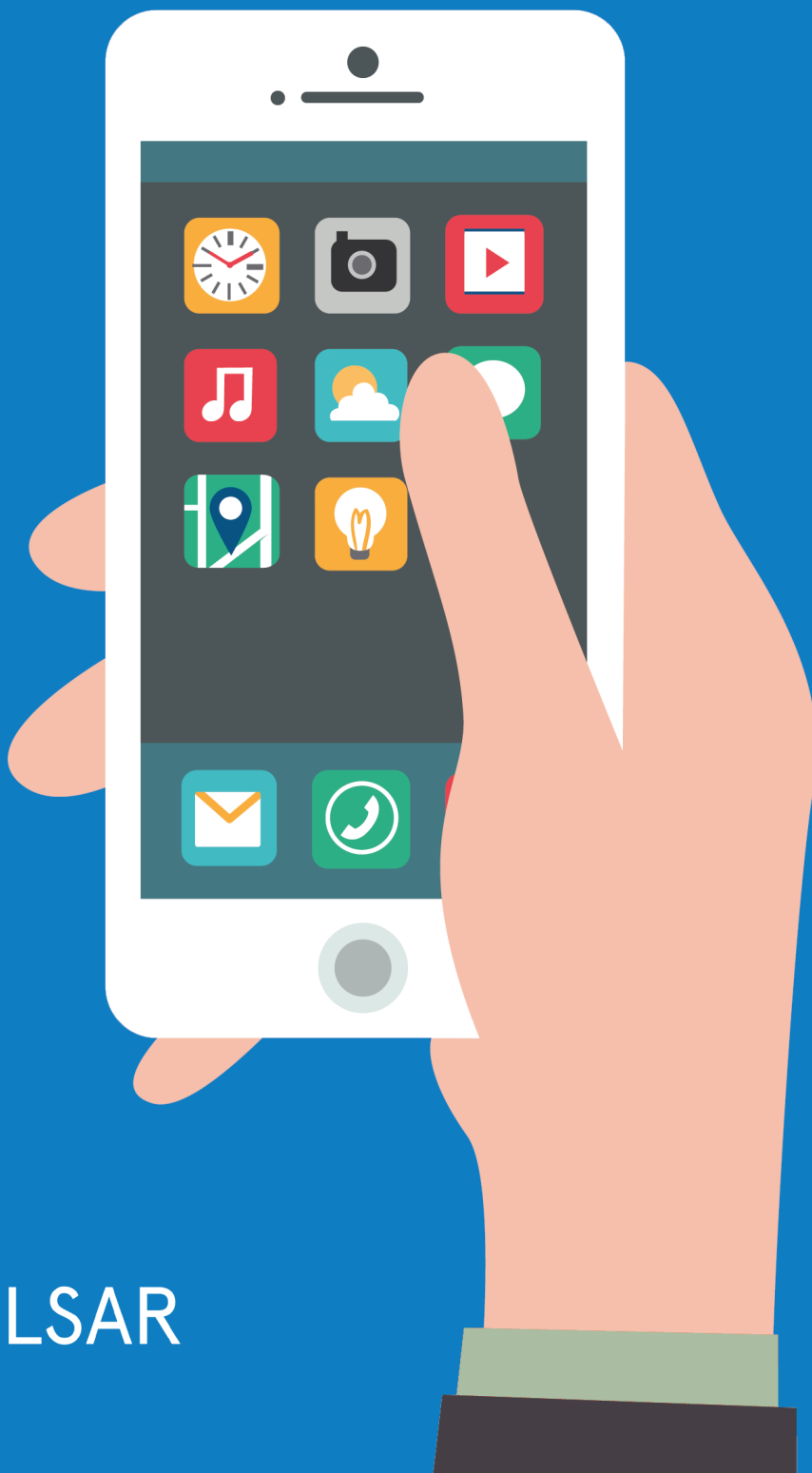# Native environments: self-ethnography in the age of smartphones

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PULSAR

Ever since the 1970s, brands and market research industry have increasingly recognised the vital need of understanding and directly engaging with consumers. Nowadays, core brand values as well as commercial success are more than ever depending on both close collaboration and communication with consumers. Putting consumers at the heart of what we market researchers do has become a necessity in an interconnected, globally participative and collaborative world following the rise of digital media and open communication channels.

To understand and effectively utilise this consumer-powered collaboration, brands as well as the market research industry itself must become socially intelligent in their very thinking. Being socially intelligent assumes that we have the capacity to adequately navigate and adjust to ever-changing and complex social frameworks. Social intelligence is a learned behaviour, which, however, needs to be constantly adapted to new social situations in order to be able to successfully understand and connect with others. This applies not only for us as individuals but also to businesses who are willing to meaningfully engage and communicate with their consumers.

This paper discusses the benefits of using an innovative approach for conducting mobile ethnography as part of socially intelligent research design, that reflects and takes advantage of current changes in social interactions brought on by existing as well as by emerging digital technologies in the hands of consumers. In this context, we refer to self-ethnography as a qualitative research method where participants capture their own behaviours and personal experiences as they happen and reflect on them.

## Integrated research design & the place of mobile self-ethnography in it

The vast diversity of social environments where human interaction happens on a daily basis sets new challenges to research design. At Pulsar's sister company FACE, we understand that to get the full picture of who consumers are, and what their aspirations and needs are, we need to apply a holistic, integrated research approach. To do so, we integrate and connect the dots between multiple data sources - from social and passive data to real-time online and offline data.

Connecting dots between these multiple data sources also means connecting the dots in consumers' lives on a deeper and more meaningful scale. Where social, quantitative and passive data or digital immersions give us unprompted content and insight, the online communities and offline qualitative methods offer a space to dig deeper and prompt to discover and validate consumers' hidden motivations, behaviours and attitudes.

However, at times, traditional qualitative techniques can prove to be too time consuming and expensive, losing the ability to be agile and inspire relevant strategies and actions on time. With the spread of digital technologies and global access to the internet, online research tools and approaches are becoming the most cost-effective and immediate solutions, allowing for fast, multi-cultural and in-depth insights. But they also pose new challenges that need to be addressed in the ways we approach project design.

According to the recent MRS and C Space Customer Inside report (2016) sharing a practitioner's view on the future of online insight communities, one of the pressing limitations of online qualitative research is the lack of 'in the moment data', which aims to capture and provide insight into actual moments of consumers' lives and behaviours as they happen. At FACE we can relate to this: although it's true that both long-term and short-term online insight communities provide a great platform to engage with consumers, the actual interactions are always prompted by the researchers and considered by the consumers. As such, the results may not always truly reflect the actual reality and the actual moments themselves. This loss of spontaneity in use could affect the outcomes. So what's a good way to deal with that?
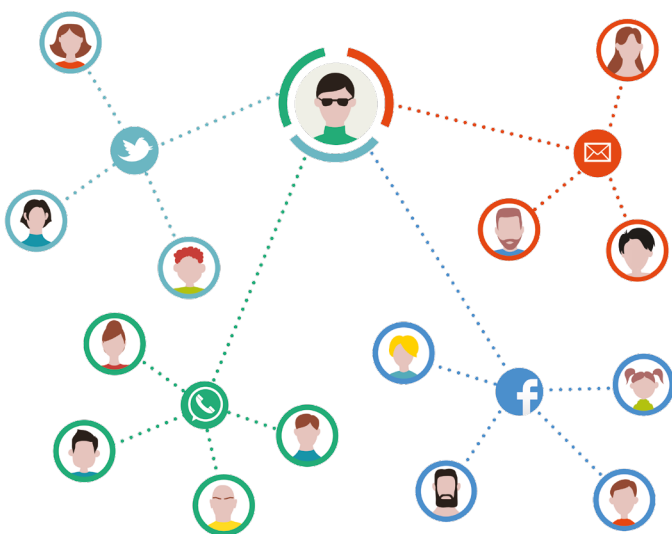
With the increasing ubiquity of smartphone owners around the world, one of the most cost-effective and easy-to-adopt solutions at hand is the integration of mobile self-ethnography. A mobile self-ethnography approach to gathering research data unlocks and encourages more live and real-time inputs on when and how certain consumer behaviours happen, and has the potential to evade consumers' rationalisation of their responses, inherent in classic research online communities. Nevertheless, from our experience, the best practice is to use mobile self-ethnography as a part of a complex research approach leveraging other methodologies – e.g. social media listening, research online communities, digital

immersions or more traditional qualitative methods. This multi-faceted approach will provide a more rounded and complex picture of your audience, and ensure no gaps are left when it comes to answering the initial research question.

Why mobile?

The number of smartphone owners around the globe rises substantially every year, counting almost half of the world's population as we speak and with speculation on the total to be 80% in 2020 (Economist, 2015). This rise of smartphone usage goes hand in hand with the growth of people connected to the internet and active social media users. We Are Social (2016, p.2) report that internet penetration is approaching 50% of the world's population, with nearly one third of this percentage also being active social media users.

Whilst desktops and laptops may still hold the leadership in the web browser traffic, it is apparent that connected mobile phones are becoming the primary day-to-day device for the most common online activities and are fundamentally changing the way people around the world access, create and consume online content. (Kemp, p.17) The considerable rise of people who predominantly (or only) use smartphones and tablets rather than using desktops and laptops to go online has recently been outlined in the Ofcom report on Adult's media use and attitudes (2016). Findings in this study suggest that in the UK, mobile phones are progressively becoming the dominant and preferred device for the majority of online activities at home or elsewhere, and specifically for accessing social media, including instant messaging services such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger or WeChat.
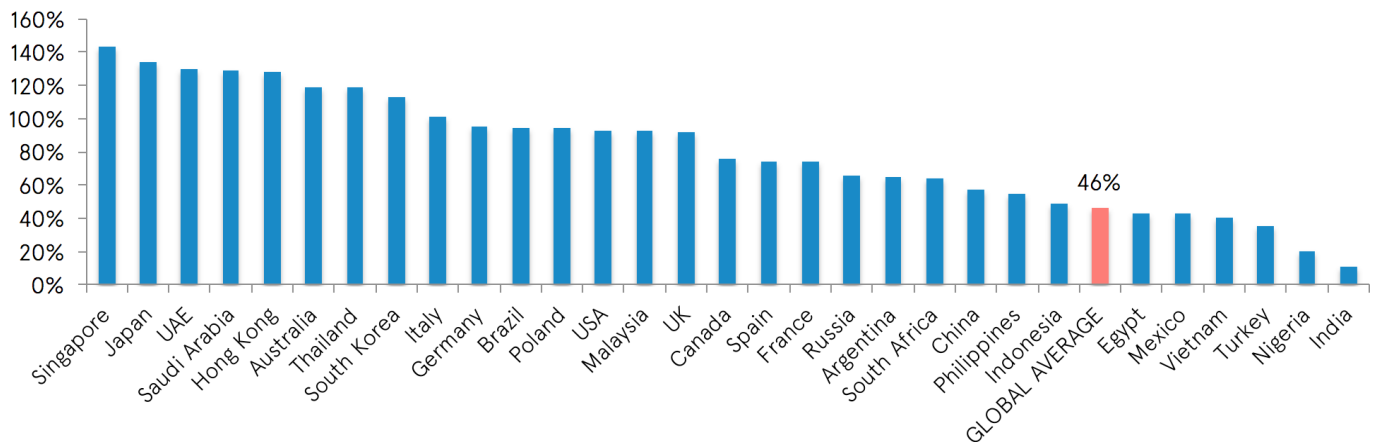
Mobile broadband connections

Fig. 1 Mobile broadband connections (Source: We Are Social 2016)

The Ofcom report furthermore suggests that nearly 96% of all adult mobile users in the UK use their smartphones mainly for communicating, including text messages, phone calls, emails, social media and sharing photos or videos – and 59% use their smartphone for content creation, such as taking pictures and videos.

Using mobile messaging services and uploading and sharing visual content belong in the top 5 most popular online activities, and are all predominantly carried out on smartphones and relevant apps. Interestingly, 42% of UK internet users are now more likely to only regularly access apps and websites they have used before, showing an 11% increase compared to 2014 (Ofcom, 2016).

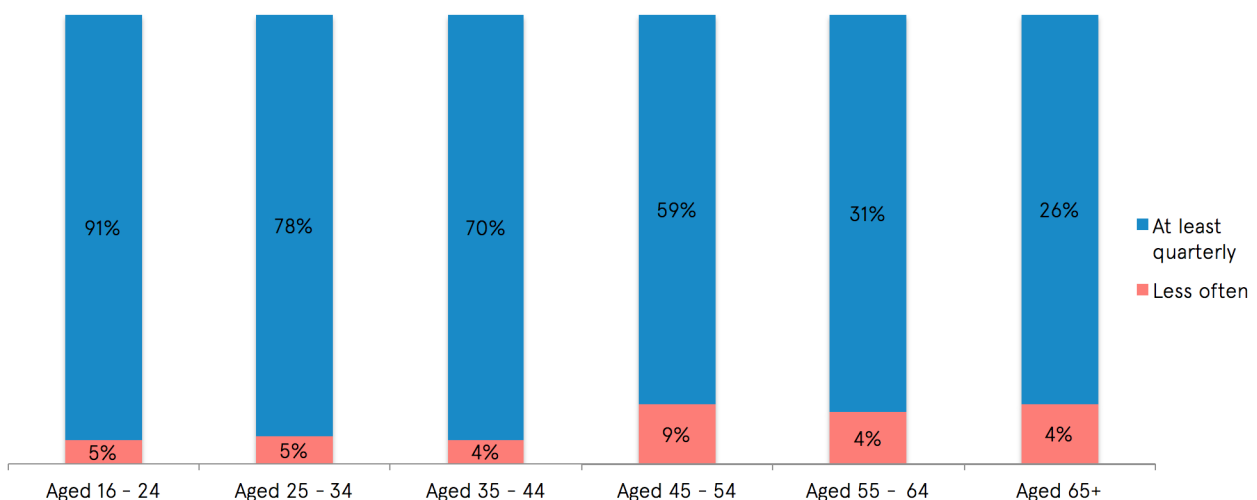## How often do you use Instant Messaging services?

Fig. 2 Instant Messaging services usage in the United Kingdom (UK) 2013, by age (Source: Statista 2016)

With this in mind, it's clear the 'mobile-first' attitude needs to be taken into consideration, and help us shape designs for online research. A key part of designing online or mobile tasks and activities involves the structure, which needs to reflect the environment in which participants will be completing them, as well as reflect the most common and natural attitudes this environment encourages. The mobile-first attitude also has to be considered when we are deciding on which online research environments (tools) to use and when.

There is a wide range of available research platforms and tools that are specifically designed for conducting mobile self–ethnography, but there are also plenty of other platforms that are already being used by billions of people on a daily basis. These are platforms on which our actual lives play out – examples are WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger and WeChat amongst many. Knowing that most internet users are more likely to use websites and apps they are already familiar with - and using them more often and with greater confidence, it would only make sense to tap into those existing online environments – environments that are already 'native' to mobile users, and in particular where we are interested in 'in the moment', real-time behavioural insights.

Why will this work?

There are multiple reasons why mobile messaging apps like WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger and WeChat have become so popular, with their respective user bases growing by hundreds of millions every year. As they are accessible through mobile broadband, the cost of using them for sending any type of content, locally or internationally, is free - or at least does not add up to users' mobile plan subscriptions. The increased use of mobile messaging apps also reflects on the emerging trend in which we see more people being concerned about digital privacy, causing them to become more selective in what, and with whom, they share personal experiences online. Messaging apps allow users to share personal content and personal experiences on a one-to-one basis or within selected groups of friends, family or work colleagues, with limited risks of these being visible to anyone else. Plus, mobile messaging apps are incredibly intuitive to use. In a matter of seconds, people can share texts, images, videos and audio messages with anyone – anywhere in the world.

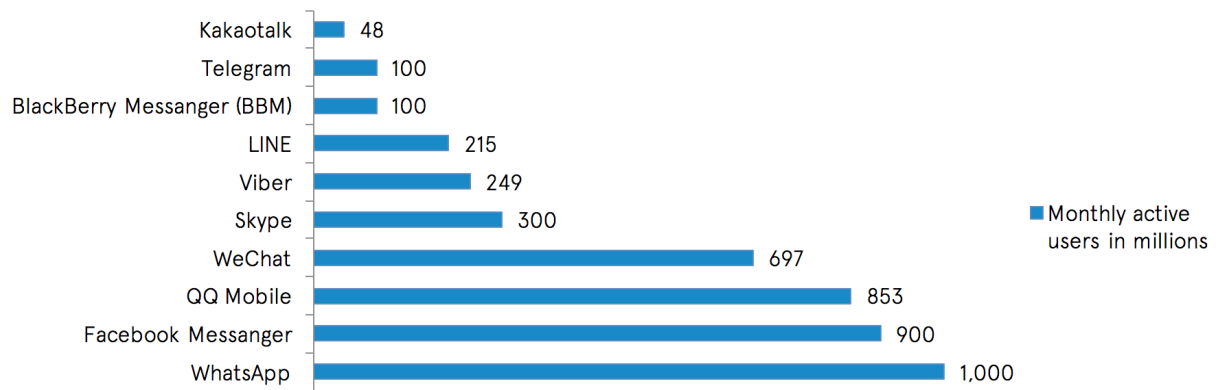## Most popular global mobile messenger apps as of April 2016

Fig 3. Most popular global mobile messenger apps as of April 2016, based on number of monthly active users (in millions) (Source: Statista 2016)

As goes with most apps, there is a broad range of mobile messaging apps available. Some are popular on singular regional level, whereas others are popular across multiple regions. For example, WhatsApp is used by one billion people across the world, with the highest number of unique users in Latin America, the Middle East, Asia Pacific & Europe. WeChat and Tencent QQ primarily attract Chinese markets, whilst LINE dominates in Japan, and Facebook Messenger is mainly popular amongst US mobile users.
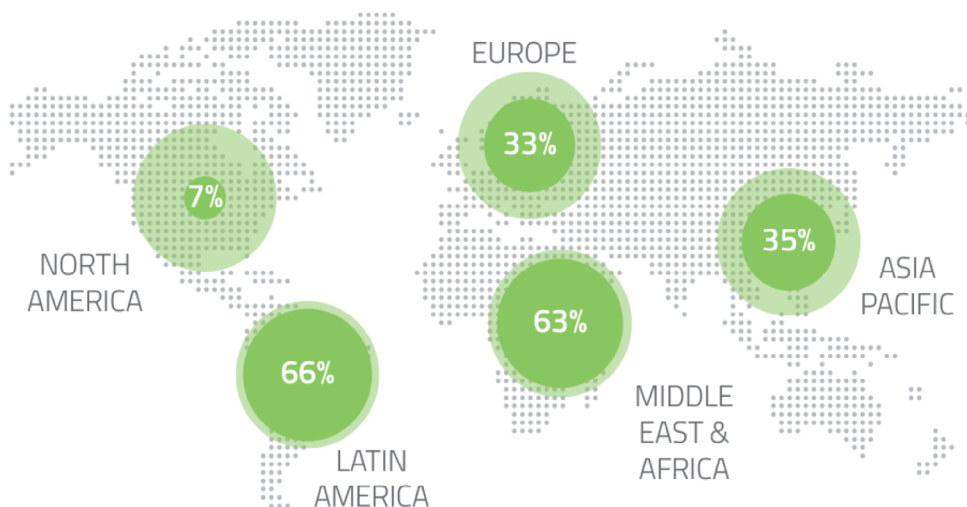

Fig. 4 – WhatsApp usage by region (Source: GlobalWebIndex 2016)

From a research perspective, this also makes mobile messaging apps ideal research platforms that can access new environments we as social humans inhabit and share, and to which we extend our social and cultural presence. On platforms like WhatsApp, WeChat or Facebook Messenger, researchers have the opportunity to engage with participants in spaces these participants have already deliberately adopted as their 'native' environments, navigating them with confidence and ease, and where they also replicate old or create new social and cultural meanings.

As researchers, we have two choices when we are deciding what tools to use for capturing online 'in the moment', real-time data. One: we can choose bespoke mobile research platforms that may potentially make our lives easier thanks to shiny, colourful and undoubtedly useful dashboards, helping us greatly with our analysis and reporting. But within these, we are forcing participants into worlds they don't know and are not necessarily comfortable with. Or two, we can enter 'native' environments like WhatsApp, and leverage the already-existing relationships and associations within these platforms. At FACE, we decided to test the latter and bring it to life.

WhatsApp as a research platform

Looking at the most popular messenger app, WhatsApp, the impressive numbers of its global usage suggest how convenient and engaging the platform is for its users, how much time they spend in this virtual environment and in what way they prefer to share information on it.

Fig. 5 – WhatsApp Now Has 1 Billion Users Globally (Source: We Are Social 2016)

On WhatsApp, we send 42 billion messages, share 1.6 billion photos and 250 million videos in one day. Plus, there are one billion private groups that WhatsApp users have created so far. What these numbers say about WhatsApp users is that they love to talk and share whatever is on their mind via text, and more increasingly and with bigger significance also via visual content. And they do this daily, in the moment they need it and amongst individuals or selected groups of people they know and wish to connect with.

Fig. 6 – example of WhatsApp communication from anonymous participant (Source: FACE 2016)

WhatsApp conversations in any shape or form can only happen with those that users have saved in their contact lists, and that also have WhatsApp installed on their mobile phones. Given the informal nature of this platform, we can confidently assume that most frequent conversations are happening predominantly within the circles of strong social ties – family, friends and close work colleagues.

And what do they share and talk about so frequently? Life as it happens; the moments that make them happy and content; moments that frustrate or confuse them; they organise and plan their whereabouts here too. And they clearly do it in multiple ways – they write, they share images and videos, send audio messages – depending on what form they deem the most appropriate for the given situation. And importantly, all of this they do fully 'in the moment'.

Based on our experience with running mobile self-ethnography within native environments such as WhatsApp or WeChat that are associated mainly with strong social ties, we have learned that our participants are more likely to establish personal connections with researchers much faster than in more conventional research environments. Not only that: they are also more willing to share more about themselves and the context they happen to be in with researchers, giving us much stronger and richer research content, as they subconsciously follow the same way of expressing themselves when they talk to their close social networks.

Recently, we have helped exotic drink manufacturer Rubicon to gain more understanding of their core audience of British Asian Millennials. Due to the change of ethnic population in UK, natural evolution of generations as well as the rise of health concerns, this target audience is being continually reshaped. Rubicon understands that to continue to have relevant and meaningful connections, they need to grow and change with their audience and the communication strategy and product positioning needs to reflect the target's aspirations and cultural positioning in the broader British society. They also know they need to embrace and engage with current sets of values and diverse spectrum of identities their audience associates itself with.

To help Rubicon achieve this, we had to get under the skin of these Millennials, and understand exactly what is going on in their lives. We used an integrated research approach combining digital immersion methodology where we tracked our participants on social media to see what online content they engage with, create or share on any topic; face-to-face in-home friendship triads to fully understand the diversity of opinions and the role it plays in their relationships and engagement with the broader society; and finally, six-day long online diaries to gain a contextual understanding of the role and place of their soft drink and media consumption in their lives.

Considering that WhatsApp is one of the key communication modes used by this audience, we decided to use this messaging platform for the online diaries. In this stage we asked our Millennials to 'whatsapp' us anytime they have any drink or watch, listen or read any kind of media (online or offline), letting us know the basics: what, where and why. For each of these moments we also asked them to take as many pictures of the context and send it to us.

Leveraging their key mode of communication – WhatsApp – we not only got the opportunity to see the moments as they happened in real-time and the opportunity to contextualise these occasions with rich imagery, but also to build personal rapport very quickly between the community manager and the participants resulting in a greater participants' engagement with the project and, therefore, in double of the content we would have otherwise received with much richer and detailed insight.
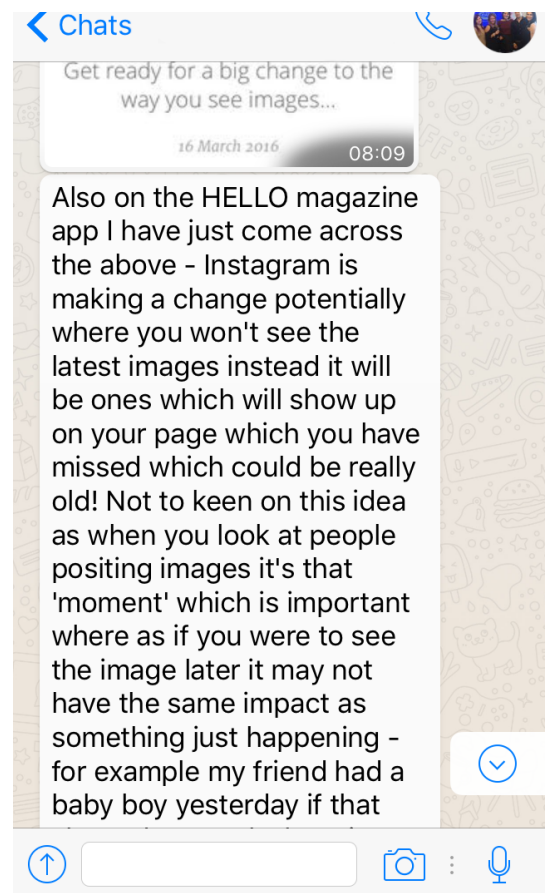

Fig. 7 – example of WhatsApp communication from anonymous participant (Source: FACE 2016)

To demonstrate the differences in engagement levels we compared the overall activity of the top 10 participants across two communities. One of the communities we ran on a bespoke research self-ethnography platform in 2015, the other on WhatsApp in 2016. Both studies included a self-ethnography task where we asked participants, all aged between 18 to 34, to share with us over five days any moments when they found themselves watching, reading, playing, listening or posting and sharing something on any social channels. On the bespoke research platform, we received on average 4.2 posts per participant over the course of five days, whereas on WhatsApp we received more than double: 9.9 posts per participant.

The difference was also significant in the amount of visuals shared with us. On WhatsApp, participants individually shared around six visuals more than they did on a bespoke research platform. The average length of individual posts was the same on both platforms, however, given that on WhatsApp we received in average 5.7 more posts per participant, the content in total provided more details and insights.

We also looked at the times we received most of the posts on daily basis, and discovered that on WhatsApp people shared moments with us approximately every 3 to 4 hours, whereas on the bespoke research platform it was usually either in the morning or later at night. This suggests that rather than posting 'in-the-moment', participants would engage with the task at the time that best suited them, hence providing content with certain delay and not in situ.

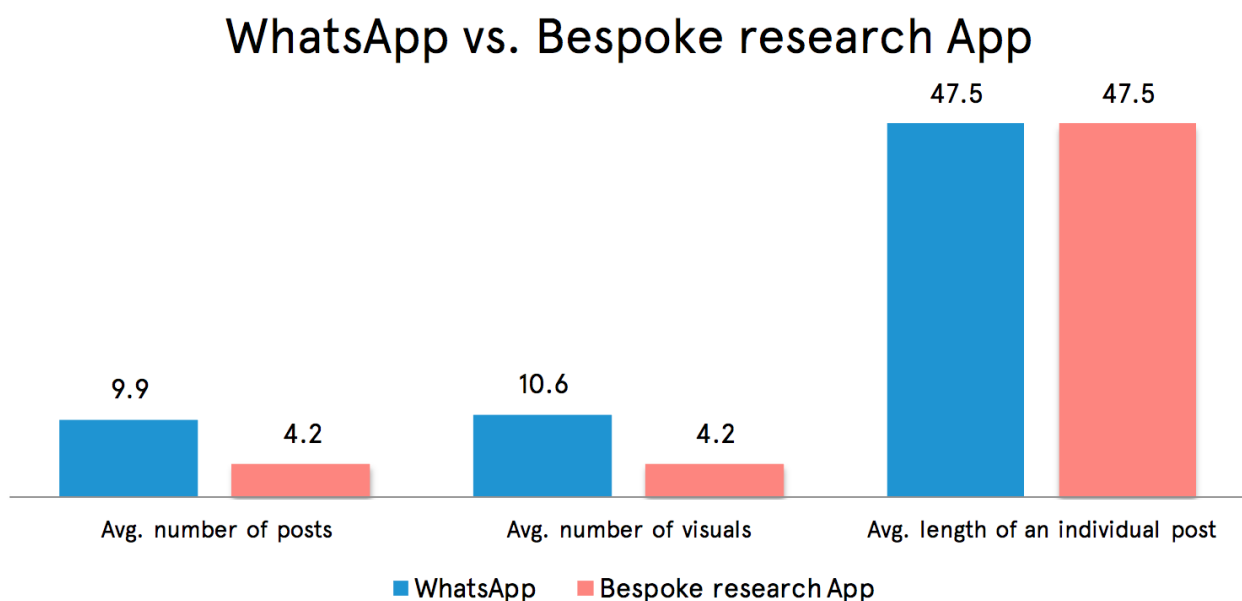## WhatsApp vs. Bespoke research App

Fig. 8 – Comparison of engagement levels over five-day long communities on WhatsApp (2016) and a bespoke research app (2015) (Source: FACE Insight self-ethnography communities 2015/2016)

We have used WhatsApp as a mobile self-ethnography tool on multiple projects with various objectives, and have mostly combined this methodology with short-term insight communities, digital immersions, social media research or classic ethnography. We have engaged on WhatsApp with young consumers to uncover their day-to-day drinks and media consumption behaviors and attitudes to help soft drink and energy drink brands to better understand their audiences and build stronger and more relevant relationships with them.

We have also helped a home electronics brand get more in-depth insight and full context of how their consumers interact with their products at home, and what roles these products play in their lives, giving the brand an opportunity to make the most of their assets, and maximise the value of their products for their consumers. WhatsApp diaries also proved to be tremendously effective in capturing and mapping consumer usage and experiences with global entertainment software services. And that's just to name few examples of how we've found a native mobile messaging app like WhatsApp incredibly powerful as a digital research tool.

The advantages of using native platforms like WhatsApp are obvious. They have a great potential to enrich our research with invaluable real-time, 'in-the-moment' experiences, sentiments and thoughts of our participants expressed or illustrated in written or visual context. The conversations between participants and moderators can happen either synchronously or asynchronously, giving the participant the chance to moderate (to some extent) the possible intrusiveness or intensity of this two-way conversation.

The easy-to-use functions (text, video, photo, location sharing) and friendly user interface design (mobile or web based) make the platform highly adaptable and easy to use, for both the participant and the moderator.

Of course, there are some disadvantages as well. Mobile conversations are notoriously famous for short and less detailed interactions, that can lead to misleading interpretations of their meaning and sentiment. However, this can be avoided by instant probing from the moderator. Furthermore, by engaging with participants on WhatsApp through their mobile phones means entering their

highly private and personal space, hence it is extremely important for moderators to find the right balance, so the communication does not become intrusive and overwhelming. Lastly, WhatsApp is not a research tool per se, and therefore offers only little, if any, features that make the analysis faster or that would give researchers a quick overview of the overall activity and content. There are no analysis dashboards available and researchers have to work with raw data. Nonetheless, the raw data will be rich, reflecting the 'in-the-moment' behaviors, with functions like video and audio recording, image and location sharing bringing more depth and context into the research.

Get connected

In today's fast moving world where, thanks to widely accessible digital technologies and online environments, interactions and social changes can happen in a matter of hours if not minutes, our industry needs to be able to offer immediate, reactive and relevant insights and solutions to brands.

The ever increasing number of 'connected' people around the globe, the ever growing number of social media users and the time they spend daily on these platforms must be reflected in the ways and environments brands engage and connect with their consumers. Therefore, this also has to be inevitably reflected in the ways market research approaches project design in order to deliver true and in-depth consumer insights efficiently, close to real time, and on a bigger, global scale.

Mobile self-ethnography as part of a complex project design can significantly help to achieve this, even more so when performed in already native environments. From capturing consumption patterns and testing user experiences to mapping customer journeys and more, native tools such as WhatsApp or WeChat, combined with other digital and offline approaches, allow us to tap into diverse audiences fast and cost-efficiently.

Making use of already existing relationships and attitudes consumers have with these platforms also enables us to connect with them on more authentic and impactful level, resulting in richer content and insights which in turn have the great potential to inspire relevant and successful business strategies and product developments. Engaging with consumers within those native environments also showcases our capacity to adapt to new social frameworks they operate and navigate in, making the brands socially intelligent and, therefore, relevant in their approach to their audiences.

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Originally from Prague, the city of hundred spires, Tereza joined Pulsar's sister company FACE shortly after studying an MA in Digital Anthropology at UCL. At Face, she heads up all our online research communities and helps our researchers manage and draw insights from community data. Additionally, she manages the production side of our social media consultancy projects. She enjoys cycling and white wine and most of the time tries her best not to mix the two.

About Pulsar
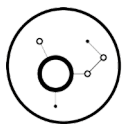
PULSAR

Pulsar is the smarter audience intelligence platform that's re-inventing social media monitoring (TRAC) and owned channel analytics (CORE) for brands and agencies. Pulsar offers extensive research services that go beyond big data and dig deeper into consumer truths through a mix of qualitative market research methodologies.

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