

WhatsApp Status Feature: Exploring Usage, Affordances and Limitations

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Abstract –WhatsApp Status as a contemporary social media feature has broken new grounds on how people communicate. This study has explored how WhatsApp users employ the feature, its affordances based on functionalities and shed light on its limitations that its users would love to see improved in tandem with Uses and Gratifications theory and Affordance theory. Responses from 8 interviews conducted on participants reveal the feature is mainly used as a tool of communication among family, friends, and acquaintances. Entertainment-related content is the most common broadcasted, while audio and video statuses need improvements in terms of length, size of files uploaded and order of uploading the snippets.

Keywords -Social Media, Affordances, WhatsApp Status, Statuses.

I. INTRODUCTION

This study seeks to explore the popularity of WhatsApp Status among university students in Norway, with emphasis on what they use it for, the affordances that appeal to them most, and the limitations experienced using the feature. WhatsApp Status was introduced in 2017 and has taken the centerstage among users who have a reference point of Snapchat spotlight, YouTube shorts and Instagram stories as a content-sharing cyberspace [1]. The exponential advances of digital technology in social media has seen dominant platforms incorporate mechanisms for statuses that are inevitable for their successes [2]. The status features offer a public sphere where individuals can share activities or obtain information in the cyberspace[1], [3], [4]. In fact [3] describes that Facebook alone produces over 293,000 status updates and over half a million per minute as it affords individuals sharing their personal life experiences to their audiences.[2] postulates that social media platforms that have reached their peak focus their attention towards broadcasting and network size, hence becoming ‘status’ media platforms. Moreover, social media companies keep inventing features that enhance users’ engagement and participation to the statuses posted such as tag, share, like, comment sections and reactions via emojis [5]. WhatsApp, an application that has well established itself as the world’s most popular mobile instant messaging (MIM) provider, and since being acquired by Facebook in 2014, there has been an idealistic shift from its

functionalities of group chats, audio and video calls towards file sharing, real-time location sharing, exchange of nonverbal communication via emojis. The WhatsApp Status feature, one of the latest additions of the WhatsApp application, has seen an explosive use among subscribers. Users have seen a sharp rise in the frequency of updating their statuses and viewing others’ statuses. This feature affords users digital spaces for expression in terms of communication, storytelling, consumption of content, work, play and politics hence interweaving digital-social worlds.

Moreover, prior research on social media affordances predominantly focuses generally on a collective view of social media combining mainly Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok [6] [7],[8]. The overall WhatsApp app affordances have been discussed by [4], [9]. However, as the artifact continues to expand and incorporate more features, this creates an opportunity for more research. Sedalo et al[8] in their study have suggested investigation of individual social media applications’ affordances rather than collectively. This consideration acts as a point of departure for the motivation of the study. In fact, this study narrows it further down to analyze and explore the subset feature of the WhatsApp application, its usage, affordances it offers, its limitations, opinions and impacts of the feature on its users. In tandem with the preceding discussion, this study seeks to address the following research questions:

RQ1. What do the students use the WhatsApp Status feature for?

RQ2. What are the affordances offered by WhatsApp Status’ functionalities?

RQ3. What are the limitations of the WhatsApp Status feature?

The rest of the paper comprises of five other sections. Section II is a summary of literature review employed in the study. Section III addresses the methodology deployed in the study including the research strategy, data generation methods and data analysis. Section IV discusses the findings of the study. Section V covers the discussions based on the findings. Section VI discusses the conclusion of the study the limitations and further research of the topic.

II. BACKGROUND

This section reviews the literature on the relevant theories applicable to the research topic. Uses and Gratifications theory and Affordance Theory are presented.

A. Uses and Gratifications Theory

This theory has its roots in the field of mass communications. It assumes that people play an active role in coalescing media into their daily lives to fulfil their needs as a means of achieving quintessential gratification [10]. Social media as a communication tool makes this theory relevant in trying to explain why people incorporate social media as an integral part in their lives. Whiting and Williams [10] deploy the frameworks of TV viewing[11] and internet (human-web-based message interaction)[12] uses and gratifications that relate to social media usage. The frameworks deployed by [10] aggregates seven themes of social media uses and gratifications including (1) social interaction, (2) information seeking, (3) passing time, (4) entertainment, (5)relaxation, (6)communicatory utility and (7) convenience utility, some of which will be used to answer the study's research questions

B. Affordances Theory

Affordance theory was pioneered by Gibson [13], coining the term 'affordance' as a concept describing relationships between animals and their environments. The term has now become relevant for ICT studies, trying to explain human-computer interactions. Moreover, [13] argues affordances vary from substances, surfaces, objects to places that offer possibilities for interactions and are independent of actors' experiences and perceptions[7]. Chen et al [7] postulate affordances are embedded in the relationships between artifacts ,personal goals and aptitudes in relation to the setting. Moreover, individuals tend to perceive a technology artifact's possibilities differently [7]. Bucher and Helmond [14] conceptualize affordances into the following classes; *perceived affordances*, *technology affordances*, *social affordances*, *communicative affordances*. This area of research is of interest as most studies have generally focused on affordances of general social platforms like Facebook[10],[14], [15], while those of WhatsApp [4] have aggregated the MIM as a whole. This study therefore narrows and doubles down to the Status feature that has limited research in extant literature.

III. METHODS

The study employs a hybrid of case study and survey strategies. We aimed to explore the Status feature in real-life context in depth[16] from individual's perspectives by conducting interviews and collecting qualitative data. Since we were bound by time, the researcher could only conduct one interview per individual interviewees. According to [16], case studies requires rich and detailed descriptions of cases, which was partially captured in the average 15-20 minutes open-

ended questions covered in the interviews in order to capture a rich detail of the interviewees' perceptions of the WhatsApp feature [16] from a blueprint interview script used as a guide for all interviews. Based on the preceding discussion, the study's strategy qualifies best as a qualitative survey. The relevant paradigm for this study is interpretivism as the main aim of the researcher is to explore and explain factors from individuals' perspectives thus garnering rich understanding of multiple subject realities. The selection of cases was on convenience basis where participants, college students in this regard, were chosen in terms of time and accessibility, while also considering typical instances to generalize findings. A total of eight interviews were conducted and two theories used to increase credibility of the study. To reduce bias the participants were randomly chosen. The questionnaire was also rigorously developed with reference to literature review.

We used an audio tape recording device to capture the details of the interview, with the interviewees' consent. The process of data analysis started with transcribing the interviews' audio files in Microsoft Word. Thereafter, the transcripts were imported to NVivo 12 Pro software for further analysis. Notes were taken and open coding was done with reference to original audio files. The scripts were axially coded with relevant thematic frameworks developed and further selective coding was done in accordance with the study's research questions. The results of the analysis were then visualized in graphs and tables and discussed in detail in the following chapter hence increasing validity of findings.

IV. RESULTS

In the eight interviews conducted, participants vivaciously discussed their reasons on why they use WhatsApp Status, and the features that appeal most to them, which also describe the affordances offered by the feature. Moreover, another element covered was the limitations the users have experienced while using the Status feature. In alignment with RQ₁ two questions were posed and the themes developed from the answers given for "*Who are the main group of people that you use WhatsApp Status for?*", and "*What type of statuses do you post on WhatsApp Status?*" 100% of the interviewees stated that the main groups of people they use the feature for are family, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances. One of the respondents stated that she employs the Status feature for business-related content. "...yes, *the main group of people I use WhatsApp Status for are my friends, family members and business groups.*" (Extracted from N-Vivo 12).

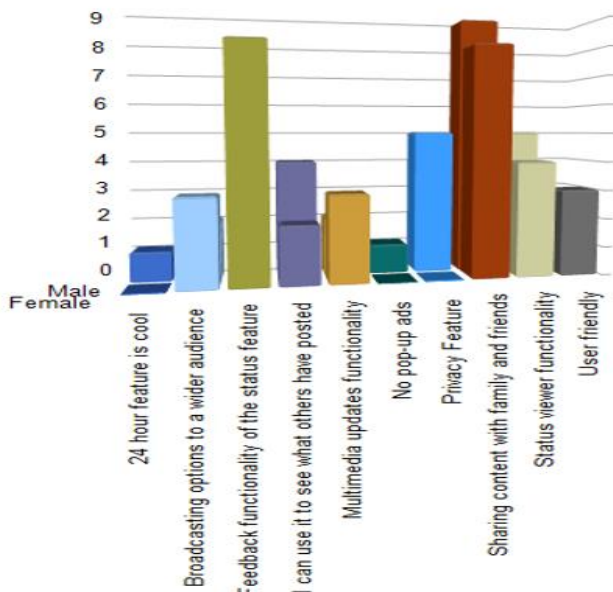
The second question that answers RQ₁ is shown below, with the highest references on entertainment-related content mentioned by 5 participants and being referenced 6 times. This in alignment with the uses-gratification theory gives users the most satisfaction. The other common statuses posted include self-expression content (5,5), events-related content (5,5), business-related content (4,4) and the least popular and gratifying being religious-related content (1,1)

being referenced by only one respondent. In alignment with the users-gratifications theory, the themes of Entertainment, Expressions of opinions, Information sharing and communicatory utility appear the most as why the students use the WhatsApp Status feature [10].

Statuses I post on WhatsApp Status	8	25
Business-related content	4	4
Educational-related content	3	4
Entertainment-related content	5	6
Events-related content	5	5
Religion-related content	1	1
Self expression content	5	5

Table 1. Extract on Types of Statuses students post

Figure 2 depicts the functionalities that appeal most to the students that use WhatsApp Status based on RQ₂. The most popular functionality was being able to share content with family and friends that has been discussed by seven interviewees and referenced 17 times (males 9 times and females 8 times). Feedback functionality was second most popular (7,12), followed by viewer functionality (8,9), platform for seeing what others have posted (4,6), user-friendliness (4,4), broadcasting to a wider audience (3,5) and privacy feature that is popular to only two participants (2,5). The 24 hour disappearance of the statuses and no-pop-up ads were the least popular among the study's participants scoring (1,1) each. The functionalities' affordances will further be discussed in the next chapter.



Graph 1. Functionalities of WhatsApp Status that appeal to students most(based on gender)

Figure 3 shows the limitations that WhatsApp Status according to the study's participants. Although not all

respondents talked of the limitations, the majority that did were more concerned with 'Size of videos' being limited and short and wanted longer audio and video times. Mixed-up video snippets also were mentioned by an interviewee. Two participants mentioned that the status expiring after 24 hours is a limitation with one noting "...and I thought of more length of time due to some people not opening their statuses or view them in time, so they expire before they have seen it. I think they should add more time and make it last for more than 24 hours." (Extracted from N-Vivo 12).

Limitations of the WhatsApp Status Feature	6	11
A status downloader function would be a good thing to have	1	1
Longer audio and video times needed	1	1
Mixed-up videos	1	1
Muting should be facilitated	1	1
Size of videos are limited and short	5	5
Statuses expire after 24 hours	2	2

Table 2. Extract on limitations of WhatsApp Status features

V. DISCUSSION

In alignment with extant literature,[10] all the students, like any other social media users employ WhatsApp Status for social interaction with their family, friends, colleagues. The most common usage of the feature was posting of entertainment-related content such as memes, funny short video snippets and jokes, which are most appealing and capture attention of their contact groups. Information sharing is also one of the reasons the students use the feature, which is in tandem with the theme of educating and inspiring others via the statuses posted. Self-expression usage has been mentioned by 62.5% of respondents, where they use the feature to present information related to themselves such as feelings, their daily activities, and life events revolving around them.

RQ₂ has been addressed by first establishing the functionalities of Status that appeal to the users. The Status feature affords multi-media content sharing to family and friends of users via its cyberspace [6]. In fact, it also affords broadcasting of content to a wider audience in a click of a button that appeals to two users. Moreover, the feature affords browsing others' contents as users can view content shared by others too. In fact, the feature affords meta-voicing, where users can communicate with each other directly and comment or give feedback on their statuses [6] 50% of the respondents mention of privacy options offered by Status where users can selectively choose whom to see their statuses. In fact we can say that the privacy affordances further afford personalization based on target audience [4]. The viewer counter of the Status offers visibility as the posters of statuses can view how many have posted. In fact, this acts as an incentive of posting on the feature as one interviewee commented" I think the fact that many people viewing and commenting on my statuses is what motivates me to post more frequently."

RQ₃'s discussions depict that the video snippets would be better off long and be systematic to 62.5% of the Status users interviewed. This however aligns with social media studies that the users' attention spans have shortened over time, hence tend to skip longer videos. This is also tailored to maximize repetitive and increased views due to monetization of social media platforms, hence the incentive to produce more content and keep people hooked to platforms and have continuation of usage intentions [5]. Perishability of content also seems to be an issue that has arisen as one interviewee is concerned with a downloader function for videos, while two others raise the issue of the statuses disappearing after 24 hours. This also can be explained that WhatsApp creators tailored the Status to have people post fresh content on a regular basis for fresh comments and views from their contacts as information is highly perishable hence the excitement of the suspense and hunger for more content consumption gives it an upper hand to competing social media.

VI. CONCLUSION

The study has contributed to the social media literature by shedding light on the usage of the Status features, the affordances it offers via its functionalities and the limitations of the features from the users' perspectives. We however note the limitations and areas for further research on the study. Firstly, the findings of the study are limited to the WhatsApp Status feature, and not WhatsApp as a whole artifact. Second, the study findings are limited to university students, a specific target group, and not all WhatsApp Status feature users. Third, the study did not have a large enough sample size with a sample size limited to 8 participants, hence low validity, and difficulty in generalization of the findings.

We propose a few directions for further research. First, further research can incorporate a broader sample size of all Status users such as adolescents and other target groups apart from university students. Moreover, we suggest a larger sample size to garner rich details of participants to increase validity of the study. Triangulation by employing quantitative research of the study is also recommended to further increase validity of findings.

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