

**Text, Voice-notes, and Emojis:
Exploring the use of WhatsApp as a responsive research method
for qualitative studies**

Ziyanda Mwanda

School of Public Health, University of the Western Cape

Corresponding Author: amwanda@uwc.ac.za

(Submitted: 8 May 2021; Accepted: 27 June 2022)

Abstract

Unprecedented times are upon us and the need for ethically responsive online research methods is increasing exponentially. Currently, literature is showing that previously frowned upon methods such as the use of social media continue to offer solutions to traditional research challenges in times of COVID-19 and beyond. This paper describes how the features of WhatsApp were used to respond to the needs of geographically dispersed, working study participants. Tronto's Ethics of Care framework is employed as a lens to place emphasis on the elements of care this emerging method offers. Participants and the researcher reflected on the high level of responsiveness WhatsApp offered as a method and the drawbacks are also discussed. In conclusion, this paper offers a list of recommendations that researchers need to take into account when using WhatsApp as a method in a context-sensitive manner.

Keywords: ethics of care, higher education, qualitative research, responsive methods, WhatsApp

Introduction

Responsive research methods are being placed at the forefront of research debates now more than ever (Richardson, et al., 2021). With the unprecedented interruptions in academia during student protests and COVID-19, the use of social media in research continues to increase in response to the physical separation of researcher and participants. Research scholars extend the use of social media to overcome traditional research challenges such as data collection. Recent studies have shown researchers innovatively using social media as both data collection tools and sites (Chen & Neo, 2019; Nyembe & Howard, 2020; Colom, 2021). While traditional researchers would question the quality of methods such as the use of social media for academic research, others such as Salmons (2014), Bampton, et al. (2013), and Burns (2010) have been arguing for a while that the assumptions that individuals can only have meaningful dialogue when they are in the same physical space are traditional and rather outdated. Salmon



(2014) based her stance on the fact that we live in a contemporary world where multiple areas of life including carrying out personal, social, and professional interactions which previously relied on physical contact, are now mostly conducted online. This then gives rise to digital researchers (or e-researchers) adapting and re-inventing qualitative research designs to study human interactions such as patterns of behaviours, experiences, and perceptions presented in the online world (Salmons, 2012).

The use of social media, for example, enables the researcher to have virtual interactions with participant/s located in other parts of the world as well as time-pressed participants. This has become even more urgent in times of COVID-19, where research would have halted had it not been for affordances of social media platforms and other web conferencing tools, such as Zoom, to continue collecting data. These online platforms or applications such as social media allow for one-on-one, one-to-many, or many-to-many interactions between study participants and researchers. They also allow for the creation, archiving, and retrieving of user-generated content. Social media sites offer their own mixture of communication features and constraints, such as the written, visual, verbal, and/or multimedia choices which were used in this study.

However, an element of care is the essence of any research when collecting or analysing data, especially when working on the role and experiences of humans (Emanuel, et al., 2010; Williamson & Burns, 2014). Through social media, researchers are finding ways to understand issues around psychosocial experiences such as aspects of well-being and quality of relationships (Kaye, 2021). Kaye highlights the need for researchers to move away from theorising social media use as a unidimensional concept and calls for empirical studies to test her stance. The need for research that not only explores participants' emotional well-being but rather studies that embody and embrace elements of care for the participants has become even more important in the times of COVID-19. Over the past two years, we could see an explosion of grey literature, such as blog posts, on digital research methods as scholars were trying to navigate this new landscape to thrive both within and beyond it (Bulsari, et al., 2020). What these writings show is that extraordinary times also present opportunities to do interesting, creative and ethical research. One such example is the use of WhatsApp as a research method, gaining popularity because of its affordances addressing some of the gaps identified in the literature with regards to the collection of rich data over time and space (de Gruchy, et al., 2021). With the increased use of WhatsApp in research, an exploration of its opportunities and challenges as a research method are critical.

This study uses Tronto's Ethics of Care elements to critically reflect on how WhatsApp can be used to respond to a range of traditional research challenges based on a study done at a large University in the Western Cape. In particular, this paper will explore how WhatsApp can be used as a data collection tool in qualitative research studies with hard-to-reach participants; how WhatsApp can potentially redefine researcher-participant relationships; the level of care and responsiveness WhatsApp offers as a research method, and finally increase awareness for the need of ethical sound guidelines for the use of WhatsApp in research.

Literature review

The use of qualitative research methods to explore lived experiences

Qualitative research methods are employed as a base for understanding processes, meaning, and purposes (Serry & Liamputtong, 2013). Qualitative research methods place emphasis on internal realities and highlight how the world can be experienced in multiple ways. It is based on the assumption that there could be different ways to interpret an observed phenomenon to understand the meaning that people construct of their world through their experiences (Creswell, 2012). Therefore, the role of the researcher is described as the one that remains open to new knowledge throughout the study and allows it to develop with the assistance of the participants. Traditional qualitative methods have been the face to face individual interviews including facilitated group discussions. Interviews are most appropriate where little is already known about the study phenomenon or where an in-depth understanding is required from individual participants (Oltmann, 2016). Interviews are also particularly appropriate for exploring sensitive topics, where participants may not want to talk about such issues in a group environment. These have generally required the physical presence of both the researcher and the participants to be in the same space. Teti, et al. (2020) argue that despite the challenges posed by this current crisis, it has never been a better time to exploit qualitative methods. This is because qualitative methods are better positioned in terms of exploring the diversity of perspectives required to fully understand the COVID-19 pandemic as it unfolds (Leach, et al., 2020). Qualitative methods can give insight into the current situation as it evolves and lessons to bring to bear on future epidemics and how to effectively manage them.

WhatsApp as a research method

The use of WhatsApp continues to increase widely amongst qualitative researchers for ethnography, pre-tasks, and discussion groups (Singer, 2020; Manji, 2021). This is due to its ease of use, convenience, and nativeness (Cribett, 2018; Rosenfeld, et al., 2018). WhatsApp offers a range of modalities - although the most predominantly used are text and emojis. Voice Notes are increasingly gaining popularity as they offer a quick response with less ambiguity. Text is words typed using the keypad of the participant' s device, which is mostly in the language of the user. Emojis are graphics used to express the participants' feelings, reactions and activities such as swimming and dancing. The latest version, WhatsApp 22.19. 352 offers over 200 diverse emojis inclusive of a range of diverse users. Users are not limited to using WhatsApp graphics (emojis) as they can also share pictures (as evidence or to substantiate their comments) and videos as another form of communication.

With only the intention to replace SMS with additional features in 2009, WhatsApp has since succeeded to make its place in the top five leading applications in the world (Statista Research Department, 2022). WhatsApp is reportedly being used by persons between the ages of 17-65+ globally. These ages include late secondary and tertiary scholars, working professionals as well the high numbers of unemployed persons reported in South Africa annually. These numbers not only illustrate the use of WhatsApp across age, gender, race, and

class but also the wide penetration WhatsApp potentially has as a research tool. To date, the use of WhatsApp as a tool for data collection in qualitative research has been limited. Current literature indicates that WhatsApp has been mostly used in quantitative research for disseminating links to an online platform such as Google Forms through the creation of a WhatsApp Group as an intervention to facilitate communication between students and/ or workers (de Gruchy, et al., 2021). Increasingly over the years, WhatsApp has been used as research sites where interaction is used to understand relationships better through content analysis (Shahid, et al., 2019). Historically, little attention has been paid to research conducted where WhatsApp is used as a data collection tool in qualitative research to accommodate the variety of participants' needs. However, we now observe an emerging area of WhatsApp being used by qualitative researchers due to the affordances that WhatsApp offers in terms of ease of use, multimodality and cost. These affordances, in a developing country such as South Africa, can be seen as a potential response to traditional data collection challenges. In a country where majority of adults are working to put food on the table, they often do not have the privilege to take time off to participate in research studies, whatsapp has proven to be accommodating in this regard. Even within the literature that does exist, limited attention has been paid to the ethical implications of using WhatsApp or the ways in which existing social and economic inequities may affect its use in research.

There are some indicators for the potential of WhatsApp for qualitative research, such as studies by Chen and Neo (2019), whose work is dedicated to exploring the potential of smartphone-based mobile messaging such as WhatsApp as new methods, and who have found WhatsApp to be a useful method to elicit group-level insights. Similarly, Singer and colleagues (2020) highlight, that using WhatsApp as a research tool can facilitate interviews (group interviews to be specific) in low resource settings which has practical implications for data collection, data quality, and data analysis. They emphasise the need for developing guidelines and an ethical code of conduct for conducting qualitative research with vulnerable populations.

Ethics of care framework

This paper uses Tronto' s ethics of care framework as analytical framework to explore the potential of WhatsApp as a *responsive* research method. Fisher and Tronto (1990) describe ethics of care as an approach to morals (personal, social, and political) that is based on an everyday practice of caregiving and care receiving. The framework is based on the reality that all human beings need, receive and give care to each other for life to be meaningful. It places emphasis on the interconnectedness of humanity. Tronto (2013) identifies four moral elements of care and their respective phases (in brackets):

1. *Attentiveness* (caring about): taking note of unattended needs and putting aside one' s own judgments in order to see the world from the perspective of the one in need.
2. *Responsibility* (caring for): taking on the burden of responding to this need.

3. *Competence* (caregiving): being competent to care, which is always both a technical and a moral and political issue.
4. *Responsiveness* (care receiving): listening to the response of the person/group that was cared for, sometimes resulting in new unmet needs.
5. *Solidarity* (caring with): taking collective responsibility, thinking of citizens as both receivers and givers of care, and thinking seriously about the nature of caring needs in society.

This paper uses the elements of the ethics of care framework to describe how the research approach was organically developed: from negotiating the best possible approach with participants, to participants' perceptions of the approach, and finally how the method has responded in the process to changing researcher and participant' s needs.

Method

This paper is based on a research study that was conducted on the exploration of social media in distance learning ecosystems of support (Mwanda, 2020). This study was conducted with students registered at the University of the Western Cape, School of Public Health, a postgraduate diploma programme. The study was aimed at a variety of students in terms of demographics and study level (1st and 2nd year) so that findings could be representative of the programme population. Although the students were registered students of the school, they were geographically dispersed. This led to the study sites being online. While the main study had three parts (Online survey, Individual interview and Focus Group Discussion (FGD)), this work will report on the findings of the individual interviews and FGDs as WhatsApp was used as a method, and participants provided reflections on its use. In addition to the data collected from the study participants, the researcher also had a research journal where she documents her experiences throughout the study.

Individual Interview

In this phase of the research study, following the online survey, participants were interviewed to get a deeper insight into their perceptions of their ecosystems of learning. The in-depth interview strategy was envisaged to follow a semi-structured approach with

predominantly open-ended questions and where closed questions were kept to a minimum. Willing students responded to an email sent by the researcher with the signed content form, their contact details and suitable time and date. Though initially eight students showed interest, finding the time to participate in the interviews proved to be of difficulty. The researcher opted for a more flexible option by suggesting using WhatsApp chats rather than telephonic or Skype conversations to conduct the interviews. Participants agreed to this method and provided the researcher with their WhatsApp contact details by email. Upon the granted permission, the conversation commenced by the researcher posting a question and at a time convenient to the participant, they would respond using a combination of text, emoji and voice-notes. Emoji are ideograms and smileys used in text messages. They are from a

range of genres, such as facial expressions, common objects, places and types of weather, and animals. Like emoticons, emoji are actual pictures instead of typographics. These asynchronous chat conversations were scheduled for two days, starting from 9 am till 6 pm. While some interviews started and ended at the scheduled time, there was more number of observed inactivity (this is the period where there was no response from the participants). It was also observed that interviews that started later in the day yielded more interaction with an average response rate of 3 - 4 minutes. These times can be noted to be optimal times to conduct individual interviews using WhatsApp.

With permission from the participants, the conversation/chat history was exported as a text file and saved on the researcher's Google Drive, while voice notes were transcribed and inserted into the exported WhatsApp chat transcripts.

Facilitated Group Discussion

Further to the interviews, a focus group discussion (facilitated via WhatsApp group chat) was conducted after the individual in-depth WhatsApp conversation had been completed. It aimed at finding out firstly what students understood to be learning and to share their experiences of using social media (WhatsApp) to support their learning. A group of six students, five females and one male formed part of this phase of the study (one participant was inactive, not responding to questions). The researcher initiated the WhatsApp group and with the permission of the students, they were added to the group. Like in phase 2, the discussion was initiated by the researcher.

The group was created a day before the start of the actual group discussion, with the first day dedicated to introducing the students to each other and the researcher, even though they might have known each other to create rapport for safe and comfortable expression of opinions. The study was also explained to the students and how the discussion group was expected to run. The discussion ran over two days with two main questions posted a day (one question in the morning and another midday). On both days the conversations ran until 18h00 and then started again at 10h00 in the morning. The conversation was then exported via text file from WhatsApp and saved on the researcher's Google Drive as a word document. A debriefing session of 20 minutes was then conducted exploring the use of WhatsApp as a data collection method. The researcher notified the participants that the group was then going to be deleted and with their permission, the researcher deleted the group.

Researcher journal reflections

Throughout the data collection process, the researcher kept a journal where she reflected on her experiences of conducting research for the first time and particularly using WhatsApp to collect data. It is worth noting that the researcher is involved in supporting students/participants to a certain extent and had some relationship with the participants prior to the study. This means that the researcher is conducting research on her own practice and reflects on her practice. According to Chang (2013), this warrants this study to be

autoethnography. An autoethnographic study is a qualitative study where the researcher uses his/her self-reflection and writing to explore anecdotal and personal experiences (Adams, et al., 2017). Participants' individual chats, group chats as well as the researcher's journal reflections are analysed and interpreted using Tronto's five moral elements of care. Below is table 1 describing how Tronto's five elements of care were used to analyse the data in line with the study's overall research objectives

Table 1: An analysis overview of illustrating the relationship of Tronto's elements of care indicators, research questions and study objectives

Tronto's element of care	Evidence or characteristics of Tronto's element	Interview/ focus group question (IQ) asked to evaluate element	Research objectives
Attentiveness	Identifying the needs of the participants – caring about	IQ: What are some anticipated challenges for being a student and full-time health professional? Researcher note: From the responses, how will these challenges translate to the level of participation in the study?	To describe how WhatsApp can be used as a data collection tool in qualitative research studies with hard-to-reach participants.
Responsibility	Being open and willing to respond to the identified needs – caring for	Researcher note: How can the identified needs be accommodated? Negotiate with participants what they think would allow them flexibility – give options	To illustrate how WhatsApp can potentially redefine researcher-participants relationships
Competence	Ability to provide caregiving care	IQ: How comfortable are you in using WhatsApp for learning and professional development? Researcher note: needed to assess the level of competence to facilitate research online conversations	To determine the level of comfort in using WhatsApp as a platform to facilitate meaningful conversation and as a safe space
Responsiveness	Reaction to the care process – care receiving	IQ: How have you found participating in a research study through WhatsApp? Researcher note: allow participants to reflect on the modality used and provide feedback for improvement	To determine the level of care and responsiveness WhatsApp offers as a research method
Solidarity	Collective responsibility - care with	Researcher note: reflect on the whole process and note limitations and ethical consideration for further studies	To increase awareness for the need of ethical guidelines for the use of WhatsApp in research studies

Interpretation of the elements of care

This section of the paper draws on quotes from participants as well as from the researcher's reflection journal using Tronto's elements of care. The participants' quotes are noted as P# which stands for participant number (eg. P3 – participant number 3). The researcher's notes are identified as RN. This section also provides a descriptive interpretation of the findings in order to highlight the significance of this study.

Attentiveness

Tronto describes attentiveness as an act of care that occurs when one notices unmet needs and suspends their own judgments and is able to see the world from the perspective of the one in need, i.e. caring *about* each other. Below the researcher provides quotes to illustrate how attentiveness played out in the study as she had to suspend her plans and try to listen and identify the needs of the participants in order to achieve optimal participation and gather rich data.

In the online survey, participants ranked time management and the ability to manage multiple responsibilities as the most challenging – being a student and working health professional. This already signalled that the participants were time-pressed meaning they did not have much time to dedicate to the study. The researcher needed to accommodate the varied time schedules of the participants who had shown interest in participating in the study. As seen in Table 1, the participants were also geographically dispersed and that meant that face-to-face would not be feasible. An asynchronous conversation proved to be suitable in this case.

RN: My initial thought was to conduct telephonic interviews with participants. This was not successful, with participants being in different time zones and the interview times clashing with their important work/family commitments. This made me realise that I needed a more flexible method to engage the participants. I needed a method that would not take them away from their core responsibilities as they participate in the study. I got the general sense the participants were really keen to participate in the study as they felt they had something to say about the support strategies and they wanted their voices to be heard"

Reflections of the researcher are included to illustrate the level of attentiveness that was perceived in the study. Even though online methods have been previously frowned upon (references), the researcher had to analyse the situation and most importantly, listen to the needs of the participants. In line with the study Barratt and Maddox (2016) note that other people have fixed schedules that often change on a predictable basis and it is best to conduct research when they are off duty or during their slack or offseason. This was the case with the participants of this study. Working with health professionals can be difficult as they work irregular hours. In the case of this study, participants could easily participate in the study

whenever they had the chance to do so as the asynchronous nature of the study afforded them to do so. It can also be noted that it is important for researchers to get a sense of their participants' schedules so that they can maximise their free time for rich data and avoid infringing on time dedicated for special duties. Accommodating these issues showed a high level of attentiveness which was observed by the researcher.

Responsibility (caring for)

Tronto (2013) describes responsibility as “caring for” . She defines responsibility as taking on the burden of responding to a need that was identified. The participants already had a relationship with the researcher as the researcher is a staff member at the School of Public Health and they have had interactions prior to the study. Some level of trust was therefore already established between the researcher and the participants. The researcher suggested different modalities to the participants in an attempt to accommodate their busy schedules and still get rich and valuable data for the study. The suggested modalities included telephonic conversations, skype, email, and WhatsApp. The majority of participants opted for WhatsApp, while one participant opted for a telephone conversation. However, poor network quality eventually resulted in us using WhatsApp as well. Here we observe how researcher-participants' relationships are redefined where participants have the voice to say what will work best for them and how the data collection process is ultimately changed in response to the identified participants' needs.

RN: Creating a safe space for the participants by allowing them to introduce themselves, reiterating the purpose of the study, and setting some engagement rules (mostly for the group conversations) was important. I had also informed the participants that they could use the different modalities (voice-notes, emoji, text, and other modes) to respond to the research questions. The participants comfortably communicated in their preferred modality with ease resulting in rich multimodal data

Below is a graphical representation of the modalities and the spread in occupation and location of the participants. While two participants used one modality (text only or call), the rest of the participants used a mixture of modalities (text, audio, and emoji).

The researcher found that allowing participants to choose their modality of choice to respond to research questions resulted in rich data. Schultze and Avital (2011) defines data richness as the opportunity provided by the data for the researcher to obtain useful knowledge that can help make interpretation of the explored topic better and easier. Multimodality (multiple modalities) refers to the variety of modes and tools that people use to communicate beyond language (Antoniadou, 2017). As previously argued by Bezemer and Jewitt (2018) that participants use multimodality in research through symbolic and physical resources available to construct meaning.

Table 2: An illustration of participant diversity, geographic spread, and use of modality during interviews

	Study level	Occupation	Location of participant	Modality used
P1	1 st year	Lecturer	Zimbabwe	Text
P2	1 st year	Medical Doctor	Zimbabwe	Text & Voice notes
P3	1 st year	Programme coordinator	South Africa	Text & Emojis
P4	2 nd year	Health Promoter	Lesotho	Text, Emojis & Voice notes
P5	2 nd year	Registered Nurse	Namibia	WhatsApp Call
Group				Text, Emojis & Voice notes

Competence

Tronto (2013) defines competence as caregiving, as being competent to care. Competence can always be both a technical and a moral and political issue. The online survey had illustrated that a vast majority of the students were comfortably using WhatsApp for personal and academic purposes. The researcher was also comfortable in using WhatsApp and she had been an administrator in a number of WhatsApp groups before. Conducting pre-sessions proved essential for the researcher to orientate the participants on how the study would take place and what was expected from them as participants. This helped build rapport and create a safe space for rich conversations. However, using WhatsApp for research purposes was a new practice for both the researcher and the participants.

RN: ... I had more time to refine my questions and reflect on the responses for better follow-up questions. However as daunting as the process was for me as a first-time researcher, I realized that some participants felt the same way. They were intimidated by interviews and sharing their experiences with a group of people in person.

A participant reflected on how she preferred WhatsApp conversations over traditional face-to-face interviews. She reflects on how she finds traditional interviews to be daunting and how participants can end up giving untrue responses as a result of how they feel.

P4: Even in cases where English is not a problem that activity of being interviewed is enough to freak you out and you end up giving false info just so you finish and clear the interviewer away from you.

As observed in the quotes above, both the researcher and the participants were competent in having online conversations due to their personalities and level of experience. The quotes illustrate how the online space has the potential to also create safe spaces for participants with reserved personalities. While this participant reflects on her challenges in participating in face-to-face interviews, she was the most responsive and engaging participant in the group discussion. Hammick and Lee (2014) found that shy individuals felt less communication apprehension during discussions conducted online than face-to-face. They

argue that the lack of multimodality in the real world (face-to-face) is the major factor that influenced the outcome. This study agrees with the notion that when participants are able to communicate/express themselves in more than one way, this creates less resistance and can potentially result in rich data sets as participant personalities are catered for.

Responsiveness (care receiving)

Tronto (2013) defines responsiveness as care receiving. It is listening to the response of the person/group who was cared for, and sometimes results in new unmet needs being identified. Here this study finds that using WhatsApp proved highly responsive in accommodating the needs of time-pressed and geographically dispersed participants. However, this meant that the researcher had to make herself available at all times during the course of the conversations and follow the modality of the participant's choice. The researcher's availability and flexibility and openness were necessary as it afforded the participants the opportunity to fully engage in the study in order to obtain rich data. While the initial needs were catered for, new needs were discovered that the researcher was not fully aware of.

P4: WhatsApp as a research method is far better than the traditional face-to-face method. With WhatsApp I am able to write, read, edit before sending just to ensure proper English 🙌

The researcher had taken for granted that all the participants would be able to participate comfortably in English. The participant above highlights how English could have been a hindering factor for her participation had it been a traditional interview session. The researchers' flexibility in the use of other modalities and time allowed the participants to express themselves to the best of their ability, particularly where English is not a first/home language. It was taken for granted that professionals are likely to be comfortable in communicating and expressing themselves in English. This study proves that this assumption is not only untrue but can contribute to participation resistance and not-so-rich (limited) data. Resch and Enzenhofer (2018) argue that there needs to be increased awareness for social research to include participants who are not fluent in the dominant research language, such as ethnic minority groups, refugees, migrants, or people with a bilingual or multilingual background. However, the inclusion of these groups of people requires an extended level of care and flexibility. In this case, WhatsApp allowed non-English speakers to reflect and revise their responses until they are comfortable sharing with the researcher. The use of emojis also helped them express themselves nonverbally. While WhatsApp allows for synchronous and asynchronous conversations, the asynchronicity afforded participants time to internalise research questions and reflect more deeply on their responses - these can also be noted as factors that resulted in rich data. The researcher in this study had applied the same care strategies and managed to retain participants from phase 2 until phase 3 of the study. And while Chen and Neo (2019) argued that the quantity and richness of the conversation did not

match that of the in-person focus groups, these findings proved that the flexibility that was afforded by the platform provided participants, who were otherwise reserved, an equal chance to express themselves during the individual conversations and mostly in group conversations

Solidarity (caring with)

Solidarity as defined by Tronto (2013) is “caring with” . She explains it as taking collective responsibility, thinking of citizens as both receivers and givers of care, and thinking seriously about the nature of caring needs in society (Swartz, et al., 2018). The element of solidarity places emphasis on the collective responsibility and linking the needs of one’ s own context to those of society at large. Elements of solidarity were not observed in this study. However, these elements could be explored in more longitudinal studies that investigate other stakeholders’ wellbeing, such as the researcher herself, when providing care to participants using WhatsApp. The findings of the suggested studies could inform the emerging research practice where care can be mutually benefited by everyone involved. This means that while care is provided for participants, the researcher is also mindful and does not neglect their own well being.

Limitations of using WhatsApp as a research method

While the researcher illustrated a high level of attentiveness and responsiveness to the participants’ needs, this approach, like any method does not come without shortfalls including issues around the wellbeing of the researcher. Tronto cautions in her work about the two potential hazards of providing care. While WhatsApp affords both the researcher and participants with a range of benefits as stated above, it also has shortcomings. Here the need to provide flexibility competed with the researchers and others’ participants off-time and personal time. However, providing flexibility in terms of when the participants responded to questions was more important and this was only for a short period of time (1 - 2 days) so there were no major adverse reactions. Other issues may include unexpected problems such as participants losing their mobile devices or the malfunction of the device itself during the course of the interviews. These incidences are unexpected and it provides difficult for the researcher to plan around this. Should this happen, follow-up interviews can also be difficult to facilitate. This is why extra precautions such as additional security features need to be implemented for research studies exploring sensitive issues. Also, using WhatsApp as a method may require internet access or data for both the researcher and the participant. Internet access and data costs continue to be an issue, more so for lower socio-economic participants in South Africa, this can be a limitation. Provision of data would need to be made when planning to conduct research using WhatsApp as a method with resource-poor participants.

Conclusion

The world continues to evolve at a rapid rate and so is the manner in which people communicate and express themselves. Responsive methods force researchers to constantly adapt their research tools so that they are easily accessible to the “hard-to-reach”

population. It is crucial that these responsive methods embody elements of care. Caring requires us to move our assumptions aside and allow ourselves to learn how we can best provide care to our participants as researchers. Providing care should be an interactive and mostly reflective process in this ever-changing field of research. This study has proved the use of WhatsApp to conduct both individual and group conversations provided participants a fair chance to voice their opinion even if they are time-poor, possible language barriers, and geographically isolated resulting in rich data sets. This paper also calls for longitudinal studies to be conducted on the ethical implications of using WhatsApp to explore sensitive issues as researcher well-being and issues around privacy when conducting WhatsApp conversations with bigger population sizes.

Author biography

Ziyanda Mwanda is an e-Learning coordinator at the School of Public Health, University of the Western Cape (UWC) and a PhD candidate at the School of Education, University of Cape Town (UCT). She contributes to the School of Public Health's coursework programmes by preparing academic multimedia materials, providing e-learning support to both students and teaching staff within the school. She leads the school's innovation efforts in educational technology and virtual learning. Ziyanda also coordinates the School's presence on the University Learning Management System (LMS) – iKamva. Her research interests are around the use of social media to support distance and postgraduate students.

References

- Adams, T.E., Ellis, C. & Jones, S.H. 2017. Autoethnography. *The International Encyclopaedia of Communication Research Methods*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118901731.iecrm0011>
- Antoniadou, V. 2017. Collecting, Organizing and Analyzing Multimodal Data Sets: The Contributions of CAQDAS. In Moore, E. & Dooly, M. (eds) *Qualitative Approaches to Research on Plurilingual Education*. Research-Publishing.Net, 435-450.
- Bampton, R., Cowton, C. & Downs, Y. 2013. The e-interview in qualitative research. In *Advancing Research Methods with New Technologies*. Hershey: IGI Global, 329-343.
- Barratt, M.J. & Maddox, A. 2016. Active engagement with stigmatised communities through digital ethnography. *Qualitative Research*, 16(6): 701–719.
- Bezemer, J. & Jewitt, C. 2018. Multimodality: A guide for linguists. In Litosseliti, L. (ed.) *Research Methods in Linguistics*. Second Edition. New York: Bloomsbury, 1-18.
- Bulsari, S., Siddiqui, N., Saeed, S., & H. Sarfraz, (2020). Adapting to the new normal in survey research. *British Educational Research Association*. Available at: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/adapting-to-the-new-normal-in-survey-research> (Accessed 10 November 2021).
- Burns, E. 2010. Developing email interview practices in qualitative research. *Sociological Research Online*, 15(4): 24-35.

- Chang, H. 2013. Individual and collaborative autoethnography as method. In Holman Jones, S., Adams, T.E. & Ellis, C. (eds.) *Handbook of Autoethnography*. London: Routledge, 107-122.
- Chen, J. & Neo, P. 2019. Texting the waters: An assessment of focus groups conducted via the WhatsApp smartphone messaging application. *Methodological Innovations*, 12(3), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2059799119884276>
- Creswell, J.W. 2012. *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating*. London: Pearson.
- Colom, A. 2021. Using WhatsApp for focus group discussions: Ecological validity, inclusion and deliberation. *Qualitative Research*, 22(3): 452-467.
- Cribbett, S. 2018. Beware of using WhatsApp for research come the mighty GDPR. *LinkedIn*. Available online: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/beware-using-whatsapp-research-come-mighty-gdpr-stephen-cribbett/> (Accessed 21 May 2021).
- de Gruchy, T., Vearey, J., Opiti, C., Mlotshwa, L., Manji, K. & Hanefeld, J. 2021. Research on the move: exploring WhatsApp as a tool for understanding the intersections between migration, mobility, health and gender in South Africa. *Globalization and health*, 17(1): 1-13.
- Emanuel, E., Abdoler, E. & Stunkel, L. 2010. *Research Ethics: How to Treat People Who Participate in Research*. Bethesda: National Institutes of Health.
- Hammick, J.K. & Lee, M.J. 2014. Do shy people feel less communication apprehension online? The effects of virtual reality on the relationship between personality characteristics and communication outcomes. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 33: 302-310.
- Fisher, B. & Tronto, J. 1990. 'Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring' . In Abel, E. & Nelson, M. (eds.) *Circles of Care*. New York: SUNY Press, 36-54.
- Kara, H. & Khoo, S.M. (eds.) 2020. *Researching in the Age of COVID-19. Volume 2: Care and Resilience*. London: Policy Press.
- Kaufmann, K. & Peil, C. 2020. The mobile instant messaging interview (MIMI): Using WhatsApp to enhance self-reporting and explore media usage in situ. *Mobile Media & Communication*, 8(2): 229-246.
- Leach, M., Parker, M., MacGregor, H. & Wilkinson, A. 2020. COVID-19—A social phenomenon requiring diverse expertise. *Institute of Development Studies*. Available at: <https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinions/covid-19-a-social-phenomenon-requiring-diverse-expertise/> (Accessed 13 November 2021).
- Mwanda, Z. 2020. Social media enhanced boundary crossing: exploring distance students' ecosystems of learning support. Unpublished Master's thesis, Faculty of Humanities, University of Cape Town
- Nyembe, B.Z.M. & Howard, G.R. 2020. Development of a quantitative instrument to measure mobile collaborative learning (MCL) using WhatsApp: The conceptual steps. In Hattingh, M., Matthee, M., Smuts, H., Pappas, I., Dwivedi, Y.K. and Mäntymäki, M. (eds.) *Responsible*

- Design, Implementation and Use of Information and Communication Technology. Conference on e-Business, e-Services, and e-Society*, 507-519.
- Oltmann, S. 2016. Qualitative interviews: A methodological discussion of the interviewer and respondent contexts. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 17(2): 146-166.
- Pultz, S. 2018. Flexibility in Research Design: How Unexpected Events Can Improve Learning and Research. In *SAGE Research Methods Cases*. Volume 2. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Resch, K. & Enzenhofer, E. 2018. Collecting data in other languages – strategies for cross-language research in multilingual societies. In Flick, U. (ed.) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Collection*. London: Sage Publications, 131-146.
- Richardson, J., Godfrey, B. & Walklate, S. 2021. Rapid, remote and responsive research during COVID-19. *Methodological Innovations*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20597991211008581>
- Rosenfeld, A., Sina, S., Sarne, D., Avidov, O. & Kraus, S. 2018. WhatsApp usage patterns and prediction of demographic characteristics without access to message content. *Demographic Research*, 39: 647-670.
- Salmons, J. 2012. *Cases in Online Interview Research*. London: Sage Publications.
- Serry, T. & Liamputtong, P. 2013. The in-depth interviewing method in health. In Liamputtong, P. (ed.) *Research Methods in Health: Foundations for Evidence-based Practice*. Victoria: Oxford University Press, pp. 39-53.
- Shahid, N., Rappon, T. & Berta, W. 2019. Applications of artificial neural networks in health care organizational decision-making: A scoping review. *PloS one*, 14(2): e0212356.
- Singer, B., Walsh, C. M., Gondwe, L., Reynolds, K., Lawrence, E. & Kasiya, A. 2020. WhatsApp as a medium to collect qualitative data among adolescents: lessons learned and considerations for future use. *Gates Open Research*, 4(130): 130.
- Swartz, B.C., Gachago, D. & Belford, C. 2018. To care or not to care—reflections on the ethics of blended learning in times of disruption. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 32(6): 49-64.
- Teti, M., Schatz, E., & Liebenberg, L. 2020. Methods in the time of COVID-19: the vital role of qualitative inquiries. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920920962>
- Townsend, L. & Wallace, C. 2016. *Social Media Research: A Guide to Ethics*. University of Aberdeen.
- Tronto, J.C. 2010. Creating caring institutions: Politics, plurality, and purpose. *Ethics and Social Welfare*, 4(2): 158-171.
- Tronto, J.C. 2013. *Caring democracy: Markets, equality, and justice*. New York: New York University Press.
- Williamson, A. & Burns, N. 2014. The safety of researchers and participants in primary care qualitative research. *The British Journal of General Practice: The Journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners*, 64: 198-200.