The Journal of Social Media for Learning 2025

What's Up with WhatsApp: Reflections on the Evolving Use of a Messaging Service by Students in Higher Education

Sharon Mallon
Staffordshire University, UK

Abstract

Students are increasingly using social media with instant messaging, to build educational communities. Personal experience from my own teaching practice suggested the majority of the student cohort were engaged in these groups. When interviewing students about their sense of community in online spaces, the strength of feeling expressed about the risks and benefits of joining WhatsApp groups outweighed all other social media apps. This article uses interview data, in combination with teaching experience, to briefly reflect upon WhatsApp use in education. It concludes with a proposed pathway for further scholarship on this important emerging area of university life.

What's Up with WhatsApp: Reflections on the Evolving Use of a Messaging Service by Students in Higher Education Introduction

There is an increasing awareness in the sector that students' sense of connection to their institution, their educational community and peers, has a significant impact on both their retention and educational success (Mallon and Dresden, 2023). Alongside this, there is longstanding concern that the turn towards online and blended programs in higher education has increased students feelings of isolation and disconnectedness (Bollliger and Inan, 2012). Yeboah and Nyagorme (2022) have proposed that instant messaging services, such as WhatsApp, are being used by students and tutors to create a strong sense of connection. Here, I provide my reflections on the turn to WhatsApp as a community creator among HE students, using anecdotal evidence from my own practice, and empirical data from a study on students' experiences of community in online settings. Early reports indicate that the absence of university oversight means WhatsApp engagement comes with risks, which some students are learning to self-manage. However, I conclude by arguing that continued use with inadequate scholarship makes both students and staff vulnerable.

Use of WhatsApp in education

At the time of writing, with reportedly 2.7 billion users worldwide, WhatsApp is the most popular messaging application worldwide (BankMyCell, 2023). It offers a wide range of functions such as instant accessibility and group chat functions (which allows many users to be added to a single group). These have likely increased their popularity among university students; one Ghanaian study found that among higher education students studying in distance settings, over 98% owned mobile phones that support WhatsApp and that over 99% of these students used the app (Yeboah and Nyagorme, 2020). In another survey of 127 students, Gazit and Aharony (2018) found that the level of participation of students who were in WhatsApp groups to be 'medium-high', also showing that once they have engaged in the group most students become active members posting regularly.

Given the high level of engagement in WhatsApp groups in HE, it is surprising that until recently there has been remarkably little attention paid in the literature to students' experiences of these groups. LeRoux and Parry's (2021) survey of instant messaging usage among over 1700 students in a single institution, found that these groups provided an environment that enhances online participation. They also compared different types of groups: finding that student-to-student groups had higher participation and more positive outcomes in terms of the students' perception of improving academic performance and reduction of academic pressure. Bharat's (2022) exploration of usage of WhatsApp among students in India identified that 70 of the 80 students reported visiting their WhatsApp accounts more than six times a day. But they also found that 26 out of 80 preferred night-time use for their WhatsApp connection. This preference connects with my own trials of social media use of Facebook with students, where students were typically most active and engaged in the site outside of the typical working hours of academia (Mallon and Dresden, 2023), and illustrates the challenges for tutors who are interested in using this medium to engage with their students.

Sharon Mallon
Staffordshire University, UK

Reflections on use of WhatsApp by Open University Students and Staff

In my own practice using Facebook to connect with students, I also noted that the use of student led WhatsApp groups seemed to rise with each cohort, where Facebook use appeared to have plateaued. Observing the attempts of students to advertise their WhatsApp groups in official university moderated spaces such as module forums, also gave me insights into the determination students had to join them and keep them active. For example, the perceived value of WhatsApp use to students was hinted at by the organisational structure that was applied to the transfer of group details from one cohort to another, so that information was saved between year groups.

In addition, students' eagerness to join these groups meant they often showed little regard for their personal security. For example, each year I had to proactively delete posts to prevent students from sharing their personal mobile numbers in module wide forums, as they attempted to gain the link to the latest module WhatsApp group. In the case of The Open University, these forums typically have hundreds of participants. This means their phone numbers were being shared widely with large groups of people they had never met, but also meant they were able to gain access to a WhatsApp group with large numbers of students. The universities lack of oversight over these spaces meant I felt an obligation to continue to support the use of tutor moderated spaces on the Virtual Learning Environment, and was concerned that allowing WhatsApp links in the forum to remain visible provided tacit approval of these spaces, and could in some ways make staff responsible for experiences that happened within them. From students, I became aware of the use of WhatsApp by some of the tutors on other modules at our institution, who were using their personal mobiles to create WhatsApp groups to connect with their students. This work was unofficial, in the sense that our institution had not approved WhatsApp for use by tutors because of the risks of communication outside of university regulated spaces. Such lack of regard for the risks is concerning, especially as the general lack of university guidance on engaging with WhatsApp and the lack of qualitative academic scholarship into the experiences of those staff and students operating within them, make informed choices about involvement or the best strategies for protection challenging.

Reflections on WhatApp Use from students

My broad areas of scholarship interest have been concerned with how connections are created for students studying at a distance. As part of this work[1] , I interviewed fourteen students about their sense of community in online spaces, during these interviews, despite not featuring as an explicit part of the initial interview schedule, the issue of WhatsApp was repeatedly raised. I noted that their reported use of WhatsApp was extensive; many reported automatically joining these groups, with some even saying they "definitely (join),… every WhatsApp group". Notably, many students reported that it gave them a sense of connection they felt was lacking from other aspects of their educational experience, describing how the groups meant they felt "in touch with students" and that it was highly motivational, particularly around assessment time, with students supporting and encouraging each other.

However, there was also a darker side to WhatsApp use, with some students reporting that groups were being infiltrated by imposters selling 'Essays', and that in bigger groups clashes were frequent and bordered on bullying. There was also lots of "talking about things they shouldn't be", with occasional sharing of copyrighted learning material, or essay plans, which meant despite gaining connections some students "tend to steer clear of them now".

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[1] (This work was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee for The Open University and by SRPP (Student Research Participant Panel).

Sharon Mallon
Staffordshire University, UK

There was also a commonly reported issue of "oversharing", and students described the groups as "intrusive" and "pinging all the time", with "massive long, constant conversations about stuff that's completely irrelevant". While some left the groups because they recognised that they "don't need this negativity" others self-managed by only going on there "when there's something specific that I'm looking for". However, it was also apparent some students felt they couldn't leave the WhatsApp groups because they would miss out on too much valuable information that was not available in official university spaces.

Directions for future work into WhatsApp.

The literature and reflections shared here describes how students, within distance and traditional HEIs, are making use of WhatsApp to create communities. As with other social media apps in HE, such as Facebook, the opportunities provided by instant messaging on WhatsApp can come with considerable benefits such that as Vázquez-Cano and Díez-Arcón (2021) pointed out students can come to prefer them to official spaces. These online settings allow students to informally engage with other students from both their module and qualification; students can also be welcomed and supported by their peers, receive advice on administrative aspects of studying, form friendships and useful study connections. However, engaging outside of university moderated spaces, also comes with significant risks (Chugh and Ruhi, 2018; Mallon and Dresden, 2023) and may be excluding those who experience digital poverty (Mallon et al, 2023). These risks include, but are not limited to, issues related to cheating, breaches of privacy, exposure to hateful or harmful content, as well as cyber bullying. Social media use is continually changing, it is a dynamic social, legal and political space, and the potential for significant incidents that threaten both the student learning experience, as well as their emotional wellbeing and safety, cannot be underestimated. Using personal mobiles to create communities with students, also comes with risks for staff as recently documented by Information Commissioner Officer's reprimand of NHS staff in the UK (ICO, 2023).

Given the levels of WhatsApp use in HE, and the range of experiences students have in these spaces, we urgently need to produce evidence on the benefits, challenges and expectations of staff and students who use it. This may include creating knowledge to develop interventions that educate students on the beneficial and harmful effects of WhatsApp[2] , and those which facilitate the development of robust, preventative reporting measures for behaviour which risks academic misconduct. However, in an era where the use of WhatsApp is so ubiquitous by HE staff and students, universities should also consider whether specific protocols and guidance are needed for using communication apps like WhatsApp.

Conclusion

This article provides one practitioner's reflections on student use of WhatsApp to create communities in higher education. As an academic with a strong background in student mental health, I watch this evolving area of practice with trepidation. Student choice is important, but it is vital that students and staff understand the risks and benefits, before they abandon official university spaces. Scholarship is essential to examine what these are and to provide protective protocols and guidance. In conclusion, my experiences of engaging with students who are using WhatsApp as part of their studies, and speaking with colleagues in the area, leads me to suggest there are five areas of potential scholarship in relation to student use of WhatsApp as part of the higher education.

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[2] To better educate students and share best practice The Open University have now created an OpenLearn Course *Using Social Media in Higher Education.* This contains a section that deals directly with some of the benefits and challenges of WhatsApp Use in HE.

Sharon Mallon
Staffordshire University, UK

(Insert Box 1) In the absence of sustained scholarship into this area, we are all vulnerable.
Box 1: Proposed pathway for WhatsApp Scholarship, Projects which explore:

- Student to student engagement;
- How to maximize the pedagogical benefits of WhatsApp- What works well?;
- Risk identification and Minimization through clear guidance and policy structures;
- Student to tutor models of engagement;
- How university spaces can better replicate the experiences of social media instant messaging platforms such as WhatsApp.

Sharon Mallon
Staffordshire University, UK

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Sharon Mallon
Staffordshire University, UK