

# Digital Communication and Mentor-ship: The Use of WhatsApp in Bishop Stuart University, Uganda

**Pamela Tumwebaze**

**Samuel Kazibwe**

**John Mulindwa Kitayimbwa**

## **Abstract**

The purpose of the study was to examine the effectiveness of using WhatsApp communication to achieve a successful mentor-ship experience for both the mentor and the mentee in Bishop Stuart University (BSU). In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted on a sample of 62 respondents who included mentors, mentees and social media experts. The study was guided by the communication affordances theory. The study revealed that WhatsApp has introduced more potentialities for mentor-ship programmes in BSU. However, the opportunities come with several challenges such as limited access to digital tools, limited digital literacy among the mentors and mentees, poor internet connection, mentees and mentors' fatigue, among others. To overcome the existing challenges, the study recommends a number measures including vigilant planning, adaptability, and clear communication.

**Key words:** *Digital Communication, Communication Affordances, Mentorship, WhatsApp*

## **Introduction**

Social Media communication has rapidly diffused, been adopted and accepted by millions of users' world over, including students, for the great number of purposes which have been advanced to explain this massive adoption in the educational context (Lenhart & Madden, 2007). It can be argued that the current generation also known as the 'network generation' has been known to be dependent on Social Media Networking (SMN) and Instant Messaging (IM), even in the area of scholarship. WhatsApp specifically, has been acknowledged as an extensively well-known and widely used platform which has been utilized as a notable and effective dais to boast, nourish, or support social learning activities (Alqahtani, 2018; Paschetto, 2022; Ujakpa, 2018). It can further be argued that this dependence has affected communication, and therefore learning dynamics. In this regard, WhatsApp has also been credited for being low cost, flexible, easy-to-use, available, and therefore a forthcoming communication, learning and mentor-ship tool (Van den Berg, G., & Mudau, P. K., 2022). Despite its advantages, the application presents certain limitations, particularly its dependence on a stable internet connection. In low-bandwidth environments, the transmission and reception of large graphic and audiovisual files can be significantly impeded (Veeramani, 2022). In addition, members of the group have the liberty of leaving the group even when no prior notifications are given (Veeramani, 2022). Nonetheless the application has been embraced by most undergraduate students as 'a way of life' which comes with many affordances, 'stickers, statuses, groups, and easy-to-use messages', and functions like video and audio as well as an opportunity to use on a computer (Lekach, 2020).

Studies by Tang and Hew (2017), and Kumar (2016) revealed that learners expressed a positive attitude towards the incorporation of WhatsApp into teaching and learning. The authors further argue that students described it as useful, easy to use and even fun, and they wished it could be integrated into formal teaching and learning. This explains why it has been easy for students to be assisted more easily using the application. Moreover, students have been known to improve in their performance in and out of the instruction room mainly because it provides for collaborative communication as well as information sharing. Compared to email, the Mobile Message Application (MMA), allows users to discuss in short-sized messages, while emails are mostly

formal and dignified, long and fully framed sentences, which require a longer time of response; instant messages, on the other hand, are similar to oral conversation (Seufert, 2016).

However, despite the advantages of WhatsApp communication in facilitating online students' mentorship projects, its effectiveness and efficiency appears still not to be fully understood especially in an environment where ICT infrastructure is not fully developed (Kavitha 2018). Hence, the purpose of this study which was to examine the effectiveness of using WhatsApp, as a communication tool, when ensuring constructive student mentor-ship at Bishop Stuart University in Mbarara, Uganda.

## Literature Review

### WhatsApp Communication in Student Mentor-ships

While Yeboah and Nyagorme (2022), and Lee, Chern, and Azmir (2023) highlight the potential benefits of leveraging WhatsApp's technological and educational affordances in teaching and learning, a closer examination reveals several implications worth considering. The studies suggest that WhatsApp's features, such as sending texts, images, and voice messages, can indeed facilitate communication and collaboration among students, potentially boosting engagement and academic achievement. However, the effectiveness of WhatsApp as a learning tool largely depends on how frequently students use the app and how it is integrated into the curriculum. Moreover, the large group chat feature, which allows up to 512 users, may be a double-edged sword; while it enables extensive discussion and collaboration, it also risks information overload and decreased productivity. Furthermore, the existing research primarily focuses on the benefits of WhatsApp use, with limited attention to potential drawbacks, such as distractions or unequal access to technology. To fully harness the potential of WhatsApp in education, future research should investigate the optimal ways to utilize its affordances, taking into account the complex interplay between technology use, student engagement, and academic achievement.

Imamyartha, et.al (2022) described WhatsApp as a “social, cultural, and collaborative tool which offers language learners with robust cognitive engagement, authentic communication, and entertainment made possible by the opportunity to store material and share it” (p.86). The authors added that WhatsApp has enhanced group discussion and provided learners a comfortable setting for them to share thoughts.

While Annamalai (2019) suggests that today's learners prefer mobile technology for its opportunities for virtual communication and collaboration, it is essential to consider the implications of relying on platforms like WhatsApp for language learning. Riyanto (2013) highlights the potential benefits of using WhatsApp for study, such as language learning and interaction with peers. However, the effectiveness of WhatsApp as a learning tool depends on various factors, including the learners' motivation, the instructors' ability to design engaging activities, and the potential distractions inherent in social media platforms (Ahmadnejad, Rahimi, & Ghaslani, 2024). The creation of a WhatsApp group with learners and instructors can facilitate language learning, but it also raises questions about the boundaries between formal and informal learning spaces. On the other hand, Rambe and Chipunza (2013) note that students feel more comfortable expressing themselves on WhatsApp, but this freedom may also lead to issues with language proficiency, such as the use of informal language or abbreviations. Furthermore, the fact that WhatsApp is free and accessible to anyone with a smartphone is a significant advantage, but it also underscores the need for critical consideration of the platform's limitations and potential biases. Ultimately, the use of WhatsApp for language learning requires careful consideration of its affordances and constraints to maximize its potential benefits.

### Challenges of Using WhatsApp Communication in Mentor-ship

In their study, Investigating Teens' Motivations for Spreading Fake News, Herrero-Diz, Conde-Jiménez, and Cózar (2020) discovered that WhatsApp was being widely used by younger people to spread misinformation on their mobile devices. It can be argued that the spread of fake news can lead to passing on the wrong or unsupported guidance which can have dire consequences on young lives of mentees. In addition,

Mendenhall, (2018) observed that “lags, or sometimes a complete lack of responses de-motivated global mentors and teachers from participating in mobile mentoring” (P.17). In this study, “teachers stated that delayed responses from mentors and fellow mentees were a disadvantage because it could take hours or days before a question was addressed” (P.17). The author adds that mentors and course instructors confirmed that delays in response time, which could be blamed on differences in time zones and delays caused by network fluctuations, were a turn-off.

Although cheating, as a problem, has existed for a long time, current technological advancements have made it worse, and social media has been identified as one of the enablers of this vice (Ubell, 2017). The author further suggests that the integrity of student submissions is frequently questioned. Because of the use of more modern technology, it is impossible to verify whether the student claiming to be on the other side of the device is truly that student. In fact, some skeptics rapidly draw the conclusion that online academic dishonesty is widespread and significantly worse than in traditional classrooms despite having no evidence to back up their assertions.

According to Kibona and Mgaya (2015), rather than using WhatsApp for academic objectives, the majority of students utilize it for their own social and personal relationships. Additionally, the authors discovered that 86% of the respondents were so dependent on this program that they had to always be paying attention to their phones, even when in class, in order to swiftly respond to messages, which impaired their ability to concentrate in class. Also, the majority of the students tested had Grade Point Averages (GPAs) lower than 2.5, which suggests a negative impact on students' GPAs from using smartphones and the related applications.

Simok, Mat, and Rahim (2021) also intimate that miscommunication is one of the challenges of using e-mentor-ship. The authors emphasize that, although the application allows synchronous meetings, “students tend to turn off their cameras to avoid internet lag, unintentionally blocking critical non-verbal facial signs, leading to misinterpretation and miscommunication” (P.108). Faceless relationships sometimes make conversations brief and stiff; one has to be creative to annul such a challenge. The creativity however will need, as the researcher further says, both the mentor and the mentee to be well versed with the skills needed for effective online interaction. This creativity also needs both parties to explore well the affordances of the application in use.

### **Possible Solutions to Challenges of Using WhatsApp in Mentor-ship**

Kohnke (2020) explored the introduction of a virtual mentoring program as a response to the effects of COVID-19, positioning it as a substitute for the traditional face-to-face mentorship model to support ongoing professional development. Study findings revealed that to achieve fruitful mentor-mentee projects, and for electronic communication between mentors and mentees to be effective, both parties must be knowledgeable and well versed with the systems. It is equally important to appreciate factors that give rise to an effective online environment. Managers of such virtual teams need comprehensive skills in leadership, technology and relationship building (Roy, 2012).

In addition, just like other Social Network Sites (SNSs), using WhatsApp does not require expensive digital tools which explains why most students own and know how to use the application and the hardware (Gasarmeh, 2016). Therefore, through proper utilization of WhatsApp communication, young adults can embrace knowledge and acquire new skills and be motivated to pursue education, which in this generation is of a multi-disciplinary nature (Yalcin & Kamali, 2020). In other words, through WhatsApp, the mentor has the opportunity to enhance and sharpen the mentee's personal qualities, life skills and goals (Chadha & Joseph, 2018).

## **Theoretical framework**

The study used the Communication Affordances theory that was first advanced by the psychologist James J. Gibson to mean “an action possibility available in the environment to an individual, independent of the individual’s ability to perceive this possibility” (as cited in McGrenere & Ho, 2000, p.179). In their work, Conole and Dyke (2004) cite Salomon (1993) who described affordances as “the perceived and actual properties of an object, primarily the functional properties that determine just what and how the object could possibly be used” (p.306). It therefore means what the user is able to do with a device or object. This qualitative study looked at affordances of WhatsApp and also established how the mobile application provides personalized guidance and feedback to and from student mentees about their skills and application of knowledge. The researcher therefore examined and described the proficiency and points of view of mentors and mentees, in a higher educational setting, on the affordances of the mobile device application and how it fits in the mentor-ship process.

## **Methodology**

Focus group discussions (FGDs) were used to collect data from student mentees at BSU. The students were divided into five focus groups with each group comprising of 10 (ten) students. In-depth interviews were also used to collect data from 10 mentors at BSU and 2 social media experts. The samples for the FGDs and in-depth interviews were selected using purposive sampling. According to Etikan, et al (2016), purposive sampling is a sampling technique in which the researcher relies on their own judgment especially when choosing the potential members of population to participate in the study. The justification for the choice of this sampling method is that since the sample size was few and are well known, it will be easier to identify the ones whom the researcher believed had the right information for study. This applied to both the mentors and mentees at BSU.

The researcher used thematic data analysis technique and data was analyzed with the aid of Nvivo software. The research protocol was submitted to Uganda Christian University Research Ethics Committee (UCUREC) for methodological and ethical clearance, and thereafter the authors were given a clearance letter from UCUREC.

NVivo software facilitated the identification of themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data. Through a systematic coding process, the data was categorized and organized into meaningful patterns, allowing for a deeper understanding of the research phenomenon. The themes and sub-themes that emerged from the analysis provided insight into the experiences, perceptions, and opinions of the participants, shedding light on the research questions.

## **Findings**

The study examined the implementation of digital communication in mentor-ship with a focus on the effectiveness of using WhatsApp communication to achieve a successful mentorship experience for both the mentor and the mentee in BSU. The study addressed three research questions as follows: RQ1: What are the opportunities of using WhatsApp in mentor-ship programmes at BSU? RQ2: What are the challenges encountered when using WhatsApp as a communication tool in mentor-ship in BSU? RQ3: How can these challenges be solved in order to have effective communication in mentor-ship in BSU?

### **What are the opportunities of using WhatsApp in mentor-ship programmes at BSU?**

One of the research objectives of the study was to examine the different opportunities of using WhatsApp in mentor-ship programmes in BSU. The study established the following:

#### ***Information sharing Platform***

Both mentors and mentees indicated that WhatsApp provided a platform for sharing opinions, challenges and questions among mentees in BSU. The mobile phone application allows increased interaction among mentees, and with their individual mentors to address routine challenges and questions they regularly

encounter. In this context, one of the interviewees expressed that digitalizing communication in mentor-ship is plummeting and increasing, and there is a migration of student participation to digital platforms, WhatsApp mostly. M8 stated that “WhatsApp platform provided me opportunity to ask questions or share a scenario that I encountered in between the face-to-face mentoring visits of my mentor”.

In a Focused Group Discussion of mentors, M6 pointed out that: “Digital communication makes work easier, and the mentorship of students becomes easy”. He added that: “digital communication fosters quick and faster learning. The method caters for the needs of students. Secondly, the students went digital, so we had to step up”.

### *Flexibility*

Another golden opportunity that comes with digital mentor-ship, and probably one of the biggest reasons behind the implementation of digital mentorship, is flexibility. WhatsApp platform has enabled mentees to join the different programmes without requiring mentees to make journeys in order to join. Digital mentor-ship has reduced, and in some cases, eliminated travel times to meetings; one can even flexibly collaborate through varieties of tasks and time schedules. The time schedules can be a challenge throughout mentor-ship, however it becomes an advantage because it would be difficult, especially, for mentors to engage with mentees during working hours, even when mentees may wish to meet during the daytime. On this point, Participant M33 emphasized that:

It is usually difficult for mentors to move from their work and daily activities, and drive to a different location just to meet with a team of mentees and get involved in their activities. Mentors find the physical movement inconveniencing; the opportunity of replacing this with an online interaction was viewed as a positive attribute.

Participant M34 further spelt out that:

I really like it so much. I actually enjoy it; digital mentor-ship made the whole experience much easier from a time perspective. Face to face mentor-ship needed time, we would have to look for time first of all just to move to a different physical location, and even more time to be engaged in the activities. Making such a journey during the working hours would be very difficult and fuel consuming. Doing it online is therefore not bad at all.

### *WhatsApp As a Reminder*

Mentees utilized the WhatsApp forum discussions as a means of reinforcing their knowledge and addressing any questions or concerns that emerged regarding routine digital communication. M21 revealed that: “My mentor shared a lot of information during the mentoring visit, and at times, I forgot some of those. However, discussions in the WhatsApp group worked as a reminder of information my mentor provided”.

## **RQ2: What are the challenges encountered when using WhatsApp as a communication tool in mentor-ship in BSU?**

Research objective 2 of the study was to explore challenges associated with using WhatsApp communication in mentor-ship at BSU. Findings of the study revealed the following landmark obstacles:

### *Limited Access to Digital Tools*

Relocating to a digital setting comes as a challenge, because mentees and mentors do not have similar access to the required digital infrastructure. Many students got access to digital tools while in school, a privilege which has not been available in the post covid-19 era. Mentees also may find it very difficult to access the digital tools used by mentors, mainly because there is an infrastructure that may need payments or licenses. In digital mentorship, robust digital infrastructure is essential for the effective functioning of information technologies and operations such as regular evaluations. Consequently, tools like broadband internet and specialized applications become indispensable.

### *Inefficient Digital Tools*

Mentor-ship becomes a challenge when the available digital infrastructure cannot perform specific tasks to a required standard. In such circumstances mentors end up compromising and adjusting to using tools which mentees can afford or access; this compromise may not be helpful since the mentor-ship process may need specific tools of communication. When standards are compromised, the two big risks will be getting results which are lower than desired and time inefficiency. Not surprisingly, mentors would find themselves in a place where they would have to use a variety of tools for different tasks; unfortunately, all these tools have not been integrated in one platform, yet. There are mentors who held regular video calls with their mentees and during these meetings mentees would be helped with programming, when mentees had questions in between video meetings they would be encouraged to use diverse chat applications or emails. This wasn't a very efficient way of managing engaging conversations and questions. When they needed to share files, they mostly used e-mails or other additional documentation tools like Google drive, in addition to WhatsApp which they preferred only when documents were not so big. Participant M23 from Focus Group 2 said that:

There were moments when we needed to support our young people with a lot of coding, we could work around this challenge by sitting and emailing each other. This back-and-forth email interaction became inefficient because they would send questions and we come up with a response. In such a case, I would have surely preferred to use a chat function or holding a physical meeting right away.

Another Respondent M25 added that:

The opportunity to share screens allows them to show mentors any issues that need attention, this is great because we can work on solutions. The main issue though is to build efficiency. In physical settings, the mentees are able to approach us quickly, the virtual mode however can be stalling because of different dynamics like looking for network and switching screens.

### *Lack of Knowledge of Using Digital Communication*

During the progression to digital communication, there was a challenge to both mentors and mentees who were not knowledgeable or experienced users of digital tools like WhatsApp. Mentors indicated that collaboration was more challenging in the virtual environment, as it required working together through a screen and adapting to unfamiliar digital collaboration tools. A mentor also shared those mentees had to learn how to communicate with each other even when they could not physically see each other, this experience exposed mentees to new learning opportunities. Respondent M42 from Focus Group 3 said that:

Indeed, many mentees needed help and advice on how to use digital applications like WhatsApp Web, we had to come up with material which could aid their evolution to the virtual setting. This transition necessitated for training, even with the volunteers and it yielded good results.

### *Access to Internet Connection*

An outstanding challenge which both mentors and mentees pointed out was access to internet connection by the mentees, especially. Most of the mentees had access to internet connection while at school but when the program transitioned to the digital sphere, they could not join the program from their homes because of limited or no access to internet. Whereas other problems mentioned have affected the results or efficiency of the mentorship programme, lack or poor internet access was the challenge that barred mentees from joining the program. Participant M 38 from Focus Group 2 had to say that:

A number of technical issues continued to crop up. Sometimes we would experience power blackouts, something we call load shedding; this would happen 3-4 times a day when electricity would be routinely shut down. Mentees would naturally not be able to battle with that. As if that was not enough, poor internet connectivity would also hinder their ability to log-in and be part of the mentoring programs.

### ***Building a Sense of Community and Accountability***

Mentors mentioned the challenge of setting up a sustainable online learning community to give mentors and mentees opportunities to connect, engage, grow skills, and develop their knowledge over time (Georgarakou, 2023). Mentors who had previously practiced face-to-face mentor-ship compared the two experiences and noted the big difference; the virtual experience was qualified as faceless, distant, and lacking communal accountability. A mentor even suggested that in order to create a better mentor-mentee relationship, both parties need to start conversations with an ice breaker in order to encourage free interaction. Respondent M8 from Focus Group 1 coincided that:

I have mentored many in the past and I confirm that one can build a relationship better and easier when you sit down with someone, in the same physical space and interact. With working digitally however, one would need at least two hours to be at the same level with mentees and to make them feel comfortable; that warmth was missing and we had to make up for it with extra conversation. Anyway, it all worked out well in the end.

Participant M7 in an in-depth interview added that:

Moments of small talk are what it took for us to get to know each other, much as it is a lot easier in a physical environment. I feel that now it's a concern that the team we have now does not want to see us once a week but they want to see us every other week. So, we will probably not get such good contact there. They may not need more it may go well there anyway but I think it would have been easier if you met, it would have gone faster.

Participant M6 in an in-depth interview added that: "For me, digital mentor-ship lacked. It did not offer opportunities for building a relation that is needed between a mentor and a mentee. Yes, we tried, as we were required but it was not as effective as it is in physical mentor-ship."

### ***Quantifying Learning Outcomes***

Mentors pointed out the challenge of quantifying learning outcomes and ascertaining that degree of achievement. The main gap, they said, comes when the mentor has to heavily depend on mentees' communication to see the success of the project at hand. Measuring outcomes of mentor-ship programs is important in any HEI. A program, like mentor-ship, should be regularly assessed to align programme goals with the institutions' brand and students' expectations and needs. Nevertheless, a significant challenge lies in the resource-intensive nature of digital mentor-ship processes and programs, which require substantial investments of both time and financial resources to achieve predetermined objectives. Mentees may encounter challenges in adapting to digital communication platforms, which can sometimes involve tangential or peripheral discussions that require additional learning and navigation. In the face of challenges however, the opportunity for mentees comes because of the need to work more on troubleshooting and find solutions to problems by themselves, and the demand to report/account in a new way. Mentees might learn different things depending on their environment. Respondent M1 in an in-depth interview announced that: "In digital communication, mentees always have to, troubleshoot and solve possible challenges by themselves. Working on solutions is good because it helps our young mentees think more."

### ***Mentees' and Mentors' Motivation Fatigue and Demotivation***

According to mentors, both mentees and mentors' enthusiasm gets negatively influenced by digital communication. Prolonged exposure to digital tools led to screen fatigue and diminished motivation among both parties, highlighting the challenges of sustained engagement in digital environments (Nielsen, 2019). Digital communication also, sometimes, resembles working or studying from home which can be demotivating. Mentors mentioned that failure to use motivational tools in digital mentor-ship was affecting students' motivation and mentors' ability to motivate them. However, mentors also mentioned that they didn't feel like they had to motivate mentees and that mentees had self-motivation to perform the tasks since this was a voluntary program. Respondent M16 from Focus Group 1 corresponded that:

Motivating a mentee online was difficult. Sometimes students would submit incomplete tasks, especially girls who I noticed were struggling to get through the programme. We had consistent meeting times, but mentees would sometimes miss because of other tasks or would simply forget.

Participant M14 from Focus Group 1 also expressed that:

Females would fail to make it for sessions and this challenge would make it difficult to achieve good results. Most of the people who missed out on attending sessions blamed it on poor connectivity and finances needed to purchase bandwidth. Less bandwidth translated into the inability to turn on videos during WhatsApp calls.

### **RQ3: How can these challenges be solved in order to have effective communication in mentorship in BSU?**

Research Objective 3 sought to suggest possible solutions for effective Digital mentorship at BSU. As a result, the following were established:

#### ***Integration of Preferred Digital Platforms into Academic Work***

This involves utilizing digital communication platforms for research and information gathering. Participant 5 from Focus Group 1 said that:

The digital media platforms have increased access to information. Digital media platforms provide mentees with easy access to a wealth of information both Academic resources and educational content. This accessibility can enhance students' learning experiences by providing them with diverse perspectives, up-to-date information, and a broader understanding of their subjects. When used effectively, these platforms can support research, deepen knowledge, and improve academic performance for the students.

#### ***Diversification of Digital Learning Platforms in Mentor-ship Programs***

Online databases, academic search engines, and digital libraries are commonly used to find scholarly articles, research work, and eBooks. Students also employ digital media platforms for note-taking and organization. Tools like Google drive allow them to create and manage digital notes, categorize information, and stay organized. Students also requested the University to support them in using their most preferred platforms. To substantiate this, Participant 7 from Focus Group 1 from the Faculty of Agriculture said that: “Universities can foster a supportive online learning environment, they can create online learning communities or discussion forums within the digital media platforms where students can interact, collaborate and seek help from peers and instructions”.

#### ***Striking a Balance Between Online and Offline Learning***

Participants emphasized the need for students to balance online and offline learning, allocating time for offline reading and face-to-face interactions. Respondents also highlighted the importance of setting clear goals and objectives and aligning the use of digital media platforms with academic goals to stay focused and make the most of available resources. Participant D during the Focus group discussion seven stated that: “I set goals and deadlines by dividing tasks among my team members to emphasize their importance of active engagement, timely feedback, and open communication to ensure successful collaboration.”

#### ***Leveraging Technology for Mentorship***

Participants stressed the need to increasingly turn to digital interventions for mentorship. Collaboration platforms, video conferencing tools and project management software should become essential in the facilitation of remote mentorship processes. In this case Respondent 11 noted that:

Digital tools like Zoom or Google Meet bridge geographical distances and provide opportunities for real-time interactions. Loom, and other asynchronous tools, help mentees and mentors use pre-recorded videos and audio files to see and hear from each other when they are not able to meet in real-time. Such tools make it easier for mentors to collaborate on tasks, communicate, and share resources. The tools also create a sense of presence, even when both parties are geographically apart from each other.

### **Discussion**

This section presents a discussion of the key findings regarding the effectiveness of using WhatsApp as a communication tool to facilitate a successful mentorship experience for both mentors and mentees at BSU. The study highlights the dual-edged nature of utilizing WhatsApp communication in mentor-ship programs; it reveals a complex interplay between opportunities and challenges. While these platforms offer innovative avenues for knowledge sharing and collaboration, the opportunities also come with significant obstacles, including disparate access to digital tools, variable levels of digital literacy among mentors and mentees, unstable internet connectivity, and the potential for digital fatigue among both parties. These findings underscore the need for a nuanced understanding of the digital landscape and its implications for mentor-ship, highlighting the importance of addressing these challenges to maximize the benefits of digital mentor-ship, as explained below.

#### **What are the opportunities of using WhatsApp in mentor-ship programmes at BSU?**

##### ***Facilitating Knowledge Sharing and Collaboration***

The use of WhatsApp in Bishop Stuart University's mentor-ship program leveraged the platform's communication affordances, enabling mentors and mentees to seamlessly share technical questions, opinions, and systemic challenges. This facilitated collaboration and addressed routine program-related queries, supporting Barhoumi's (2015) assertion that WhatsApp fosters knowledge creation and sharing. According to the theory of communication affordances, the visibility, persistence, and editability of WhatsApp's messaging features likely contributed to its effectiveness in this context. While potential limitations such as information overload and unequal participation should be considered, the benefits of using WhatsApp, including increased accessibility and convenience, appear to outweigh the drawbacks. This highlights the potential of WhatsApp as a valuable tool in mentor-ship programs, particularly when thoughtfully integrated to leverage its affordances and support meaningful interactions.

Findings highlighted that WhatsApp platform's communication affordances, such as visibility, persistence, and editability, facilitated enhanced engagement between mentors and peers, promoted learning, and fostered discussions. Both mentees and mentors actively participated in WhatsApp group interactions, regardless of age or program, contradicting previous studies (Henson et al., 2011) that suggested older adults may struggle with social media. This study's results suggest that WhatsApp's user-friendly interface and accessible features enabled participants to overcome potential age-related barriers, creating a collaborative and inclusive learning environment.

##### ***Dynamic Mentor-ship through WhatsApp***

According to the theory of communication affordances, WhatsApp's features enable a range of communicative possibilities that facilitate regular and dynamic exchanges between mentors and mentees. The platform's affordances, such as the ability to communicate asynchronously, afford flexibility and convenience, fostering stronger relationships and more effective mentorship. This digital environment allows participants to transcend geographical and temporal boundaries, engaging across different time zones and locations. However, this shift towards digital mentorship also requires consideration of the implications of these affordances, including the need for mentors and mentees to adapt their communication styles and boundaries to maximize the benefits of the platform.

## **What are the challenges encountered when using WhatsApp as a communication tool in mentor-ship in BSU?**

### ***Structural differences and digital divide***

The integration of WhatsApp video calls in mentorship programs illustrates the complex interplay between the affordances of digital communication tools and the structural constraints of users' environments. While video calls afford opportunities for face-to-face interaction and nonverbal cue exchange, they also require stable internet connectivity with sufficient upload speed, which can be a limiting factor for mentees with restricted access to reliable internet. This highlights the importance of considering the digital divide and its implications for communication equity, as Sari & Nayir (2020) note that mentees may experience more communication-related challenges in digital environments. To mitigate these challenges, mentorship programs must develop strategies that account for the uneven distribution of technological affordances, ensuring that all mentees can equally access and benefit from the service.

### ***Leveraging WhatsApp Affordances for Effective Mentor-ship***

From a communication affordance perspective, WhatsApp's features, such as temporality, interactivity, multimodality, and portability, offer a range of possibilities for mentorship in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Yeshua-Katz et al., 2021). However, these affordances also introduce complexities that can both enable and constrain effective mentorship. For instance, the affordance of interactivity can facilitate dynamic exchanges, but also create opportunities for distractions and digressive behavior. To harness the potential of WhatsApp in mentorship, both mentors and mentees must develop an understanding of the platform's affordances and cultivate strategies to utilize them intentionally. This requires mentors to provide guidance and mentees to exercise discipline in navigating the platform's affordances, ultimately leveraging them to support meaningful mentorship relationships.

Mentors and Mentees also acknowledged that mentor-ship through WhatsApp increased a sense of connection and immediacy since they would have an opportunity to see each other's online status and even get to know the last time a person would have been online. The affordances of visibility and accessibility reportedly fostered a more dynamic and responsive mentorship relationship. For example, the visibility of an online status, according to mentees, creates expectation of an undelayed response which in turn becomes valuable for urgent matters although it could also lead to increased pressure on mentors or mentees to be constantly available (Farman, 2018).

## **How can these challenges be solved in order to have effective communication in mentorship in BSU?**

The effective use of digital media platforms like WhatsApp in mentor-ship requires a delicate balance between productivity and distractions. While these platforms offer numerous benefits, such as facilitating collaboration, timely feedback, and open communication, they also pose significant challenges, including the potential for distractions and decreased focus. To maximize the benefits of digital mentorship, students must develop strategies to stay focused and motivated, setting clear study goals and deadlines, and dividing tasks among team members to ensure successful collaboration. By being intentional and disciplined in their use of digital media platforms, students can harness their power to enhance their academic experiences, access valuable learning resources, and achieve their learning outcomes. According to the respondents, effective use of WhatsApp as a digital media platform for academic purposes requires mentees to harness its affordances, such as persistence and editability, to set study goals, deadlines, and facilitate collaboration. However, the platform's affordances, like instant notifications and multimedia sharing, can also introduce distractions that divert mentees' attention. To maximize the benefits of WhatsApp, mentees' need to strike a balance between leveraging its affordances for productive purposes, such as timely feedback and open communication, and minimizing distractions. By doing so, students can enhance their academic experiences, access valuable learning resources, and achieve their learning outcomes. This requires an understanding of the platform's affordances and intentional use to support academic success.

## Conclusion

The digital transformation of mentorship represents a paradigm shift, one that warrants critical examination of the opportunities and challenges afforded by technology. While platforms like WhatsApp leverage affordances such as mobility, shareability, persistence, multimodality, link-ability, and editability, among others to enhance mentor-mentee interactions and relationships, it is crucial to consider the implications of these affordances on the dynamics of mentorship. As technology continues to reshape the mentorship landscape, it is essential to thoughtfully evaluate how these affordances can be harnessed to foster more effective, equitable, and all-embracing mentorship experiences. By doing so, we can unlock the full potential of digital mentorship and pave the way for innovative trends that prioritize meaningful connections and outcomes.

In conclusion, harnessing the affordances of technology, particularly those of WhatsApp, can catalyze unparalleled opportunities for personal and professional growth in mentorship programs. By leveraging the platform's affordances mentees can transcend geographical boundaries and collaborate with mentors to achieve tailored objectives. However, realizing the full potential of digital mentorship requires commitment, strategic planning, adaptability, and intentional communication. By thoughtfully designing mentorship experiences that capitalize on WhatsApp's affordances, such as asynchronous communication and multimedia sharing, mentors and mentees can foster meaningful interactions and drive goal attainment. Ultimately, this study suggests that digital mentorship via WhatsApp offers a cost-effective and efficient means of enhancing frontline mentors' capabilities, underscoring the need for forward-thinking organizations to integrate these affordances into their mentorship strategies.

## References

- Annamalai, N. (2019). Using WhatsApp to Extend Learning in a Blended Classroom Environment. *Teaching English with Technology*, 19(1), 3-20., <http://www.tewtjournal.org>.
- Barhoumi, C. (2015). The Effectiveness of WhatsApp Mobile Learning Activities Guided by Activity Theory on Students' Knowledge Management. *Journal of Contemporary Educational Technology*, 6(3), 221-238. <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/cet/issue/25741/271536>.
- Chadha, G., & Joseph, M. T. (2018). Introduction: Mapping and marking Feminist Sociologies in India. In *Re-imagining Sociology in India* (pp. 1-29). Routledge India. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780429470974-1/introduction-gita-chadha-joseph>
- Etikan, I., Musa, S. A., & Alkassim, R. S. (2016). Comparison of Convenience Sampling and Purposive Sampling. *American journal of theoretical and applied statistics*, 5(1), 1-4. <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ajtas.20160501.11>
- Kibona, L., & Mgaya, G. (2015). Smartphones' Effects on Academic Performance of Higher Learning Students: A Case of Ruaha Catholic University- Iringa, Tanzania. *Journal of Multidisciplinary Engineering Science and Technology (JMEST)*, 2(4), 777-784. <https://www.jmest.org/wp-content/uploads/JMESTN42350643.pdf>.
- Kohnke, L. (2020). Mentoring in the Online Sphere: A Case Study of EAP Teachers. *Teacher Development Academic Journal*, 1(1), 30-43. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/hrm.21879>.
- Lee, C. E., Chern, H. H., & Azmir, D. A. (2023). WhatsApp use in a higher education learning environment: perspective of students of a Malaysian private university on academic performance and team effectiveness. *Education Sciences*, 13(3), 244 <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13030244>
- McGrenere, J., & Ho, W. (2000, May). Affordances: Clarifying and Evolving a Concept. in *Graphics Interface*, 2000, pp. 179-186). <https://doi.org/10.1080/08832323.2019.1644276>.

- Mendenhall, M., Skinner, M., Collas, S., & French, S. (2018). Expanding Teacher Support through Mobile Mentoring in Kakuma Refugee Camp: Benefits and Challenges. *Current Issues in Comparative Education*, 20(2), 9-23. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1205676.pdf>.
- Rambe, P. and Chipunza, C. (2013).” Using Mobile devices to Leverage Student Access to Collaboratively Generated Resources: A case of WhatsApp Instant Messaging at a South African University”. *International Conference on Advanced Information and Technology for Education*. <https://doi.org/10.2991/icaicte.2013.66>.
- Riyanto, A. (July 2013). *English Language Learning Using WhatsApp Application*. Akhmad Rianto, *Love for All, Hatred for None*. WordPress, the Splendid Theme.  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35314/inovish.v6i1.1946>.
- Roy, S. R. (2012). Digital Mastery: The Skills needed for Effective Virtual Leadership. *International Journal of e-Collaboration (IJeC)*, 8(3), 56-66. <https://doi.org/10.4018/jec.2012070104>.
- Seufert, M., Hoßfeld, T., Schwind, A., Burger, V., & Tran-Gia, P. (2016, May). Group-based Communication in WhatsApp. In *2016 IFIP Networking Conference (IFIP Networking) and workshops*, (pp. 536-541). IEEE. <https://doi.org/10.1109/IFIPNetworking.2016.7497256>
- Simok, A. A., Pa, M. N. M., Abdul, A. F., & Rahim, J. A. M. M. (2021). Challenges of e-mentoring Medical Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Education in Medicine Journal*, 13(4), 107-111. <https://doi.org/10.21315/eimj2021.13.4.9>.
- The Economic Times. *WhatsApp Will Soon Allow Up to 1024 Participants to Join Same Group Chat*. 11 October 2022. Available online: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/whatsapp-will-soon-allow-up-to-1024-participants-to-join-same-group-chat/articleshow/94782713.cms>.
- Yalcin, G., & KamaliArslantas, T. (2020). Mentoring Inservice Teachers to Support Their Inclusive Science Teaching Practices for Students with Visual Impairment. *International Journal of Contemporary Educational Research*, 7(2), 112-131. <https://ijcer.net/en/download/article-file/1115609>.
- Yeshua-Katz, D., Shapira, S., Aharinson-Daniel, L., Clarfield, A. M., & Sarid, O. (2021). Matching Digital Intervention Affordances with Tasks: The Case of a Zoom and WhatsApp Mental Health Intervention for Seniors during the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Health Communication* 38(3), 499-511. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2021.1956071>
- Van den Berg, G., & Mudau, P. K. (2022). Postgraduate students' views on the use of WhatsApp groups as an online communication tool to support teaching and learning during COVID-19. *Perspectives in Education*, 40(1), 112-128 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/2519593X/pie.v40.i1.7>

### About the authors

Pamela Tumwebaze is a prospective PhD student in Journalism, Media and Communication at Uganda Christian University. She is currently Director of Student Affairs; Uganda Christian University.

Samuel Kazibwe, PhD., is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Journalism, Media and Communication at the Uganda Christian University.

John Mulindwa, PhD., is an Associate Professor and currently serving as the Deputy Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs at the Uganda Christian University.