WhatsApp? Opportunities and Challenges in the Use of a Messaging App as a Qualitative Research Tool

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Abstract

This article evaluates the use of the popular Mobile Messaging App (MMA) WhatsApp as a way to conduct qualitative research with geographically dispersed samples. Through the use of a case study of Latino expat-wives around the globe, we show how traditional methods of qualitative interviewing were adapted and evolved through the use of this application. Findings suggest that WhatsApp is a valuable tool for conducting qualitative research with specific advantages over other MMAs and VoIPs due to its familiarity amongst the target group and its flexible blending of video, audio, and written forms of communication. Particularly its use on smartphones led to interactions that went beyond regular face-to-face interviews, thus allowing us access normally only gained in ethnography studies. While this can be a gain in terms of building rapport and increase the depth of data collection, it also brings new challenges in terms of ensuring data quality, interpreting non-verbal cues and ensuring high ethical standards.

Keywords

WhatsApp, asynchronous interviews, digital ethnography, geographically dispersed samples, online qualitative research

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This article evaluates the use of the popular Mobile Messaging App (MMA) WhatsApp as a way to conduct qualitative research with geographically dispersed samples. Through the use of a case study of Latino expat-wives around the globe, we show how traditional methods of qualitative interviewing were adapted and evolved through the use of this application. Findings suggest that WhatsApp is a valuable tool for conducting qualitative research with specific advantages over other MMAs and VoIPs due to its familiarity amongst the target group and its flexible blending of video, audio, and written forms of communication. Particularly its use on smartphones led to interactions that went beyond regular face-to-face interviews, thus allowing us access normally only gained in ethnography studies. While this can be a gain in terms of building rapport and increase the depth of data collection, it also brings new challenges in terms of ensuring data quality, interpreting non-verbal cues and ensuring high ethical standards.

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Introduction

Online interviews represent a relatively new normality in today's researchers experience due to the pandemic. In fact, it is not rare to listen to conversations between colleagues, who were planning in-situ research, commenting with disappointment that now they must do their qualitative data gathering on-line. This was not our case. Given that our sample was geographically dispersed, the presented study was planned and executed online from the beginning. Here, we aspire to show researchers the positive experience of working with Apps (in this case WhatsApp) and open an invitation to consider different types of on-line encounters that may produce data that is as valid and even richer than personal in-situ data (see O´Connor & Madge, 2018 on face-to-face encounters as the "*golden standard*").

Internet, Mobile Messaging Apps, Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) and other mobile technologies are increasingly becoming popular tools in research that complement or even replace face-to-face encounters. They typically offer the possibility of voice, message, file exchange and video calling almost anywhere in the world at no or low cost (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013; Lo Iacono et al., 2016). Despite the "digital divide" that affects mostly people from developing countries and women in particular (ITU, 2020; see also Madge & O'Connor, 2004), there is now widespread use of smartphones, with growing proportions of the global population having access to relevant technologies (ITU, 2020; World Bank, 2016). Even in developing countries, the great majority of homes have easier access to mobile devices than to basic services (World Bank, 2016, p. 2). In fact, it is predicted that by the end of 2025 there will be a total of 5.8 billion mobile subscribers around the Globe (GSMA, 2019).

The particular strength of MMAs, VoIPs and similar platforms for research purposes lies in the ability to study geographically dispersed samples without the need to travel extensively, which is not always a possibility due to budget or time constraints (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013; Hanna, 2012; Madge & O'Connor, 2004; O'Connor & Madge, 2018, Panter-Brick et al., 2021). Given the growing mobility as part of globalization processes (Gatti, 2009), and the need to adapt to extensive travel restrictions in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic (Lobe et al., 2020), socially distant mobile methods (i.e., methods for which mobile devices / services are central to the data collection; see Boase, 2020, p. 113) are imperative to keep up with highly mobile groups, such as international migrants, refugees or expat professionals (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013). Thus, it is necessary to consider to what extent new mobile technologies, such as WhatsApp, offer a viable alternative to face-to-face interaction in this research field.

A major concern of research to date has been whether established qualitative methods of data collection can be successfully adapted to the use of internet (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013; Holmes, 2009; Lobe et al., 2020), VoIPs (Baron, 2020; Lo Iacono et al., 2016;) and Mobile Instant Messaging Applications (Chen & Neo, 2019; Kauffman, 2020; Kaufmann & Peil, 2020) while establishing rapport and gathering high quality data. In relation to video conferences, discussions have largely focused on the advantages and disadvantages of using Skype as a tool for conducting interviews (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013; Hanna, 2012; Lo Iacono et al., 2016). Research has found online interviews to be a valid option, producing reliable data and facilitating in-depth encounters, rather than being a secondary choice to face-to-face interviews (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013; Madge & O'Connor, 2004). While in principle, WhatsApp can be used for interviewing remotely just like Skype or Facetime, it offers additional features that merit consideration as they have important consequences for the research process.

To date, the messaging app, WhatsApp, has been discussed in the literature as a tool for telemedicine before (Giordano et al., 2017) and after Covid-19 (Sharawat & Panda, 2021; Tourkmani et al., 2021), as a training/communication tool in the health sciences (Arroz et al., 2019; Henry et al., 2016; Raiman et al., 2017), as a method for gathering qualitative data on health research (Arroz et al., 2019; Fardousi et al., 2019; Henry et al., 2016) and in relation to its use in education and distance learning (Cetinkaya, 2017; Kenchakkanavar & Hadagali, 2015; Madge & O'Connor, 2004; Mistar & Embi, 2016). In the social sciences, WhatsApp has been studied as a tool for remote in-group communication, specifically using WhatsApp's instant messaging feature, between researchers and assistants (Jailobaev et al., 2021), as a survey tool to request consent and communicate with Syrian refugee youth and their parents (Panter-Brick et al., 2021), as a valid digital method for messaging interviewing (MIMI) (Kaufmann & Peil, 2020) and focus groups research (Chen & Neo, 2019). In all these, the familiarity and expertise of the participants within the App seemed to be a key element in using WhatsApp as a useful and accessible tool for communicating while educating, asking for consent, providing support, boosting team building and providing good quality data. We aim with this article to build on the existing literature that evaluates the validity of WhatsApp as a method for qualitative data gathering in the social sciences by demonstrating how videoconferences through the app evolved to quasi-ethnography and by discussing our asynchronous use of written message and audio note features (written -audio note interview) for interviewing geographically dispersed samples.

We draw on experiences gathered within a qualitative research project on how race, class and gender intersect in the migratory experiences of a highly mobile and geographically dispersed group to outline how the combination of features offered by WhatsApp, as well as the familiarity of participants with the application as part of their everyday communications, offer the potential for insights that may even go beyond those obtained in once-off interviews. At the same time, we discuss challenges that arise in the practical implementation as well as

methodological and ethical implications involved in such an approach. We do so by firstly describing the specific case study that forms the empirical basis for these methodological considerations. Secondly, we provide an overview of the ways in which WhatsApp was used within the project, highlighting various advantages and disadvantages of the different features for qualitative research purposes. Finally, we address the main challenges of building rapport and engaging in interaction when using MMAs and reflect on ethical challenges of this method.

Case Study: Latino Expat Trailing Spouses Across the Globe

The research presented here is a case review analysis of how we used WhatsApp as part of a qualitative study with Latino expat wives around the globe. The literature on expatriates and their so-called "accompanying spouses" typically focuses on the experience of Western expatriates living in non-Western countries (Arieli 2007; Fechter, 2016; Fechter & Walsh, 2010; Leonard, 2010a, 2010b, 2013; Lundström, 2010, 2012; Lundström & Twine, 2011; Wang, 2013). By focusing on Latino expats, the study aimed to dissect how this group negotiated their own position between economic privilege, gendered expectations, and ethnic discrimination. The term "expats" here refers to what has been classically defined as "*corporate expatriates*," that is, individuals who have been relocated by a company to a country of which they do not hold citizenship and where they are legally working and temporarily residing (McNulty & Brewster, 2018, p. 17). Sampling was purposive, with the use of personal contacts, snowball methods, and via approaching people in international chat groups on Facebook. Using mobile methods allowed contacting a much wider range of participants than would have been feasible if only face-to-face interviews had been conducted. This was not only because of the geographical dispersion of the target group across the globe, but also because most of the participants had very busy lifestyles as they were high-skilled international professionals, business entrepreneurs, and/or because their motherhood duties kept them on the run. In general, the sample had a very privileged lifestyle economically, including their day-to-day privilege "to stay connected" (Madge & O'Connor, 2004), even those living in less developed countries. It is important to consider that the target group is placed at the privileged side of the digital divide, with all participants having easy access to the technologies required (good internet connection, a laptop, tablet or phone with built-in camera, phone, and speakers) and extensive experience in using them (Lobe et al., 2020). The methodological reflections in this contribution therefore cannot be transferred directly to other contexts in which these conditions are not met.

We draw here on the data from 42 interviews with Latino expat wives in their thirties and forties that were held between Jan 2018 and April 2021. Participants who were not able to participate in face-to-face interactions were given the option to select the method that they felt most comfortable with. Participants' preferences quickly emerged favoring WhatsApp over, for example, Skype (i.e., not all participants had an active Skype account), which soon became the main communication channel. Having the participants choose the communication channel was crucial in gathering good quality data as introductions or tutorials were not needed (see also Thunberg & Arnell, 2021).

Participants' relatively young age also played an important role in method preferences versus other forms of communication (see Aguado & Martinez, 2020). For them, WhatsApp was a tool they used daily as it is a popular messaging service in Latin America and for Hispanics living abroad, which they use to communicate with friends and family in their home country (Smith & Anderson, 2018). They were thus able to collaborate with the researcher in a more natural form (see also Kaufmann, 2020).

Our experiences suggest that this, in addition to the interviewer having a similar ethnic and social class background to the interviewees, were important pre-conditions for bringing

out the advantages of this approach. It allowed the interviewer to be perceived as part of the in-group, "*getting in and getting along*" (see Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2016, p. 378 on gaining access) with the participants with almost no difficulties. Of the 42 total interviews, 25 interviews were conducted through WhatsApp: using audio only (7), video conference (10), written and voice notes (5), and a combination of Skype video conference with written and voice notes (3). The rest of the interviews (17) are a combination of in-person, Skype, Facebook, Google Hangouts and phone call interviews. Our analysis here draws firstly on the transcription of all interviews. We compared how interviews proceeded across the different forms of interviewing in length, insight, clarity, and rapport. Additionally, participants were asked directly how they found the process, especially those using the written and voice note method, as this was a novelty for us, and we wanted to understand their subjective experience of participating in research of this kind. We grouped observations with particular attention to how interactions between interviewer and respondents were shaped by technology, with specific focus on how we used the App, what disadvantages and benefits were generated by different aspects of the App, and how the sample responded to the way the App was used. We compare this with the challenges that arise when doing interviews with regular phone calls and via video conference calls that have been discussed more widely in the previous literature.

The Use of WhatsApp for Research Purposes

The Mobile Instant Messaging app WhatsApp was launched in 2009, free of charge and advertising. Its VoIP system similar to Skype and Facetime allows the possibility of doing phone and video calls connecting people across large distances via internet on real-time connection (Lo Iacono et al., 2016). Additionally Mobile Instant Messaging (MIM) allows users the exchange of not only messages but also videos, files, voice notes and other digital products (Kaufmann, 2020), thus allowing both synchronous and asynchronous communication. WhatsApp is one of the top five most downloaded Mobile Instant Messaging applications (Aguado & Martinez, 2020) with reports showing two thousand million daily users worldwide by 2020 (Kemp, 2020). Contrary to Skype, which was initially targeted at desktop users, WhatsApp is primarily used on mobile devices (Baron, 2020) and it is widely used among mobile groups to maintain contact with family and friends across the globe (Kauffman, 2020; Montag et al., 2015; Smith & Anderson, 2018).

Three features of the application were used in the research project: (1) video-voice conference call, (2) voice phone call, and (3) written and voice notes. Frequently, communication blended all three forms. The video/voice conference mimics other video conferencing applications, while the voice phone call is very similar to a regular phone call. Voice calls were only used by request of the participants or when internet connection was poor, proving to be a useful alternative when video calls failed. More commonly, video calls were conducted and took on their own dynamic, as is further discussed below. Given that the general benefits and challenges of interviews via video conference have already been discussed in the literature (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013; Hanna, 2012; Lo Iacono et al., 2016), the focus here will be primarily on differences compared to previous research due to the highly mobile and flexible use of the application on respondents' smartphones, the use of asynchronous communication (i.e., written and voice notes), and on the blending of different forms of communication that emerged throughout the research process.

Being Part of Everyday Life – How Online Interviews Evolved

Personal one-to-one online interviews were planned at the beginning of the project due to the geographic dispersal of the sample. Participants were found to be highly comfortable

with the online interview format, which, in the case of WhatsApp, quickly took on a different dynamic to "regular" video interviews described in the previous literature, for example via Skype (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013; Lo Iacono et al., 2016). Respondents would hold their phones, put on some earphones, and answer the questions while performing everyday life tasks. Suddenly the interviewer found herself accompanying the interviewees while driving to pick up their kids, watering plants, walking in the park with their dogs, and attending to their babies. Having a little peek into the participants' lives made a link between their discourse and their everyday practices and redefined both the interviewer's and participants' sense of place and presence (Aguado & Martinez, 2020). This did not happen while doing interviews on Skype, which felt more rigid, perhaps due to its association with desktop rather than smartphone use. In contrast to what Lo Iacono et al. (2016) reports about Skype interviews, where typically only face and neck were visible, the interviews through WhatsApp showed participants walking, moving, or resting. Similar observations are made regarding phone interviews by Holt (2010), where participants would take their phones everywhere around the house as it allowed them flexibility. This same flexibility was perceived in our research, with the added feature of the camera and the fact that mobile users are used to holding their phone close to their bodies (Kaufmann, 2020), which allowed capturing the participants' movements and surroundings. The way participants placed and held their smartphones allowed visual observation of their homes, cars and places of their everyday life to the point that, at times, it felt more like a brief ethnographic observation than purely an interview.

This is illustrated well in the case of an interview that was held with a Mexican expat housewife, who had to pick up her baby in an hour and was preparing food. She asked the researcher if she would mind her cooking during the interview, the researcher agreed to it. She put on some earphones, set her cellphone aside and started cooking. It was clear she had done that before (cooking while video chatting). On the screen, one could see from the countertop of her kitchen straight into her living room. The interview evolved around her experience as an accompanying wife in Germany while she was chopping vegetables and adding them to the frying pan. Similarly, in many other interviews, the researcher was able to greet children, partners, and even dogs. She was able to see gardens, living rooms, kitchens, and even toilets. Many times, participants could have asked the interviewer to wait (as one would do in a personal interview). However, most respondents took the researcher along, as they would do with their family and friends. Contrary to what one may expect in terms of technology creating a distance between interviewer and the participant, it opened a window beyond what we (as researchers) normally get to see in a regular in-person interview, which would have probably been held at some neutral location, showing that "*the digital world is essentially inseparable from today's research*" (Paulus & Lester, 2022, p. 2). It seems that at least for this target group, their smartphone and messaging applications are such familiar technologies that this led to a friendly informality despite the geographical distance, impacting data generation from audio only to a deeper digital (almost in-situ) experience. This allowed us to contextualize our findings with observational data, particularly on their physical living conditions and family situation that were relevant for our understanding of their privilege but also the challenges they reported. It also changed our perspective on our use of WhatsApp as a research tool, as it created an easy going, relaxed and friendlier atmosphere in comparison to other Apps and data gathering methods. It also led to the need to reflect carefully on our concerns around ethics and personal data in this context, which are discussed further below.

Asynchronous Interviewing: The Written-Voice Note Interview

In addition to the synchronous online interviews described above, another approach that emerged during the research process was asynchronous interviewing. This consisted of sending

questions in a text message and then waiting for the participants to answer on audio, or, less frequently, in written messages. The "written- voice note" interview was also used for asking previous participants of face-to-face or online interviews for clarification on their previous comments. The transcribed answer was later attached to the formal interview. This mode was not planned for at the beginning but emerged within the project as a solution to interviewing a particularly busy participant who regularly moved between different time zones. The "written-voice note interview" was agreed on as it would allow her to answer whenever she had a chance in between other commitments. Having shown to be a useful alternative in some cases, it was later on used for other participants in similar situations. The initial participant was a highly skilled professional woman and mother of two children, who was constantly in meetings and traveling to several parts of the world. Her life was very rich in terms of expat migration experiences and privilege, and she was an important case for the study. This meant two choices: either set a day and time and do a very quick interview, or, as the researcher suggested, the participant would receive the questions by written message and would be able to answer whenever she was free through a voice message. The interviewee started answering while commuting from plane to plane, while going to her job or preparing dinner. This went on for months (the participant sometimes even took a week for answering), and the interview became friendly and open to the point she felt comfortable giving some insights into her marital life and the struggle of being a woman in business. At the end of the interview when asked her how she found it, she answered:

> *I think that this way of interviewing on one hand simplifies the process against having to write. Writing seems to be the heaviest. Because as I do many magazine interviews and all that, writing is always exhausting. When doing it by voice it seems very personal to me, I feel very comfortable. But it is true that perhaps the thread is lost a little, I think that the best thing is a face to face or directly do a telephone hour. Uhmmm the other thing is that, doing it like this, it also gives you a lot of time to think about your answer, maybe elaborate it a little more. Has advantages and disadvantages. [...] Written it seems to me, like they say here (in Spain) a pain in the ass (laughs). It is much more formal, and (...) the intention, is much lost.*
>
> *(Hilda)*

Her comments capture quite well some of the advantages and disadvantages of such an approach. Written responses require the willingness and ability to formulate ideas in sufficient detail, and place a higher burden on participants, as is widely acknowledged in research for example on the use of open-ended questions in survey questionnaires (Züll, 2016). This challenge is addressed here by the option to send voice notes, which makes it less time consuming and gives the feeling of co-presence (Aguado & Martinez, 2020) making a method that could seem cold and distant more enjoyable, as the respondent notes. She also captures two other main concerns: one is the flow of the interview, the other one the opportunity to reflect more on the answers given. The latter does not necessarily have to be a disadvantage, as Burtt (2020) argues based on a study using written interviews with prisoners maintaining innocence in England and Wales. The longer timespan participants had to reflect on their answers led to meaningful narratives and "highly self-revelatory" experiences (Burtt, 2020), an observation that e-mail asynchronous interviewing (James, 2016) and our study with WhatsApp confirms. Because we were aware that "*software can influence the knowledge produced within a research project*" (Kauffmann & Tzanetakis, 2020, p. 940), we carefully compared the transcribed data from the asynchronous interviews to that obtained through face-to-face and video interviews. Data obtained through the asynchronous method was almost

twice as long (56,26 minutes and 614 transcribed lines average) as face-to-face interviews (36 min, 322 lines average), with subjects being mostly active during the time of the interviews (while face to face, skype and other methods proved to be more static) and covering all pertinent subjects. As this interview type lasted for at least a couple of days and both parts had more time to reflect about the questions and to build rapport, these interviews were more emotionally charged (e.g., they cursed and talked more about issues in their private life), more descriptive (more detailed answers in general), and with deeper insight that provided substantial depth of information in comparison to other interview types. In the few cases where answers were short or unclear, the researcher would listen to the audio again and make another question to go deeper in the matter, having also had more time to reflect on follow up question. Interviewees found it to be a comfortable and convenient experience. In addition, the audio answering format would appear to allow for more spontaneous responses than written replies, as participants are less likely to edit. If they do not like an answer, they may delete it entirely; but it is not feasible to edit only parts of a voice note as one could easily do with a written response.

The asynchronous written-voice note interview, in which questions were sent written and answers received through audio, appears to depend strongly on the participants' commitment and their interest in the study to keep the flow going. This flow may not be quite as natural as in a synchronous interview but, given that the interviewer listening to the incoming audios equally has the chance to reflect more on the answers given, they can relate to what was previously said and adapt their further questions where relevant. There is thus some trade-off between spontaneity and the opportunity to tailor questions more thoroughly, with this type of interview being placed between a written and a "regular" synchronous interview in this regard.

Establishing Rapport through WhatsApp

As in other research, a major concern was to encourage mutual self-disclosure while creating a warm environment where opinions can be expressed without restrictions on a subject (Marvasti, 2004). Previous research on online interviews shows that participants feel more open to participate, are less inhibited, and provide more direct reflexive answers in comparison to face to face interviews, especially in on-line interviews that do not use video (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013; Madge & O'Connor, 2004; Sullivan, 2012; Thunberg & Arnell, 2021) and when the possibility of future face-to-face encounters are small (Walther, 1996). Even asynchronously, messaging apps have shown to maximize affective connection (Aguado & Martinez, 2020). Our findings suggest that the use of WhatsApp for qualitative interviews does not appear to be a disadvantage in terms of personal disclosure when used with a population that is familiar with the application. In a way, the researchers took advantage of the opportunities that emerged by using WhatsApp and mobile devices with participants who, as migrants, are skillful users that constantly check out their devices to maintain a connection with family and friends (Kauffman, 2020). This made the device and the App a highly personal, social tool integrated into their daily routines (Boase, 2020), creating an environment in which participants felt comfortable and open to answer personal questions, even on difficult or highly personal matters.

As outlined above, the interviewer gained insights that went beyond those of regular interviews due to the fact that respondents were using *their* smartphones to do video conferences as they do in everyday life. According to previous literature this may be boosted by the interviewer sharing many personal characteristics with participants (Kauffmann & Tzanetakis, 2020; Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2016; Stephens, 2007). Here, the personal characteristics and experiences of the interviewer allowed a point of contact with interviewers' background: being a Latino migrant woman, "Morena" (= women whose skin

color is situated at "*nearly all points in the color continuum with the exception of white persons with light hair color*" [Telles, 1995, p. 1609]), expat wife and mother. More subtle aspects were also at play, especially when face-to-face interaction was not feasible, such as her tone of voice and certain use of language that characterized her as part of the Mexican upper-middle class (see also Holt, 2010, and Holmqvist, 2021 on elite interviews). This was a type of admission process that granted the interviewer "insider" status (Kaufmann & Tzanetakis, 2020), allowing the interviewer to obtain substantial access to participants' lives when talking about lifestyle in the country of origin, ethnic or racial discrimination abroad, and the struggles of living outside the home country.

The following quote from one of the interviews on the topic of possible discrimination of Latino expats illustrates this:

> *I am going to tell you something that I did not tell you before, when they finally accepted the residency procedure, they told us that everything was already paid. I mean, we had negotiated well. The company had already pre-paid the residency procedure, which is very expensive, and the racist gringo (from HR), the **swears** just refused to accept. And what they were saying to my husband, when my husband started to kind of threaten them by saying -Well this is the last year that I stay if you don't give me the residency-. The gringos told him that, they said, -Well, if you go, where are you going to go? You will have to return to Mexico-. As if Mexico was the worst thing in the world that could happen to us.*
>
>   *(Amanda)*

Interviewees were comfortable enough to make jokes, occasionally swear, or make politically incorrect comments. The last quote shows a participant confident enough to share "something she didn´t tell before" like a confession, she swore and shared her personal views by calling the American a "racist gringo." This openness can be found through all of the interviews held through WhatsApp, and to a greater extent during asynchronous interviewing in comparison to interviews held through more conventional methods. Overall, it seemed that the anonymity of recruiting participants through social media and the opportunity of being heard by a peer through a familiar channel (and in some cases, not being directly facing the interviewer) created an environment in which participants would feel confident enough to yell, swear, share their divorce stories, claim feminist fights and discuss racial discrimination.

Reading Non-Verbal Cues

Non-verbal cues, such as voice and gestures, bring richness to qualitative data (Lo Iacono et al., 2016). On this matter, a video conference would be the nearest way to mimic a face-to-face interview, as facial gestures and body language can be appreciated on the screen. However, this was not always possible due to internet quality or participants' request, leaving no choice but to work with audio only. Also, using video on a smartphone, seemed to encourage a less static view (as discussed above) allowing us to have a bigger view of the surroundings and less of the interviewee, as it depended on how a respondent is positioned towards the camera.

Working with audio only required additional skills from both the interviewer and the interviewees to compensate the loss of subtle non-verbal cues (see Madge & O'Connor, 2004). The tone of voice became more crucial in interpreting what was being said and how it was intended. It seemed that since respondents were very used to communicating via MIMs, they knew how to modulate their tone to ensure that their feelings were expressed well at a distance.

They additionally made expert use of emojis, gifs, stickers, capital letters, videos, exclamation marks and other resources within MIM messages to replace non-verbal and verbal expressions (see Aguado & Martinez, 2020, and Sugiyama, 2015, on reading expressions on Apps). According to Aguado and Martinez (2020), this repertoire of multimedia expressions, rather than lacking cues, must be considered as "*multi-cue*" that plays a role in expressing the user's personal identity (Aguado & Martinez, 2020, p. 444). Overall, our observations confirm what has been found in other research on the use of communication technology amongst migrants. As constant mobile platforms users, they are quite aware that emotions do *happen online* and are keen on expressing them, managing them, and translating them into multimedia (see Beneito-Montagut, 2011, p. 727 on emotions and multimedia techniques). Thus, much rests on the ability of the interviewers to read and interpret these nonverbal cues, which was aided by having a similar background, speaking the native language and being familiar with the experiences referred to.

New Ethics for New Methods?

In contrast to other types of social media, research through WhatsApp uses information that is not publicly posted. Rather, it is private data directly obtained from living individuals with their consent, similar to regular interview data with the same considerations for informed consent, privacy and data protection (Moreno et al., 2013). Interviews did not touch on any potentially illegal or stigmatizing topics; the sample was not part of any vulnerable population and researchers did not use any mobile digital traceable data. However, similar to the Mobile Instant Messaging Interview (MIMI; Kaufmann & Peil, 2020), we could not provide any assurance that the user's data would be secure on part of WhatsApp as service provider[1]. The main difference primarily occurred because of the way in which interviewees allowed access to participants' lives through their smartphones, which blurred the lines between an interview and ethnographic methods. While only audio was recorded (and therefore no "accidentally revealed" visual data was used) and transcribed, the interviewer nevertheless got some quite intimate insights into people's lives via the use of smartphone cameras. In a particular interview, one of the kids, a 2-year-old, requested being taken to the restroom. The mother told the interviewer that she was going to take her as the kid was learning to go by herself. She took the phone with her before the interviewer could say anything, as the following except shows:

Carmen: (*while commenting on the interview, her daughter interrupts and requests going to the toilet*) wait, she's learning to go to the bathroom and it's like now or now, this ... (*she takes the phone to the bathroom, I can see the white corridors and the second floor of the house on the camera. Arriving at the white bathroom she puts the phone with the camera looking at the ceiling for privacy*) ... so it was kind of a complicated year in that regard (...) (*to her daughter who wanted to flush the W.C.*) wait, wait! we will throw that away later love, come.
Daughter: but mommy!
Carmen: ok, ok, ok, let's throw the pee (*laughs*)
Interviewer: nothing happens, I also have children
-flushing sound-
Daughter: goodbye pipi!
Carmen: goodbye pipi! (*laughs*)

Even though the camera was looking at the ceiling as a way of having privacy, the participant still took the phone. This would certainly have never happened in a face-to-face

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[1] There is a present debate on WhatsApp's, as part of the Facebook corporation, administration of user's data.

interview, where the interviewee would surely have asked the interviewer to remain waiting at a neutral place, in this case the tool (the mobile phone with camera) and the software chosen by both researcher and participant directly impacted the research outcome (see Paul & Lester, 2022 on technology tools choice reflections). Similar to what happens, for example, with posted breastfeeding and menstruation pictures in social media, the observation was problematic not because users are posting it, who view it as normal/natural; but by the receiving part, the interviewer, an external spectator (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). In the case of our research, the interviewer instinctively tried to normalize the fact that she was being part of something very private by exclaiming "*nothing happens, I also have children.*" While this kind of access to people's lives was certainly never forced within the research process, one has to consider to what extent this was what people signed up for when consenting to their participation in an interview. Most important, researchers need to take into account that during on-line communications the control over the interaction decreases (Lobe et al., 2020). In this case, it seemed that the participant´s familiarity with the technology for their everyday communication with family and friends led them to adopt the same approach within interviews, even though they did not have a personal relationship with the interviewer. As participants felt more comfortable in taking their smartphones with them everywhere during the interviews, conversations became richer as they started portraying visually their everyday lives and places. The method of the interview changed unintentionally, and the interviewer went from being a mere interviewer to also being an observer and (although not in body) "be" on the field (see also Airoldi, 2018 for online ethnology and digital fields). This method of qualitative data collection was no longer only a semi-structured in-depth online interview, but it involved events, places and identities that, by being taken into account in the transcriptions, could be re-consulted and become part of the analysis (Gatson & Zweerink, 2004). As exciting as it was for the interviewer to suddenly see people's "natural habitat" and have a peek into participants' lives, boundaries were easily crossed (see also Gatson & Zweerink, 2004, on online boundaries). And while this is on the one hand an achievement in terms of gaining access and establishing rapport, it raises the question to what extent such data should be used, and how it can be ensured that people do not show more than they would like to if they gave it a second thought.

As interviewing through software applications is relatively new, there is an extensive and compelling need to develop an "*ethnography for the internet*" (Airoldi, 2018, p. 663) as there is a lack of clear guidelines to date regarding privacy issues and borders between what is public and what is private (Airoldi, 2018; Beneito-Montagut, 2011; Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Holmes, 2007). Researchers planning on using video conference tools should be aware, however, that ethical issues are likely to arise, particularly when participants use mobile devices and when researchers are actually successful in establishing rapport with their participants. It remains ambiguous to what degree the interviewer may be rendered invisible due to the familiarity of the smartphone and the app. We also know little about the extent to which the awareness of being watched and watching had an effect on the participants' behavior and on the researcher´s attitudes, as everything she saw, heard and felt finally was redirected into her final work (Hordge-Freeman, 2018). Researchers planning on using similar methods are encouraged to reflect in advance on whether and how they will include such observations gained into their data and analysis and develop strategies to ensure that boundaries are not crossed. Our approach included only recording audio for later transcription and taking field notes on any additional observations. Researchers may also wish to create greater awareness amongst participants of how much the researcher is actually able to see in a video conference, and what they plan to do with this information, to ensure that the consent that is given is truly informed. Because most of the interviews were held before Covid-19 outbreak, neither the

interviewer nor the participants were aware of the possibility of using a background to keep their privacy (Lobe et al., 2020).

Conclusions

In this paper we attempted to show, through our own work with a sample of 42 Latino expat wives, the benefits and challenges that arise when conducting synchronous and asynchronous (written and voice notes) online interviews through WhatsApp. Most importantly, though, this is a reflection on how the digital world shaped our data gathering process, by choosing this particular digital communication channel (Paulus & Lester 2022). Clearly, for a geographically dispersed sample, alternatives to face-to-face interaction are crucial to ensure that such research can be carried out in a timely and affordable manner. Overall, the data gathered through the different ways of using WhatsApp was meaningful, and similar in length and sometimes even more detailed and insightful in comparison to other – more static – video conferencing tools and face-to-face interviews. A key element to the research was the use of smartphones for video calls, which opened the door to the interviewees' world beyond regular interviews, bringing with it, however, additional ethical implications. Smartphone-based applications appear to offer a good alternative to the more established techniques of doing interviews via more static VoIPs (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013; Hanna, 2012; Lo Iacono et al., 2016), overcoming some, though not all of their limitations in relation to establishing rapport and non-verbal clues. In saying this, however, it is important to consider that the success of gathering meaningful data in the project was also based on a combination of other factors: firstly, having the participants to choose the communication channel as a key factor to gather good quality data (see Paulus & Lester, 2022, on agency over technology use). Second, the similarity and connection established by the interviewer and the interviewee. Third, the characteristics of the group, which in the case of our sample was a highly mobile group, very keen on the use of WhatsApp and familiar with the technologies that they already used regularly to stay connected with family and friends. For other target groups, other smartphone applications offering similar features may be more commonly used and would therefore be preferable. Further research will be needed to determine to what extent such methods can be applied successfully with groups that do not use such applications as part of their day-to-day communication, or where there is a greater social distance between interviewer and interviewee.

Equally, further research on using asynchronous interview techniques with voice notes or a combination of audio and written messages would be useful as this appears to be a promising technique for target groups that cannot commit to a longer once-off interview, or when researchers explicitly want to encourage deeper reflections as they would in written interviews (see Burtt, 2020). Compared to written messages, voice notes place a lower response burden on respondents, increasing the chances for longer answers and more regular exchanges. In terms of spontaneity, they appear to occupy a middle ground between the direct interaction in a synchronous interview and a written answer. As this method evolved only as a by-product of the case study here, its use needs to be explored more systematically in future studies to establish its benefits and limitations in greater detail. Lastly, when planning a project, the particular ethical issues that arise in such research need to be taken into account, with digital boundaries often being more (or at least differently) blurred than in "real life." It should be anticipated that interviewers may get more than just a simple interview and will need to develop strategies to ensure data protection and observance of high ethical standards.

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