

Repurposing a WhatsApp group: How a fantasy cricket group transformed into a site of care and support during India's second wave of Covid-19

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Abstract

Set in the context of India's second Covid-19 wave (April–June 2021), this article examines the transformation of a WhatsApp group originally created to study a pool of fantasy sport players into a site of care, concern, and support. By using netnography and in-depth interviews to chart the various challenges faced by the study's participants, the article analyzes how key health information was curated, moderated, and shared by the group's participants during the period. Our findings indicate that during the Covid-19 wave, users of WhatsApp relied on the personal connections it offered as they found ways to make the platform their own. By harnessing WhatsApp's capabilities with regard to accessing and sharing essential information that was both timely and locationally relevant, users of the service found ways to stay informed in moments that were fraught with uncertainty. By analyzing the various ways in which the group's participants shared information with each other and outside of the group, this study argues that the insights obtained can be used to understand broader social realities and the possibilities offered by platforms such as WhatsApp that could help navigate the various challenges presented by the ongoing pandemic in the Global South.

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Keywords

WhatsApp, Covid-19, India second wave, care, support, SNS groups

Reframing the study

This article documents a study that examines the transformation of a WhatsApp group that was created to study fantasy players in the Indian Premier League, (an international cricketing tournament) into a site of care and concern and a repository of crucial health information during India's second Covid-19 wave. The opening section of this article is autoethnographic (Chang, 2008) in nature because the authors would like to provide the readers with some understanding of how this study came about.

It is March 2021. As India and its cricket-loving population gear up for a season of the Indian Premier League (IPL)—an elite cricket tournament that features professional athletes (cricketers) from more than 10 nations—the two of us decide to examine the tournament and its fanbase through the dimension of fantasy sport (Billings & Ruihley, 2013; Deshbandhu, 2019). Fantasy sport, primarily an online activity, is an ancillary sport service that is based on statistics from real-world sports. Dwyer and Drayer (2010) consider fantasy sport to be a key part of every major professional sport today. Fantasy sport is a competitive platform that integrates knowledge of the sport, statistical ability, and socialization (Ruihley & Hardin, 2011). It is extremely popular around the world, for example, the Fantasy Sports & Gaming Association estimates that the United States alone has 45.9 million players who engage with the format (Fantasy Sports and Gaming Association, 2021). In the Indian context, fantasy sport has been quite popular among the nation's networked publics for the last two decades. Pfanner (2004) records that there were over 750,000 players engaging with fantasy cricket in 2004, and Deshbandhu observed in 2019 that fantasy sport continues to remain a popular format in the country when he found that over 200,000 players from India had taken part in the Fantasy Premier League (the fantasy sport format based on the English Premier League annual football competition) between 2017 and 2019 (Deshbandhu, 2019). In addition, fantasy cricket, especially the game based on the IPL, enjoys considerable popularity in India because the recently concluded IPL 2022 had over 2.25 million participants registered on the league's official fantasy platform (<https://fantasy.iplt20.com/season/league>).

Because of the popularity of the sport and its fantasy equivalent, we had conceptualized a study that would look at various aspects of engagement among IPL fantasy players. These would include their analysis of sports information, decision-making, communication and socializing among themselves, and the ways in which they formed bonds with specific teams and athletes. We had chosen to gather our data using netnography (Kozinets, 2010, 2019) by creating a WhatsApp group for the participants in the study. This would allow us to examine their posts, the multitude of emergent conversations, the various in-group interactions, and the group dynamic that would unfold over time, to gain insights that could help understand both the IPL spectator and the fantasy player. Because the participants would require specific characteristics to take part in the initial study (qualifying criteria included the following: people who followed cricket as a sport and the IPL tournament in particular; people who were well versed

in fantasy sport; and people who were willing to play the game mode and interact in relation to their choices and decisions in a WhatsApp group), a snowball sampling method was used to identify participants and then build a suitably sized participant pool. The snowball technique was chosen because of its inherent ability to first identify participants who would meet the study's pre-set criteria and then subsequently help identify and gather other suitable participants from networks the participants already selected interacted with. The snowball technique has been found to be beneficial in earlier studies in the subfield of game studies and the specific context of fantasy sport because the questions asked in the survey are designed to be exploratory to extract qualitative information and achieve an in-depth understanding of the topic in question (Deshbandhu, 2019, 2020; Deshbandhu et al., 2022). In order to achieve diversity and variety in the participant pool, two parallel snowballs were set in motion to find participants. The participant group that emerged from the snowball exercise consisted of a blend of spectators and players of the fantasy sport who were representative of the IPL tournament's Indian and overseas or diasporic fanbase. The participant pool we assembled had 12 players (inclusive of one researcher), of which, at the time of the study, eight lived in India, and the other four were of Indian origin, residing in various regions of the United States. The netnography component of the proposed study was to be augmented by in-depth interviews with the participants to gain further insights. As the tournament was set to start on April 9, the WhatsApp group was created on April 1 and most participants were part of the group's conversation by April 3.

Most early conversations in the group were lighthearted as participants discussed their strategies, tactics, and approaches to the fantasy sport, and friendly banter soon became the norm. However, for the participants of this study, the 2021 IPL was unlike any other.

As it was organized in India nearly a year into the Covid-19 pandemic, the conditions were unprecedented, because by April 4 most participants in the WhatsApp group were discussing how Devdutt Padikkal, a cricketer that most of them were eying up for their fantasy teams, had tested positive for the virus (The Hindu staff reporter, 2021). Less than three weeks into the tournament, the IPL's safety bubble had been breached and matches were being cancelled, and a month later, on May 4, the tournament was suspended indefinitely as India began to face the brunt of the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic (India Today Web Desk, 2021). With the cancellation of the tournament, the study was off and the group along with its participants was expected to go dormant as is generally the case with most WhatsApp groups that are created for a specific purpose. However, the conversation in this group continued as participants began to share crucial health information with one another, and they inquired regularly about the well-being of other members. Over the next few weeks, the WhatsApp group not only transformed into a site of care and concern, but also began to serve as a repository for immediate health information that its members could use. Watching a site created specifically for discussing participants' trivial leisure pursuits transmute by such a staggering degree became worthy of examination (Raman & Mukhpalkar, 2014) and, thus, this study was reframed to examine both the group's transformation and the various acts and decisions of its participants, to gain insights into the role played by social networking service (SNS) platforms such as WhatsApp during the various waves of the ongoing pandemic in contextual realities like the Global South.

Situating the contexts

WhatsApp as a SNS in India

The Kantar–IAMAI 2021 report (2021) on India’s usage of the internet indicates that 43% of the Indian population actively use the internet. However, the report defines “active” internet usage as accessing the internet and its many services at least once a month, a definition that challenges understandings of meaningful access and the need to be “always on” (Boyd, 2012), conditions essential to charting the various interactions on a platform such as WhatsApp. The same report observes that 67% of India’s urban population use the internet “actively,” a number that reduces drastically to 31% in rural contexts. Internet usage across India’s various states is also disparate, because the top three states in terms of internet access—Maharashtra, Goa, and Kerala—have nearly double the number of users vis-à-vis the bottom three—Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Bihar (Kantar–IAMAI, 2021). Incidentally, the former states rank among the top half of Indian states in terms of per capita GDP, whereas the latter three are in the bottom half (Reserve Bank of India, 2022). The last two years of the pandemic have seen the digital divide reify existing inequalities across class, caste, gender, religion, and region (Roy et al., 2021); therefore, studying WhatsApp interactions between members of a group created to discuss fantasy sport in a nation like India implies we were studying a section of the country’s population that had meaningful access.

WhatsApp is one of India’s most popular SNS platforms; the service had over 200 million active users by 2017 (Singh, 2017), a number that has steadily risen and had nearly doubled to 390 million by 2020 (Jain, 2021). These 390 million users make India the nation with the highest number of active “monthly” users of this SNS platform. WhatsApp is a web-based service that blurs the boundaries between traditional text messaging and social networking, and it offers its users features that enable them to communicate directly with other users, be part of groups, and broadcast messages to addresses in their list of contacts (Dev et al., 2018). As countries from the Global South see their populations make the shift to an online mode of existence, the number of people who use services like WhatsApp, which bridge conventional messaging and offer a novel SNS experience, will only continue to grow in nations such as India—people Payal Arora classifies as “the next billion” (Arora, 2019). In her book, Arora (2019) considers those from the Global South who use SNS platforms to be vulnerable, and at risk from the various dangers posed by the internet and the World Wide Web (also Shah, 2015). Most research on WhatsApp coming from India reflects Arora’s idea of a vulnerable population in that it looks at the SNS platform as a site that is used to disseminate and amplify misinformation, which often leads to the enactment of antisocial acts, resulting in civic, social, and communal disharmony (Banaji et al., 2019; Farooq, 2018; Garimella & Eckles, 2020; Vasudeva & Barkdull, 2020). However, since then, some recent research has shown how the trend has changed in small but valuable ways. For example, Cruz and Harindranath (2020) have noted how SNS platforms like WhatsApp offer their users from the Global South uniquely intimate media environments. They further observe that the users often view these services as “technologies of life” (Cruz & Harindranath,

2020, p. 1), that is, as utilities that both empower and sustain them. Similar observations have been made in the context of WhatsApp in India: newer research indicates that with time, users of services like WhatsApp have not just acquired the requisite capabilities to use such platforms, but have found ways to benefit from them. For example, Agarwal and Mittal note the positive use of the platform in the context of higher education (2019), and Kamani et al. (2016) note the potential of the platform in India's agricultural sector.

The potential of WhatsApp as a platform for effecting meaningful everyday change is observed by Varanasi et al. (2021) in their qualitative study, in which they examine how teachers from low-income Indian schools use the platform to their advantage by curating, moderating, and sharing content, fostering cooperation and collaboration in their work in the process. The repurposing of SNS platforms and "making them their own" is also observed in the context of other such platforms, especially in urban India. In this sense, Sarwatay and Raman (2021) note that conversations about digital platforms, particularly social media spaces, in the context of children's everyday are necessary and need to begin early. This idea is reinforced by Sarwatay et al. (2021), who argue that a culture-centered approach taking into account the various socioeconomic realities at play is needed to understand issues that arise from systematic and prolonged engagement with SNS platforms in contexts such as India. This article wishes to address Sarwatay et al.'s concerns by looking at the IPL as a cultural entry point into the digital everyday of the WhatsApp group participants. It then tries to understand the various contextual realities they grappled with as they struggled to overcome the innumerable challenges posed by India's second Covid-19 wave.

SNS and mobile communication: Sites of care, concern, and support

The use of messaging services, SNS platforms, and by extension the mobile phone, as means of sharing crucial, time-sensitive information with precision, synchronicity, and instantaneity has been well documented. In the case of medical emergencies and natural disasters, studies from India have shown that mobile-mediated communication services have been more effective than traditional online sources like the internet. In suggesting a possible mHealth initiative, Kapadia-Kundu et al. (2013) note that mobile phones provide a wider and quicker reach than the internet. Similar observations were made by Bhuvana and Arul Aram (2019) following their analysis of the use of SNS platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp as disaster management tools (see also Kavota et al., 2020) during the Chennai floods of 2015. Although media technology platforms like WhatsApp have the potential to disseminate timely and crucial information and their efficacy in doing so has never been in doubt, it is important to examine the nature of this interaction and its engagement during challenging times. Kapadia-Kundu et al. (2013) note this requirement when they identify the human/actor and their contexts as essential in the information exchange as opposed to the technology and the device, a shift we feel allows researchers to examine the contextual and the personal in all such interactions. Arminen and Weilenmann (2009) note that mobile media communication reconfigures conventional understandings of closeness and intimacy by allowing dynamic contextual information to permeate the process and, consequently, the social actions that emerge from such interactions offer radical new possibilities. Thus, the

decisions that users make, their willingness to engage with other users, the nature of these interactions (Horst, 2021), and the acts they perform, are all essential aspects of mobile media platforms if these are to be of meaning and potentially transform into sites where notions of trust and reliability are forged. Cumiskey and Hjorth (2017) identify some of the possibilities that Arminen and Weilenmann (2009, p. 6) suggest when they say, “Increasingly, the mobile phone is not just a companion, witness, repository, and disseminator of events; it also amplifies a type of affect in the way in which events are experienced.”

Cumiskey and Hjorth note that the ubiquity of the mobile phone creates a “mobile intimacy” (2017, p. 15) in which the electronic and social are overlaid and the emotional coalesces with co-presence. The device then transforms into an artifact that contains within itself both memories and possibilities. In such a frame, platforms like WhatsApp (on which users share their activities, achievements, and the everyday) seamlessly establish ongoing connections with others irrespective of spatial and temporal constraints. Cumiskey and Hjorth further expand on this understanding when they note that people use their mobile phones to both “regulate and contain” and “amplify or intensify” their emotions (p. 30). These foundations are essential for understanding the change in dynamic in the WhatsApp group this article examines as it helps us chart and investigate how a site created to foster competition and banter among its participants transmuted into one that emphasized their well-being. The participants’ concerns, challenges, anxieties, and pain then become possible entry points for the researchers in their attempt to understand the contextual realities the participants endured during India’s second Covid-19 wave, and their emotions as expressed in the WhatsApp group become key enablers for further examination of the prevalent social conditions. In a nation in which emotions are considered a key element of the communication process (Kapadia-Kundu et al., 2013), a methodological approach that builds on Cumiskey and Hjorth’s understanding (2017) seems apt.

Remapping the methodology

As we reframed the study, our main focus was to consider the transformation of the WhatsApp group into a site of care, concern, and support. Examining this required an understanding of the various factors that brought about the transformation, and an investigation of the WhatsApp group as a complex artifact that needs to engage both with the materials shared by the participants and the acts performed by them—their thought processes, contexts, decisions, and reflections. As we remapped the methodology, we were conscious and aware of the digital divide and its many disparities in India. Thus, the WhatsApp usage analyzed and the arguments made in this paper are representative only of a section of Indian society, a section that enjoys social, cultural, and economic privileges, and can both afford and access uninterrupted internet usage.

Netnography, with its inherent ability to examine various kinds of data on online platforms (Kozinets, 2019) offers a viable approach for examining the gamut of interactions in the WhatsApp group because it allowed the researchers to elicit key observations and thick descriptions by immersing themselves in the group and participating in the various

multifaceted exchanges. Moreover, netnography's fluid structure makes it open to adaptation, contextualization, and accommodation of "new devices, new rules, new platforms, and new types of data" (Kozinets, 2020, p. 7), thus making it a fitting method for this study. The accommodating nature of the method especially suits the charting and examining of messaging interactions because it allows researchers to feed in elements of context into their analysis in order to make sense of frequent elements like emojis, memes, and GIFs (graphic interchange format), which often explicitly and implicitly carry contextual markers. Netnography as a method was also suitable for the study because it allowed the researchers to examine the group's chat in its multilingual form—the participants frequently flitted between Hindi, English, and Telugu in their messages. Messages were often written in bilingual form because phrases of English, Hindi, and Telugu were commonly part of larger messages written in one of the other languages. Being multilingual themselves, the researchers were able to gather intelligence about the various different language contexts in the feed.

The netnographic analysis was augmented by in-depth interviews with the participants that were carried out in late 2021 and early 2022. The rationale for the time gap between the events examined and the interviews was to ensure that the participants had some time to cope and come to terms with (in line with Cumiskey & Hjorth's (2017) observations) the suffering and the challenges they experienced during the second wave. The in-depth interviews were open-ended and free-structured, and were conducted with the help of an interview guide (see Appendix 1). They were used to help the researchers gain insights into the various decisions that the participants made as they interacted with the group and to fill in other personal and contextual dimensions that were not available as part of the conversation on WhatsApp. The interviews were also reflective in nature, because while they were taking place, the participants scrolled through the group's chat during India's second wave of Covid-19 in order to provide insights into their thoughts, concerns, actions, and decisions, therefore helping the researchers navigate through the various polysemic aspects of the group's chat.

Thus, the two data streams, one the netnography of the WhatsApp chat, and the second elicited using in-depth reflective interviews, were woven together as part of the analysis presented in this article. The netnographic data were sorted temporally as suggested by Muskat (2020) by situating the analysis in three "particular moments" (p. 271). The first such moment was when cricketer Devdutt Paddikal tested positive for Covid-19 (as discussed earlier in the article), the second was when a participant left the group because his mother had tested positive, and the third was when the IPL tournament was halted indefinitely. Please see Figure 1 for a timeline of all the major events during the study. The analysis presented in this study revolves around these discrete events but also weaves in elements of the social to understand the various interactions in the group holistically. The group and its subsequent transformation, once holistically charted and examined, becomes a case study (Yin, 1989, 1993, 1994) that can potentially explain how other WhatsApp groups in similar contexts functioned in the same time period and the various measures they could possibly have undertaken.

Finally, the cumulative data were analyzed by the researchers through coding, and open, axial, and selective codes were developed (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) on the basis of the broad, narrow, and specific themes that emerged. The entire

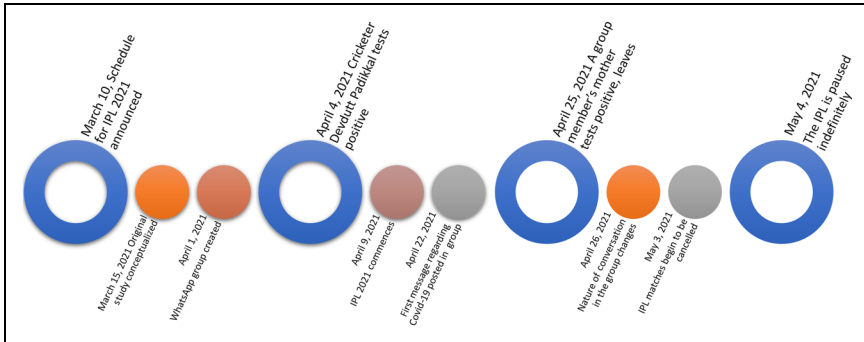


Figure 1. A Timeline of Key Events in the Study.
 Note. IPL = Indian Premier League.

process of theme identification and coding was done by both the researchers and intercoder reliability was achieved at every stage of the analysis process through continuous discussion between the two (Carey et al., 1996).

List of participants

A list of the 11 participants in the study is presented in Table 1.

Analysis

Understanding the group's transformation

Existing research indicates that some WhatsApp groups are created for very specific reasons and serve as sites for conversations on specific issues (Varanasi et al., 2021). In the same vein, the WhatsApp group examined by this study was established for a very clear purpose and all its participants were aware of the primary reason for its creation. Netnographic analysis reveals that the participants reinforced the purpose of the group in its early days through their messages. For example, on April 3, 2021, “This is the group guys, all fantasy IPL discussion Pehle teams bana do, we can discuss strategy phir (Make your teams first, and then we can discuss strategy).”

This singular focus of the group was reinforced by one of the participants, Chaitanya, in an interview, “The purpose of the group was the IPL Fantasy League—to create a pool on the website, discuss teams and captain selection, ball-to-ball action, and of course, the banter and comedy.”

The jovial lightheartedness and competitive banter that Chaitanya mentions were clearly visible in the group's early interactions because most conversations were trivial and competitive in nature and they showcased the sporting spirit that usually accompanies annual events such as the IPL. Another participant, Anabil, states in his reflections, “It [the WhatsApp group] was for entertainment, and nothing else.” Netnographic analysis

Table 1. List of Participants.

No.	Name of participant	Place of residence at the time of the study	Number of years of WhatsApp use	WhatsApp group usage
01	Anabil	Hyderabad, India	13 years, first used the service on a Nokia Symbian device	Part of several groups for family, friends, colleagues, hobbies, and interests. Mutes all groups except those of close friends.
02	Baibhav	Hyderabad, Patna, Chennai, and Delhi, India	6 years, first used the service on a Vivo phone	Part of groups for family, friends, and office colleagues. Reads the conversation on the groups he is a part of but prefers to reply through direct messages.
03	Chaitanya	Tampa, United States	11 years, first used the service on a Nokia XpressMusic phone	Part of several groups for family, friends, and colleagues. Actively engages with the status feature. Reacts to WhatsApp messages before all other SNS. Never mutes groups.
04	Pimanshu	Hyderabad and Etah district, Uttar Pradesh, India	10 years, first used the service on a Moto G device in 2012	Part of several groups for family, friends, and colleagues. Uses it a lot to engage with colleagues at work unofficially. Finds that most groups are vibrant at first and then die down. Tries to revive conversation in dormant groups.
05	Kaushik	Hyderabad, India	7 years, first used the service on a Nokia device	Part of several groups for family, friends, colleagues, hobbies, and interests. Is very active on most groups, likes to initiate banter and uses stickers and GIFs frequently in the chat.
06	Kiran	Bengaluru, India	8 years, first used the service on a Google Nexus 5	Part of several WhatsApp groups but is rarely active on any of them. Uses them to schedule meet-ups with other group members when he can.

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

No.	Name of participant	Place of residence at the time of the study	Number of years of WhatsApp use	WhatsApp group usage
07	Prashant	Hyderabad, India	6 years, first used the service on a Redmi device	Uses WhatsApp exclusively to stay in touch with his gaming and sports friends. Is active on groups that often discuss the activities he is interested in. Most active on groups with people he plays sports and video games with.
08	Rahul	Orlando, United States	11 years, first used the service on an Android device	Doesn't like the groups feature, likes to communicate with people directly on WhatsApp. Has a group in which he is the only participant, uses it to take notes. Hates forwarded messages, mutes all groups.
09	Rohit	Oklahoma, United States	9 years, first used the service on an Android device	Uses groups to stay in touch with family from India. Reads conversations on groups to find out what is happening but will rarely engage with people.
10	Sagar	Atlanta, United States	10 years, but accessed WhatsApp through the Bluestacks workaround on MS Windows	Uses groups to stay in touch with friends from India and stay in touch with his political beliefs. Likes to take part in the banter in groups in which he has friends.
11	Teja	Hyderabad, India	7 years, first accessed the service on a Coolpad Android device when he entered college	Part of several groups for family, friends, colleagues, hobbies, and interests. Believes in a hierarchy in the groups he is a part of and is generally active on those that do not require too much effort to keep up.

Note. SNS = social networking service; GIF = graphics interchange format.

from this stage showcases the banter in several ways: participants were mocking each other's team allegiances; they were encouraging others to get their teams ready

quicker; and they were discussing the various criteria they were considering while making their teams. Anabil's messages in the group on April 5 were reflective of these early trends:

05/04/2021, 17:48—Anabil: Right now we have more pressing issues

Not able to get the right balance in the team

There are simply too many players

05/04/2021, 17:49—Chaitanya: 🙄🙄 trueee

05/04/2021, 18:03—Teja: Time to steal 😏😏😏

The first signs of the pandemic intersecting with the groups' frivolities, excitement, and its single-minded purpose of fostering competition among the fantasy sport players were noticed when the cricketer Devdutt Padikkal tested positive for Covid-19 just before the tournament was about to start. This was important information for the members of the group, because Padikkal, as Teja recollects in his interview, "was in most teams [of the members' fantasy teams], and captain." The WhatsApp group analysis indicates that the discussion at this point still centered on how to play an entire season of the tournament during which other cricketers could test positive and the various strategies the group would have to use to accumulate the most points. However, participants' reflections from interviews indicate that a few of them were quite wary of the situation right from the start. In his interview, Rahul explicitly states: "When he [Padikkal] tested positive, it initiated the thought that other players practicing with him might also test positive and there may be a mass spread. I was wondering what would happen to the IPL then."

Similar opinions were held by Himanshu, because in his interview he observed that he was worried about the players, and if they could test positive with all the facilities at their disposal in the bio-bubble, then we were far more susceptible to the rising wave. However, it is interesting to note that these concerns were not shared by the group's participants at this juncture. According to Cumiskey and Hjorth's understanding, the group's members were containing their concerns. In their interviews, all the participants shared their fears of a possible nationwide spread as early as April 4, but chose not to express these fears in the group.

However, things changed quickly, because by April 22, one of the participants, Himanshu, shared contact information for several pathological labs where people could undergo tests if they were showing symptoms. Himanshu's message was the first instance in which the conversation in the WhatsApp group acknowledged the pandemic in a context that wasn't directly related to the IPL. However, the frivolous atmosphere was severely dented on April 25 when one of the participants, Kaushik, chose to leave the group because his mother had tested positive for the virus. The nature of the group's conversation suddenly changed and is presented as follows:

25/04/2021, 15:35—Teja: Oh shit!

25/04/2021, 15:35—Teja: Is she getting admitted?

25/04/2021, 15:35—Teja: Or home treatment?

25/04/2021, 15:37—Teja: Hope for the best

25/04/2021, 15:37—Teja: 🙏

25/04/2021, 15:38—Himanshu: All of you take good care

25/04/2021, 15:38—Himanshu: Mera kal se office start hora (My office starts tomorrow in an offline mode)

25/04/2021, 15:38—Himanshu: Kya hota ki (I have no idea what will happen)

25/04/2021, 15:39—Himanshu: Mask, sanitizer, yoga, Chyawanprash (Chyawanprash is an immunity-boosting home remedy)

25/04/2021, 15:39—Himanshu: 🤔

25/04/2021, 15:40—Himanshu: I'm doing all these

This event fueled several conversations in the group in which messages of care, concern, and well-being were posted. The participants had begun to discuss their various everyday challenges in the group, and the chat excerpt shows that Himanshu was worried about his livelihood and well-being and was sharing his concerns with the group. By May 4 when the IPL was paused indefinitely, the conversation about the tournament being paused was of minimal concern in the group because participants were sharing health advice, critical health information about live bed trackers in hospitals, location- and time-specific details in relation to where vaccine shots could be obtained, information with regard to where oxygen could be procured, and leads indicating where the drug remdesivir could be found. India was facing a severe shortage of medicines, vaccines, and key resources such as beds and oxygen, and netnographic analysis reveals that the group had transformed into a site where real-time, immediate, and live information was being shared by the participants. Contact information, location-specific data, and real-time trackers were being shared because platforms like WhatsApp were tapping into the various features of the modern smartphone (location data, built-in internet connectivity, voice calling) so that users could share essential lifesaving information immediately. The group's transformation is best showcased by this conversation from May 5 (the day after the IPL's indefinite pause), on which members of the group were discussing the availability of vaccines because most of them had yet to receive their first shots.

05/05/2021, 14:19—Himanshu: Did anybody find slots for vaccination?

05/05/2021, 14:20—Teja: Yeah bro got it for Covishield

05/05/2021, 14:20—Teja: For my mom

05/05/2021, 14:20—Teja: No Covaxin though

05/05/2021, 14:21—Himanshu: I'm asking for 18–44 wala category re

05/05/2021, 14:21—Teja: Lol 😏😏😏😏😏

05/05/2021, 14:22—Teja: Don't think it's possible now

05/05/2021, 14:22—Teja: Maybe in 2 weeks

05/05/2021, 14:22—Himanshu: I found 2 centers who are providing on 8th May and they are already booked

05/05/2021, 14:23—Himanshu: That's in the entire Sangareddy district

05/05/2021, 14:23—Himanshu: Remaining all centers are showing 45 + age group only and all are Covishield

Himanshu's concern about finding a vaccine for himself is indicative of the fact that by May 2021, India had yet to open up the vaccination program to people under the age of 45; thus, all the participants in the WhatsApp group were anxiously waiting to be vaccinated. In these anxiety- and grief-stricken contexts with the virus spreading uncontrollably, there was little or no resistance when the group's conversation moved away from the primary purpose of fantasy sport to issues of health, care, concern, and support. Participants' reflections suggest that that change in tone, seriousness, and dynamic of the group can be attributed to multiple factors.

First, because the group was engaging in constant vibrant activity and was taking part in everyday conversations before the sudden peaking of the wave, this meant that participants felt the active nature of the group would continue unabated and they were more likely to continue engaging with the conversations in this group. As Anabil observes in his interview, "Since we were all active on this group, it became more convenient and accessible to reply here."

Second, the trust that participants of the group had in each other and the immediate concern they felt for their fellow chat members were essential reasons for the group's activity, despite the members' recent everyday interactions being at a superficial level that centered on conversations concerning the IPL. All the participants in the study observed that they trusted WhatsApp as a platform in such circumstances because it allowed them to limit conversations to individuals in their phone's address books—people they trusted more and had a higher degree of faith in because they knew them personally in both their offline and online lives. As Rahul states categorically in his interview:

In India, people want to have an extra level of affirmation that what is being said is true. It's easy to get misinformation—information is available freely, anyone can say anything, many times people try to cash out. Thus, people rely on those who they talk to regularly.

Teja takes Rahul's idea further when he notes, "this was not a random group or page on Facebook, it was on a much more personal level with people I know." All the participants observed that there was hierarchy in the SNS platforms they used and the WhatsApp groups they were in. Most participants in the study felt that WhatsApp was the SNS platform on which they could be reached most easily and also the platform from which they responded to others most frequently. This group ranked at the top of their chats as their most "presenced" (Couldry, 2012, pp. 33–58) or "always on" (Boyd, 2012), because it was vibrant and active during its fantasy phase and soon transformed into a site where valuable information could be found. The participants felt that the WhatsApp group was the best place to share information and receive credible leads because of the bond they shared with fellow participants, and they mentioned how players of fantasy sport habitually searched for verified, reliable information as they engaged with their sports of choice (Deshbandhu, 2019). Teja notes:

If a person is constantly online checking the health, performance, and form of a whole bunch of athletes every week, transferring those skills to look for health information is not very difficult. I soon realized the information being shared on our group was reliable and updated.

The information and resources shared on the WhatsApp group were consumed, used, and shared by the participants in myriad ways as they engaged with them. The next analysis section delves into these intricacies.

Dynamics of information exchange

This section of the analysis investigates the various ways in which the health information shared on the WhatsApp group was curated, moderated, and shared. Most participants of the study were aware of the use of platforms like WhatsApp to spread misinformation. In their interviews, most of them went into great detail to tell us how information exchange on platforms like WhatsApp in a country like India requires a cautious and measured approach in which every bit of information needs to be scrutinized, confirmed, and verified before being shared. This process of repeated confirmation acquires newer meanings in the digital age in that participants (in their limited capacities) are attempting to face what can be best understood as a multifaceted version of the classical game "telephone" in which not only is the chain of receivers and senders impossible to track but it is also extremely difficult to pinpoint/identify the various alterations and manipulations that the message undergoes in its multitude of transmissions.

In considering a platform such as WhatsApp, on which content is created, mediated, and remediates several times over in a multitude of iterations via its built-in features for forwarding messages, posting statuses, and broadcasts, the netnographic analysis reveals that the group's participants were repeatedly verifying content that other participants had posted. Chaitanya questioned several participants in relation to the links they had shared

in the group's chat and in early May highlighted a few fake links giving information on vaccination slots, redirecting users to other web pages. Similarly, in his interview, Rahul observed how difficult it was to limit the effects of misinformation on a platform like WhatsApp, "In India, information is available freely, anyone can say anything, many times people try to cash out. Because of our large population, it is hard for the police etc. to control how information is being shared, mishandled or misinterpreted."

At a time when the nation's health systems and infrastructures were on the verge of collapse, and desperation among the people had peaked, the participants in the study were aware of the havoc misinformation on platforms like WhatsApp could unleash. Anabil drew from the mainstream media's news coverage during his interview when he noted how in desperate moments people were taken advantage of on SNS platforms, "WhatsApp caused a lot of damage. Many people got fooled for oxygen, for example, in Delhi, people were made to pay advance money and never sent the oxygen."

Despite the efforts of the members in the group to curate and verify the links that were posted, the participants remained cautious because most kept going back to already verified links and resources to ensure they were still working. Anabil had shared a live bed tracker in the chat and in less than 45 s two other participants had noticed the link was broken. Even before Anabil could respond, one of the participants had searched for the new functional link, verified it, and shared it as soon as possible. Netnographic analysis reveals that members of the group were working in tandem to curate, verify, and post relevant live information. The trust and reliability that underpinned the dynamics between members of the group removed some of the verification rituals, but did not eliminate them completely. Teja was vehement in his interview when he said, "I trusted people in this group, and I did my own verification of URLs before forwarding them. Me, being a carrier of information, needed to be trustworthy." On the other hand, Himanshu was quite happy with the group's verification processes when he said, "In some big groups where I don't know people, I don't trust them. But from groups like ours I can blindly forward and share links." Teja and Himanshu's comments were indicative of the trust they placed in other participants of the group but also the responsibility that each of the group's participants shouldered in order to remain trustworthy and reliable at a precarious time when misinformation was abundant.

Himanshu was not the only participant who was sharing links, resources, and information from the WhatsApp chat with people outside of the group; most of the participants who were in the United States had shared the links from the group with their relatives and friends on WhatsApp or other SNS platforms. Rahul's parents had contacted the virus and he had shared information from the group with them. Similarly, information from the group was shared with Kaushik via direct messages from the participants after he had left the group. Teja had begun to "star" links, sources, and contact information from the group's chat, and as their number increased he had to move them to a OneNote file, which he used as a repository. He was in touch with circles of friends who benefited from information that appeared on the group and vice versa.

Most participants acknowledged that the activities in this group did not take place in isolation and, in fact, most groups they were part of had acquired a similar character and tone at the time—a trend that also received coverage from mainstream media platforms in India and abroad (Indian Express Tech Desk, 2021; Choudhury, 2021). Thus, in India, the

users of SNS platforms were part of several smaller networks that were intersecting with each other in myriad ways and were connected by repetitive cycles of collation, curation, and dissemination. Anabil notes how Instagram as a platform had released a new feature called the “guide.”

I created a guide on Covid-19 resources which had multiple resources—numbers for oxygen, medicines etc. It was all verified. It was very useful because I would just point people to my guide which had multiple resources for each item.

Anabil, with the guide by his side, was borrowing resources from the group and adding to the group’s repository from the guide simultaneously, a trend that was increasingly becoming the norm across SNS platforms as cross-posting became a necessity if India’s networked publics were to reach the widest possible audience. Being part of new networked publics on the platform meant that information supplied by one citizen was reaching, being used by, and helping an exponential number of other citizens, most of whom were probably strangers but were in dire need of those resources. In his simple summation, Teja aptly explains the trend, “It’s human instinct. Get the message, spread the message. They call us social animals. We’re curious by nature. We heard the good news, we wanted to share it.”

The participant pool for this study was an all-male group, a skewness in gender that is in line with previous studies on fantasy sport (Davis & Duncan, 2006; Deshbandhu, 2019). However, once the group transformed, some of the information being shared both from the group and to the group was from several women. The participants acknowledged the significant role played by the women they were seeking information from. For example, Anabil was obtaining his information from a team of women doctors who were working in hospitals across the country, Teja was in touch with friends from school who were now working in the medical sector, Himanshu was relying on information from his coworkers, and Chaitanya was dependent on members of his extended family for information. The contributions of these women, although only implicit in the WhatsApp group, were significant because they helped the members of the group access and further disseminate crucial live information at a precarious time.

The importance of a platform like WhatsApp in the unprecedented times of the second Covid-19 wave cannot be overstated, as Himanshu pointed out, “Getting live information was not possible, official information was outdated. The only way we got local information was through groups.” The inherent immediacy, personalization, and the “live” nature (through a built-in internet connection) of platforms like WhatsApp made it the best choice for users to obtain crucial information while allowing for information from other SNS platforms to flow in. WhatsApp is a platform that allows both aggregation and activation of the various groups it hosts, and at a time when people were desperate, fear-stricken, and helpless, this group’s engagement on WhatsApp indicates the various ways they used it to empower themselves and others in their networks. The information the study participants gathered and shared is indicative of how they made the platform their own and used it to make informed lifesaving decisions at an unprecedented time when the country’s health and information systems were on the brink of collapse.

The next section of the analysis looks at the broader social contexts at play that make the story of a single WhatsApp group that was created to play fantasy cricket worth examining.

Connections with society at large

This section of the analysis focuses on how the lived experiences of this study's participants can be examined to understand the broader social challenges that India as a nation was facing during the second wave of Covid-19. It is imperative for us to understand why the participants were going to such lengths to help other people, and our analysis reveals that most of them had never seen the country and its health machinery overwhelmed to such an extent. Chaitanya and Rahul were both very definite when they stated that they had never heard of hospitals being unable to treat patients and beds not being available. Although other participants admitted that various government and civil society initiatives had set up helplines for people in need, they also observed how these were constantly busy and it was difficult to obtain help from them. Teja puts it succinctly when he says, "There were no other official sources to go to. There was nothing verifiable [information] coming in, nothing from the government. It was the people who helped each other during the pandemic." The stark inequalities in Indian society and the precarious nature of the times were laid bare, as Rahul observes:

I'm pretty sure if those who play IPL get sick, death won't come to them, but a doctor and an oxygen cylinder will come to them first. But if something happens to the common man due to the IPL, death will come to them but they won't even get a bed at a hospital.

As the second Covid-19 wave continued unabated, most participants in India were confined to their homes. The "everyday" in the time period was permeated with anxiety, worry, and panic, because most people were isolated and lonely. Rahul observed how people in his family in India suffered significantly at the time and Himanshu noted how he used WhatsApp as a platform to check in on his nearest and dearest at a time when helplessness was all-pervasive. He used the platform's video call functionality to check in on those who were affected and were feeling helpless or traumatized. As the number of those affected kept rising, the role played by platforms such as WhatsApp continued to expand. In the case of our participants, the WhatsApp platform was now also being used by them to stay in touch with their nearest and dearest as lockdowns of varying degrees were imposed across the country and separation was inevitable. All the four overseas participants in the study noted that they used the platform to stay in touch with family and friends in India and access essential information to make sense of what was happening in their homeland. The group's participants who were located in India also helped their diasporic counterparts by sharing information that was location- and time-specific when discussing the policies of the various government bodies, the decisions they made, and the challenges they faced. Chaitanya, one of the diasporic participants, calls WhatsApp his perfect SNS platform because it combines the urgency of telephone calls with the asynchronous nature of text messaging while bypassing spatial and

temporal constraints because of its built-in connectivity. All of the 11 participants in the study also observed that WhatsApp did not require them to be active on the groups all the time and they could simply read the conversations that were useful to them and gather the information they required. The netnographic analysis reveals this aspect further when we consider most of the participants situated in the United States were seeking specific contextual local information from the group, information that wasn't available in mainstream media coverage or on larger social networks, but appeared in abundance on smaller immediate sites such as WhatsApp groups. The effectiveness of the networks in such groups was felt in both immediate and distant contexts, because several times information for specific areas was sought and group members contacted other networks to try and fulfill the need. Anabil notes how he contacted participants in the group, "I remember I called members of the group to ask for oxygen. It wasn't even for someone in Hyderabad (Anabil's home city), but for someone in Delhi."

Hyderabad and Delhi are two cities geographically separated by over 1,500 km, but the group's participants harnessed WhatsApp's functionality to bridge the distance to the best of their capabilities. This incident is a clear indicator of how they transformed the group into a site of care, concern, and support, and then a curated resource of timely information that could help others in need.

Discussion and conclusion

This study examines how a WhatsApp group that was created by players of a fantasy cricket tournament transformed into a site of care, concern, and support as the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic ripped through India. It charts the lived experiences of the participants by using netnography to understand the various interactions in the WhatsApp group, and then uses in-depth interviews to encourage the participants to reflect on the various challenges they faced during the unprecedented conditions they were living through. Our findings and analysis indicate that people relied heavily on platforms like WhatsApp as they sought crucial up-to-date health information that was relevant to their own locations. In such challenging times, the mobile/smartphone became the people's "go-to" device of communication because they used it to access essential information, contact people that mattered, obtain essential resources, and make crucial decisions in short amounts of time. In such challenging times, groups on most SNS platforms transformed into repositories for links that provided live data, contact information, and other essential information as people searched for medicines, hospital beds, oxygen, and vaccines. WhatsApp stood out at such a time when compared with alternatives such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook because it offered a higher degree of personal connectivity.

This study shows the various dynamics and processes that went into the creation of such a site of care and support and also highlights the different processes of curation, moderation, and sharing as the participants tapped into the inherent functionalities of the platform to make it their own and chose to "contain, regulate, amplify, and intensify" (Cumiskey & Hjorth p. 30) specific information depending on the circumstances they

faced. The initiative shown by the participants of a group that was specifically created for trivial pursuits and to foster a spirit of camaraderie needs to be acknowledged, because earlier work from games studies (Deshbandhu, 2020) has shown that communities of players, and forums can serve as sites of support, although a transformation of this nature and magnitude is both unique and representative of the challenge the participants were facing. Our analysis also indicates the group members' capabilities in harnessing WhatsApp's features as they became aware of the challenges posed by misinformation (Banaji et al., 2019) and the vulnerabilities faced by India's networked publics (Arora, 2019), and actively found ways to mitigate them. The findings from this study, despite the small participant pool, could help in understanding the various dynamics at play in several other similar groups that were functional at the time around the world. In his interview, Rahul observed how his Colombian colleagues in the United States were part of similar groups from their homeland that were sharing Covid-related information. The role of SNS platforms such WhatsApp cannot be understated in the ongoing pandemic because all the participants unanimously agreed that in contexts like India they were essential for people's timely access to key health resources and essential information. Additionally, this study does have its limitations because the participants had initially come together to be part of a study on fantasy sport and, thus, the all-male participant pool, although in line with previous studies on fantasy sport (Davis & Duncan, 2006; Deshbandhu, 2019), could not reflect the group's (or this study's) transformed nature in a situation in which participants relied on women in their online and offline networks to provide them with live information to help them make real-time decisions. Similarly, it is important to note that all the participants located in India were based in urban areas, had a good understanding of IT, and had meaningful access to the internet, all of which enabled them to create a site of care and support on which they could develop the requisite capabilities to combat misinformation and gather reliable, time-sensitive information.

Finally, previous studies from India on Covid-19 have shown the challenges the Indian government faced in disseminating essential information during the pandemic (Roy et al., 2021), and this study builds on their contributions to observe how some sections of India's networked society were able to find the essential information they needed and disseminate it to their immediate networks. As people found ways to help each other survive in a once-in-a-generation pandemic, this study also lays bare the various inequalities that came to the fore in contexts such as India as traditional binaries resurfaced. The cost of being disconnected from the internet and such SNS networks (like the one examined in this study) seems impossible to compute.


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Supplemental material

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