problem

Although GIFs and symbols are widely used and seem helpful, there are still concerns about how effective they really are in communication. They are meant to make communication easier and help people express their feelings, but they can sometimes cause misunderstanding. This happens when different people interpret the same symbol or GIF in different ways. It becomes even more confusing because of differences in culture, situation, and individual understanding.

In addition, the over-reliance on GIFs and symbols may reduce the clarity and seriousness of communication, particularly in formal or academic settings. Their informal nature may blur the intended meaning of messages and affect the quality of information exchange. Hence this study seeks to critically examine the usefulness of WhatsApp GIFs and symbols in digital communication with a view to determining whether they truly enhance communication or contribute to misunderstanding and reduced message clarity.

Theoretical Framework

This study is hinged on the Media Richness Theory, which was developed by Richard L. Daft and Robert H. Lengel in 1986. The theory explains how different communication media vary in their ability to convey information effectively and reduce ambiguity.

Media Richness Theory sometimes called information richness theory classifies communication channels based on their “richness,” that is, their capacity to transmit multiple cues, provide immediate

feedback, support natural language, and convey personal feelings. According to the theory, richer media are more effective for complex, ambiguous, and emotionally laden messages, while lean media are more suitable for simple and straightforward Communication. To this end, Richard Bergen opines that “Communication transactions that can overcome different frames of reference or clarify ambiguous issues to change understanding in a timely manner are considered rich. Communication that requires a long time to enable understanding or that cannot overcome different perspectives are lower in richness”(1).

This is to say that Rich communications are exchanges that quickly clear up misunderstanding, They can adapt to different people’s perspectives or backgrounds. They allow people to learn or understand new information efficiently. Example: A face-to-face conversation or a live video call is “rich” because you can see body language, tone, and get instant feedback. While Lean communications, take longer to understand or are not flexible in handling different viewpoints, misunderstandings may be harder to fix. Example: A formal email or a printed notice is “lean” because you can’t ask immediate questions or clarify tone easily. Hence, a communication medium is considered rich or lean based on its ability to provide immediate feedback, convey multiple cues, support language variety, and express personal emotions, as explained by Media Richness Theory. Media that possess these features are regarded as rich, while those lacking them are considered lean.

Vala, Moosavi and Baghiabadi posit that in media richness theory, ambiguity is a key concept to determining the best communication media used for each task type. Therefore, the most opaque messages need to use more powerful communication media to be effective”(46). Communication messages also include a level of uncertainty (mistrust). Uncertainty usually refers to the lack of information in the message (Shannon and Weaver, qtd in Vala et.al 46).

This implies that Communication messages are not always clear. Sometimes, they carry a level of uncertainty, which can make the receiver confused or even doubtful about the message. According to Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver (1949), uncertainty happens when there is not enough information in a message. In other words, the message does not fully explain itself, so the receiver may struggle to understand the exact meaning. This can happen when the message is too brief, unclear, or open to different interpretations. It can also be caused by distractions or “noise” that affects how the message is received. Because of this, the receiver may misunderstand the message or even mistrust what the sender is trying to say. In digital communication like WhatsApp, this is very common. For example, GIFs and symbols do not always have one clear meaning. Their interpretation depends on the situation and the relationship between the people communicating. If both people do not understand the message in the same way, it can lead to confusion or wrong assumptions. So, uncertainty simply means that the message is not clear enough, and this can affect how well communication is understood.

Application of Media Richness Theory to WhatsApp Communication

In the context of digital communication, platforms like WhatsApp have evolved to become richer through the use of emojis, symbols, and GIFs, which help to express emotions, provide context, and reduce ambiguity in messages. These elements enhance the communication process by adding non-verbal cues to text-based interactions, thereby improving clarity and interpretation. Therefore, the richness of a communication medium ultimately reflects its capacity to facilitate quick learning, shared understanding, and effective interaction, making it highly relevant in modern digital communication environments. WhatsApp started as a lean medium (text-based) but with technological advancement and

digital evolution GIFs and symbols (emojis, stickers) became infused making the communication process richer. The Media Richness Theory identifies four major aspects, which provide the foundation for its application to WhatsApp communication.

i. Immediacy of Feedback: Immediacy of feedback refers to the degree to which a communication medium allows quick or instant responses between participants. If communication allows you to get a reply instantly or very quickly, it has high immediacy of feedback. If there is a delay before you get a response, it has low immediacy of feedback. Hence, Immediacy of feedback deals with speed of response, back and forth interaction and real time clarification. For instance, a face to face conversation has a high immediacy because you talk and the other person responds, phone calls and video calls on WhatsApp,

WhatsApp chats are also immediate but moderate because they are not always instant. It also refers to how fast a receiver can respond to a message. In WhatsApp, users can reply instantly using emojis or GIFs, instead of typing long responses, a single symbol can serve as quick feedback. GIFs and symbols make communication faster and more responsive, which improves interaction and understanding, it allows for questions and clarification and makes communication more effective especially for complex messages. With regards to the topic under discussion, Media Richness Theory explains that communication is more effective when feedback is quick. Hence, WhatsApp allows users to reply instantly through chats, voice notes, and other features, making communication faster, clearer and richer.

iii. Multiple Cues (Non-verbal Signals): Communication most times, is not about what you say but how you say it and what accompanies it. Multiple cues refer to the different types of signals used to pass meaning during communication, especially beyond just words. These cues help the receiver better understand the message, emotions, and intention of the sender. Multiple cue includes various verbal and non-verbal signals, such as facial expressions, tone of voice, gestures, and symbols, that accompany a message and enhance understanding in communication. It includes the following, to mention but a few:

- Facial expressions (smiling, frowning)
- Tone of voice (angry, calm, excited)
- Gestures (hand movements, body language)
- Eye contact
- Posture
- Emojis, GIFs, stickers (in WhatsApp communication)

Ordinarily, text messages which are considered a lean medium of communication lack these cues, but when GIFs and symbols are introduced to the conversation, they turn visual and emotional expressions into conversations. For example, when someone says I'm fine, without any symbol accompanying it. That is a lean communication because the receiver of message does not really know if the sender is actually fine or not. But when the message comes with a smile you believe them. If it comes with a sad face and low tone, you know something is wrong. However, the words are the same, but the cues change the meaning thus enhancing the communication and creating room for efficient understanding. Fortunately WhatsApp allows users to use these cues because hence messages are more expressive, emotions and intentions are better conveyed and misunderstanding are reduced thereby making WhatsApp a richer medium compared to plain text messages regarded as lean. Suffice it to say that WhatsApp aligns with the multiple cues aspect of Media Richness Theory by enabling users to combine different forms of expression to enhance understanding.

iii. Language Variety (Natural Language): It is not just what you say, but how you say it. This idea reflects the concept of language variety in Media Richness Theory, which emphasizes that effective communication depends on the flexibility and expressiveness of language used. In WhatsApp communication, users employ natural language, slangs, GIFs, voice notes emojis, and other features to enhance meaning and understanding. Language variety, as proposed by Media Richness Theory, refers to the extent to which a communication medium allows the use of natural, flexible, and expressive language. This flexibility promotes better understanding and reduces ambiguity, thereby increasing the richness of the medium. WhatsApp communication requires everyday, natural conversational languages and not formal or rigid words. Examples are "I'm so happy, Omo, this thing shock me, I can't deal with this right now" all these reflects real emotions, culture, and personality. However, WhatsApp strongly supports language variety because users can communicate freely using:

- Informal language ("Hey", "What's up")
- Slang and local expressions ("Abeg", "No wahala")
- Code-mixing (English + Pidgin + local languages)
- Emojis and GIFs to support meaning
- Voice notes to express tone naturally.

Imagine two friends chatting on WhatsApp:

Case 1: Without language variety

Person A sends: "I'm fine."

This is plain text. The receiver may be confused. Are they truly okay? Are they upset? Are they being sarcastic?

Case 2: With language variety (natural language + cues)

Person A sends: "I'm fine ooo... this day just tire me!"

Now the message includes: Natural language ("ooo", informal tone), Emotion and Cultural expression ("this day just tire me")

The second message, clearly shows emotion and mood, feels more real and personal and reduces misunderstanding. It serves as a space where families, friends, and colleagues interact and stay connected. For families, it functions as a bonding platform; for friends, it strengthens relationships; and for colleagues, it provides an avenue for collaboration, idea sharing, and discussions. Therefore, the use of language variety becomes essential, as effective bonding and interaction depend on the ability of individuals to communicate in ways that are natural, relatable, and easily understood by all participants.

iv. Personal Focus (Emotional Expression): Personal focus (also called personalization) in Media Richness Theory refers to the ability of a communication medium to convey personal feelings, emotions, and a sense of human connection between the sender and the receiver. It is how much a message feels personal, direct, and human, instead of formal or distant. WhatsApp has proven to be a medium with high personal focus which allows for expression of emotions and feelings, use of personal tone (friendly, caring, informal), direct addressing of individuals and creation of a sense of closeness or relationship. Hence, personalization is a necessity in media communication because Communication is more effective when it feels personal and engaging, media that support personal focus are considered richer and it helps build trust, understanding, and connection.

Unlike formal channels (like emails or official notices), WhatsApp gives you tools to make messages personal. You can call someone's name, You can adjust your tone, express emotions, respond instantly and casually and even share personal moments like pictures, videos and voice notes. All these make communication feel human, not mechanical. For instance, Instead of typing:

"I'm sorry" Someone sends a voice note: "I'm really sorry about what happened... I didn't mean it. The receiver now hears Tone, sincerity, Emotion. Thus WhatsApp allows people to adjust how they speak based on who they are talking to, show emotions easily and build relationships through communication and that is exactly what personal focus in Media Richness Theory is about. In summary, in real life, people don't just talk to pass information, they talk to connect, express feelings. Show care and build relationships and WhatsApp supports all these because it removes distance, It allows emotional expression and It makes communication feel like a face-to-face interaction (even though it is digital) that is why it is considered a rich communication medium.

Origin and Growth of WhatsApp

WhatsApp was founded in 2009 by Jan Koum and Brian Acton, two former employees of Yahoo. Before establishing WhatsApp, both founders had spent several years working in the technology sector at Yahoo!, where they gained experience in internet services and software development. After leaving Yahoo! in 2007, Koum and Acton explored various opportunities within the technology industry. They even applied for jobs at companies such as Facebook but were unsuccessful. This experience motivated them to pursue their own innovative idea that would eventually transform digital communication.

The idea for WhatsApp emerged during the rapid expansion of smartphones, particularly after the release of the iPhone. When Koum purchased an iPhone in 2009, he realized that mobile applications had the potential to significantly improve the way people communicate. Initially, WhatsApp was created as a simple mobile application that allowed users to update their status and inform friends about their availability or activities.

However, with the introduction of push notification technology in the iOS operating system, the founders modified the application so that users could receive notifications whenever a contact updated their status. Users soon began responding to these updates, and the platform gradually evolved into a real-time messaging service. This development marked the beginning of WhatsApp as an instant messaging application (ontag & Diefenbach, 3).

During its early development, WhatsApp encountered several technical and financial challenges. The application frequently crashed and initially struggled to attract users. At one point, Jan Koum reportedly considered abandoning the project because of these difficulties. However, Brian Acton encouraged him to continue developing the application and later invested about \$250,000 to support the startup.

With this financial support, the founders were able to improve the platform and expand its features. By 2010, WhatsApp began to gain popularity as smartphone usage increased and users looked for cheaper alternatives to the traditional Short Message Service (SMS). Scholars note that mobile instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp gained popularity because they provided faster and more cost-effective communication than conventional messaging systems (Church & de Oliveira, 353).

As the platform gained more users, WhatsApp introduced several features that enhanced its functionality and improved user experience. These included multimedia messaging, which enable users to share photos, videos, and audio recordings. The application also introduced group messaging, allowing multiple users to communicate within a single chat environment.

Another important innovation was the synchronization of users' phone contacts with the application, which made it easier for individuals to locate and communicate with their existing contacts. The platform also expanded to support multiple smartphone operating systems, increasing its accessibility to a broader audience. According to scholars, the simplicity and efficiency of WhatsApp significantly contributed to its rapid adoption across different regions of the world (Church & de Oliveira, 354).

The growth of WhatsApp accelerated as smartphones became more widely used around the world. Its user-friendly interface and affordability made it particularly attractive to individuals seeking efficient and low-cost communication tools. Consequently, the platform quickly gained millions of users across different countries.

A major milestone in the development of WhatsApp occurred in 2014 when it was acquired by Facebook, now known as Meta Platforms, for approximately \$19 billion. This acquisition represented one of the largest technology acquisitions in history and demonstrated the growing influence of WhatsApp in global digital communication (Montag & Diefenbach, 5). Following the acquisition, WhatsApp continued to expand its technological capabilities. In 2015, the platform introduced voice calling, enabling users to make calls through internet connectivity rather than traditional telephone networks. This was followed by the introduction of video calling in 2016, which allowed users to engage in real-time visual communication.

A new significant development occurred in 2016 when WhatsApp implemented end-to-end encryption. This security feature ensures that messages can only be read by the sender and the intended recipient, thereby enhancing privacy and security for users. Scholars have noted that this development strengthened user confidence in the platform as a secure communication tool (Montag, Błaszczewicz & Sariyska, 2). In addition to these developments, WhatsApp introduced voice notes, document sharing, and status updates that allow users to share photos, videos, and text that disappear after twenty-four hours. These features transformed WhatsApp from a simple messaging application into a comprehensive digital communication platform.

A further milestone in its growth was the introduction of WhatsApp Business, which enables businesses and organizations to communicate directly with customers, provide services, and promote their products. This innovation has expanded the platform's relevance beyond personal communication into business and commercial interactions. Today, WhatsApp has become one of the most widely used messaging platforms in the world, with over two billion active users. The platform plays a significant role in facilitating interpersonal communication, social interaction, education, and business transactions across different societies.

In many developing regions, particularly in Africa and Asia, WhatsApp has become an essential communication tool because it enables people to exchange messages, share multimedia content, and make voice or video calls at relatively low cost. Scholars argue that mobile messaging platforms such

as WhatsApp have fundamentally transformed digital communication by enabling instant, interactive, and multimedia-based communication among users (Montag&Diefenbach, 2018, 6).

Concept of Symbols and their Uses in WhatsApp Messages

The advancement of digital communication technologies has introduced new forms of interaction that go beyond traditional text-based messages. On platforms such as WhatsApp, communication increasingly involves the use of symbols, emojis, and GIFs to convey emotions, ideas, and reactions. These visual elements have become an essential part of online interaction because they help users express feelings, clarify tone, and enhance the meaning of messages in digital conversations. According to Telaumbanua et.al:

In today's digital era, the use of emojis has become an integral part of everyday online communication and interactions on social media platforms. The development of communication technology and the growth of internet use drive the popularity of emojis. The rapid growth in the use of emojis since they were first introduced in the late 1990s transcends the boundaries of written language and becomes a global language (118).

Symbols are visual signs or characters that represent particular meanings or ideas within a communication process. In digital communication, symbols appear in various forms, including emojis, icons, and typographic signs. Emojis, in particular, are small graphical icons that represent emotions, objects, or ideas, such as (laughing), (love), or (approval). They are one of the most common types of symbols used on WhatsApp. According to Ochulor et.al:

Emoji is a small digital image or icon that is used forexpressing an idea or feeling. It enlivens text messages withtiny cheerful faces. Emoji is used to indicate gratitude, support, life, care, surprise, and other positive affectionateemotions. Its major role is to provide emotional clues that would otherwise be absent from a textual discourse (85).

These symbols function as non-verbal cues that provide emotional or expressive context to text-based messages. In face-to-face communication, people rely on gestures, facial expressions, and tone of voice to convey meaning. However, in digital messaging environments like WhatsApp, these cues are absent. Emojis and other symbols help fill this gap by visually representing emotions or reactions, making messages more expressive and easier to interpret (Derks, Bos& von Grumbkow, 766).

Babatunde Rotimi Ojebuyi asserts that, “digital communication platforms enable users to combine text with visual symbols such as emojis and icons to express emotions, reactions, and intentions more effectively in online interactions”(47). In support of this view, symbols and emojis also enhance communication efficiency. Instead of writing long explanations, users can employ a single emoji or symbol to convey complex emotions such as approval, humour, sarcasm, or empathy. This contributes to faster, interactive, and engaging digital communication.

Since digital communication often lacks physical cues like facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice, symbols help compensate for these limitations by providing visual and emotional context to messages. Beyond expressing emotions, symbols perform several important functions that improve the effectiveness of digital interaction. Some of them are discussed below:

Facilitating Quick Communication: Symbols enable users to communicate ideas quickly and efficiently. Instead of writing lengthy explanations, a single emoji or symbol can convey a complete reaction or response. That is to say it saves time instead of typing. For example, a thumbs-up emoji may indicate agreement or approval without the need for additional text, flowers depict love and greetings can be achieved by a single emoji. This helps make communication faster and more convenient in digital environments (Danesi,45).



Plates 1
Aggrement



2
Love



3
Greetings

Enhancing Message Clarity: Symbols help clarify the meaning of messages by providing emotional context. In text-based communication, messages can sometimes appear ambiguous or be easily misinterpreted hence, contradicting the essence of the message sent across. For instance, two friends chatting on WhatsApp may exchange messages in a playful manner. If one person sends the message “You are stupid,” the receiver may interpret it as an insult because the message appears harsh in plain text. However, when the sender attaches a laughing or a playful emoji, it immediately signals that the statement is meant humorously rather than offensively. In this case, the symbol helps clarify the sender’s intention and prevents misunderstanding. This illustrates how symbols and emojis provide emotional cues that enhance message clarity in digital communication. To this end, Derks et.al posit that “the inclusion of emojis helps indicate whether a message is intended to be humorous, sarcastic, friendly, or serious, thereby improving the clarity of communication”(766).



Plate 4 A Laughing Emoji

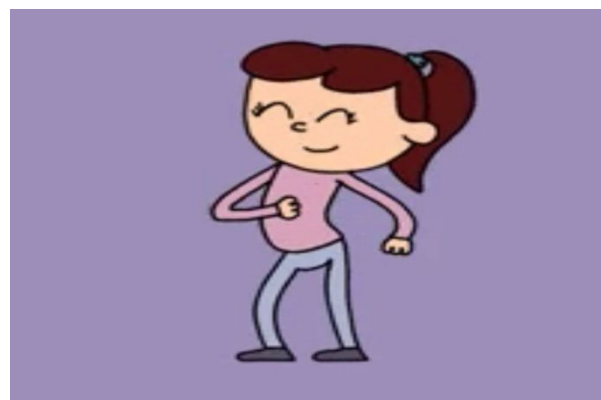


Plate 5 A Playful Emoji

Strengthening Social Interaction: Symbols contribute to building and maintaining social relationships in digital communication. Emojis such as hearts, smiles, and celebratory icons help convey warmth, friendliness, and appreciation among users. Scholars note that the use of emojis enhances interpersonal interaction and helps maintain social bonds in computer-mediated communication (Riordan, 550).



Plates 6
Appreciation



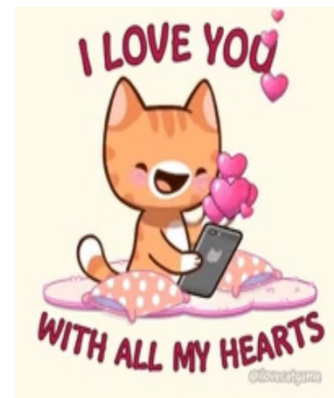
7
Warmth,



8
Friendliness

Making Communication More Engaging: This is one of the most important and interesting aspects of WhatsApp communication. Users, especially young people, often report that they prefer using symbols and GIFs over typing long messages because these elements make chats more lively, expressive, and enjoyable. The use of symbols makes conversations more lively and visually appealing. Messages that include emojis and other visual symbols often appear more interactive and enjoyable than plain text messages. This increased engagement encourages active participation in digital conversations and enhances the overall communication experience (Danesi, 67).

Supporting Emotional Expression: Symbols allow users to express emotions that may be difficult to communicate through words alone. Emojis representing laughter, sadness, excitement, or surprise enable users to convey feelings instantly. This ability makes digital communication feel more personal and emotionally expressive (Riordan, 551).



Plates	3	4	5
	Sorrow	admiration	Love

Bridging Language Barriers: Symbols can help overcome language differences among users. Because many emojis represent universal emotions or ideas, they can be easily understood by individuals from different linguistic backgrounds. As a result, symbols serve as a form of visual language that facilitates communication across cultures.

Encouraging Informal and Friendly Communication: The use of symbols promotes a relaxed and informal style of communication. On platforms such as WhatsApp, emojis and symbols create a conversational tone that makes interactions feel more natural and less rigid compared to formal written communication.

Graphics Interchange Format (GIFs) and Their Uses

A GIF (Graphics Interchange Format) is a short, looping animated image used to express reactions, emotions, or ideas in digital conversations. In messaging platforms like WhatsApp, GIFs function as a visual communication tool that helps users convey messages quickly and creatively without typing long texts. According to Paul Levinson:

Computer-mediated communication has evolved to include visual symbols such as emoticons, emojis, and animated images which help users express emotions and reactions that text alone may not adequately convey. These visual elements enrich online conversations and allow individuals to communicate ideas quickly and creatively in digital environments (37).

GIFs are widely used in WhatsApp chats to enhance interaction and make conversations more lively. They allow users to communicate emotions such as excitement, laughter, anger, surprise, or sarcasm through moving images. Because communication on digital platforms often lacks facial expressions and tone of voice, GIFs help fill this gap by adding visual context to messages. In line with the statement, Nerea Aldunate and Roberto González-Ibáñez asserts:

In computer-mediated communication, particularly in text-based interaction, facial expressions and other non-verbal cues are absent. To compensate for this limitation, users employ emoticons and similar visual symbols to convey emotional meaning and enrich the expressiveness of their messages (2).

GIF was created in 1987 by Steve Wilhite. It was initially used for simple web images, but now widely used in social media and messaging platforms like WhatsApp. They can be categorized as reaction GIFs which express laughing, clapping and anger. Movie or celebrity GIFs express dramatic emotions. Text based GIFs can be used to express greetings and gratitude like “Good morning” and “Thank You”

Importance of GIFs in WhatsApp Communication

It enhances emotional expression: GIFs help users express feelings and reactions more clearly than plain text.

It makes communication lively and engaging: They add humour and entertainment to conversations, making chats more interesting.

It saves time and effort: Instead of typing long explanations, users can send a GIF that instantly communicates their reaction.

It improves message interpretation: When used correctly, GIFs help the receiver understand the sender's mood or intention.

It supports digital culture among youths: Many young people prefer using GIFs because they make communication modern, informal, and interactive.

Effects of WhatsApp GIFs and Symbols on Users and Masses

The effects of WhatsApp GIFs and symbols on users and the general public can be viewed from both positive and negative perspectives. On the one hand, they enhance clarity, emotional expression, and interaction. On the other hand, they may lead to misinterpretation, over dependence, and reduced use of formal language in communication. This section examines these effects in detail, beginning with the positive impacts and subsequently addressing the negative implications.

One major positive effect is that GIFs and emojis help users express emotions more clearly. In text-based communication, people cannot see facial expressions or hear tone of voice, which may lead to misunderstanding. Emojis and GIFs help solve this problem by adding emotional meaning to messages. Udoudom et al. explain that emojis serve as visual cues that help users express emotions, tone, and context in digital conversations (226). Similarly, Iguoba and Chukwu note that emojis function as semiotic tools that help users "encode and interpret emotional meaning" in WhatsApp communication (3). This shows that symbols make online messages more emotionally accurate.

Moreover, GIFs and emojis improve clarity and reduce misunderstanding. Without visual cues, a message can be interpreted in different ways, but adding emojis helps clarify the sender's intention. Danesi opines that emojis act as a form of visual language that supports meaning-making in digital communication (45).

GIFs and symbols also make conversations more interactive and engaging. Instead of plain text, users can express reactions in a more lively way. To explain this, Kaye, Malone, and Wall state that emojis and GIFs enhance communication by providing expressive and interactive elements that make conversations more socially engaging (66).

Besides, these tools help maintain politeness and social relationships. In Nigerian and African communication culture, tone and respect are very important. Emojis help soften messages and make communication sound friendlier. Ugwu N.G observes that emojis are often used to convey politeness and friendliness in online communication, helping users manage social relationships effectively (1).

Lastly, GIFs and emojis make communication faster and more efficient. Instead of typing long explanations, users can send a single emoji or GIF to represent a feeling or idea. To this end, Danesi explains that emojis function as "visual shorthand" that simplifies digital communication while still preserving meaning (52). This shows that Visual shorthand is a way of communicating ideas quickly using images, symbols, icons, or visual cues instead of long written words. In simple terms, it means "saying a lot with a little picture."

Negative Effects of WhatsApp GIFs and Symbols on users

According to Walther & D’Addario; “emoticons can significantly alter message interpretation, sometimes amplifying negative meaning depending on context (234). GIFs and symbols (like emojis) can distort intended meaning, leading to misunderstanding between users. In computer-mediated communication, symbolic cues often fail to carry clear context, so recipients may interpret them differently from the sender’s intention. Research shows that while emoticons can enrich meaning, they can also shift interpretation depending on context, especially when emotional tone is unclear. For instance, a smiling emoji or GIF used sarcastically may be taken as genuine happiness.

Furthermore, there is likelihood of ambiguity and context collapse in the sense that GIFs are often culturally or socially dependent; making meaning unclear to receivers who do not share the same context. GIFs may reference movies, memes, or cultural events that some users do not understand. This leads to communication breakdown or confusion in WhatsApp conversations.

Example: A meme GIF may be funny to one group but meaningless to another. Studies on GIF communication show that meaning depends heavily on shared context, and lack of it leads to miscommunication in digital chats.

In conclusion, it also creates emotional manipulation or misleading impression. GIFs and emojis can be used to manipulate how a message is perceived. A sender may add positive symbols to soften negative messages thereby creating emotional confusion or deceptive tone framing. Research shows emojis can change social perception of messages, influencing how trustworthy or friendly a sender appears.

Findings/Results

The study reveals that WhatsApp GIFs and symbols play a significant role in enhancing digital communication by improving clarity of messages, aiding emotional expression, and increasing interaction among users. They serve as a form of visual shorthand that enables quick and efficient communication, while also making conversations more engaging and fostering stronger social connections. However, the findings also showed that excessive reliance on these visual elements can lead to misinterpretation and reduce users’ ability to communicate effectively using words alone. Furthermore, their use was found to be largely inappropriate in formal communication settings, where professionalism is required. Overall, while WhatsApp GIFs and symbols are useful tools in informal communication, their effectiveness depends on context, user interpretation, and moderation in usage.

Conclusion

In conclusion, WhatsApp GIFs and symbols play an important role in digital communication by helping people express feelings and ideas more easily and in a more lively way. They make conversations more engaging and easier to understand, especially in informal chats. However, if they are used too much or in the wrong context, they can cause misunderstanding. Therefore, they are useful tools, but they should be used carefully depending on the situation.

Recommendations

The findings of this study clearly show that emojis and GIFs in WhatsApp communication enhance conversations, create understanding, and build connections between people. Hence, the researcher recommends that users should;

1. Use WhatsApp GIFs and symbols in moderation so that messages remain clear and not confusing, and to combine GIFs and symbols with clear text to avoid misinterpretation of messages.

2. Always consider the context and audience before using GIFs and emojis, especially in formal or professional conversations. This will guide them on how to use GIFs and emojis appropriately in digital interactions.
3. Be aware of the proper use of digital symbols to promote effective communication among users as well as avoid over-dependence on GIFs and symbols to enable them develop good writing and communication skills.

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