Messaging Mobile Apps:
The variety at Georgia Tech
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By Diptark Bose (GT ID: 903613944)

INTRODUCTION

As a new MS CS student at Georgia Tech, my first question upon arrival in Atlanta was, *"Which platform should I use for interacting with fellow jackets hailing from different parts of the world?"*. And to my surprise, there wasn't one definitive answer. In this report, I explore this in detail and analyze why we see a disparity in the choice of messaging platforms here on campus.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEWS

The interviews consisted of a series of questions modeled around the focus area of *Messaging*. I interviewed a total of *seven students (in the age group of 20 - 30)*, as I intended to develop an acute understanding of the student community's needs pertinent to messaging. These participants hailed from the *US (two students)*, *China (one student)*, *Kenya (one student)*, and *India (three students)*. As expected, each nationality had varying, interesting opinions to offer. I took a hybrid approach for interviewing, wherein I interviewed some people in person and some over chat. I can't thank all the participants enough for their time and cooperation in the process. In this section, I summarize all those interview experiences.

1. Indian Students Say

I had the opportunity to interview three male Indian students in person, whom I met at a diversity fair held on campus recently. All three are MS CS students. When asked, all of them unanimously voted for **WhatsApp** as their primary messaging platform. Below, I list some important insights I derived after interviewing them:

1. For all three of them, WhatsApp provides complete connectivity with their family and friends. The first interviewee mentioned that he didn't see the need to switch platforms because *everyone he knows is accessible on WhatsApp*. The other interviewees also agreed with him.

2. The second interviewee *admired WhatsApp's features (i.e., text, voice & video calls) and their delivery quality*. He further added that WhatsApp *features are* *"packaged neatly"*. He also mentioned that he wouldn't mind switching to a more prevalent platform. However, the third interviewee was skeptical about adding himself to other platforms and argued that *being active on multiple apps would hamper his productivity*.

3. When asked why WhatsApp is indispensable to them, the first interviewee mentioned that he couldn't leave WhatsApp because it's the only way to stay connected to his family. He explained that *his elders have difficulty adjusting to UIs they aren't familiar with and thus refuse to leave WhatsApp*.

4. Another interesting angle that all the three interviewees put forth was that *WhatsApp is the best way to stay connected with the Indian community at the campus*. From this statement, I concluded that a sense of community has been keeping Indians faithful to WhatsApp.

2. Kenyan Students Say

Thanks to a mutual friend, I had the opportunity to interview a Kenyan student via WhatsApp chat. He is a male undergraduate student. In his own words, "**WhatsApp is the king of messaging in Kenya**". The interview session with him was very informative and shed light on a few critical aspects. Below are some of the insights I recorded from his interview:

1. In Kenya, people purchase "data bundles" for internet access, which aren't very economical. Thus, *WhatsApp is popular in Kenya because it consumes less data when compared to other platforms*. This quality also makes it usable in rural areas of Kenya.

2. The interviewee explained how WhatsApp is even used for selling products in Kenya. When asked why people don't use Facebook's Marketplace feature, he said that *WhatsApp shows only pertinent info and doesn't overwhelm users with a massive volume of info like Facebook and other platforms do*.

3. He too, stressed on the fact that *WhatsApp is a go-to messaging app for his elders*. It's necessity and habit that makes WhatsApp popular among Kenyan elders.

4. He added that WhatsApp is so deeply embedded in Kenya's population that many schools used it to make announcements for students and their parents during the pandemic.

3. Chinese Students Say

A colleague of mine who hails from China, and is currently pursuing her PhD here at Georgia Tech, helped me understand the perspective of Chinese students regarding this topic. According to her, **WeChat** is the most popular messaging app among Chinese students. Also, since I had never used WeChat, she was kind enough to walk me through it's functionalities. Below, I include noteworthy details from her interview:

1. When asked why WeChat is indispensable for them, she mentioned how *multifunctional* it is. According to the interviewee, WeChat comes with a very unique environment where, apart from chatting, people can post, share articles, make payments (within anywhere in China), subscribe to channels, and a lot more. Most importantly, Chinese government offices, organizations, and hospitals have accounts on WeChat. She further informed me that WeChat is a certified "**super app**" that *houses all important functionalities under one hood*. People love having a single app that does all work.

2. Further, the interviewee mentions that she uses different messaging apps to interact with different sets of people. Korean students use **KakaoTalk**, and Japanese students use **Line** here.

3. The interviewee praises WeChat by saying that it's easy to use for voice messages, stickers, GIFs, and group chats. Also, it provides students *a way to stay connected with their families located in China*.

4. American Students Say

I got the opportunity to interview two students (one male and one female) who were US citizens about this topic. When asked about the messaging platform of choice, they mentioned **FB Messenger** as their go-to app. Below, I include noteworthy details from their interview:

1. Both interviewees agreed that *FB Messenger is used by all of their friends and family members*, and thus they prefer using it themselves.
2. The second interviewee emphasized how feature-rich FB Messenger is. She was particularly excited about how FB supports up to 50 people on its video calls, whereas WhatsApp still maxes out at 8. According to her, *WhatsApp limits the number of friends she can catch up with at the same time*.
3. The interviewees did briefly mention their security concerns. The first interviewee narrated an incident wherein he started seeing targeted ads populating his FB feed after he messaged a friend about that particular product. *They were concerned that FB Messenger might not be very secure*.

ANALYZING THEIR RESPONSES

After interviewing these seven students, I gathered a holistic overview of messaging apps and the student expectations. While there were many similarities in students' thought processes hailing from different corners of the world, there were multiple areas where people had opposing opinions.

Common Themes

1. International students need a convenient way to stay connected with their families. According to them, the optimal way to do this is by using messaging apps widely used in their respective countries. Thus, *the choice of messaging apps is a more community-driven decision*.
2. Almost all interviewees explicitly mentioned that *video call quality is essential for them*, even more so after the pandemic. However, some interviewees maintained their unwillingness to switch even if some other platform offers better video calls.
3. Indian and Kenyan interviewees expressed that the availability of *customized stickers helps them communicate better than text sometimes*, mostly when sharing funny content.

Conflicting Themes

1. While Indian and Kenyan students appreciated WhatsApp for its focus on communication-oriented features, Chinese students are drawn towards WeChat due to the vast array of varied functionalities it offers within one platform. *What seems feature-rich to a particular section of the society is considered cluttered by others*.

2. While the American students had concerns about how FB Messenger handles their data, WhatsApp users don't complain about this. ***This is interesting to note since Facebook owns both the products***.
3. People had ***different opinions about switching/adding themselves to another platform***. Some cited UI familiarity of elders as a reason for not switching, while some had no objection to switching.
4. Indian interviewees had tried WhatsApp and FB Messenger extensively and then settled on WhatsApp as their primary messaging app. On the other hand, the Kenyan interviewee mentioned settling *on WhatsApp without trying out different apps*. WhatsApp was the first messaging app he used, and he stuck to it due to its intuitiveness, utility, and less demanding connectivity. Therefore, sometimes, ***people can settle on the first app they try if it fulfills all their needs and expectations***.

MY CONCLUSIONS

After interviewing such a varied collection of students and comparing these results across different parameters, I was able to identify aspects that are necessary for a messaging app to become successful. Below, I introduce these "Success Mantras" I gained after conducting my study:

1. First-In-The-Market Strategy

After hearing the Kenyan student, I understood that being first in the market could help. WhatsApp is the first messaging app he and his family used, and they have stuck with it over the years simply because it fulfills all their needs very well. Being first in the market has helped establish reliability, leading to solid retention among users.

2. Market Capture Strategy

For a messaging app to be successful, it's necessary to be widespread. Once the app is trusted and relied upon by a group of users, it's natural that all their connections who wish to communicate with them will eventually have to subscribe to the same messaging platform. Thus, a messaging platform will keep on thriving as the user network keeps expanding.

3. Care deeply about your user's constraints

In some cases, constraints can govern the choice of messaging apps. As highlighted by the Kenyan interviewee, WhatsApp is known for its lower connectivity demand. In countries where internet connections are still a luxury, it's vital to have messaging apps that consume less data services. This is why WhatsApp won hearts in Kenya. The learning here is straightforward; to launch a successful messaging app, it's vital to assess the prospective user's constraints carefully.

4. Feature-rich vs Niche : Take decisions based on the demographic's needs

Being feature-rich can come with its share of problems. A feature-rich app might consume higher bandwidth and data and might require frequent updates. This might annoy users and lead to less popularity among internet starved countries. Moreover, as observed with Indian and Kenyan interviewees, a vast array of features might not be desirable for every demographic. Some people prefer to have their apps focussed on a specific task set, and have separate apps for separate categories of tasks. So it's best to decide whether to focus on the breadth of features based on what your target demographic needs and expects.

5. Staying connected with Family Members back home

Perhaps the most important thing that binds people to their messaging app choices, was the concern over losing connection with their communities and families. This study shows that people regard this engagement very highly, and it's important to let people stay connected in order for the success of a messaging app. After all, the central mantra of messaging is all about communities.

So, after performing this study, I believe that there isn't one specific optimal messaging app out there, as different demographics perceive the features and possibilities differently. However, it would be interesting to see if someday, in the future, a solitary messaging app could indeed dominate this space.