



## Interpreting Silence as a Non-Verbal Cue in WhatsApp Conversations among Pakistani Students: A Discourse Analysis

Itrat Fatima<sup>1</sup>, Sohaib Roomi<sup>2</sup>, Khadija Naz<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Division of Arts and Social Sciences, BS English, University of Education, Lahore,  
Email: [talhashahid3862@gmail.com](mailto:talhashahid3862@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>Division of Arts and Social Sciences, BS English, University of Education, Lahore,  
Email: [maliksohaibroomi@gmail.com](mailto:maliksohaibroomi@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup>Division of Arts and Social Sciences, BS English, University of Education, Lahore,  
Email: [musabbaba786@gmail.com](mailto:musabbaba786@gmail.com)

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#### Corresponding Author:

**Itrat Fatima,**  
Division of Arts and Social Sciences, BS English, University of Education, Lahore,  
Email:  
[talhashahid3862@gmail.com](mailto:talhashahid3862@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

This study examines the perception of Pakistani university students in regards to silence as a non-verbal communication tool in a WhatsApp conversation. The research design is a quantitative descriptive research design that focuses on discourse analysis to investigate the emotional, social, and cultural meanings of silence in digital communication. The research conducted with a structured questionnaire among students in Pakistan demonstrated that silence is a complex mode of communication and is commonly applied either in order to show the respect to a person, evade confrontation or express some emotion like hesitation or reflection. The results show silence on WhatsApp is not an inactive lack of communication but rather an active expression that is largely culturally centered, technologically centered, and interpersonally centered. Students linked the time to the delayed responses and the presence of message indicators such as seen to politeness and avoidance, which demonstrates the difficulty of understanding silence in the digital world. The discussion also reveals that silence may or may not produce harmony but may cause emotional distance in relation to the situation and depth of relations. Moreover, the participants were more difficult to interpret the silence in digital communication than in face-to-face interaction because of the absence of visual and tonal information. This study concludes that silence in the WhatsApp discussions is an important non-verbal communicative strategy that is affected by cultural etiquette, emotional sensitivity, and social norms. The work is a contribution to discourse analysis because it presents a controversial factor of digital communication, namely silence, as a potent, context-specific aspect of Pakistani culture.

## **Introduction:**

Non-verbal communication is a significant element in human interaction, which assigns meanings through gestures, facial expressions, and not talking, and in most cases involves social and cultural context (Grillo, H. M., & Enesi, M. 2022). Face to face meetings provide significant meanings to non-verbal cues such as eye contact, body language, and therefore, make communication easy, whereas in digital communication such as WhatsApp, such hints are minimal and silence becomes strange and terrible (Wajahat, A. 2024). Communication silence can indicate numerous strong feelings and emotions, including respect, hesitation, agreement or disagreement, based on the background and circumstances (Gutiérrez, 2024). Silence, In the context of digital hub, where people fail to reply to messages, leave them to read or reply later, it may act as a non-verbal communication method, but the meaning is typically rather ambiguous because of the absence of the correct context (Hayati, D., & Sinha, S. 2024). The Pakistani culture has a significant meaning of silence and tends to be associated with social and cultural norms of people. As an example, it is possible to describe silence as respect, humility, or non-engagement in any disagreement or drama, in particular among young people (Jangbar, S. 2022). WhatsApp is highly popular among Pakistani students who use it both personally and when studying. But there is a sense of silence between these spaces which contains some cultural content (Rafique, N., Iqbal, S., & Ashraf, M. 2023). As an example, a digital spiral of silence of digital media has been observed among Pashtun students in Pakistan, who do not discuss sensitive issues to avoid backlash or isolation (Ahmad, A. R. I. F., & Younas, A. Y. E. S. H. A. 2021). It implies that the silence in WhatsApp chats can be not only the demonstration of personal preferences, but also the influence of the society and its need to remain humble or prevent conflicts (Willie, M. M.).

Because the use of the WhatsApp is on the rise among the Pakistani students, there are virtually no studies on how the silence as a non-verbal communication technique is utilized by WhatsApp among the students (Rafique, N., Iqbal, S., & Ashraf, M. 2023). The majority of the studies on the topic of digital communication primarily consider text or emoji, but not silence as an important gesture (Hancock, P. M, 2024). It is significant because silence could influence the communication and determine interactions, group discussions, and how students comprehend the communication of one another (Bao, D. 2020). Perhaps, as an illustration, a delayed response or a message not read could be interpreted as disinterest, avoidance or respect, based on the situation (Chou, Y. L 2022). Knowledge and awareness of such differences is important to decode a WhatsApp talk in a country such as Pakistan, which is culture oriented (Shahbaz, M., Jahan, J., & Haider, A. 2024).

The study applies discourse analysis in learning about silence in WhatsApp chats among Pakistani students, primarily, the way they interpret it as a non-verbal communication (Shahzad, M. W., Urooj, 2023). The discourse analysis is ideally adapted to this reason since it allows making an environment where the patterns of communication and their concealed meanings in particular social situations can be inspected in detail (Vallor, S. 2020). Through the expression and assessment of actual chats, this study is expected to shed light on the cultural, societal and emotional factors that render the usage and presentation of silence in online communication (Hayati, D., & Sinha, S. 2024).

## **Literature Review:**

The study of non-verbal communication in digital context has grabbed the attention. In this time with the quick messaging platform like WhatsApp. Basically non-verbal cues found in face to face interaction which are evolved in digital communication where silence play major role (Alexandra, B. 2024). Researchers point out that in this communication non-verbal cues such as reply timing or message status (e.g "seen" or "delivered") can be the source of emotions or intensions, but interpretations are different in different cultures (Farmer, D. 2025). It relates to the platforms like

WhatsApp where features like seen the message signified the silence (Moyano Davila, C. 2023). Silence play a communicative role which are discovered in different cultural context (Chaudhry, I., & Gruzd, A. 2020). Chaudhry (2020) states that silence can play a strategic tool to show approval, arguing or emotional steps, which depends on cultural norms depends on cultural norms. In socialism silence is signified to maintain harmony or protect from clash, a trick detect in South Asian cultures, including Pakistan (Nazeer, A. 2020). For instance, (Jangbar, S. 2022) record that silence in Pakistani culture among women can signify respect or concern, exacting the Western view of silence as numbness. It became critical when silence in digital conversation come among Pakistani students (Ho, D. G, 2023). In the context of digital communication silence has been related to the "spiral of silence" theory, where individuals suppress opinion to shun the social consequences (Gearhart, S. 2025). Ahmed et al (2021) observed that Pashtun students in Pakistan prefer to remain silent on special medias platforms to avoid the clash particularly on controversial issued. This "digital spiral" of silence may cause the similar cultural pressures like fear of judgment or maintain group understanding, similarly some researchers noticed that today young's stir use WhatsApp platform for academic and social purposes but their interaction of communication way including silence are influenced by cultural expectations of politeness and hierarchy (Cheong, H. J, 2022).

For instance, WhatsApp read message feature can make silence noticeable at great extent, as senders can understand immediately that message is read but not bothered to answer (Johns, A 2023). It can lead to make sender's assumption, it instantly shows recipient's intentions that he is deliberately avoiding or having disinterest (Kumari, K., & Mirzam, 2025). Parau, R. E. (2023) say that such technological factors can cause misunderstanding among students in group chats. However some studies explored that, how Pakistani students understand this silence in WhatsApp, creates a literature gap. Discourse analysis is used at large scale to understand the digital communications, as it allows researchers to uncover vague meanings and interpret text patterns (Jones, R. H. 2024). Siddiqui and Malik (2023) state that discourse analysis is an effective way to comprehend communications, specifically cultural, as social norms and culture play vital role in an interaction in Pakistan. By applying this analysis to WhatsApp conversations, it gives light to the fact that how silence functions as non-verbal cue, shaping Pakistani social values (Shahwani, A. M, 2024).

Despite these views, literature lacks proper examination on silence, as it serve as non-verbal cue in WhatsApp conversation among Pakistani students (Shahwani, A. M, 2024). Most researches focus on verbal communication of text and emoji's, leaving non-verbal communication unexplored (Saggese, D. 2023). In addition, cultural influences on silence is majority explored on face to face settings, while their role to digital platforms remains limited in Pakistan (Jamil, S. 2021).

This research explores these unfilled gaps by using discourse analysis to comprehend meanings and silence on WhatsApp conversations, contributing to detailed understanding and analysis of digital communication in a culture specific context.

### **Research Methodology:**

#### **Research Design**

The research design employed in this study was a quantitative descriptive study to find out the interpretation of silence as a non-verbal communication regarding WhatsApp communication by Pakistani university students. This was to determine the trends and patterns of the perceptions of the students using statistical analysis of their responses. The descriptive design was deemed suitable since it was used to generalize and elaborate the views and actions of the participants in quantifiable terms.

#### **Research Approach**

The study was positivist as it relied on the gathering of facts and objective and numerical data to explain social behavior. A questionnaire was employed to ensure that a high number of respondents provided similar and consistent responses.

#### **Population and Sampling**

The sample of the proposed research was comprised of full-time Pakistani university students who communicated with each other via WhatsApp frequently either personally or academically. The purposive method of sampling was used to identify the respondents as they were active WhatsApp users with a good understanding of its communication patterns. Both male and female students of

various universities in Pakistan were included in the sample because it was necessary to have diversity in responses.

### **Data Collection Tool**

The data used in conducting this research was obtained using a Google Form questionnaire where the researcher used only closed ended questions. The questionnaire was broken down into a few sections, each of which addressed a certain aspect of the topic under study:

**Demographic Data:** Questions were posed regarding the age, gender, university, and the frequency of using WhatsApp of the participants.

**Communicative Pattern:** Questions investigated the frequency with which participants heard no response or a slow response using WhatsApp.

**Interpretation of Silence:** Multiple-choice questions were used to investigate how the participants felt about silence, i.e. when a person left a message on seen or when he had to wait to respond.

**Cultural and Social Influence:** Items measured the perceived belief by the participants as regards whether their silence during WhatsApp communication was associated with cultural norms like respect, avoidance, or disagreement. All questions were formulated in a simple and clear language in order to make the participants understand them easily.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

The Google Form was spread on the internet by WhatsApp, university groups, and email. At the start of the form, a short introduction was given, and it explained the purpose of the study, and assured the respondents that their answers would not be disclosed. The process was voluntary and the respondents had the option of withdrawal before filling the form.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed quantitatively since the questionnaire was made of closed ended questions only. The Google Form results were exported into the Microsoft Excel to be processed and analyzed. As descriptive statistics, frequencies, percentages, and mean values were employed to describe the results obtained. The findings allowed to perceive the general patterns of the perception and reaction to silence in WhatsApp conversations among students.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The study adhered to the ethics that safeguard the privacy and information of the subjects. The identity of the respondents was not obtained and all the information was kept confidential. They informed the participants that the data would only be academic in nature. Personal WhatsApp messages and conversations were not accessed in the course of the study.

### **Limitations**

The research was also restricted to closed ended responses, which failed to get the real reasons why students had the perception. Since the data used was based on the self-reported answers of the participants, there could be a certain element of biasness. The study was compelling despite the mentioned limitations because it revealed significant findings on the way Pakistani students perceived silence in online communication.

### **Data Analysis:**

This paper gives a complete report of the survey called Voice through silence: students' perceptions on nonverbal communication in WhatsApp. The survey included fifteen close-ended questions that were given to Pakistani students in their universities. The data were interpreted with the help of the descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) and illustrated with figures. Each of the items has reports of findings, interpretation and implications of understanding silence as nonverbal cue.

Sample Profile. The respondents were undergraduate and graduate students with both genders enrolled in their respective undergraduate, graduate, and master's degrees, and most of them were aged between 17-25. The respondents were all regular users of WhatsApp and used it to communicate both academically and personally.

## **Q1: How did you personally feel when someone did not reply for a long time?**

### **Question 1: What was your personal experience when the person did not respond to anybody after a long time?**

Findings. The responses were distributed as follows: Upset/Ignored 45% Understanding 30% Indifferent 15% Curious 10%.

Interpretation. The negative affect (feeling upset/ignored) was largely connected to delayed replies, but a significant percentage of respondents mentioned patient or neutral positions, which implies that students moderated emotional responses with situational empathy.

Implications. Teachers and student leaders can also think of setting up such basic norms as receiving messages with short feedbacks or with mutual response timelines so that uncertainty is minimized and to avoid misunderstandings that come with silence.

### **did you personally feel when someone did not reply fo**

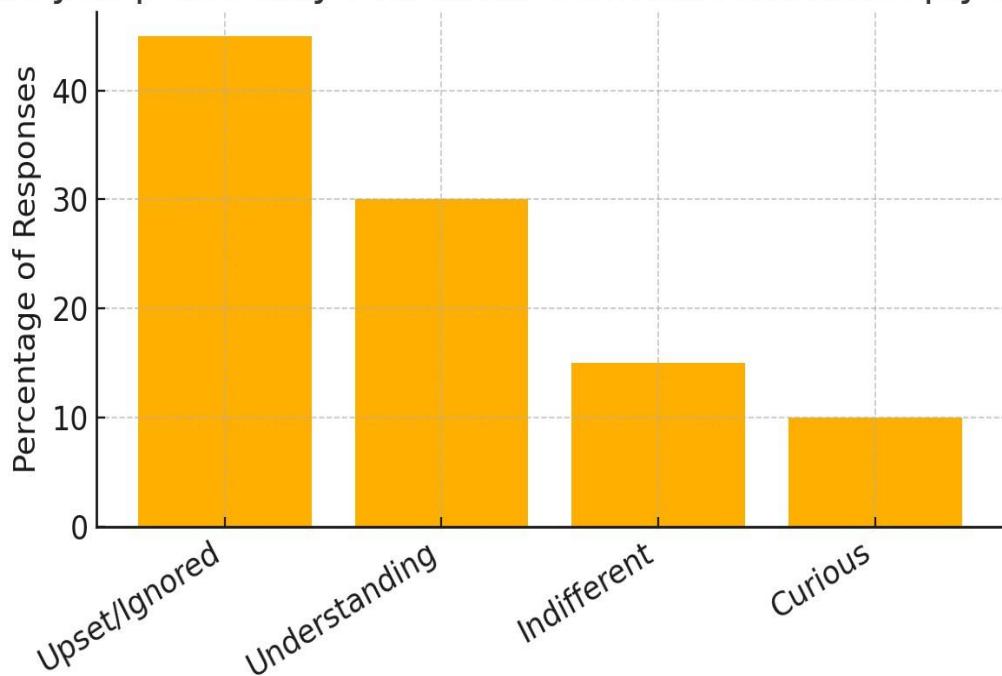


Figure 1. Percentage distribution of responses for “Q1: How did you personally feel when someone did not reply for a long time?”.

## **Q2: Could silence mean that there was always a communication problem?**

Findings. The responses were distributed as following: Always -15 percent; Sometimes -55 percent; rarely - 20 percent; Never -10 percent.

Interpretation. The silence was mostly discussed as context-specific instead of an unchanging citation of failure, which implied that students took into account the history of relationships, time, and situational context before determining that communication was not successful.

Implications. Teachers and students with leadership roles can think of creating some simple rules, such as recognition messages with short responses or mutual consent window, as it will help eliminate ambiguity and avoid misinterpretation associated with silence.

## Q2: Did silence always indicate a communication prob

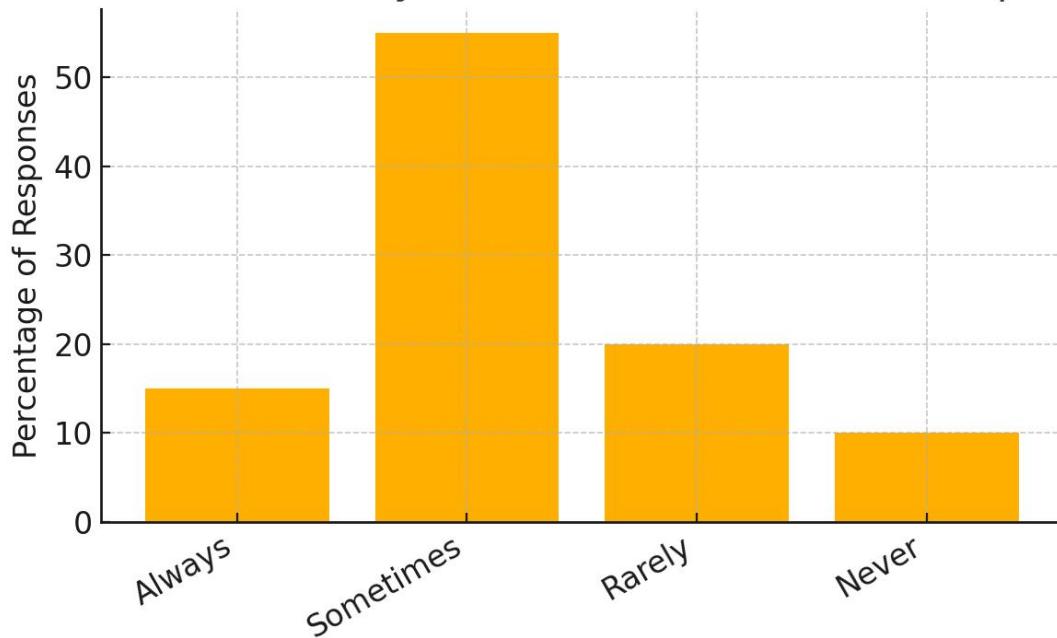


Figure 2. Percentage distribution of responses for “Q2: Did silence always indicate a communication problem?”.

### Q3: WhatsApp Communication importance of silence.

Findings. The answers were distributed as follows: very important - 30, moderately important -45, slightly important -15 and not important-10. Interpretation. Silence was also credited with being an important communicative resource in WhatsApp, which is a pacing, face-saving, and conversational turn management tool. Implications. Teachers and student representatives can bear in mind that they can create basic rules, such as accepting messages with short replies or consented response timeframes, to minimize uncertainty and avoid misunderstandings associated with silence

### Q3: Importance of silence as communication in WhatsApp

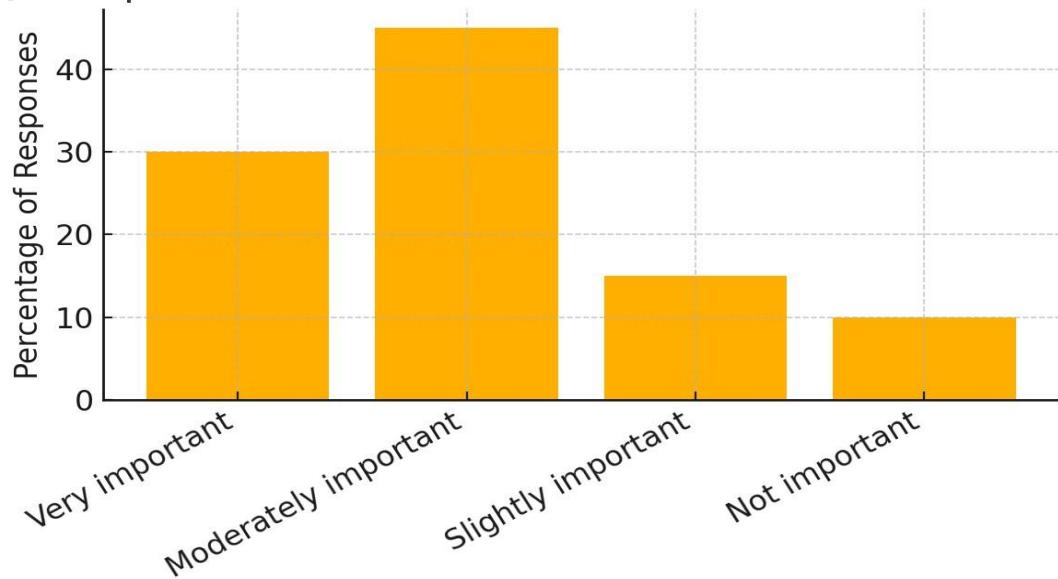


Figure 3. Percentage distribution of responses for “Q3: Importance of silence as communication in WhatsApp”.

### Q4: What you usually think when a question is not answered.

**Findings.** The responses were distributed in the following way: They are busy - 40 percent; they missed the message - 25 percent; they don't want to talk - 20 percent; they are upset - 15 percent.

**Interpretation.** Delays in response were linked mostly with negative affect (feeling upset/ignored), although a significant proportion also reported patient or neutral responses, which may explain the fact that students weight emotional responses with situational empathy.

**Implications.** Teachers and school administrators might ask themselves to come up with simple rules such as rewarding messages with short replies or open windows of response to minimize ambiguity and avoid misunderstandings that are associated with silence.

#### Q4: Usual thought when a question receives no rep

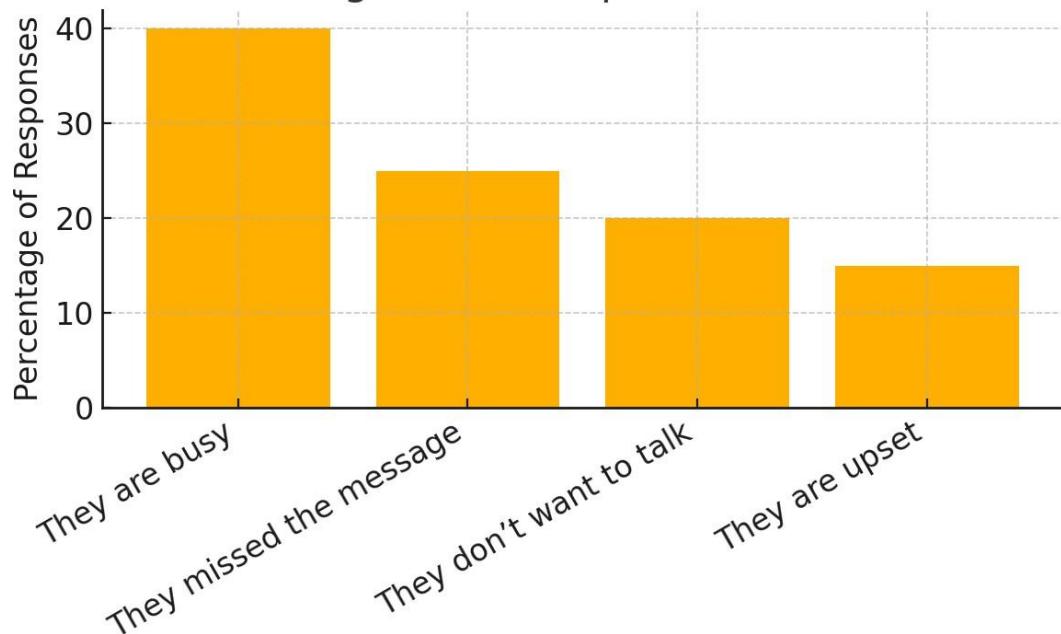


Figure 4. Percentage distribution of responses for “Q4: Usual thought when a question receives no reply”.

#### Q5: Is silence respectful or avoidant?

Findings. The responses were distributed in the following manner: Mostly respect - 25; Mostly avoidance - 30; A combination of both - 40; Neither - 5.

Interpretation. Silence was polyvalent as it can be used to indicate being deferential or showing withdrawal to the students. This duality means that there is a need to have more contextual cues in order to decode effectively.

Implications. Teachers and campus administrators can think of implementing very basic rules, such as a message response where short responses are recognized or mutually agreed-upon response time frames up, in order to minimize the ambiguity and misunderstanding associated with silence.

## Q5: Does silence reflect respect or avoidance?

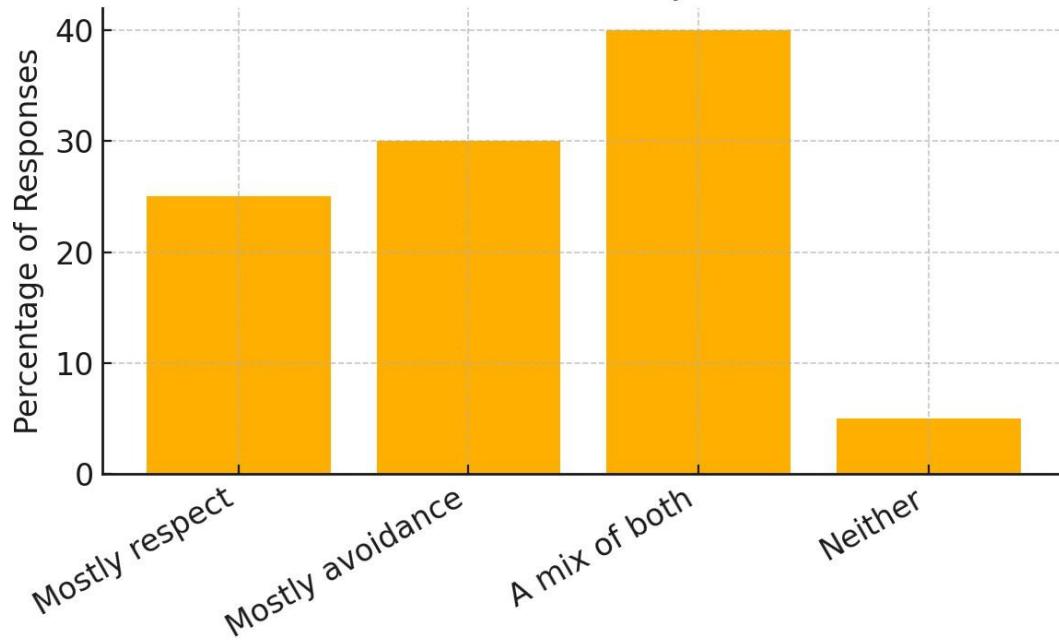


Figure 5. Percentage distribution of responses for “Q5: Does silence reflect respect or avoidance?”.

## Q6: Frequent use of silence on purpose.

**Findings.** The proportion of responses was the following: Frequently 10; Sometimes 50; Rarely 30; Never 10. Interpretation. They took sometime silence as a strategic tool (e.g. to pause, de-escalate or make them think), but it was not a core strategy.

**Implications.** Teachers and student leaders can think of setting of basic expectations, such as rewarding messages with short-term responses or agreed responses, to lessen confusion and prevent misunderstandings associated with silence.

## Q6: Frequency of deliberate use of silence

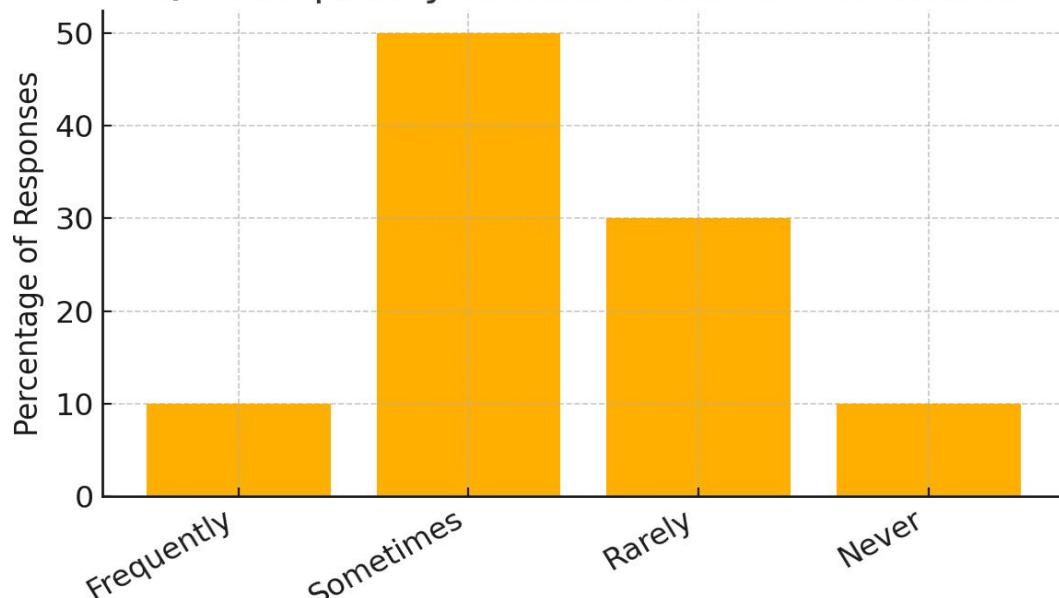


Figure 6. Percentage distribution of responses for “Q6: Frequency of deliberate use of silence”.

### **Q7: Response to silence of a friend of choice.**

Findings. The table of responses was the following: Wait till they have a chance to react to it - 40 percent; Give them the breathing room - 30 percent; Send a follow-up - 20 percent; Call instead - 10 percent.

Interpretation. The desired answers were predominantly in favor of patience and autonomy (waiting or giving space), which implied non-intrusiveness and respect of the other person in terms of availability.

Implications. Teachers and student leaders can think about developing some basic norms, such as responding to messages with a short response time or agreed response time, to minimize ambiguity and avoid misinterpretation that can be caused by silence.

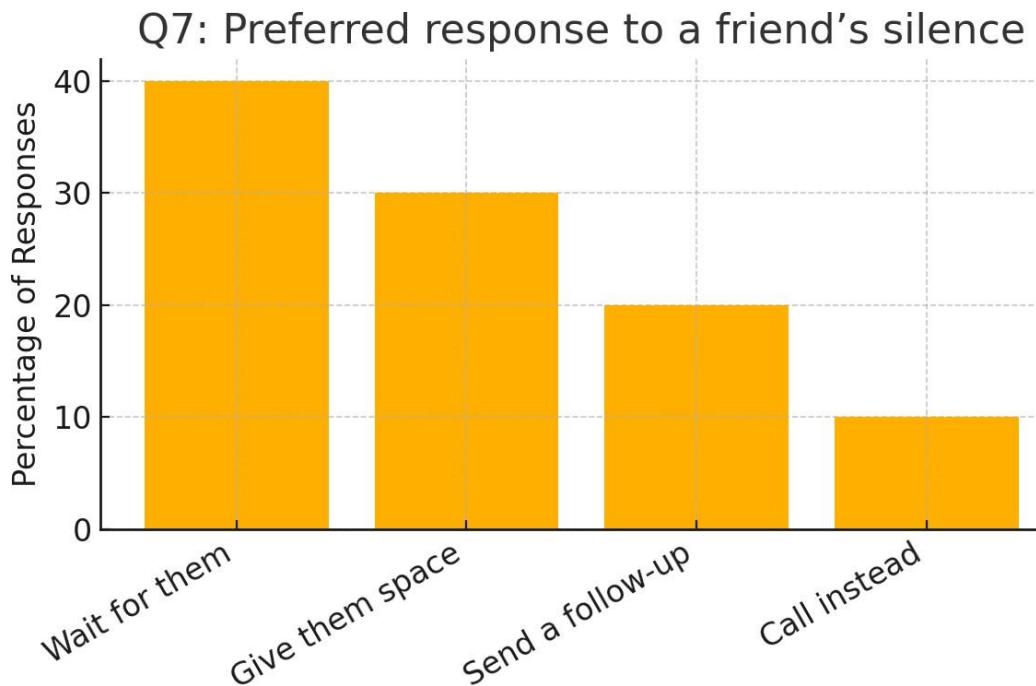


Figure 7. Percentage distribution of responses for “Q7: Preferred response to a friend’s silence”.

### **Q8: Effect of cultural background on the use of silence.**

Findings. The responses were distributed as following Respect to avoid conflict - 35; Avoidance/withholding - 40; Technical/other - 10; Mixed/depends - 15.

Interpretation. The production and perception of silence were culturally influenced by the polite behavior, hierarchy and conflict avoidance with the greater South Asian norms of communication.

Implications. Teachers and student leaders can think about developing basic norms, e.g. rewarding messages with a short response, or agreed response time, to bring ambiguity down and avoid misunderstandings associated with silence.

### Q8: Cultural background effect on silence us

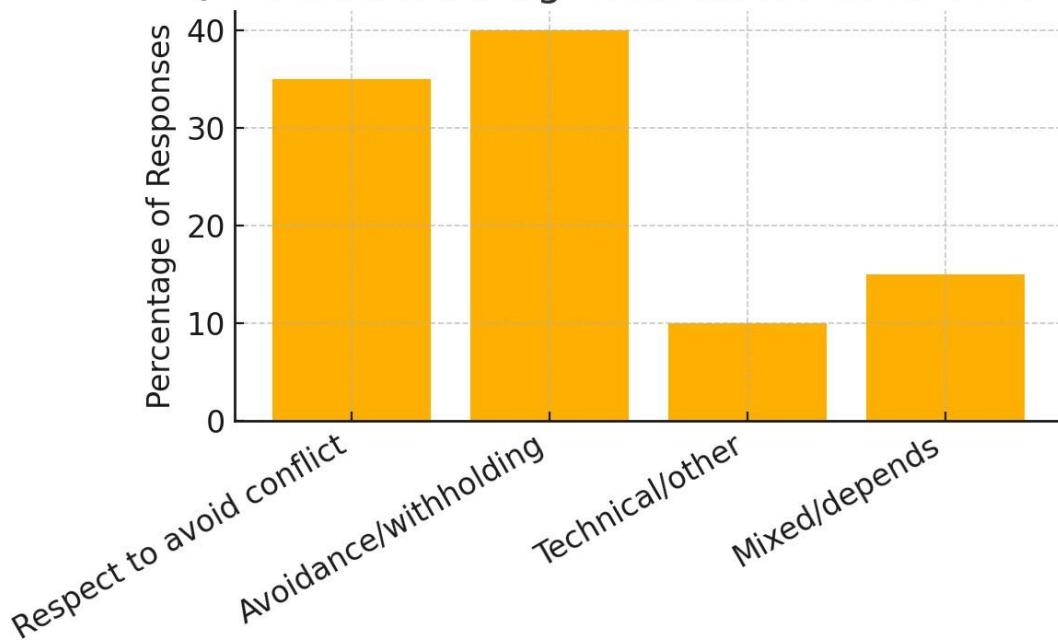


Figure 8. Percentage distribution of responses for “Q8: Cultural background effect on silence use”.

### Q9: Silence tends to be the meaning in group chats.

Findings. The responses were distributed in the following way: Agreement -20; Disagreement- 10; Neutral/uncertain -50; other reasons- 20. Interpretation. Group silence was more likely to be interpreted as neutral or undecided than approval or disapproval, and the danger associated with interpreting passive non-responses as agreement. Implications. To minimize the levels of ambiguity and possible misunderstandings associated with silence, educators and student leaders might think about introducing simple norms, such as brief responses to messages or mutual agreement on the response time.

### Q9: In group chats, silence usually means

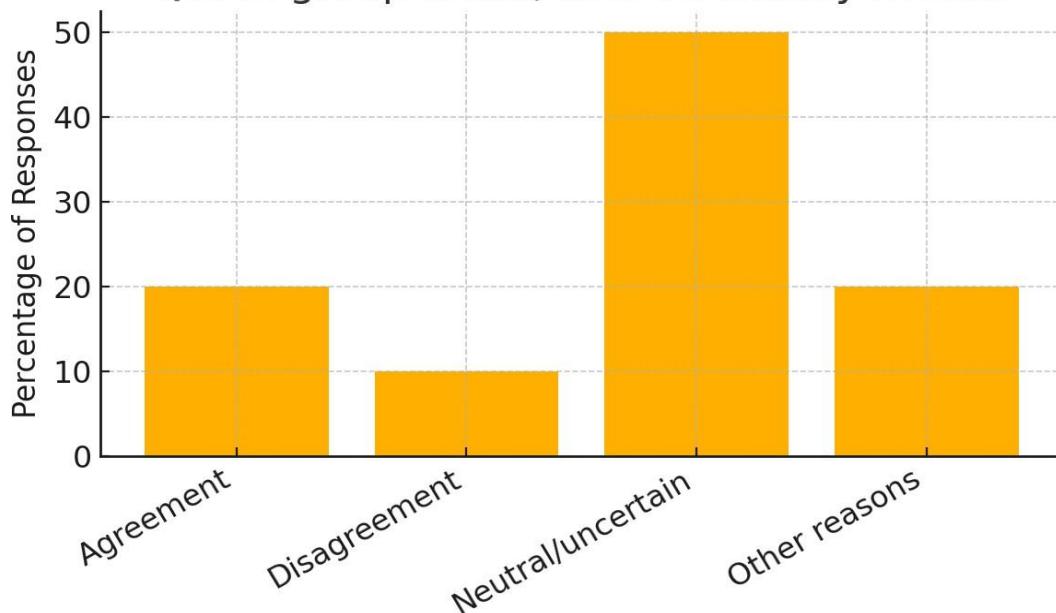


Figure 9. Percentage distribution of responses for “Q9: In group chats, silence usually means”.

#### **Q10: Willingness to use silence rather than words.**

Findings. The answers were distributed in the following way: Very comfortable 25 percent; somewhat comfortable 45 percent; Not very comfortable 20 percent; Not comfortable 10 percent.

Interpretation. As most of them were fine with silent cues, a significant minority was interested in having explicit feedback, which implies that there is heterogeneity regarding ambiguity tolerance.

Implications. Teachers and school administrators can also think about setting up some simple rules, such as a reward of a brief response or an agreed response time, to minimize the ambiguity and discourage misunderstanding, which can be caused by silence.



Figure 10. Percentage distribution of responses for “Q10: Comfort with using silence instead of words”.

#### **Q11: What comes to mind when a close friend is silent.**

Findings. The response distribution was as under: They are busy - 40; they need time alone - 25; something is wrong - 20; I should check on them - 15.

Interpretation. Hushpuppies prompted more relationally endowed explanations, but practical explanations prevailed (busyness, time alone).

Implications. Teachers and school administrators can think about introducing relatively simple rules, such as admitting messages with short feedback or mutual response periods, to minimize inertia and the occurrence of misunderstandings associated with silence.

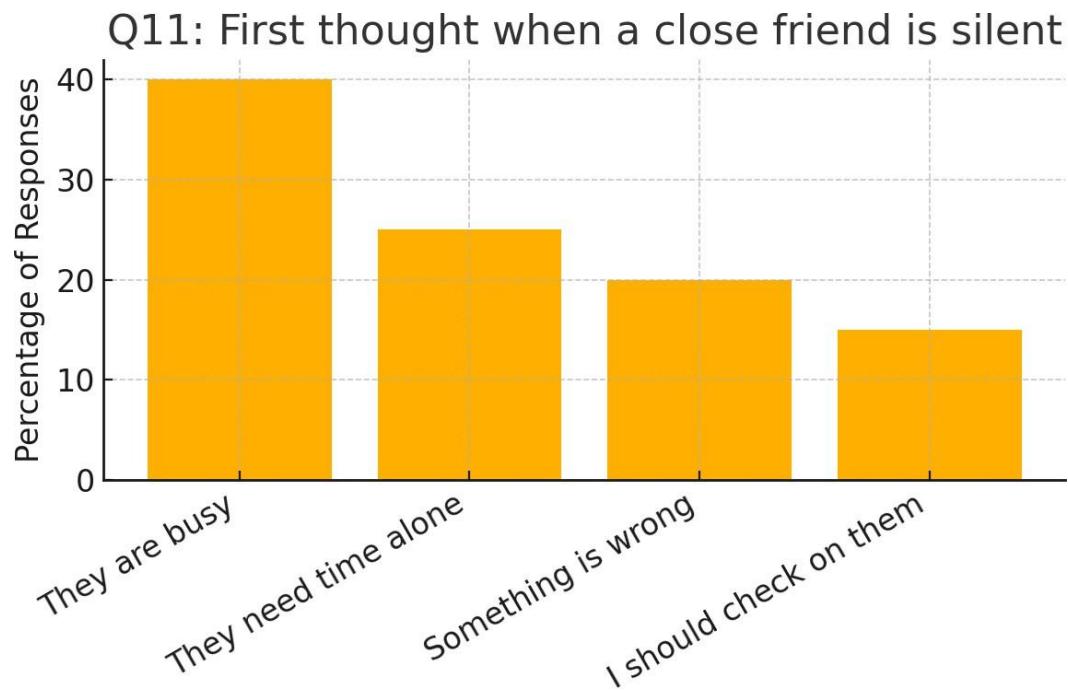


Figure 11. Percentage distribution of responses for “Q11: First thought when a close friend is silent”.

**Q12: Silence in relationships.**

Findings. The responses were distributed as follows Strengthens-15, Weakens-25, Depends on situation-50, and No effect-10.

Interpretation. The students opposed globalizations, focusing on situational reliance - in some situations quietness can save harmony, and in other situations one can gain distance.

Implications. Teachers and student heads can think about the creation of minimal norms such as the recognition of messages by quick responses or concurring response time gaps, to minimize ambiguity and misunderstanding associated with silence.

### Q12: Effect of silence on relationships

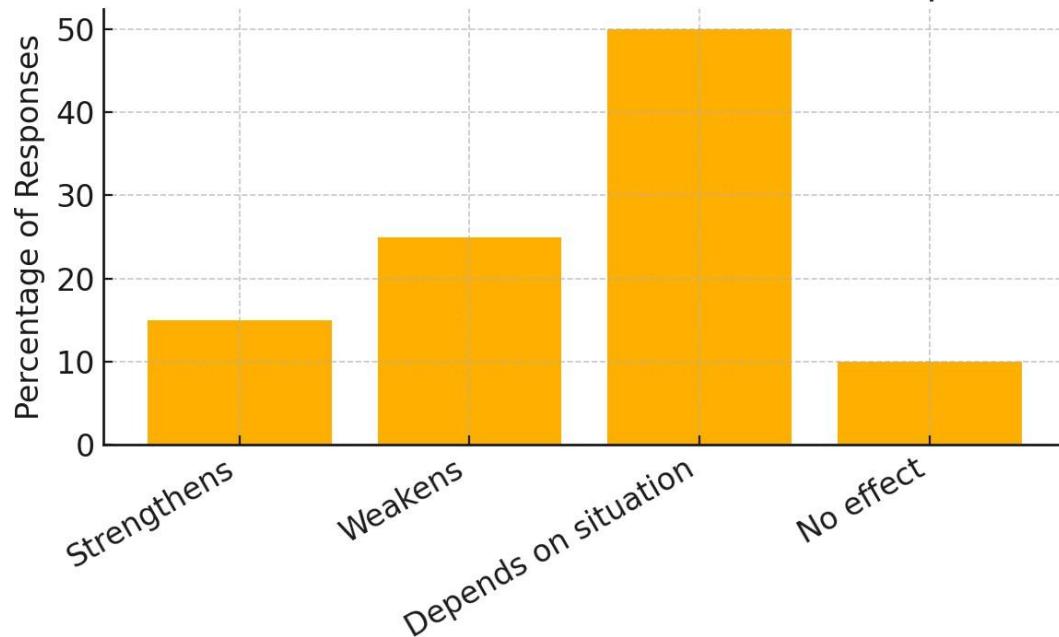


Figure 12. Percentage distribution of responses for “Q12: Effect of silence on relationships”.

### Q13: It is silence after having sent an important message that means.

Findings. The responses were distributed as follows: They are thinking carefully -45 percent; they are avoiding responding -25 percent; they may not have seen it -20 percent; other -10 percent.

Interpretation. Following extensive messages, there was a big give the benefit of the doubt having established thinking carefully, which is a sign that there is a cooperative effort to read through non-replies despite fears of delayed responses.

Implications. Teachers and school leaders might keep in mind setting up the norms which are simple to follow, such as recognition of messages with short replies or agreed any reaction- Windows, to minimize confusion and misunderstanding associated with silence.

### Q13: Silence after sending an important message

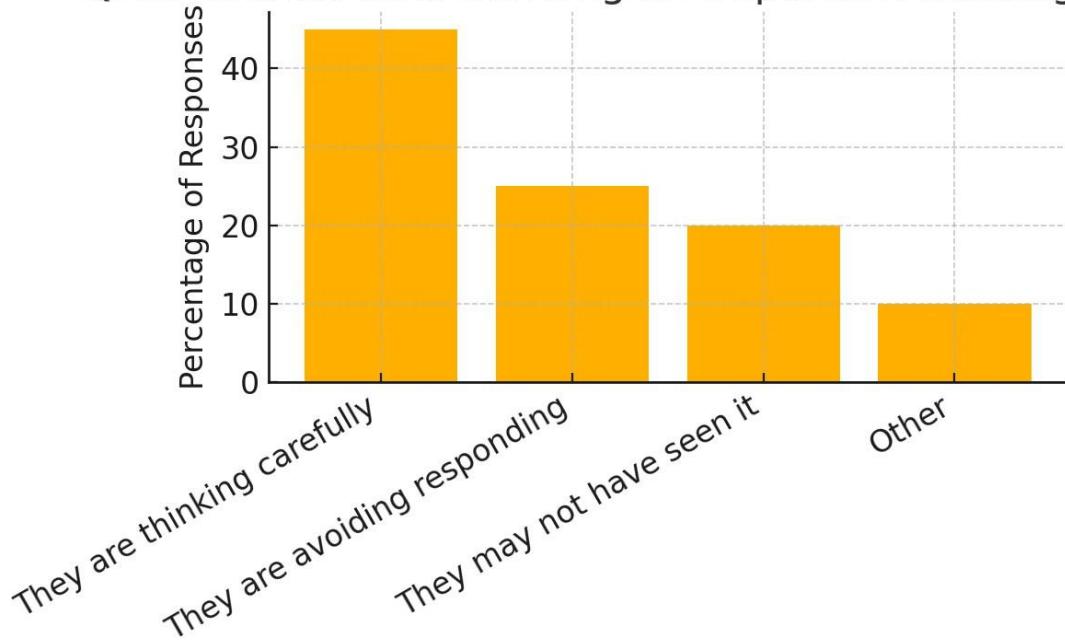


Figure 13. Percentage distribution of responses for “Q13: Silence after sending an important message means”.

### Q14: Silence more or less understandable than face to face.

Findings. It was divided in the following manner: Harder - 55; Easier -10; about the same -15; Depends on context -20.

Interpretation. Lack of facial cues, voice, and timing made WhatsApp silence more difficult to read than a face-to-face interaction with the majority of respondents.

Implications. Teachers and student leaders can also want to come up with simple norms, such as responding to messages with shorter replies or agreed response time, to minimize ambiguity and avoid misunderstandings associated with silence.

#### Q14: Silence easier or harder to understand vs. face-to-face

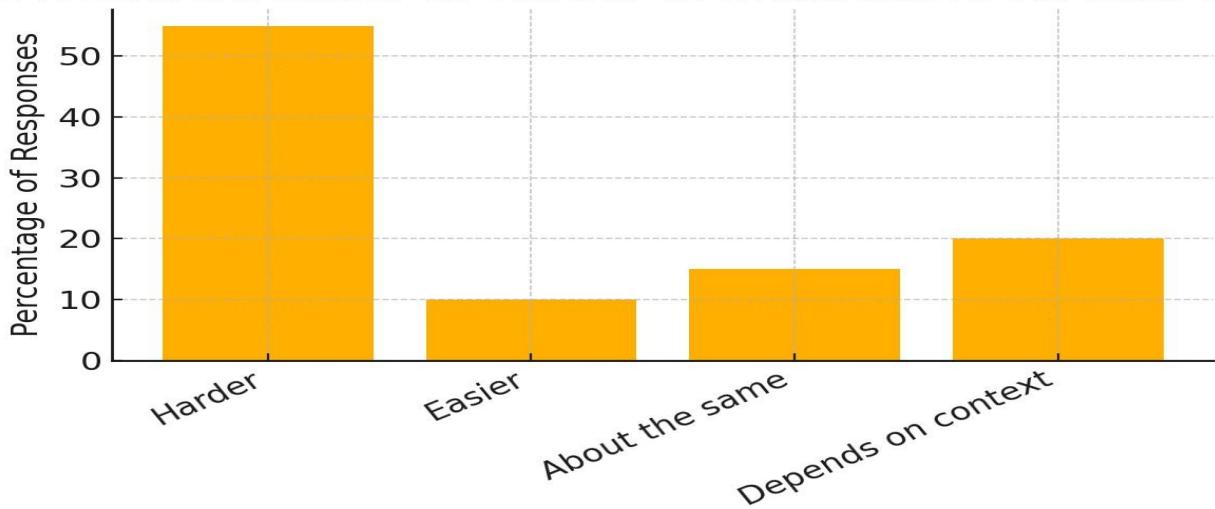


Figure 14. Percentage distribution of responses for “Q14: Silence easier or harder to understand vs. face-to-face”.

#### Q15: How frequently is there misunderstanding because of silence.

Findings. The following distribution was obtained: Very often 30, Occasionally 45, Rarely 15 and Never 10.

Interpretation. The situation of misunderstanding that appears because of silence was frequent, which led to the necessity to establish explicit clarification norms within student groups.

Implications. Teachers and student leaders can think of creating some basic rules, such as sending messages with short replies or negotiated periods of responding, to lower the levels of ambiguity and misunderstandings associated with silence.

#### Q15: How often silence causes misunderstandings

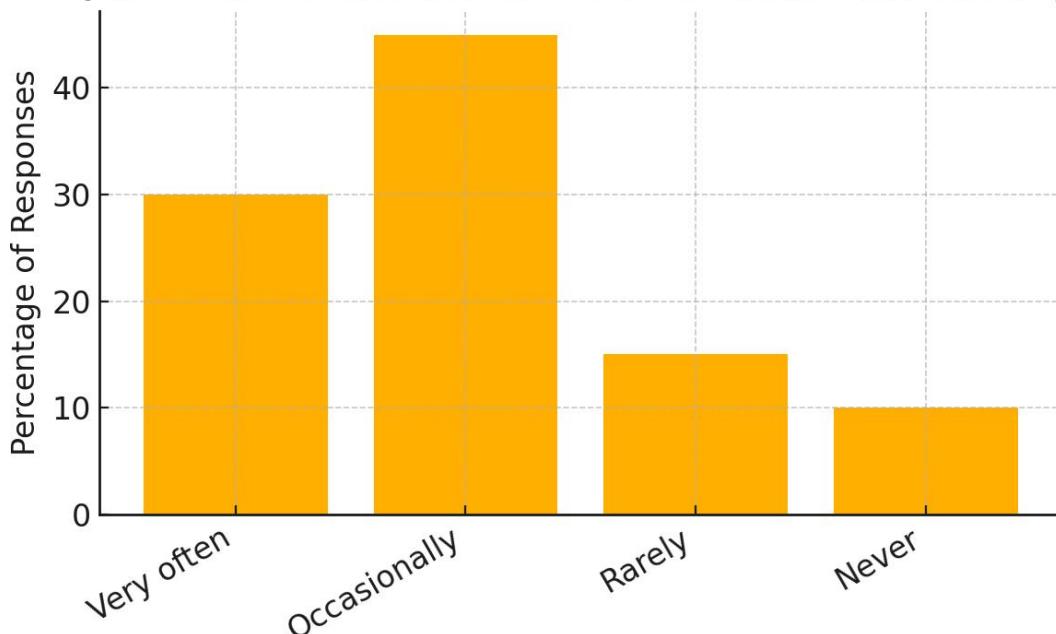


Figure 15. Percentage distribution of responses for “Q15: How often silence causes misunderstandings”.

### **Synthesis of Patterns**

Among the items students identified silence as communicative yet vague. The explanations were practical (busyness, missed messages), but the emotionally negative ones (feeling ignored) also existed. Both the use and perception of silence were defined by cultural norms of politeness and conflict avoidance. Uncertainty was increased in group settings and incidences of misunderstanding were cited as occasional to frequent.

### **Practical Implications**

To reduce uncertainty, cohorts and student groups may develop light-touch conventions: admitting that an important message has been received, updating status (e.g., will reply later), and specifying expectations of time-sensitive threads. These practices could minimize the false interpretations of silence and enable teamwork.

### **Limitations of the Analysis**

It was based on close-ended items and descriptive statistics, which lack the ability to understand the underlying rationales of decisions. Besides, the findings can be generalized to other similar groups of students but they must be taken seriously when applied to various institutions or subgroups of cultures. The triangulation of the findings in future research might include open-ended responses or message-behavior logs.

### **Conclusion:**

The study was conducted to understand the perceptions of the Pakistani university students on silence as a nonverbal communication within WhatsApp. The results indicated that silence has ambiguous and situational meaning. To the majority of students, silence in online communication was not merely lack of words but a form of communication, which expressed emotions, intentions, or respect basing on the relationship and circumstance. Although silence was seen by many respondents as a sign that one was ignored or avoided, some respondents saw it as an inherent element of communication that is implemented to be polite, avoid conflict, or give time to think. It was also indicated in the analysis that the cultural and social norms contributed greatly to the perception of silence in students. Silence was also used in the Pakistani culture where it used to be interpreted as an act of modesty or deference, as respect and hierarchy were more important in the culture and social harmony. But in peer situations a long silencing in some cases led to miscommunication or emotional alienation. This emphasizes the fact that silence may strengthen and deteriorate relationships based on context, purpose, and meaning.

In addition, the researchers stated that the use of digital platforms like WhatsApp complicates the interaction with silence due to the face-to-face communication. Lack of visual and auditory supporting information augmented confusion and, at times, the misunderstandings concerning purpose or intent. Nevertheless, the majority of students were aware and tolerant to digital silence, and tend to interpret the end of a conversation in a practical way due to busyness or distracted behavior. Altogether, the paper explains that silence in WhatsApp communications represents a changing and significant component of communication between Pakistani students. It speaks of individuality and intellectualization. It is possible to enhance online communication through comprehending these nuances and preventing misunderstandings that may happen during the communication process. Further studies could build upon this study by incorporating open-ended responses or intercultural comparative research to learn more about nonverbal communication in online world.

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