



WhatsApp as a Qualitative Data Collection Method in Descriptive Phenomenological Studies

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Abstract

This article presents WhatsApp as a means of data collection among vulnerable populations, reporting on a study conducted in South Africa and Zimbabwe, to determine the terminology used for and among different genders and sexually diverse individuals. 19 LGBTIQ+ individuals, recruited through a modified snowballing technique, participated in the study. Using WhatsApp text-based information, the interview questions and information regarding the study and ethics-related information were forwarded from one participant to another. The same approach was used for data-collection purposes, where responses (either voice notes or written texts) were forwarded until they reached the initial two participants and/or the principal investigator. Data were analysed using Collazi's steps for data analysis. As the study focus was on the data collection technique, the paper highlights the ethical implications related to using WhatsApp as a data collecting tool. The study also indicates the advantages and disadvantages of using this platform and further emphasises that voice note WhatsApp messages yielded higher-quality and more in-depth responses than text messages. The limitations of using WhatsApp, and ways of enhancing its use as a means of data collection among vulnerable populations, are also addressed.

Keywords

Descriptive phenomenology, gender, LGBTIQ+ individuals, sexually diverse groups, vulnerable populations, WhatsApp

Introduction

Descriptive phenomenological studies commonly use face-to-face interviews as a means of data collection, instead of technological platforms such as WhatsApp (Englander, 2012). The foundational point of departure for the study reported on here, was based on descriptive phenomenology as a social science research technique, which fully conceptualises how WhatsApp may be used as a data-collection method. Christensen et al. (2017) outline descriptive phenomenology as a form of social science research that focuses on studying the lived experiences of individuals. The descriptive tradition of phenomenology emanates from the works of Husserl (1983), who conceptualised it as an interpretive approach aimed at deriving meaning (Neubauer, et al., 2019). Descriptive phenomenological studies usually involve face-to-face interviews being conducted in the actual setting of the participants.

At times, however, it is not possible to do in-person interviews with certain key populations, since their concealed nature, and the associated stigma, discrimination and

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criminalisation they face for their behaviour, make it difficult to access them. Often, researchers may only know or have access to a limited number of potential participants, or none at all. In such situations, the use of a snowballing technique to recruit participants from a vulnerable population which cannot easily be reached, becomes an important recruitment strategy.

The 2019 Coronavirus outbreak (hereafter Covid-19), which led to nationwide lockdowns with associated restricted population movement, presented many challenges in respect to how research is conducted, exacerbating difficulties in accessing vulnerable populations and making data collection more challenging (Reñosa et al., 2021). These restrictions called for innovative ways of collecting data in descriptive phenomenological studies, while minimising the spread of Covid-19. One such approach involves the use of WhatsApp – an American freeware, cross-platform centralised instant messaging and voice-over-IP, which is used to send text and voice messages, make voice and video calls, and share images and documents, user locations, and other content (Metz, 2016). The use of WhatsApp platforms enhances the anonymity and privacy of users – and, by extension, of study participants in qualitative studies, as the researcher only sees the data, not the source (Metz, 2016). Due to intersectionality, by WhatsApp as a data-collection method, a researcher can easily collect national and even international data, especially if the inclusion and exclusion criteria settings are not emphasised in the original message (Colom, 2021). In the context of Covid-19, where physical interaction is limited (no face-to-face interviews) and distances are significant, the WhatsApp platform bridges that gap, and delivers almost instant responses. WhatsApp, as a platform, represents an innovative data-collection strategy, since information comes in the form of texts, voice notes or videos, thereby enhancing the audit trail. According to Colom (2021), there is very little evidence of the use of WhatsApp in conducting individual interviews. Gibson's (2020) study explored the experience of conducting interviews via WhatsApp, while Mare (2017) used the platform to complement data collected through individual interviews. Notably, Neo et al. (2022) used WhatsApp to conduct focus group discussions in Singapore, and commended the approach as useful for saving time, enhancing participation, and enabling the gathering of both quantitative and qualitative data.

This qualitative methodological article presents the use of WhatsApp as a data-collection method among vulnerable populations, as part of a descriptive phenomenological study. One such vulnerable population comprises lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer and plus (LGBTIQ+) individuals – a subset among the broader category of sexually and gender-diverse individuals (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). In this instance, the researchers felt that LGBTIQ+ people are a vulnerable group, being both sensitive and marginalised, with limited spaces where they can freely and safely express themselves. For that reason, WhatsApp was deemed ideal for creating a space of freedom and security for them. In this context, the researchers thought it critical to

generate evidence on the use of WhatsApp to facilitate data collection, particularly from this vulnerable group. WhatsApp offers a means of collecting information from, and sharing information with, people located in different areas, without establishing physical contact. Using this relatively cheap means of gathering information, the researchers sought to add to the existing body of knowledge on online research methods (Colom, 2021; Gibson, 2020).

Highlighted here is a descriptive phenomenological design, and the adverse effects which Covid-19 has had on research, with the greater aim of proposing plausible ways of collecting data despite stringent lockdown restrictions. The researchers further introduce WhatsApp and its ability to elicit data, instead of reporting to in-person interviews. Also presented are the sampling techniques used, the data-collection process, and the ethical implications of collecting data in this way, while ensuring the trustworthiness of the study. The advantages and disadvantages of collecting data through this method, are presented. To conclude, a detailed conceptual discussion follows on how WhatsApp messages can be used to accelerate and advance data-collection.

Descriptive Phenomenology and Mobile Messaging Applications

Kaufmann and Peil (2020) note that the everyday use of social media presents an opportunity for researchers to exploit various platforms, to obtain rich data from an ever-increasing digital community. Cetinkaya (2017) draws attention to the need to examine the positive and negative implications of collecting data via social media networks, mindful of the fact that this could negatively affect the credibility of a study, as highlighted by Barbosa and Milan (2019). WhatsApp is an instant messaging service which allows its users to send and receive text and audio-visual messages in real-time, irrespective of their geographical location (Manji et al., 2021). As Shahid (2018) indicates, the limited research on WhatsApp as a data-collection method should not discourage scholars from exploring the seemingly endless possibilities of enhancing social science research. Importantly, basic ethical considerations – especially with regard to informed consent and confidentiality – should always be adhered to, even if the data are being collected through unconventional means (Barbosa & Milan, 2019; Reñosa et al., 2021).

Method

Design

A descriptive phenomenological design was used to explore and describe the experiences of LGBTIQ+ persons regarding the terminology/names used to identify or refer to them, in either a discriminatory or respectful manner. In essence, phenomenology seeks to understand the lived experiences of individuals who experienced a particular phenomenon, by studying the essence of that phenomenon (Ellis, 2019; Qutoshi,

2018). This design was deemed appropriate in the research study, as it explores the complex world of individuals' lived experiences (Qutoshi, 2018). Basically, descriptive phenomenology seeks answers to the question: "What is it like?" Here, the researchers explored how LGBTIQ+ community members felt about the terminology used to describe them, and what terminology they preferred. Diverse terms are employed to refer to LGBTIQ+ individuals, many of whom are verbally abused, and identified or often labelled using derogatory names (Mavhandu-Mudzusi & Sandy, 2015; Netshandama et al., 2017). Descriptive phenomenological design is also suitable for studying people's understanding, beliefs, and interpretations of the world (Ellis, 2019; Sloan & Bowe, 2014). The researchers sought to articulate the meanings which the study participants ascribed to their experiences of the phenomenon under study (Sajama & Kamppinen, 2013). To that end, they adopted a descriptive phenomenological design, but adapted and modified some of its criteria to incorporate WhatsApp as a data-collection method.

Descriptive phenomenology is a qualitative research design, in which the researcher's responsibility is to explore and describe the experiences of participants (Christensen et al., 2017). Ordinarily, this involves understanding words and the underlying meanings of a text (subtext), through maximum interaction with research participants, to elicit their lived experiences (Culver et al., 2012; Englander, 2012). The approach emphasises phenomenological reduction; which focuses on researcher's self-reflection and recognizing and questioning own views about the aspects under study (Englander, 2012). Researchers are expected to adopt a neutral position, setting aside their personal beliefs on a subject, to allow the participants to share their experiences, without the former imposing their own experiences on them (Jackson et al., 2018; Shosha, 2012; Todres, 2005; Qutoshi, 2018).

The original descriptive phenomenology design focuses on people's everyday lived experiences, using one-on-one or group face-to-face interviews. Notably, Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2018a) introduced couple interviews as a data-collection tool in phenomenological studies, specifically interpretative phenomenological analysis. Here, however, WhatsApp was used as a means of collecting data from LGBTIQ+ individuals, to explore the naming conventions/terms they are exposed to, to highlight their preferences, and the reason(s) for their response(s).

Rationale for Using WhatsApp as a Data-collection Method in a Descriptive Phenomenological Study

The advent of Covid-19 brought about a new social order, in which human interaction is constrained. Discovered in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 (Hall et al., 2021), the contagious Coronavirus gained worldwide notoriety when, on 11 March 2020, the WHO declared it a global pandemic. By February 2021, there were over 102 million cases worldwide

and a million deaths. The mitigation efforts which nation-states introduced included lockdown regulations, to curb the spread of the virus and limit the number of deaths and alleviate the burden on the healthcare sector. This meant that personal interactions or contact between human participants was limited. Lockdown regulations have had a severe negative impact on participatory research and engaged scholarship, particularly in cases where researcher must interact personally with study participants, for instance where communities have no access to the internet (Barroga & Matanguihan, 2020; Reñosa et al., 2021; Tindana et al., 2020). In those cases, descriptive phenomenology as a participatory research method came under threat, since researchers were unable to interact with study participants, either due to lockdown regulations or for fear of contracting the disease.

Such constraints might hamper efforts to obtain consent or convince the public to participate in a study, since they are not immune to fears of contracting the virus. Here, that fear was eliminated, because no face-to-face interaction was required.

The initial rationale for using WhatsApp was to circumvent those restrictions which prohibited mobility. The researchers had the option of using telephones or cell phones to contact participants, but due to the sensitivity of the topic – especially where hurtful names and terminologies were used to describe LGBTIQ+ individuals – the distance afforded by an online platform was deemed beneficial. As part of the inclusion criteria for the study, participants needed to have smart phones with the WhatsApp application (app) loaded on them. The participants used WhatsApp text messages to send their responses at times which were convenient to them. Since many LGBTIQ+ people are not "out", accessing participants presented a problem, hence the focus was on including individuals from diverse rural and urban locations. WhatsApp allowed the researchers to establish direct contact with a few participants, while others were linked to the study through their peers. In that way, the participants were free to share information without fear of being identified or stigmatised.

Sampling and Recruitment

Given the nature of the data-collection method used, sampling, recruitment and data collection occurred concurrently. The initial study population was LGBTIQ+-identifying young adults in South Africa and Zimbabwe – an intentional demarcation, as both countries form part of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), but have different views regarding LGBTIQ+ individuals. While the constitution of South Africa (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1996) embraces LGBTIQ+ individuals, the Zimbabwean constitution (Republic of Zimbabwe [RoZ], 2013) considers being gender or sexually non-conforming a crime (Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2017). Estimating the number of LGBTIQ+ people is impossible, since many are still "in the closet" and have not revealed their sexual orientation. In the case of those who are

“out”, no formal documentation (e.g., census results) specifies gender non-conforming or sexually non-binary individuals. The snowballing technique was chosen to recruit participants. To that end, the principal researcher had the phone numbers of two South African LGBTIQ+ individuals, called them individually, and explained the nature of the study, its purpose, and the proposed use of WhatsApp as a data-collection method. To ensure confidentiality, she asked these participants to forward an information leaflet and the interview questions to other members of the LGBTIQ+ community who were known to them, and were aged 18 years and older. The participant information sheet contained information on the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality and shared confidentiality (where participants who were not willing to WhatsApp the principal researcher directly, could send their responses via the person who had forwarded the message to them), the potential risk of participating in the study, and details of the principal researcher. Potential participants were invited to text the latter for further clarification, and were informed that there would be no financial benefit for participating in the study. By responding to the WhatsApp questionnaire, participants provided tacit consent to participate in the study. By guaranteeing anonymity, the principal researcher relied on her experience of working with LGBTIQ+ individuals in rural areas, where many were loath to inform anyone outside of the LGBTIQ+ group, including healthcare professionals, that they were gender non-conforming, for fear that their status would be revealed to their parents/family, which would have the negative consequences of being banished from home, or forced into marriage or parenting (Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2017; 2018b).

The questions put to the participants were the following: *How old are you? How do you identify yourself on the LGBTIQ+ spectrum? What terms or names have you been exposed to or called as an LGBTIQ+ individual? How did you feel about that? What collective term related to gender do you prefer, and why? Which terms do you hate? Please explain why.*

Data Collection

Data were collected from 1 September to 31 December 2021. As mentioned, the two initial participants consented to participate in the study, and were the first to respond by sending messages back to the authors. Their responses were forwarded to a computer and saved as a Word document, without identifying phone numbers, to ensure confidentiality. The collected data were discussed by the entire group of authors (Post doctoral students and Research Assistants), who perused the type and depth of information provided, and the feasibility of continuing with data collection, as proposed. Being satisfied, the researchers gave the two participants the go-ahead to forward the documents to other LGBTIQ+ individuals, and asked them to continue the message chain. The instruction was, before forwarding the message, a

recipient had to respond to either the person who forwarded the WhatsApp, or directly to the principal researcher. This approach ensured that the participants' responses to the questions would not be influenced by the responses of others. While WhatsApp has end-to-end encryption, privacy and anonymity might be compromised because contact numbers are visible. To mitigate this and ensure participants' privacy and anonymity, returning text using the same snowballing relay technique meant the interview data arrived via the two initial contacts – a process which all participants opted for, since nobody responded directly to the principal researcher. Moreover, since the messages were directly forwarded and sent back there was no way of tracing a cell phone number, as no numbers were visible, except those of the two initial participants.

Data Analysis

The principal researcher transferred data from her phone to a laptop. Where voice notes were received, the recordings were sent to the second researcher for transcription. Colaizzi's (1978) method of data analysis was applied within 48 hours of data collection (Giorgi, 2020), and adapted as follows: in step one, each transcript was read several times to gain a sense of the content as a whole. During this stage, any thoughts, feelings, or ideas arising from the researchers, due to their experience of interacting with LGBTIQ+ persons, were bracketed (Colaizzi, 1978; Polgar & Thomas, 2019; Speziale et al., 2011). In the second step, significant statements from the transcripts, pertaining to the participating LGBTIQ+ individuals' experiences of terms they have been exposed to, and their preferences and reasons for those, were identified. In step three, meanings were formulated from the significant statements, and compared. Relevant quotes were categorised, and themes were formulated based on several statements conveying similar meaning (Beck, 2019; Speziale et al., 2011). In step four, the formulated meanings were sorted into categories, clusters of themes, and themes (Beck, 2019). This led to step five (Maher et al., 2018), when all emergent themes were defined into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon under study: using WhatsApp as a qualitative data-collection method in a descriptive phenomenological study. In step six, the fundamental structure of the phenomenon was described. In the final step, the study findings were validated using “member checking” – a technique which explores the credibility of results (Birt et al., 2016). Since the communication from the study participants was one-way, the researchers had access to the first two initial contacts, who validated the findings.

Findings

Since the focus is on WhatsApp as a data-collection method, only an overview of the methodology is provided, with a brief focus on the biographical data of the participants, and the quality and quantity of the data collected.

In the end, 19 participants with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities participated, with 15 hailing from South Africa, and four from Zimbabwe. The breakdown was: lesbian (1), gay (2), bisexual female (1), transgender (6), females, 3 males [$n = 9$], intersex (1); queer (3) and men who have sex with men (2). The participants' ages ranged from 22–40.

As regards the data collected, all the transgender people responded through voice recordings lasting 10–45 minutes each, while all other participants submitted written responses. The voice notes were more elaborate than the written responses. In the voice-recorded information, it was easy to correlate the tone of voice and responses, and deduce the participants' feelings – something the written information did not reveal much of. Because of the brevity, vagueness and ambiguity of the messages, it was not easy for the researchers to describe and explore some of the written responses. That carried a risk of bias creeping into descriptions and interpretations of the findings. Due to the closeness and links between the circle of participants from this vulnerable population, the two key participants reported receiving the initial request to participate in the study more than once, as did some other participants. Despite assurances of confidentiality, some potential participants ended up not responding/returning their responses, and also probably did not forward the information to people they knew.

Ethical Implications of Using WhatsApp as a Data-Collection Method

Protecting the rights of study participants is a significant ethical issue (Gray, Grove, & Sutherland, 2017). Ethical approval was obtained from the University of South Africa, College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee (90187598_CREC_CHS_2021). The study participants were provided with a detailed information sheet explaining the study (which facilitated the granting of informed consent), were informed that participation was voluntary, and that they were free to withdraw at any time, if they so wished. To enhance anonymity pseudonyms were used, and the data were stored securely on a password-protected computer.

The use of remote data-collection methods, such as WhatsApp, is riddled with ethical concerns. Neo et al. (2022) note that using WhatsApp, especially in focus group discussion, holds a potential risk of confidential data being exchanged between participants and facilitators. However, in focus group discussions, regardless of the approach used, issues of privacy and confidentiality are usually compromised, because of the number of people involved. In the process of obtaining consent, if WhatsApp groups are not strictly protected, infiltration can occur. A study by Barbosa and Milan (2019) proved that a WhatsApp group chat could compromise ethical principles, with threats ranging from failure to obtain consent, to difficulties in retaining the attention of large chat

groups throughout the data-collection process. In addition, it is not a once-off activity, given the evolving nature of group chats, but rather an ongoing process of negotiation and exchange. The ethical principles of research require that the right to privacy of research participants be respected in the course of the data-collection process and thereafter (Creswell, 2017). Also, obtaining consent from individual participants through WhatsApp proved daunting during the pandemic (and even before) (Byrne et al., 2019). As stated by Hensen et al. (2020), in some instances a research participant may be under the age of 18 and then consent is required from a parent or guardian, or it might be a challenge to authenticate the former's age. Other challenges might include ensuring that the user giving consent is the relevant participant, not a friend or relative. In this study, the participants were asked to use voice notes, to give consent.

Lastly, WhatsApp conversations must be properly documented and protected, for the privacy and safety of all research participants. Access to such documents must be strictly protected through security functions such as passwords. In the context of this study, all research-related data were securely kept, with the focus on anonymity and encryption. To enhance data security, anonymity was guaranteed by ensuring that the responses were not associated with particular research participants, and by making use of pseudonyms. The data were stored in a password-protected computer, and following data analysis, all data sent to the principal researcher, were encrypted.

Advantages of Using WhatsApp

WhatsApp is a text-based communication tool with increased recognition to its data-collection capabilities. Given Covid-19-related travel restrictions, online or text-based platforms such as WhatsApp can grant wider geographic access to study populations. For this undertaking, the researchers were able to source data from participants in South Africa and Zimbabwe, which may otherwise have been difficult due to the costs involved, and the vulnerability of the target population. Several authors note that WhatsApp allows researchers to interview people from around the world, provided they have access to a smartphone or computer, and a network (Gibson, 2020; Opdenakker, 2006; Singer et al., 2020; Squires, 2010). It is not easy to reach most members of the LGBTIQ+ community, since many keep their orientation private. WhatsApp is ideal for contacting reclusive populations, allowing researchers to communicate with shift workers, stay-at-home moms, the disabled, and computer addicts, for instance. It also allows researchers to reach participants at sites with limited access, such as hospitals and military installations. Via WhatsApp, researchers can also access participants residing in politically sensitive sites, such as war zones or disease-prone areas, since the platform offers a means of circumventing the bureaucracy involved in visiting such areas (Gibson, 2020; Neo et al., 2022; Opdenakker, 2006; Singer et al., 2020; Squires, 2010).

In this study, the researchers sought the views of participants from a sensitive and vulnerable population group, in different locales. The fact that the latter responded at their own time meant they were not rushed, and could reflect on the interview questions and their responses. The approach used for recruitment and data collection involved using a modified snowballing technique, which created a feeling of safety for participants, since nobody outside of the LGBTIQ+ circle could access their identity – forwarded WhatsApp messages do not show the origin of a message, unless that is included in the message itself. This established a non-threatening environment in which participants could say whatever they wanted, without fear or embarrassment (an impediment, in face to face with another person, such as a researcher). Despite having been involved with related research, the principal researcher was surprised at some of the new terms which came to light, having never encountered them during interactions with LGBTIQ+ students or community members.

Generally, digital technology facilitates a series of different communication methods, including video and audio. Text- and image-based communication via WhatsApp accounts for many young people's interactions on social networks. Text-based communication tools allow users to express themselves freely and fluently (Gibson, 2020; Squires, 2010), while such communication is often more private than verbal communication, offering a comfortable space to interact, without adult involvement or supervision (Ito et al., 2010).

Disadvantages of Using WhatsApp

Concerns were raised about the limitations of online or text-based tools such as WhatsApp as a data-collection instrument. In this study, the researchers recruited participants through adjusted snowballing, where only two known LGBTIQ+ participants forwarded the information to other participants, who in turn forwarded it to their other links/contacts. There is a possibility that the remaining participants were only friends who might have had comparable experiences and similar preferences regarding names. The fact that one of the core/initial participants was transgender, may have meant that only transgender individuals felt free and safe to participate, and comfortable enough to share voice messages. Admittedly, most transgender people tend to be out of the closet, and are easy targets of stigma, discrimination and name calling. Some responses were very short, and some used abbreviations, acronyms and emojis which made it difficult to understand, interpret or describe the intended message. Other studies have documented similar concerns about reading and interpreting the emotions expressed in texts (Manji et al., 2021; Pearce et al., 2014), with the interviewer not being able to clarify sufficiently, or requiring participants to elaborate/respond appropriately. In this instance, the interviewers could not probe, paraphrase/verify or

do member checking, as recommended by Manji et al. (2021) and Deakin and Wakefield (2014), who warn that the quality of the interview itself might suffer due to a lack of interaction between the researchers and participants, thus limiting in-depth probing which would have generated detailed data suitable for qualitative analysis.

The other challenge is that not all LGBTIQ+ individuals in South Africa use smartphones or can afford data, which means some potential participants are excluded due to their low socioeconomic status, or reluctance to be on social networks for fear of cyberbullying. Singer et al. (2020) and Chen and Neo (2019) concur, admitting that WhatsApp may not be feasible for people without smartphones and a reliable internet connection.

Another challenge may be that, because of the bullying which many LGBTIQ+ individuals are subjected to, many drop out of school, and may thus not fully understand what is required in a study of this nature, and therefore end up not responding. This was highlighted by Singer et al. (2020) and Chen and Neo (2019), who found that using WhatsApp required participants to be literate, in order to be able to interpret relatively complex texts.

In addition to the above disadvantages, practical considerations relate to participant access to and knowledge of technology, and issues of data protection (Gibson, 2020; Jowett et al., 2011; Manji et al., 2021). Confidentiality concerns may have intimidated some participants, as there was no guarantee that the contacts via whom they submitted data, would not share their responses with others outside the circle, as the researcher did not have control over how the gathered information would be managed by participants.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this study was the lack of traditional non-verbal cues. Admittedly, some participants used emojis, which facilitated interpretation. Another limitation was the lack of rich literature on using WhatsApp as a data-collection method (Byrne et al., 2019). The pandemic has created an opportune scenario for scholars to explore the possibilities of using various social media platforms as data-collection instruments, to overcome the increasing challenges and complexities of social science research in this day and age (Barbosa & Milan, 2019; Cetinkaya, 2017). From both a descriptive and an interpretive phenomenological perspective, interpreting data can be challenging when working with text messages. Although researchers can overcome this limitation by requesting a face-to-face WhatsApp video, solely interpreting textual data received via WhatsApp remains a challenge (Chen & Neo, 2019; Kaufmann & Peil, 2020). Another limitation was that member checking was only done with two participants, since the researchers relied on them to check information with their peers who participated in the study.

Advancing the Effectiveness of Data Collection

WhatsApp enables multimedia communication, allowing the sharing of data by means of videos, which can significantly benefit the growing body of research in this field (Gibson, 2020; Jowett et al., 2011). Although WhatsApp mostly mimics common forms of communication on social media with the use of texts and images, it also allows audio and video calls, which can be used in conjunction with the snapshot messenger function. Such audio and video calls may assist in advancing the effectiveness of data collection (Gibson, 2020; Jowett et al., 2011; Kopung, 2016). In addition, familiarity with online emoticons and abbreviations is helpful, and interviewers may wish to interpret each participant's use of such conventions, to avoid misunderstandings (Gibson, 2020).

Conclusion

Whilst WhatsApp as a tool for data collection is novel, the study findings brought insight (Barbosa & Milan, 2019)s and contributed to the generation of evidence on how to use this platform to collect data, with particular reference to the LGBTIQ+ community. This undertaking proved that WhatsApp provides a safe space for collecting data from vulnerable and stigmatised groups such as LGBTIQ+ persons. Mobile messaging apps are a modern way in which most young people communicate face to face. WhatsApp, in particular, has replaced other methods of communication, including SMS, and is ideal for reaching out to research participants due to its speed, cost-effectiveness (in terms of not requiring travel), and the convenience it affords those who might be unwilling to participate in face-to-face interviews. Descriptive phenomenology serves to counter ignorance, requiring personal interactions to be adjusted, in line with external forces (i.e., technological standards). To improve WhatsApp messages, an array of voice recordings, videos and animation can be used to convey feelings, non-verbal messages, and the tone of a research participant. This can help to overcome challenges related to the inability to study participants' physical expressions. Emerging from this study were ethical issues that called for careful management, especially in handling vulnerable groups such as LGBTIQ+ people. How, for instance, are privacy and anonymity maintained, when contact numbers accompany WhatsApp text?


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