

## A simple solution adopted during the Covid-19 pandemic: Using WhatsApp at a university in Zimbabwe

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The Covid-19 pandemic has altered education across the globe in unprecedented ways. Higher education institutions were forced to rethink and innovate in order to save the academic year under these extraordinary circumstances. This study explored the experiences of students and lecturers at a university in Zimbabwe with using *WhatsApp* to communicate during these unprecedented times. Drawing from cultural historical activity theory, the researchers analysed the adoption and adaptation of *WhatsApp* in a postgraduate program. The researchers engaged in a qualitative cyber-ethnography study, wherein data were generated using semi-structured interviews and observations with a purposive sample of five lecturers and ten postgraduate students. The findings established that a simple solution was adopted for the extraordinary circumstances imposed on higher education in Zimbabwe by the Covid-19 pandemic. *WhatsApp* use proved to be a simple solution that was easy and convenient for both lecturers and students. It supported interaction between lecturers and students at a time when face-to-face was prohibited due to lockdown regulations. The participants had positive experiences with the integration of *WhatsApp* into teaching and learning during the pandemic. The participants' prior familiarity with *WhatsApp* was instrumental in its adoption at the sampled university.

### Background

There is burgeoning discourse on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic which is global (Worldometers, 2020), posing challenges and complications of unprecedented magnitude to all sectors of life activities. These highly unusual times have necessitated universities and academics to be innovative and navigate the restrictions arising from actions to contain the spread of Covid-19 in communities. This article draws from a study of the experiences of postgraduate students at a university in Zimbabwe, where electronic learning offered a solution for navigating social distancing and face-to-face restrictions that were imposed due to the pandemic.

An elaborate definition of social media is provided by Gretzel (2017, p. 1), stating

Social media are Web-based communication platforms or applications that take advantage of Web 2.0 technologies, which make it possible for users without technical expertise to easily produce and publish contents on the Internet. Social media encompass a variety of different types, such as social networks, review sites, instant messaging applications, and video and photo sharing sites.

*WhatsApp* is an internet-based instant messaging application that allows sharing of content. Barhoumi (2015, p. 222) explained WhatsApp "allows users to exchange images,

videos, and audio or written messages using their Internet connection.” The WhatsApp platform permits numerous types of content to be shared over an Internet connection, including electronic books, images, videos, audio files and written messages.

Internet usage statistics in Zimbabwe further indicate that 93% of Internet user access is via mobile phones (GlobalWebIndex, 2020). Mudzingwa (2018) reported that smartphones were mainly used for WhatsApp in Zimbabwe. Additionally, it was noted from contemporary literature that WhatsApp was basically used as a communication tool (Tarisayi & Manhivi, 2017). Additionally, the GlobalWebIndex (2020) report ranked WhatsApp as the number 1 mobile application based on monthly active users throughout 2019. Globally, the WhatsApp platform was number three after *Facebook* and *Youtube* in popularity (GlobalWebIndex, 2020). Social media platforms have bridged the gulf created by physical distancing brought about by Covid-19 restrictions. Social media use has spiked recently due to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. GlobalWebIndex (2020) stated,

WhatsApp has seen a 40% increase in usage that grew from an initial 27% bump in the earlier days of the pandemic to 41% in the mid-phase. For countries already in the later phase of the pandemic, WhatsApp usage has jumped by 51%.

Numerous studies have investigated different aspects of integrating WhatsApp into education. Brabazon (2014) argued that there is an apparent conflation of social media and educational media. Online platforms previously designed for social networking have been adopted, adapted and integrated in education. Maphosa, Dube and Jita (2020) stated that WhatsApp is a common app among university students in Zimbabwe. Irfan and Dhimmarr (2019) investigated the impact of WhatsApp on university students in India and established that it improves communication. Maphosa et al. (2020, p. 84) found that "WhatsApp can support 21st century learning through autonomous, collaborative and learner-centred education." Another study focusing on distance education students established that WhatsApp was a critical social media tool that enabled transfer, translation and transformation of educational experiences while studying 'at a distance' (Madge et al., 2019). Cetinkaya (2017) studied the impact of WhatsApp use on success in education at Ankara University, finding that students developed positive opinions about the use of WhatsApp in their course (Cetinkaya, 2017). Students linked their positive views to the sharing of content and communication. Tarisayi and Manhivi (2017) reported on the use of WhatsApp in the implementation of a new curriculum in Zimbabwe. Their study noted that WhatsApp was instrumental in the dissemination of teaching materials among teachers in Zimbabwe. Teachers in Zimbabwe managed to overcome the debilitating effects of shortages of teaching materials through sharing content in WhatsApp groups. Hence, we argue that various studies have established that the integration of WhatsApp in higher education has a multiplicity of benefits.

Online learning has received increasing attention in recent months as a panacea for Covid-19 pandemic restrictions on higher education, when very many universities had to turn to "A form of education where students access content over the Internet, participate in virtual discussions with an instructor and other students, and submit assignments and receive feedback electronically." (Nwankwo, 2015, p. 10). Essentially, online learning has

ultimately become the new buzzword within education circles both globally and locally. Nguyen and Pham (2020) noted "Vietnam has been slow to take up online teaching, but COVID-19 is an opportunity to review and strengthen online training capacity." The slow uptake of online teaching and learning, as well as ICT (information communication and technology) integration, found in Vietnam, has also been found in Zimbabwe (Konyana & Konyana, 2013; Ndlovu, 2012). Covid-19 pandemic restrictions have curtailed any face-to-face and campus engagements over more than five months in Zimbabwe. Nguyen and Pham (2020) argued that in Vietnam "online learning has been widely welcomed and accepted both within institutions and in the wider community." The realisation that campus activities were likely to spread Covid-19 has compelled wider acceptance and support for online learning. In this study, the focus is on the integration of WhatsApp as a strategy for navigating the unprecedented times caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The researchers engaged in a virtual ethnographic study of postgraduate students' experiences at a university in Zimbabwe, navigating the challenges posed by Covid-19. The postgraduate students were enrolled for a block release program that was delivered through face-to-face lectures during school holidays. Makombe, Mapfumo and Makoni (2016) stated that block release programs are a blend of elements of conventional traditional classroom education and distance learning. The postgraduate students were supposed to have contact lectures for a month each semester. The program targets school teachers and therefore timetabling and delivery strive to avoid disrupting the school calendar. The School of Education at the university offered the postgraduate program for MEd students.

## **Theoretical framework**

The study drew from cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) to unpack the experiences of both lecturers and students in the integration of WhatsApp during the Covid-19 pandemic. Devane and Squire (2012, p. 242) stated that cultural historical activity theory is "a guiding theoretical framework to understand how technologies are adopted and configured through use in complex social situations." The Covid-19 regulations passed by the government prohibited physical face-to-face interactions in Zimbabwe. These regulations excluded higher education from exemption as an essential service, thus universities were closed, and students were not allowed on campus. Therefore, whilst operating within the confines of the laws, continuation of tuition using WhatsApp was essentially a complicated social situation, falling under the purview of cultural historical activity theory. Hence, drawing from CHAT the researchers studied the adoption and adaptation of WhatsApp into an educational platform during the Covid-19 pandemic. Engestrom (2001) and Devane and Squire (2012) revealed that CHAT is rooted in Vygotskian social psychology that "treats human activity as socially, culturally and historical situated." (Devane & Squire, 2012, p. 243). According to the CHAT paradigm,

Technology provides user with mechanisms to actively engage in the learning process, access multiple forms and perspectives of information, think critically, communicate during inquiry, and engage in other activities with which to construct own knowledge." (Koszalka & Wu, 2005, p. 494).

Drawing from the CHAT paradigm, WhatsApp was viewed as providing mechanisms for students to engage in the learning process actively. Fundamentally, we utilised CHAT to interrogate how technology was used by postgraduate students and lecturers to access information, engage in the learning process and construct knowledge.

## Research method

The study fell under the interpretivist paradigm and followed a qualitative approach. This entailed a "study (of) things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 3). Neuman (2011, p. 102) defined the interpretive approach as,

the systematic analysis of socially meaningful action through the direct detailed observation of people in natural settings in order to arrive at understandings and interpretations of how people create and maintain their social worlds.

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011, p. 19) argued that, "within the interpretivist paradigm, the role of the researcher (scientist) is to understand, explain, and demystify social reality through the eyes of different participants."

The study was qualitative in approach, with the researchers using cyber-ethnography to generate data. Cyber-ethnography entails "applying ethnographic research concepts and procedures to online environments such as social media" (Kozinets, 2020, p. 6). Whilst the origins of ethnography research can be traced to the 1920s (Akturan, 2009), cyber-ethnography is only two decades old (Kozinets, 2020). Additionally, Kozinets (2020, p. 5) stated that cyber-ethnography "encompasses interviews, data scraping, archival work, online observation, and active engagement with new forms of data collection, visualisation, thematic analysis, and field-level rhetorical representation." The researchers engaged in these activities by participating in the WhatsApp group conducted for the postgraduate program.

The selection of cyber-ethnography for this study resonated with the phenomenon of experiences with WhatsApp integration in teaching and learning. In addition to the researchers' ethical clearance from the university, data collection was guided by the code of ethics for cyber-ethnographic research, as identified by Kozinets (2002, p. 65)

the virtual community should be fully informed about the presence, affiliations and intentions of the researcher. The confidentiality and the anonymity of the participants should be ensured. The researcher should seek and incorporate feedback from members of the virtual community.

Thus, we utilised pseudonyms to ensure anonymity of the participants. The purposive sample of five lecturers and ten postgraduate students for this study is identified as Lecturer A, B, C, D and E, while students were given codes Student A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I and J. Data were generated using semi-structured interviews with participants and observations. The researchers analysed the data from semi-structured interviews using content analysis. Hsieh and Shannon (2005, p. 1277) stated, "content analysis describes a

family of analytic approaches ranging from impressionistic, intuitive, interpretive analyses to systematic, strict textual analyses." Hence, in this study content analysis entailed systematic analysis of transcripts from the semi-structured interviews. In the development of themes we drew from Vaismoradi and Snelgrove's (2019) view that "during the theme development the researcher relies on the analytic examination of narrations related to social phenomena through breaking transcriptions into small units and performing data analysis."

## **Findings and discussion**

Several themes emerged from findings from this study, identified as:

- Unprecedented times;
- A simple solution;
- Using for both synchronous and asynchronous learning;
- WhatsApp a cheaper alternative; and
- Scaffolding.

### **Unprecedented times**

The Covid-19 pandemic altered tuition in higher education as institutions tried to save and ensure completion of the 2020 academic year. The challenges posed by the pandemic to the 2020 academic year are illustrated by these interviewees:

Lecturer A (who had more than two decades experience)	In my more than two decades in higher education, I never thought a disease outbreak could shut down the entire system. I never imagined that countries would lockdown their borders for weeks. This is indeed unprecedented that the entire higher education in the country could come to a halt.
Lecturer B	Living through the Covid-19 lockdown was extraordinary in every sense. Borders were closed, the economy was virtual on pause and the education system was closed. I could not go to my office on campus for more than three weeks. I never imagined spending more than a week away from campus.
Student A	The Covid-19 pandemic caused untold suffering and anxiety. In Zimbabwe, the statistics were not as high as in neighbouring South Africa but still everything was suspended. There was a great deal of uncertainty across the breadth of the country. Worrying about the effects of the pandemic on the academic calendar was a luxury. All that people wanted was to survive.
Student B	The announcement of the first person to succumb to Covid-19 in Zimbabwe sent shockwaves across the country. People were in panic mode. The declaration of a national lockdown by the president confirmed that we were in unprecedented times. No one ever anticipated a pandemic of such magnitude.

The views expressed above by the participants indicate that the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic may be described as "unprecedented". Zimbabwe went into a national lockdown on 30 March 2020, announcing Covid-19 regulations that restricted movement, public gatherings and face-to-face campus activities. These measures confirm the view that the country and the world in general were going through "unprecedented times". The closure of campuses locally and globally was unprecedented. Additionally, the cancellation and postponement of examinations in universities were also unusual. The need to save the academic year through online learning at a university limited by resource constraints can be described as "extraordinary". Other studies such as Astafeva, Astafiev and Osipova (2020) also have reiterated the role of online learning in higher education during the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **A simple solution for unprecedented times**

The views of the participants indicate that WhatsApp was a simple solution for "unprecedented times". Participants revealed that WhatsApp was easy and convenient to use for both lecturers and students. The way that WhatsApp was integrated into the postgraduate program show that it was a simple solution to a complex problem. The views of lecturer and student participants are illustrated below.

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| Lecturer A  | A number of online alternatives were considered as ways of saving the academic year. WhatsApp proved convenient for me and my class because it was already familiar to everyone involved. It was just a matter of integrating WhatsApp into my lecture delivery.   |
| Lecturer D  | The Covid-19 pandemic caught us by surprise. As a university, we never anticipated operating in an environment without face-to-face lectures and interaction. There was an increase in WhatsApp communication among us academics during the lockdown. It was easy to extend the communication utility of WhatsApp to teaching our students.      |
| Lecturer B  | I have been using WhatsApp to supervise my students' research for a couple of years now. It was easy and convenient for me to use it to overcome the challenges brought about by Covid-19.   |
| Lecturer E<br>(coordinator of<br>the university's<br>postgraduate<br>program) | The Covid-19 pandemic caught us completely unprepared. Our program was offered through block release and face-to-face tuition was the mode of delivery. Our university has a website but it does not have an online learning and teaching platform. Due to the Covid-19 restrictions we had to think outside the box and WhatsApp saved the day. |
| Student J   | WhatsApp is a popular platform among Zimbabweans as we share news, religious scriptures, politics and jokes. It was easier for me to engage with my lecturers during the Covid-19 closure of campus. It was a matter of changing my mind set and accepting that my phone was now lecture room.   |

- Student B Other alternatives that had been suggested such as Zoom, Google groups were alien to us. For me I only learnt about Zoom when it was suggested as learning platform during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown. However, with WhatsApp, it was an easy and convenient platform to receive learning materials, contribute to discussions among others.
- Lecturer C The integration of WhatsApp in my teaching the semester did not call for the purchase of new devices or gadgets. Even most of my students did not need to buy new phones. Largely because they have been using WhatsApp for years. So basically it was a matter of using WhatsApp for educational purposes.
- Lecturer D WhatsApp can be viewed as idiot-proof. Due to WhatsApp's user friendliness there was easy integration into my teaching. I did not need any staff development to use WhatsApp in my lectures.

It emerged from the above views by the participants in this study that WhatsApp offered convenience in the delivery of lectures during the Covid-19 pandemic. They indicated that the convenience of WhatsApp was based upon prior exposure to the platform. There was notable increase in communication using WhatsApp among academics during the lockdown of 21 days that began on 30 March 2020. Academics, students and university leadership had to find alternative platforms to interact and create ways of continuing with the academic year. Most of this engagement depended on WhatsApp, because options such as Zoom, Skype and Google Groups that were suggested as alternatives were new to both lecturers and students, whilst WhatsApp was a more familiar terrain for all the stakeholders at the university.

Additionally, it also emerged that the university did not have an online learning and teaching platform before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The postgraduate program was offered through block release face-to-face lectures on campus. Essentially, we argue that WhatsApp offered a solution that built on what the participants were already familiar with and therefore, there was convenience. Importantly the participants noted that the integration of WhatsApp into the postgraduate program did not require an investment in new technologies or devices. Both lecturers and students indicated that they used the smartphones that they possessed before the Covid-19 pandemic. Essentially, WhatsApp provided a simple solution that harnessed the resources already at the disposal of both lecturers and students. Other alternatives such as Zoom and Skype would have required an investment in new devices and technology, according to the participants.

Despite the Covid-19 pandemic taking everyone by surprise, the university found a solution built on a platform that was already in use by lecturers and students. The adoption and adaptation of WhatsApp to provide an avenue for postgraduate students to access learning during the Covid-19 pandemic confirm the tenets of the cultural historical activity theory. The principles of CHAT aver that technology should enhance social interaction. The researchers established that both lecturers and students who participated in this study were already WhatsApp platform users before the Covid-19 pandemic.

Hence, the participants' experiences of the integration of WhatsApp were influenced by their antecedent exposure and knowledge of the platform. Thus, we argued that WhatsApp as a learning platform was accessible to both lecturers and students due to its user friendliness. The study therefore established that both lecturers and students had positive experiences in the integration of WhatsApp in the postgraduate program.

### **Using for both synchronous and asynchronous learning**

The participants further revealed that WhatsApp was utilised for both synchronous and asynchronous learning in the postgraduate program at the selected university in Zimbabwe.

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| Lecturer E | The WhatsApp platform facilitated real-time teaching during Covid-19 pandemic. Also pre-recorded learning materials were shared with students in the form of audio recordings, PowerPoint presentations and pdfs. I can say WhatsApp actually saved the semester.   |
| Lecturer A | One important aspect of the postgraduate program is the oral presentation. Students were able to submit their oral presentations on WhatsApp and get feedback from their peers and lecturers.   |
| Student C  | The discussions that we engaged in via WhatsApp managed to bridge the physical gap between us and our lecturers. The audio recordings shared on WhatsApp allowed me to revisit each and every lecture in my spare time.   |
| Student E  | Before the Covid-19 pandemic it took a lot to arrange group discussions to do group assignments. Surprisingly with Covid-19 pandemic restrictions, group discussions were easy to arrange. We did our group discussions on the WhatsApp platform and everyone participated. WhatsApp seemed to be convenient than the traditional face-to-face group discussions. |
| Student F  | WhatsApp helped in the sharing of soft copies of learning materials. In the previous semesters we relied on printed documents but during the Covid-19 pandemic, we had to switch to electronic documents like pdfs and PowerPoint.  |
| Student F  | Some of the learning material shared on the WhatsApp group could be listened to at our own pace. Whenever I have free time I would go back to earlier lectures and revise. Traditional lectures do not allow that, in a way WhatsApp brought some convenience.  |

The above view reiterates the convenience brought about by WhatsApp. Additionally, participant Student F revealed that WhatsApp facilitated asynchronous learning. Students were able to go back to earlier lectures and listen to the learning materials.

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| Lecturer E | Some limitations associated with traditional lectures were overcome by WhatsApp. In traditional lectures, students are more worried about capturing lecture notes. However, with WhatsApp all learning materials shared can be revisited and students can make notes at a leisurely pace. WhatsApp actually revolutionised how learning materials are shared. |
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The above narration by a lecturer who participated in the study aptly reveals the benefits brought about by the integration of WhatsApp in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. WhatsApp brought greater convenience to way that lectures and students interacted. Additionally, WhatsApp brought flexibility to the studying and revision by students through eliminating the need for capturing lecture notes under pressure. Essentially, despite WhatsApp being a stopgap measure it revolutionised delivery of education at the selected university.

Essentially, the researchers noted from the views of the participants that WhatsApp provided opportunities for both synchronous and asynchronous learning in the delivery of the postgraduate program selected for this study. Synchronous learning was facilitated through WhatsApp video calling, WhatsApp group calling, audio recordings and *PowerPoint* presentations that were shared between the lecturers and students. Students were able to contribute to the class discussions in real-time. Asynchronous learning was facilitated through sharing of learning materials which students could interact with individually and at their own pace. It was observed that WhatsApp supported digitisation of lectures for the academics. Unprecedented times associated with the Covid-19 pandemic excluded some teaching methods that rely on the face-to-face interaction, that is chalkboard and hard copy. Hence, WhatsApp was infused into the teaching approaches by academics to replace traditional teaching methods.

It was observed also that lecturers assigned individual and group tasks to the students. Furthermore, students gave feedback on assigned tasks to the class on the WhatsApp group. It was also interesting to note from the students' experiences that WhatsApp enhanced group discussions. WhatsApp use during the Covid-19 pandemic provided convenience in coordinating group discussions which was previously not the case. Therefore, we argue that WhatsApp promoted student collaboration and interaction. Student collaborations were exhibited in the completion of group tasks using WhatsApp.

### **WhatsApp a cheaper alternative**

The researchers asked the participants about the impact of Internet access and data cost upon the integration of WhatsApp in their teaching and learning.

Student B                      For me WhatsApp was a cheaper alternative. From my calculations, it was actually cheaper to learn using WhatsApp as compared to the usually face-to-face classes. I was learning from the comfort of my home, so the cost of Internet is far less than the transport and accommodation costs that were avoided due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Student I                      The university negotiated Internet bundles with Internet services providers which were discounted for registered students. The bundles were adequate to cater for my WhatsApp classes. I would say even without the discounted Internet bundles, I always bought weekly WhatsApp bundles. So instead of sharing jokes, music and videos, this semester I was using my WhatsApp bundles productively.

Student C I never imagined that WhatsApp could be harnessed to facilitate learning at university. For the past five years, I have been buying WhatsApp bundles in order to share jokes, news with my colleagues. For the first time my WhatsApp bundles were used for educational purposes. Same expenses as before but now going towards something productive. It was a simple solution to a crisis situation caused by Covid-19.

The quotes above buttress our argument that the integration of WhatsApp was cost cutting. Students did not need an extra budget specifically for WhatsApp; they just used the same bundles they previously allocated to communication and sharing jokes and news.

Lecturer D I have heard arguments about Internet access and data costs hinder online learning but I think WhatsApp provides an economic solution. From my experience, the majority of students in Zimbabwe were already using WhatsApp before it was harnessed to overcome the Covid-19 pandemic induced restrictions. Why not take advantage of the high WhatsApp use among university students and use the platform for learning?

It emerged from the contributions by the participants that there were cost savings attributed to WhatsApp use by postgraduate students. Some students revealed that the cost of Internet access and data was comparatively lower than the costs they typically incurred to attend face-to-face lectures on campus. The participants indicated that face-to-face learning involves transport and accommodation costs that were eliminated this semester due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Hence, we argue that despite the cost of Internet access, WhatsApp integration in the delivery of the postgraduate program reduced the overall expenses for the students. Although the integration of WhatsApp was aimed primarily at delivery of lectures during the Covid-19 pandemic, it also had economic benefits.

Additionally, the students and lecturers revealed that they were already using WhatsApp for various social activities prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and most importantly, the participants were already incurring expenses of WhatsApp bundles. Hence, we argue from the participants' views that the WhatsApp bundles meant for sharing jokes and music among others were now being utilised productively in their learning. The participants also indicated that they had access to discounted Internet bundles negotiated by the university. Hence, we argue that Internet access and data cost were not a hindrance in the delivery of the postgraduate program at the university selected for this study. This finding on the nexus between the cost of Internet access and online learning contradicts views by Mukeredzi, Kokutse and Dell (2020). Mukeredzi et al (2020) reported that student representatives in Zimbabwe viewed e-learning as 'unaffordable and elitist'. However, from the findings of this study, we argue that WhatsApp use in e-learning was not unaffordable in the delivery of the postgraduate program selected for this study.

Further, the integration of WhatsApp into the formal teaching at the selected university did not require an investment in new devices. The students and lecturers adapted the WhatsApp platform for learning purposes without requiring new devices. Essentially, we argue that the integration of WhatsApp was comparatively cheaper and convenient for the

students, compared to other alternatives weighed by the university. Statistics further reveal that WhatsApp connections contribute almost half of Zimbabwe's Internet use (Thomas, 2019). Hence, we argue that WhatsApp integration in the postgraduate program at one university capitalised on the affordability of the platform and its widespread use as evidenced by the statistics proffered by Thomas (2019). Additionally, the findings are consistent with statistics by GlobalWebIndex (2018) and Mudzingwa (2018) that attest to the popularity of WhatsApp in Zimbabwe. Therefore, it can further be argued that the simple solution implemented to save the academic program at one university in Zimbabwe was built on the student's familiarity with the platform (WhatsApp). Thus, the integration of the WhatsApp platform in the delivery of the postgraduate program did not involve both students and lecturers venturing into uncharted waters. WhatsApp was familiar terrain and hence the ease of use and acceptability perceived by both students and lecturers.

### **Scaffolding**

It also emerged from lecturers that scaffolding strategies for the postgraduate program were implemented on the WhatsApp platform. The students who participated in this study endorsed these views. To illustrate:

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| Lecturer B | The integration of WhatsApp into the postgraduate program promoted student participation. This is postgraduate program that draws students from practicing teachers. We try as much as possible to apply concepts to real-life situations in the schools. WhatsApp allowed student reflections to be easily integrated into the lectures. |
| Lecturer D | I realised that peer-to-peer learning and collaboration was high during the WhatsApp coordinated lectures. Students were comfortable engaging with each other and learning from each other's reflection.  |
| Student D  | WhatsApp provided a convenient platform for discussion with colleagues. Whenever we had assignments and tasks it was easy to engage with peers via WhatsApp. In the past peer discussions would have meant going to campus etc. However, with WhatsApp it was very convenient.  |

The above views indicate that the integration of WhatsApp promoted scaffolding among the postgraduate students. There was apparent consensus between the student and lecturer participants that the WhatsApp platform promoted engagement amongst students. Several scholars (De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Gonulal & Loewen, 2018; Taber, 2018) concurred that scaffolding is crucial in higher education. Gonulal and Loewen (2018, p. 1) explained "Scaffolding as a metaphor in teaching and learning describes the adaptive and temporary support provided by a more competent person (e.g., teacher or adult) to a less competent person (e.g., student or child)." Scaffolding in this study was implemented through student reflection and peer-to-peer learning. Essentially, the way that WhatsApp was utilised by the participants facilitated student interaction that in turn promoted scaffolding at one university. The Covid-19 regulations were viewed as a threat to student engagement due to the closure of campuses. However, at the university

that was selected for this study WhatsApp was utilised to overcome hurdles in student engagement.

## Conclusion

WhatsApp integration into the postgraduate program supported both synchronous and asynchronous learning. Lecturers utilised the WhatsApp platform to teach using WhatsApp group video calling, shared PowerPoint presentations, audio recordings, Portable Document Files, among others. It was established that there were positive experiences both among students and lecturers. The positive experiences were related to the convenience brought about by the delivery of learning content during the Covid-19 pandemic. The positive experiences of both students and lecturers were influenced by their antecedent exposure to WhatsApp as a communication platform. Therefore, the integration of WhatsApp into the formal learning built on the stakeholders' familiarity with the platform.

Fundamentally the integration of WhatsApp into teaching and learning at the university that was selected for this study built on a familiar technology. The WhatsApp platform was utilised by the students and lectures for class discussions, group work, sharing of pre-recorded audios, PowerPoint presentations and Portable Document Files, among others. Additionally, the WhatsApp platform promoted the implementation of scaffolding strategies. Fundamentally, there was consensus among the participants that WhatsApp was instrumental in addressing the vacuum created by the Covid-19 restrictions imposed by the government. Covid-19 regulations banned higher education institutions from offering face-to-face tuition and instructed them to consider alternatives. It was also interesting to note that despite the apparent cost of Internet use, WhatsApp was viewed as a cheaper alternative, as students saved on other costs such as accommodation and transport. It seems that the costs associated with campus learning outweighed the cost of learning utilising the WhatsApp platform, for the postgraduate students who participated in this study. The main criticism that has been leveled against different online learning platforms in the wake of the pandemic stems from the need to ensure that no student is left behind. Arguments have been proffered to the effect that online learning leads to the exclusion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Drane, Vernon & O'Shea, 2020; Therborn, 2020) who cannot afford laptops and Internet access.

However, from this study it was noted that WhatsApp was comparatively affordable for the majority of postgraduate students who participated in this study. Additionally, WhatsApp integration had the notable advantage of utilising the smartphones that the lecturers and students were already using before the COVID-19 pandemic. It can further be argued WhatsApp was utilised to a greater extent, to ensure that no students were left out during the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions and lockdown. From the findings of this study, we recommend that in unprecedented times, solutions capitalise on strengths and terrain familiar for the beneficiaries. Additionally, as this study focused on a postgraduate program at one university in Zimbabwe, it is imperative that the phenomenon be investigated among undergraduate students to get a more holistic picture.

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