

# **Using Chat Group Discussion on *Whatsapp* to Increase Students' Vocabulary**

Tiray Febria Zananda

febriatiray@gmail.com

English Education Study Program, Palembang University

M. Fahmi

English Education Study Program, Palembang University

## **Abstract**

Many people's everyday lives points at new possibilities for conducting online and mobile focus groups. This paper offers new empirical insights from using the method as part of a digital ethnography with young activists. The presence of WhatsApp in participants' everyday lives offers a context with high ecological validity. The paper suggests that this opens up new options for designing online focus groups. WhatsApp also offers opportunities for creating more inclusive group discussions also finds that this familiarity and inclusivity affords the potential for group deliberation, which can be particularly valuable in participatory research.

Keyword: WhatsApp, Focus Group Discussions

## Introduction

Affordances are understood as possibilities offered, although not determined, by artefacts or technologies. Whether these possibilities are actioned depends on the context in which the given technology is used and interpreted (Hutchby, 2001; Roberts, 2017; Zheng and Yu, 2016). This paper draws on the empirical evidence of a focus group on WhatsApp. Its conclusions are to be considered as possibilities for using WhatsApp in other contexts rather than prescriptive guidelines.

The paper starts by situating WhatsApp in the literature on focus group methodology to show its unexplored potential. It then presents the digital ethnography study in which the method was used. It proceeds to make the case for the following key insights. WhatsApp is available on Android, iOS or KaiOS smartphones and is used by over 1 billion people across 180 countries. It allows instant one-to-one or group sharing of text and voice messages, links, images, videos and other files. It also allows voice and video calls. All of these services are at no additional financial cost other than the cost of internet access (mobile data or Wi-Fi). It has a desktop version called WhatsApp Web, which can be used by pairing the computer with the phone by scanning a QR code. WhatsApp also includes 'social information' (Church and De Oliveira, 2013: 353), which indicates, for example, when someone is online or typing. The application also indicates when the recipient has received the message or when they have read it, unless the user has disabled this feature to manage how much information about their WhatsApp activity is available.

WhatsApp has been covered in the academic literature across many disciplines largely as an object of study rather than a research method. The methods used in these studies include, among others, questionnaires, analysis of WhatsApp chats and face-to-face focus groups. However, despite WhatsApp being studied for its communicative value, its use as a tool for online focus group discussions is practically non-existent in the identified literature. Research using WhatsApp for one-to-one interviews is also limited. Mare used WhatsApp as a complement to the in-depth interviews that the author conducted on Facebook in Zimbabwe and South Africa (Mare, 2017) and a study by Gibson covered the author's experience conducting interviews on WhatsApp with young people in New Zealand (Gibson, 2020).

During the first decade of the century, academic research on online

focus groups can largely be found in health research. Stewart and Williams (2005) researched online focus groups drawing on Stewart's work using email threads and William's work using 3D graphical environments. These two examples allowed Stewart and Williams to observe the differences between asynchronous focus groups, typical of email-based distribution lists or 'web boards', and synchronous focus groups, a more obvious online equivalent to face-to-face group discussions as the conversation happens in real time. This paper develops these considerations using empirical data from a digital ethnography study in Kenya and finds its unexplored potential.

### **The WhatsApp focus group: methodological and practical considerations**

In addition to being a familiar space that the group was already using, WhatsApp offered a practical solution for this study both in terms of cost and the possibility to include more people. Participants were spread across different constituencies and organising the logistics for them to gather in the same physical space would have been costly. It could also have added a burden on those wishing to take part if this meant stopping work, studies or arranging for childcare, for example. The group met face-to-face occasionally as part of their training and activism, but time was precious during these offline meetings as there was much content for the group and the civil society organisation that trained them to discuss. Consequently, it did not feel appropriate to organise a focus group during those days. Respecting participants' time and spaces for discussion was particularly important considering my positionality as a Western researcher and the power imbalances that this carries. I was, therefore, aware and reflexive of the need to minimise any burden on participants. Doing an online focus group seemed to be a more suitable approach.

For the method to be suitable, however, it also had to be mobile. It was rare for the young activists to own a laptop or computer, but most owned a smartphone and used WhatsApp on a daily basis. In addition, then, it also felt more ethical to use the participants' own space of communication (see also Williams et al., 2012). As I will argue, this familiarity has implications for the way participants engaged and communicated during the focus group discussion, including the use of languages. To support this point, all quotes from participants included in this article are kept as typed in the group discussion.

## Discussion

This study harnessed WhatsApp's ubiquity in people's daily lives and communicative habits to design a one-day focus group discussion with young activists. This atypical duration enabled the inclusion of a wide range of personal circumstances and resulted in a combination of synchronous and asynchronous interactions that transcends the limitations described in the online focus groups literature of using either approach in isolation. The functional affordances of WhatsApp helped to manage this approach. For example, using bold font and numbering when introducing a new question helped to signpost the discussion so that participants catching up after a break could identify the different topics while scrolling up and down. As for the synchronous exchanges, often fast-paced, the function in WhatsApp to reference the comment that one is responding to helped to manage conversation threading, although this was not always used and the visual reference is lost when the chat is exported as a .txt file, therefore requiring the researcher to anticipate the analysis of multiple synchronous interactions.

In addition, the method enabled inclusivity through the communication affordances of WhatsApp as a disembodied medium seen by participants themselves as a familiar and free space that helps to overcome the fear of speaking up. Instant messaging communication has also been found to be a genre that allows the use of multiple languages and the representation of non-verbal cues in participants' own terms, which in this study helped to disrupt unequal power relations between participants and myself as an European researcher. Participants would indeed mix Kiswahili, informal expressions and emojis in their interactions, which can also be interpreted more systematically by the researcher in a text-based discussion.

Finally, discourse analysis suggested that the WhatsApp group discussion enabled deliberation among participants. Although many factors may play a role in providing deliberative space, such as the facilitator and the objective of the discussion, I have argued in this paper that WhatsApp's ecological validity and communication affordances as a disembodied space can support more deliberative interactions. This has to be understood in the context of the study, with a group of people who were already working together as activists and shared a common goal. However, the group discussion was designed by the researcher to answer specific research questions. This suggests that using WhatsApp can offer even greater deliberative potential if discussions are facilitated in the context of participatory research approaches where power

and decision- making is more fundamentally intended to be in the hands of participants.

Despite these benefits, researchers considering WhatsApp need to be mindful of digital inequalities. In the context of the broader digital ethnography that this focus group was part of, some of the young people did not have a smartphone or had to use their partner's. Others could not always afford data or access Wi-Fi, so they would be offline for relatively long periods. Others lived in areas where the network was so weak that their online access was very intermittent. This was less so the case for the core group of activists engaged in the focus group discussion and the approach to recruiting, designing and conducting the focus group took these realities into account, by, for example, covering the data costs and calling participants to go through informed consent. Using WhatsApp was still a practical and inclusive option for this specific group of participants but others thinking about using this approach need to carefully consider the communication ecosystem and the realities of potential participants.

WhatsApp offers the option of using photos, videos, voice messages and various file types which could help communicate with persons with difficulty in typing or reading or might be relevant for other research. However, different mediums will add new layers of complexity in the dynamics of the group discussion or may also challenge some of the advantages of the disembodied experience of text-based communication. The use of voice messages or other types of media in WhatsApp focus group discussions has not been attempted or explored in this study and would benefit from further research.

Finally, as a mobile method, using WhatsApp requires careful attention to ethics. A dialogical and recursive approach was used in this study to emphasise the risks, such as visibility of phone numbers, and the collective responsibility for privacy. However, other options might be more suitable if the group discussion is to be organised for more sensitive topics or with participants who do not know each other.

## **Conclusion**

As the most used instant messaging application in the world, WhatsApp's ubiquity in many people's lives offers new avenues for qualitative research. Yet, evidence on its potential is limited. This paper has shared some lessons and benefits of using WhatsApp for online and mobile focus group discussions drawing on a digital ethnography with young activists. In this study this opened possibilities for more inclusive and equalising discussions as well as for new approaches to online research. Finally, the study also finds WhatsApp can enable deliberative

discussions, which can be particularly valuable in participatory action research. Yet, careful consideration is needed when deciding on using WhatsApp, as these affordances will not apply to all contexts, participants or topics.

## References

Church K and De Oliveira R .(2013). What's up with WhatsApp? Comparing mobile instant messaging behaviors with traditional SMS. *MobileHCI 2013 - Proceedings of the 15th International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction with Mobile Devices and Services*, 352–361. DOI: 10.1145/2493190.2493225

Gibson, K .(2020). Bridging the digital divide: reflections on using WhatsApp instant messenger interviews in youth research. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 00(00): 1–21. DOI: 10.1080/14780887.2020.1751902.

Hutchby, I .(2001). Technologies, texts and affordances. *Sociology* 35(2): 441–456. Jowett A, Peel E and Shaw R (2011) Online interviewing in psychology: reflections on the process. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 8(4): 354–369. DOI: 10.1080/14780887.2010.500352. Liamputtong P (2011) *Focus Group Methodology: Principle and Practice*. London: SAGE Publications.

Mare, A .(2017). Tracing and archiving ‘constructed’ data on Facebook pages and groups: reflections on fieldwork among young activists in Zimbabwe and South Africa. *Qualitative Research* 17(6): 645–663. DOI: 10.1177/1468794117720973.

Roberts, T .(2017). Participatory technologies: affordances for development. *IFIP Advances in Information and Communication Technology* 504: 194–205. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-59111-7\_17.

Stewart K and Williams M. (2005). Researching online populations: the use of online focus groups for social research. *Qualitative Research* 5(4): 395–416. DOI: 10.1177/1468794109337866. Treré E (2020) The banality of WhatsApp: on the everyday politics of backstage activism in

Mexico and Spain. *First Monday* 25(12). DOI:  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v25i1.10404>.

Williams S, Clausen MG, Robertson A, et al. (2012) Methodological reflections on the use of asynchronous online focus groups in health research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 11(4): 368–383. DOI: 10.1177/160940691201100405.

Zheng, Y and Yu, A. (2016). Affordances of social media in collective action: the case of free lunch for children in China. *Information Systems Journal* 26(3): 289–313. DOI: 10.1111/isj.12096.



