

Socio-Pragmatic Communication Preferences Among Saudi WhatsApp Users: Text Messages vs. Voice Messages

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Abstract—The present study is an investigation into whether different social contexts have an impact on Saudi WhatsApp users' socio-pragmatic language preferences among different methods of communication, namely voice messages or written messages. A quantitative survey-based method was employed. A questionnaire was designed that presented 12 emotional and non-emotional social situations, to which 485 male and female Saudi WhatsApp users indicated their preferences for messaging mode in which to respond. The results revealed that text messaging was their preferred communication method in a variety of social situations, regardless of whether or not there was emotional intensity in these contexts. Moreover, gender was found to have little effect on the mode of communication across both emotional and non-emotional situations, although females are slightly more likely to use text messages. The study's findings provide insight into Saudis' language preferences in WhatsApp communication, which can help to improve cross-cultural communications and lead to the development of more successful communication strategies and technologies.

Index Terms—WhatsApp, socio-pragmatic communication, computer-mediated communication, language preferences, mobile text-based interactions

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background

Since the invention of the Internet in 1969, the linguistic landscape has evolved to provide a variety of forms of interactions. The affordances of such digital mediums as instant messaging, email, online forums, and social networking provide platforms for language to be used in new ways. This trend has led to the emergence of what is known nowadays as computer-mediated communication (CMC), that is, communication that is primarily transacted through electronic devices. While CMC shares some features of face-to-face interactions, it has gradually shifted away from in-person communication and developed as a new medium of communication. However, this shift is partial in that it has impacted only the socio-cultural aspect of language. Nevertheless, Crystal (2006) argues that CMC has evolved to be a third medium of communication that is hybrid between conventional speech and written language.

With technology involved in almost every aspect of human interaction, the use of instant messaging and social network services now occupies a large part of daily life as the primary means of communication. In Saudi Arabia, the context of this study, one of the most popular platforms for instant messaging is the WhatsApp Messenger. The service, which can be accessed through its mobile device and computer application, allows users to send text and voice messages, make voice and video calls, and share locations, documents, and other content. In 2018, WhatsApp introduced its business version, intended for small businesses and companies. Based on a survey conducted by the Saudi Center for Opinion Polling in 2022, it was reported that “WhatsApp is the most commonly used app in the Kingdom and has the highest top-of-mind awareness among Saudi adults” (Arab New, 2022). According to Ceci (2024), WhatsApp was expected to have nearly three billion active users worldwide by June 2024.

Based on its popularity and the diversity of its uses, which provides a range of multi-faceted socio-linguistic situations that are worthy of investigation from a social and cultural perspective, WhatsApp was selected as the data source for this study. Wentker (2018) described the application as unique in that it “can be established as an independent and discrete socio-technical mode which comprises more than the basic features of traditional text messaging” (p. 113). Also, WhatsApp is operable only through an account linked to the user's phone number, which facilitates a level of familiarity among interlocutors in the platform that affects the nature of communication through the app. This was taken into account in building the questionnaire for the study. Additionally, due to the asynchronous nature of communicating through WhatsApp, it allows user the time and tools to express themselves creatively. For instance, besides sending texts, users can express themselves using emojis and stickers, and instant reactions to messages. Users can also send voice messages, videos, pictures, and other contents such as files and locations. So, such various ways of self-expression can be stemmed from the different social situations that interlocutors find themselves in.

Additionally, WhatsApp Messenger has been used for a variety of purposes, and this is not limited to the context of the study. The application is not only primarily used to communicate with family members and friends, but is also used in the workplace among colleagues and for educational purposes as well. For example, as stated by Andujar (2016),

WhatsApp is a potent educational tool that promotes participants' connection in a second language, and that one of the least utilized features of mobile phones is its enormous potential to engage students. Not only that, but WhatsApp can also be used for educational purposes such as Andujar (2016), Bouhnik and Deshen (2014), Parejo (2016), which highlighted the use of WhatsApp to develop learners' vocabulary, writing and listening skills. Furthermore, using this app as a learning tool confirmed that utilizing WhatsApp had a favorable impact on learning, as found in Attewell (2005); Cakir (2015); Cavus and Ibrahim (2009).

Pragmatics provides a useful framework for studying communication phenomena in WhatsApp. Broadly speaking, pragmatics is the use of language in communication, particularly the relationship between language and the particular context in which it is employed. Mey (2001) described pragmatics as the study of "the use of language in human communication as determined by the conditions of society" (p. 6). Pragmatics serves the purpose of finding common ground in a shared conversational context, which facilitates communication and depends on interlocutors understanding non-verbal cues (such as tone, pitch, and facial expressions), and those with high pragmatic ability can use such skills to interact with people in and outside of diverse communities and cultures (Clark & Isaacs, 1987). The study of the transmission of pragmatic information in texting contexts is a relatively new area of research. However, cues that texters employ to help communicate pragmatic information and close the communication gap created by the CMC environment have been identified and labeled "textisms", which include emoticons, face and non-face emoji, and other symbols that aid in communicating emotional valence. Textisms can help clarify the tone of messages, clear up misunderstandings, and establish common ground (Byron & Baldrige, 2007).

B. Objectives of the Study

The main goal of this study was to explore the impact that different social contexts have on speakers' socio-pragmatic language preferences while communicating on WhatsApp. The specific objective was to determine whether the participants' choices between two basic WhatsApp's communication methods, text messages and voice messages, were affected by the social scenarios presented to them. These scenarios included both emotional and non-emotional social situations. It was hypothesized that the type of situation would affect the participants' language preference when responding.

C. Significance of the Study

The significance of the study stems from the popularity of the WhatsApp application among Saudis for many purposes, including social, educational, and commercial. The prevalence of WhatsApp in their daily communications entails a wide range of social behaviors, which are reflected in their language at multiple levels; primarily the pragmatic level. Understanding these phenomena can provide insight into the cognitive depth of social communication as well as into the impact of the emotional intensity of social situations on preferences for either voice messages or written texts. Thus, the results hope to provide an understanding of participants and how this is linked to their language preferences. To the best of my knowledge, this research is the first investigation of how Saudi speakers' reaction to the different levels of emotionality in social situations when using WhatsApp affects their preferences for text or voice messages. Hence, the present research fills a current gap in the socio-pragmatic language communication research and establishes a framework for further studies that focus on speakers' modality preferences while communicating on WhatsApp.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To investigate Saudis' language preferences between voice and text messages while using WhatsApp, a quantitative survey-based methodology was employed. WhatsApp was selected as the target platform because of its prevalence in Saudi Arabia for social communication. To examine the extent to which users' choices between the two message types were impacted by social factors when communicating through the application, data collection was focused on situations that were most likely to generate a large number of daily interactions on WhatsApp. Three research questions were as follows:

1. What communication methods (text message, voice message, both, or not sure) are preferred by Saudi WhatsApp users in various social situations?
2. Does the emotional intensity of a social situation significantly influence the choice of communication method (text message, voice message, both, or not sure) on WhatsApp?
3. Is there a statistically significant gender difference in preferred WhatsApp communication methods (text message, voice message, both, or not sure) in either emotional or non-emotional social situations?

A. Instruments and Data Collection

As noted, the collection of survey data in reference to WhatsApp reflects the platform's growing utilization for research purposes due to its capabilities for generating rich data across different dimensions, alleviating some of the shortcomings identified in existing literature (de Gruchy et al., 2021). A questionnaire was designed and administered using the data collection software Qualtrics. Qualtrics was also utilized to assist in evaluating and interpreting the responses. The questionnaire included 12 social situations similar to those which the participants might encounter while using WhatsApp (see Table 1). These situations intended to represent as large a proportion as possible of WhatsApp's daily communication

content. Additionally, these situations were social, not professional or commercial in nature as well as various levels of emotional valence, from none to high. The questionnaire was organized so that the situations involving some types of emotion were listed with even numbers and non-emotional situations with odd numbers. However, participants were not informed of this organization so they would focus on each item independently of a common feature. Volunteers to participate in the survey were recruited through multiple platforms dedicated to Saudis. The invitation included a brief description of the study, a depiction of what members would be expected to perform, and an estimate of the time commitment.

TABLE 1
EMOTIONAL AND NON-EMOTIONAL SCENARIOS

Scenario	Description
1	When asking for money from someone, I use
2	When apologizing to someone I hurt, I use
3	When asking someone for a car ride, I use
4	When expressing condolences over the death of someone, I use
5	When asking to borrow someone's car, I use
6	When telling someone good news, I use
7	When informing someone that a meeting has been postponed, I use
8	When expressing dissatisfaction or annoyance with someone, I use
9	When inviting someone to a social event, I use
10	When expressing gratitude to someone I use
11	When inquiring about whether some information is true, I use
12	When expressing dislike over a specific situation, I use

B. Participants

Initially 489 Saudis volunteered to participate in the study, but four were excluded because they did not use WhatsApp, resulting in a sample of 485 Saudi participants, 299 males and 186 females, all of whom were native speakers of Arabic. Participants were notified via WhatsApp with the consent form, and their affirmative response indicated that they were willing to participate. They represented a wide range of educational level, include 9 who had not completed high school, 70 with high school diplomas, 65 with 2-year diplomas, 241 with undergraduate degrees, 61 with master's degrees, and 39 with Ph.D. degrees. It should be noted that level of education was not a variable in the study and is given only as demographic information.

III. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

A. Question One: What Communication Methods (Text Message, Voice Message, Both, or Not Sure) Are the Preferred by Saudi WhatsApp Users in Various Social Situations?

In answer to this question, a descriptive summary of the results for scenarios 1 to 12 is shown in Table 2 and graphically represented in Figure 1, providing an overview of the participants' communication method preferences. Across all social situations, text messaging emerged as the overall most popular mode of communication, ranging from 26.19% to 77.73%, with an average preference of around 60%. For instance, in Scenario 4, which involves expressing condolences, the highest number of participants, 77.73%, preferred to use text messages. Similarly, in Scenario 9, which involves an invitation to a social event, 74.23% opted for text messaging. On the other hand, voice messages constituted the second highest preference. For example, for Scenario 6, which involved reporting good news, participants showed a higher preference for voice messaging, 41.44%, than for the other three options. However, a considerable number of users expressed preference for using a combination of both text and voice messages, particularly in scenarios that involved emotional undertones. For instance, in Scenario 10, which involved expressing thanks, 40% of the respondents preferred to use both text and voice messages. Overall, there was a low level of uncertainty expressed by choosing the "not sure" option. The highest level of indecision was registered for Scenario 5, asking to borrow a car, for which 12.37% of participants were unsure about the best communication approach.

TABLE 2
THE FREQUENCY OF USE OF COMMUNICATION MODES, "VOICE MESSAGE", "TEXT MESSAGE", "BOTH", AND "NOT SURE", ACROSS EMOTIONAL AND NON-EMOTIONAL SCENARIOS IN PERCENTAGES

Scenario	Text Message	Voice Message	Both	Not Sure
Scenario 1	67.664671	3.193613	20.958084	8.183633
Scenario 2	54.639175	17.731959	24.742268	2.886598
Scenario 3	67.935872	2.805611	26.252505	3.006012
Scenario 4	77.731959	5.773196	15.876289	0.618557
Scenario 5	47.216495	18.556701	21.855670	12.371134
Scenario 6	26.185567	41.443299	30.721649	1.649485
Scenario 7	65.154639	11.752577	21.443299	1.649485
Scenario 8	61.443299	12.371134	21.649485	4.536082
Scenario 9	74.226804	5.979381	19.175258	0.618557
Scenario 10	42.680412	16.907216	40.000000	0.412371
Scenario 11	54.639175	16.494845	27.422680	1.443299
Scenario 12	59.793814	12.371134	20.824742	7.010309

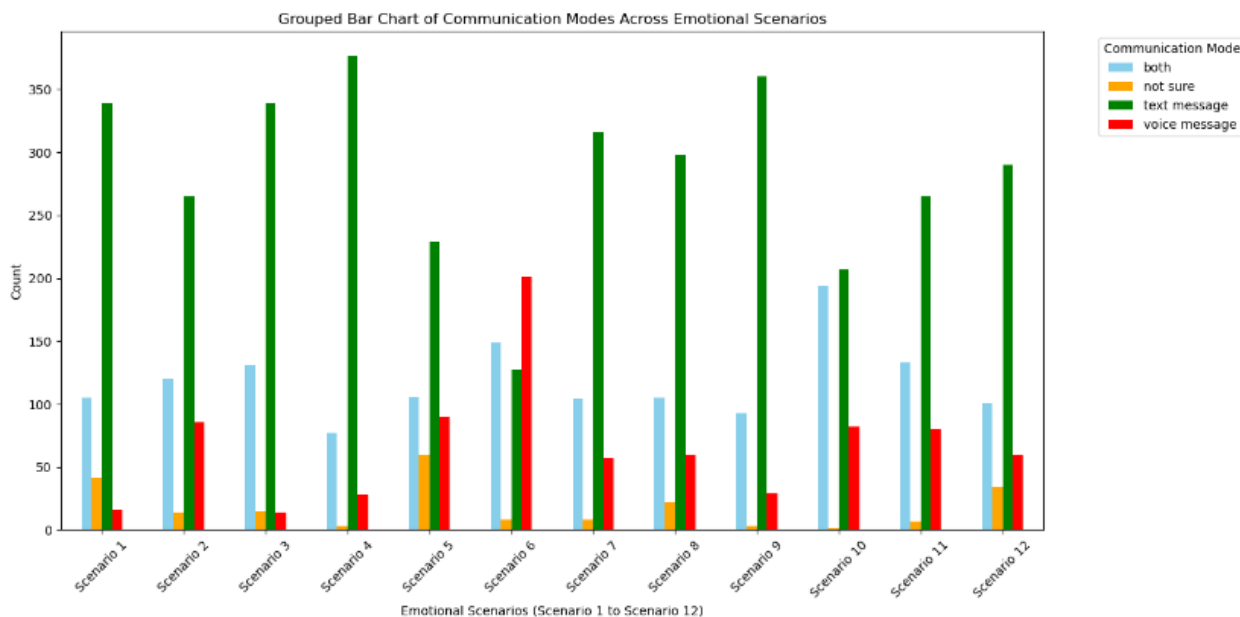


Figure 1. Group Bar Chart of Communication Modes Across Emotional and Non-Emotional Scenarios

B. Question Two: Does the Emotional Intensity of a Social Situation Significantly Influence the Choice of Communication Method (Text Message, Voice Message, Both, or Not Sure) on WhatsApp?

To explore this question, the scenarios were categorized (as having either high or low emotional intensity, based on the assumption that responses to highly emotional social situations like expressing condolences might be different from responses to non-emotional situations like asking for a car ride). Scenarios that involved some type of emotion were marked with even numbering in the questionnaire, and those that were emotionally neutral were marked with odd numbering. Then, as shown in Table 3, the frequencies of voice and text messages in the two categories were compared. A Chi-square test was applied to these results to determine if there was a significant difference in communication method choice based on emotional intensity.

TABLE 3
THE FREQUENCY OF “VOICE MESSAGE”, “TEXT MESSAGE”, “BOTH”, AND “NOT SURE” ACROSS EMOTIONAL AND NON-EMOTIONAL SCENARIOS

Communication Method	Percentage_Emotional	Percentage_Non_Emotional
Text message	53.745704	63.505155
Voice message	17.766323	8.797251
Both	25.635739	23.092784
Not sure	2.852234	4.604811

Chi-Square Test Statistic: 4.385 P-Value: 0.223

For both emotional and non-emotional situations, text messages were found to be the most preferred method of communication on WhatsApp. Approximately 53.75% of participants preferred text messages in emotional situations, while a higher percentage (63.51%) opted for them in non-emotional scenarios. On the other hand, voice messages were more commonly chosen in emotional situations (17.77%) than in non-emotional contexts (8.80%). Also, a preference for using both text and voice messages was slightly higher in emotional (25.64%) than in non-emotional (23.09 %) Situations. Finally, the "Not Sure" option, which overall was less preferred than the other options in both kinds of scenarios, shows a minor difference between emotional and non-emotional scenarios, with slightly more participants uncertain in non-emotional (4.60%) than in emotional (2.85 %) scenarios. In light of these findings, the p-value of 0.223 indicates that there was no statistically significant difference among the choices of communication methods between emotional and non-emotional social situations on WhatsApp ($p \geq 0.05$). In other words, the emotional intensity of a situation was not found to significantly influence whether participants preferred text messages, voice messages, or both, or were unsure.

C. Question Three: Is There a Statistically Significant Gender Difference in Preferred WhatsApp Communication Methods (Text Message, Voice Message, Both, or Not Sure) Used by Males and Females in Either Emotional or Non-Emotional Social Situations?

This question was approached by first filtering the data by gender and then comparing the communication methods used in emotional and in non-emotional situations. The frequencies of “voice message” and “text message” were calculated for males and females separately (Table 4). Again, a Chi-square test was employed to determine if the differences in communication methods preferred by males and by females differed statistically significantly in either emotional or non-emotional scenarios.

TABLE 4
THE FREQUENCIES OF “VOICE MESSAGE”, “TEXT MESSAGE”, “BOTH”, AND “NOT SURE” FOR MALES AND FEMALES ACROSS EMOTIONAL AND NON-EMOTIONAL SCENARIOS

Emotional Situations		
Communication Method	Percentage_Male_Emotional	Percentage_Female_Emotional
Text message	53.288740	54.480287
Voice message	19.230769	15.412186
Both	24.637681	27.240143
Not sure	2.842809	2.867384
Non-Emotional Situations		
Communication Method	Percentage_Male_Non_Emotional	Percentage_Female_Non_Emotional
Text message	60.535117	68.279570
Voice message	11.371237	4.659498
Both	23.578595	22.311828
Not sure	4.515050	4.749104
Chi-Square Test Statistic for Emotional Situations: 0.565		P-Value: 0.904
Chi-Square Test Statistic for Non-Emotional Situations: 3.317		P-Value: 0.345

As shown in Table 4, both males and females preferred text messages during emotional situations, with about the same frequency (53.29% of males and 54.48% of females) choosing this method. However, males were slightly more likely to use voice messages (19.23%) than females (15.41%), while slightly more females (27.24%) than males (24.64%) preferred to use both text and voice messages in emotional situations. Finally, almost identical numbers of males (2.84%) and females (2.87%) were unsure about their preferred communication method. With regard to non-emotional Situations, text messages remained the most popular choice in non-emotional situations, with 60.54% of males and 68.28% of females preferring this method. Also in non-emotional situations, males were more likely to use voice messages (11.37%) compared to females (4.66%). Similar percentages of males (23.58%) and females (22.31%) preferred using both communication methods, and "not sure" option was chosen by 4.52% of males and 4.75% of females in non-emotional situations. In conclusion, the p-value of 0.904 indicates that there was no statistically significant difference between males and females in their choices of communication method during emotional situations on WhatsApp ($p \geq 0.05$). Moreover, the p-value of 0.345 also shows that there was no statistically significant difference between males and females in their choices of communication method in non-emotional situations on WhatsApp ($p \geq 0.05$). In other words, in social situations the level of emotionality did not significantly influence whether male and female participants preferred text messages or voice messages.

IV. DISCUSSION

The communication methods preferred by Saudi WhatsApp users in this study indicate that text messaging is the most popular mode across various scenarios, highlighting probably due to its convenience, speed, and affordability (Af Segerstad, 2002). The results also suggest that while text messaging is overwhelmingly the preferred WhatsApp method of communication, the participants adjusted their preferences based on the emotional context of a situation, particularly when there might be need for a personal touch. Moreover, using both text and voice messages was also chosen in about 25% of instances, suggesting the need for more nuanced or emotionally driven communication or a balance of formality with personalization. These results highlight the role of context in determining the most appropriate communication method, with users opting for more nuanced, personal forms of communication in some situations and efficiency in others. As Tagg (2015) indicated, the formality of a context may have an impact on the decision between voice and text communications. For example, voice messages may be more appropriate in casual settings, whereas text messages may be preferred in official circumstances where exact language is essential. On the other hand, voice messages, while generally less preferred, may be considered appropriate in sensitive or emotional scenarios, such as Scenario 6 (Table 2), which involves sharing someone good news. In this context, 41.44% of the participants chose voice messaging, suggesting Saudis often perceive voice communication as appropriate for emotionally charged situations or when a personal touch is necessary. Also, the low percentage of expressions of uncertainty suggests that Saudis have clear preferences for modes of communication in specific circumstances. They may indicate less clarity in deciding the most appropriate response to emotionally-complex or otherwise complicated situations.

Second, WhatsApp text messages were the most preferred method of communication regardless of the emotional intensity of a social situation, confirming earlier findings that text messaging is the primary means by which young adults communicate, even with emotional content (Crosswhite et al., 2014). Byron and Baldrige (2007) assert that textisms can be adjusted to aid in message clarification, help clear up misunderstandings, and provide common ground. This control over content may largely explain the dominance of text over voice messaging in a wide range of interactions. Nevertheless, the finding that voice messages are still frequently preferred in emotional situations suggests that they are often considered more suitable for conveying emotions or sentiments in sensitive situations. The nearly even percentages of preferences for both text and voice messages this indicates that users might resort to multiple communication methods to make sure they have effectively expressed themselves in both more and less emotionally charged scenarios. The little-used "not sure" choice reveals a generally low level of uncertainty, although the slightly higher percentage of use in non-emotional (4.55%), than in emotional (2.85%) situations may reflect that users are less certain when the emotional intensity is lower.

Ultimately, this result suggests that while there are some differences in the percentages, they are not strong enough to be considered statistically significant ($p \geq 0.05$) and that Saudi WhatsApp users tend to maintain similar communication preferences across both emotional and non-emotional situations.

It was also found that the choice of WhatsApp communication methods did not significantly differ between males and females, as both genders exhibited the same pattern of text messaging being the most favoured method, followed using both text and voice messages. However, females were slightly more likely to use text messages in both emotional and non-emotional situations, (see Table 4), which is consistent with findings in other settings. For example, in Norway, 40% of young women text every day, making them the country's most frequent texters among teenagers and young adults (Ling, 2005). Similar findings were reported by Höflich and Gebhardt (2005) and Schmidt and Androutsopoulos (2004) in Germany and by Herring and Zelenkauslaite (2009) in Italy. However, gender differences were not statistically significant ($p \geq 0.05$), suggesting that they do not play a significant role in determining the communication method in emotional and non-emotional scenarios.

V. CONCLUSION

Just as changes in technology are accelerating throughout the world, so too are people's ways of expressing themselves and communicating. Accordingly, the present study addressed the question of whether different social situations have an impact on Saudi participants' socio-pragmatic language preferences while communicating on WhatsApp. The findings suggest that Saudi WhatsApp users' preferred communication method across various social situations is text messaging regardless of presence or absence of emotional intensity in a social situation, text message has the dominance in these contexts. Additionally, in both emotional and non-emotional situations, gender was found to have little bearing on the communication method. It can be concluded that Saudi WhatsApp users prefer text messaging across both emotional and non-emotional situations, and that gender does not play a significant role in their preferences.

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