

UTILIZATION & GRATIFICATIONS OF 'WHATSAPP' **APPLICATION IN 'NARIKURAVAR' COMMUNITY**

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Abstract

Keywords:

New Media

Narikuravar

Social Media

Gypsy

Nomadic community

A Social media is the collection of online communications dedicated to community-based input, interaction, content-sharing and collaboration. Users are engaged with social media via computer, tablet or smart phone via web-based software or web application. This study deals with the access and usage pattern of 'WhatsApp' among a nomadic community in Tamil Nadu which is known as 'Narikuravar'. They are termed as Gypsies. They are one of the marginalized communities of Tamil Nadu. They are deprived of the basic resources of life yet they are aware of the digital technologies. It is observed that the Gypsies have the online social participation which may be different from the main stream society. There are economical and cultural barriers which are associated in the usage of digital platform. The access and the usage pattern of WhatsApp within the

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community are studied incorporating qualitative method including content analysis and virtual ethnography. The samples were selected through snowball technique. It can be concluded that, the access and the usage pattern of 'WhatsApp' among the members is low but it is one of the popular medium among the community that motivates them towards education which is the prerequisite for the development of this community.

1. Introduction

Today in the era of digital advancements, the social media is playing an effective role in effective communication. As we are aware that social media is a type of media which is based on computer based technology. It enables the user to share ideas, messages and data and helps to build a network within a community. It is based on new media and offers users to transmit messages in all forms electronically. Any gadget can be used to participate in the social media. Social media can take the form of a variety of tech-enabled activities, such as photo sharing, blogging, social gaming, social networks, video sharing, business networks, virtual worlds, reviews and more. It is used to keep in touch with friends and extended family, network for career opportunities, find people from all over the globe who share a common interest, share content and more. Those who engage in these activities are part of a virtual social network.

WHATSAPP IN INDIA

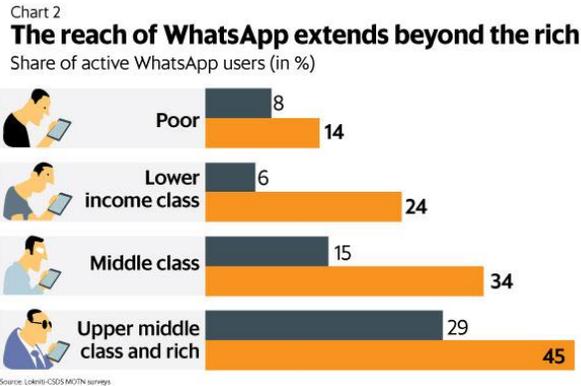
WhatsApp Inc. was founded in 2009 by Brian Acton and Jan Koum with the tag line "Simple, Personal, Real time messaging" is a mobile messaging app which allows the users to exchange messages without having to pay for SMS. WhatsApp works with internet connectivity and helps its users to stay in touch with friends and relatives in the contact list. Apart from making its users getting connected with each other, it also helps them to create groups, send unlimited images, video and audio messages. Studies have proved that WhatsApp is the most popular instant messenger service used by youth today. It is one of the most used products in India. With

a staggering 96% penetration on smartphones, it is now being used by people from all the sectors of the society. It is distinctly designed and marketed for smartphones. It can be accessed by all android and IOS based operating system in smartphone. It helps them in providing multiple benefits like low cost, sharing Rich media messages, confirmation of messages for sending, delivering and reading and group chatting, etc. It is the most admired and accepted media by the youngsters around the world. It recently reached 200 million Daily Active Users in India, far ahead of its home market of USA. The number of internet users is supposed to reach 730 million by 2020 with rural India forming a large chunk of it. Most of these first time users are going to experience internet through a smartphone and WhatsApp is going to be one of the first apps they will install. It uses a customized version of the open standard Extensible Messaging and Presence Protocol (XMPP). It has 1.3 billion users globally and its largest user base in India is looking for a country head. (Economic Times, 2018).

India remains the biggest market for WhatsApp, which had 160 million active users in the country last November 2016. Moving forward, Brian Acton, a founder of WhatsApp, said the company will explore ways to contribute to "India's vision for digital commerce." WhatsApp has its own challenges, too. It has been billed as one of the biggest sources for spreading of fake news and other misleading information in the country. But for now, its dominance in India remains unrivaled. (Manish Singh, 2017).

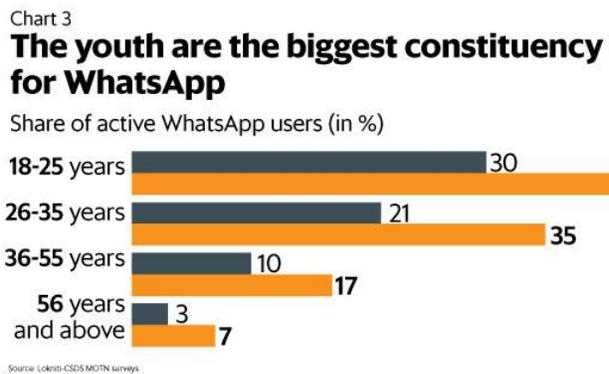
Lokniti is a research programme at the Delhi-based Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS). According to a Survey data collected by Sanjay Kumar and Pranav Gupta in 2018, shows that the reach of WhatsApp has increased rapidly over the past couple of years. The MOTN survey conducted by Lokniti in mid-2017 had found that 14% of respondents used WhatsApp on a daily basis. That proportion has jumped to 24% in just one year, the most recent MOTN survey data show.

Fig: 1



Source: Lokniti-CSDS MOTN Survey, 2018

Fig: 2



Source: Lokniti-CSDS MOTN Survey, 2018

By the above statistics we can understand the penetration of this social media among all the sectors of the society. The major number of the users is from the age group of 18-25 years. This statistics proved helpful for the present study. Today WhatsApp is used for professional ways, where the people can have a group based on their community interests, profession, friends, family and the like. So the study aimed to understand the usage pattern of this social media among one of the nomadic groups in Tamil Nadu who are called as 'Narikuravar'.

'NARIKURAVAR' – A NOMADIC COMMUNITY

The present study aims to understand the participation level of Gypsies in the social media in Tamil Nadu. The Gypsy community in Tamil Nadu is termed as 'Narikuravar'. 'Nari' means jackal, 'kuravar' means people. They belong to Dom community which is a community of

Indian Gypsy. Literally, the Tamil word ‘*Narikuravar*’ means ‘the fox or jackal hunters.’ ‘*Narikuravar*’ is a non technical term which is used to denote semi-tribal or tribal communities which have the connection ethno linguistically. Currently, there are about 8,500 ‘*Narikuravar*’ families (30,000 people) in Tamil Nadu that is less than 1% of their population. This study deals with the access and the usage pattern of the WhatsApp among the community in Tamil Nadu. Although they are one of the marginalized community and lacks basic necessities in life, the current status of their life can be said as slightly improved after incorporating the media, and the education into their lives. The Gypsies have the access to all the media which the common people have the access to. They have the exposure of the new media and the components which they use in their daily lives. The social media WhatsApp is being largely used by the community. They are reaping its potential benefits from the media. It is also motivating the members to incorporate their lives with the main stream society.

2. Objectives of the Study

- To understand the WhatsApp access among the community.
- To study the WhatsApp usage pattern among the community.
- To analyze the gratifications acquired from the application among the community.

3. Research Questions based on the objectives

1. To understand the WhatsApp access among the community.
 - How the community is accessing the application?
 - By whom the members have the access to the application?
2. To study the WhatsApp usage pattern among the community.
 - In what are the ways the application is used by the community?
 - What is the structure of the online interaction by the community?
3. To analyze the gratifications acquired from the application among the community.
 - What are the gratifications that are acquired by the community?
 - What are the outcomes of the gratifications acquired by the community?

4. Literature Review

In the field of social media and nomadic or tribal communities, there are handfuls of studies that are related to the present study. The reason is that, the communities still long for their identity in the main stream society. They are unable to incorporate with the society due to cultural and class barriers. The reviews are based on the usage pattern and access to WhatsApp application.

In a study conducted by R. Venkatesh Aravindh & S. Sree Govind Baratwaj (2016) on the purpose and utilization of WhatsApp among the (100) college students in Salem district found that, The age of social networking site users were between the age group 17-20 with about 53%, which clearly states the maximum users were higher school & college students, the next majority users were between the age group of 21- 24 with 47%. Regarding the types of content shared in WhatsApp, 41% of respondents strongly agree for sharing personal content, 37% respondents strongly disagreed that they do not share education based content, 43% respondents agreed that they share news based content, 45% respondents agreed that they shared Casual content, 39% respondents agreed that they share Cinema based content and 35% respondents strongly agreed that they share Cinema based content, 31% respondents agreed that they share Business / Technology based content, 25% respondents agreed that they share Culture / Religion based content, 21% strongly agreed that they share Culture / Religion based content, 43% strongly agreed that they share sports based content, 48% respondents strongly agreed that they share Political content, 47% respondents strongly agreed that they share Wishes (General / Festival) based content, 40% respondents strongly agreed that they share content based on Social Awareness / Issues, 43% respondents strongly agreed that they share Memes as content. The study concludes by stating that WhatsApp is highly used by the youngsters in the society. It becomes an important media than the other traditional media. The diverse dissemination of that interest based data encourage the youngsters to access it. The two way communication pattern in the application provided freedom to the students to express their feedback and opinions. The study also revealed that the youth are very much interested in sharing their personal content like picture, text, videos, etc. It is observed that the self-marketing parameter among youngsters in Tamil Nadu seems increasing in internet. Youths also show interest in sharing social Awareness content, which shows the youngsters social responsibility factor in social media.

Many studies were conducted in India by taking the youngsters as respondents have revealed that smart devices and the levels of online access are making the present generation the most connected. In a study done by Jisha. K & Jebakumar (2014) on WhatsApp mobile communication among Chennai youths revealed that, Majority of the youngsters remain online 24/7 to access WhatsApp, thereby getting in touch with their friends without missing any single message. All the respondents agreed that they use their mobile phone full time to access WhatsApp. 96 out of 100 respondents rated mobile as a necessity of their life in a scale of 1 to 5. Majority of youngsters use WhatsApp to chat with friends followed by relatives. Majority of the youngsters agreed that they converse with more than 15 people a day through WhatsApp. The usage of unlimited audio files and video files were given 3 on 5 point scale. The researcher stated that *“WhatsApp has created a sense of belongingness, nearness and intimacy with friends and relatives. It has created a psychological experience of being close and caring. WhatsApp has become a cosy/comfortable application among youngsters”* Jisha. K & Jebakumar (2014).

There are also many international studies that are done on the usage and the effects of WhatsApp application. One of the studies that is reviewed by a researcher Johnson Yeboah & George Dominic Ewur (2014) who have done on the impact of WhatsApp application among the students in Ghana. The study evidently proved that WhatsApp has been an evil for students in tertiary institutions in Ghana. This stems from the fact that, it can also enhance the performance of the students if it is used positively. It makes communication easier and faster by enhancing effective flow of information and idea sharing among students. However, if it is used negatively it has adverse impacts on the performance of students. Among the negative impacts that were identified include the following: it takes much of the students studies time, destroys students grammar and spellings, leads to lack of concentration during lectures and difficulty in balancing online activities and academic preparation. As a coin has two sides so are the effects of any technology. There are positive and negative effects based on the usage pattern of the audience.

Fig: 3

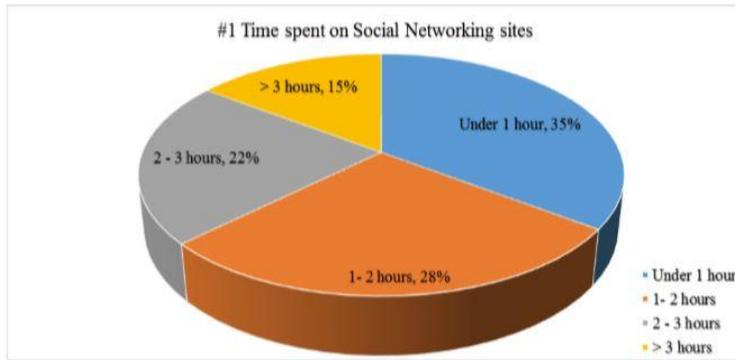


Figure 1: #1 Time per Day Spent On Social Networking Sites

Source: Akashdeep Bhardwaj & Sam Goundar (2018)

Fig: 4

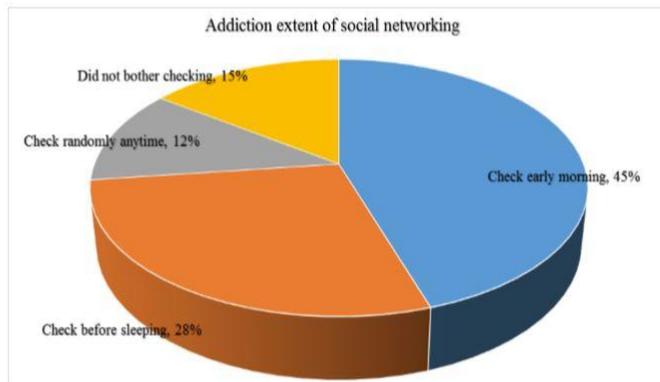


Figure 2: #2 Addiction extent of Social Networking

Source: Akashdeep Bhardwaj & Sam Goundar (2018)

The author also reviewed the advantages of the social networking sites in culture development, building self-identity, developing relationships and acquisition of social, communication, and technical skills.

5. Theoretical Framework – Uses and Gratification Theory

The theory was introduced by Blumler and Katz in 1974 in the article “the Uses of Mass Communications: Current Perspectives on Gratifications Research” and focuses its attention on media users’ roles.

- To show the relation of mass communication and how it is used to gratify needs.
- To find out primary intentions of media use by people.

- To know the positive and negative aspects of media use on the media users.

Uses and gratification theory is one of many communications theories that help to explain human's relationship with mass media. This theory can be said to have a user/audience-centered approach. The main idea is that people turn to media to assist them in fulfilling certain needs that used to be filled by just talk to other people. Specifically there are five distinct categories of needs fulfilled by media: cognitive, affective, personal integrative, social integrative and tension-free needs. This theory is used as a base, as it perfectly applies with the objectives and the nature of the study. The study aims to how the community uses the application and helps them for their development.

6. Methodology

The study incorporates qualitative method that incorporates the analysis of online interaction which is under virtual ethnography. The samples were selected through snowball technique. Samples were selected from two districts in Tamil Nadu namely, Theni and Tirunelveli. There are four Gypsy colonies in the respective places. Two colonies in each place have been chosen based on the application usage. There are 76 families in Theni and 116 families in Tirunelveli, total 192 families were based on the selected Gypsy colonies. Ten women were chosen for the study. They were the high users of the application in their community. Their online interaction structure was evaluated and observed by the researcher. The data were collected in the period of fifteen days in the month of July 2018. Content analysis of their online communication pattern is done through using specific codes. In-depth interview with the respondents were also done with the selected respondents. The objectives of the study are aimed to present the gratifications and its outcome that may have reflected in their life among the community members.

7. Analysis & Interpretations

WhatsApp Access in the Community

The Gypsies are one of the extremely marginalized communities in Tamil Nadu. The community is facing various problems that are associated with their health, education, occupation and cultural backwardness which results in social isolation from the main stream society. In order to understand the WhatsApp access of the community, selected respondents' WhatsApp accounts were reviewed and the conversation pattern was analyzed.

- **ECONOMIC STATUS**

Gypsies sell products like beads which are mainly worn by the people in times of pilgrimage, honey, combs, clips, copper rings, lucky charms that are equipped with medicinal herbs, plastic toys and hair bands. They don't have any financial stability. They tend to earn up to 300rs. Per day. They tend to recharge for their mobile internet based on their average monthly income.

- **AGE GROUP**

It is noted that, the younger generation in the age group of 15 – 30 are very much active in WhatsApp, as they are the ones who are aware of the new media and other mobile applications. They are interested to learn about the new media in compare to the other age groups. Though they are not familiar with other communication applications, it is observed that the very few Gypsies are having the access to the social media like WhatsApp and facebook.

- **SMART PHONE USAGE**

The younger generation in the age group of 15 -30 has the access to smart phones in the brand of Micromax, Samsung, and Gionee. The price of the mobile phone ranges from 4000rs-8000rs. They are the ones who have the access to the new media as; they are gradually exploring the scope of using a smart phone. The mobile phone is also seen as a symbol of status or prestige among the community which is mostly poverty ridden. So having a high quality smart phone is definitely a thing to boast off. The major purpose of the smart phone usage in for making calls and playing games.

- **INTERNET ACCESS**

It is already mentioned that the present generation are the flag bearers in the usage of new media. All the selected samples had the smart phone and had access to Internet. The prime objective of using the internet is for access and the usage of WhatsApp and for watching videos in Youtube.

- **UNDERSTANDING OF THE APPLICATION**

The younger generation Gypsies are much familiar with the WhatsApp application. They have the understanding of the application as a tool of sharing their personal content with their beloved ones. They are also aware of the potential lies with the application.

WhatsApp Usage Pattern in the Community

- **AUDIO/VIDEOCALLS**

The community members who have the access to the internet use it to make audio and video calls in WhatsApp. Video calls are mainly utilized among the community members as the audio calls are not used due to the poor connectivity. Since the community is highly illiterate the video calls are feasible for them to facilitate the communication process.

- **MESSAGING**

One of the main purposes of using the WhatsApp is for unlimited messaging. There are also various formats of messaging pattern apart from regular texting which is found within the community members.

- **VIRTUAL CONNECTION WITH FRIENDS AND FAMILY**

It is observed that the other community members are also in their contact list who are close to them like the news reporters, NGO worker, and political representatives. The political representatives are mainly in contact with the head of the community. The community members feel a connection with their friends and family through audio and video calls.

- **GRAPHICAL EMOJIS**

This is also one of the important forms for communication used by them along with the textual messages. The symbols represent their mood and feelings to the opposite member. This is one of the easiest forms of communication as most of the community members are illiterate. But the younger generation employs audio messages, text messages, Graphical emojis, photos and videos.

- **SHARING GRAPHICAL CONTENTS**

The whatsapp account of the selected samples were viewed for the purpose of understanding their messaging pattern, types of photos, graphical messages shared, audio/ video content shared, status and display picture preferred are observed. In the WhatsApp, they tend to upload their pictures either individually and in group during an occasion in their community. They also upload group photos. Usually they tend to like the actor and actress photos with some love or motivational quotes. They share funny videos or some which related to crime, devotion, useful tips for daily life, songs, and news. They tend to like the media content of entertainment, devotional, news related, crime and thriller oriented. They use mainly audio messages to share any information on personal basis. As they lack proper education, it is easy for them to send

messages through pictures and audio messages. So this is a main mode for them to transfer the information. It is found that, the whatsapp usage pattern is also same as the Facebook. The whatsapp usage is more preferred than facebook due to its feasibility.

Selfie culture is taking a boom in the community. Research has shown that adults make emotional connections to what they see posted online, and that their behaviors and decisions are influenced by how peers in their social network are interacting. In fact, experts say selfies are just continuing a long tradition of visual communication, dating back almost 40,000 years. That's according to author Katrin Tiidenberg, an Associate Professor of Social Media and Visual Culture at the Baltic Film, Media, Arts and Communication School of Tallinn University, Estonia and a Post-Doctoral Researcher at the School of Communication and Culture in Aarhus University, Denmark. Katrin describes the practice of taking selfies as a form of 'visual self-representation'. Youngsters are having numerous numbers of selfie in their mobile phones which can be assumed that the present generation is having a selfie addition with their smart phone.

Gratifications acquired by the community

- **COGNITIVE NEEDS**

The community members in the age group of 15-30yrs acquire gratifications for their cognitive needs as well along with other purposes. Here the cognitive needs represent the online information that they acquire through the application on health, politics, entertainment, food and lifestyle, and their community related news. It is noted that the women are very keen in acquiring the information related to health and food, as they hold the major responsibility of the household than the men.

- **PERSONAL INTEGRATIVE NEEDS**

In terms of personal integrative needs, the possession of smart phone among the community signifies a status of high rank. Now-a-days the community members tempt to buy new smart phones as there are many models that are available in moderate rates which can be afford by economically weak people. Those who have a smart phone of high price tend feel a bit superior to the other community members.

- **SOCIAL INTEGRATIVE NEEDS**

This is one of the prominent needs of the community that is fulfilled by the social media. Though the community members lack literacy, they have their own communication pattern through

which they communicate in order to socialize with friends, family and community members. The social media also helps them to contact with other community members with whom they feel reluctant to meet or talk in personal. It is found that with the influence of the social media, the community's life has been gradually transforming. The reason behind the statement is that, they tend to adopt the practices which they perceive in the social media. The health related videos or messages have a direct influence in their lifestyle. It is also noted that, they feel inferior when they couldn't have a certain product which they see in the popular media. Poverty is one of the major issues among the community so maximum number of the families couldn't afford what a few families who are well to do can get. There are significant changes in their behavior and outlook which may have a direct link to the access and the usage of the WhatsApp. Their traditional way of behavior is gradually changing who have an optimum exposure of the media. So it can be said that the smart phone and WhatsApp usage is more than the conventional media.

8. Conclusion

The present study deals with the WhatsApp access and usage pattern among a nomadic community called '*Narikuravar*'. Since this nomadic community is highly illiterate, the researcher adopted a qualitative approach to get the data from the respondents. As it is more effective to understand a nomadic community like this from the base level. The new media like the WhatsApp application proves to be one of the important mode for their communication in spite of illiteracy. Indirectly it can be said that it is helping to transforming their lifestyle matching with the main stream society. As in the present time they are having a sufficient access to the traditional and new media, with the regular exposure to the new practices and belief system. This may be a changing factor in their way of life. Since literacy is one of the major problems in the community, it is interpreted that the social media like WhatsApp may motivate them to pursue their education in order to access the media effectively which may be consider as one of the building block for their development of the community. The younger generations are more involved in social media than the older generation. They are the ones who have completed their primary education and have the ability to read and write. So it is predicted that they will motivate their kids to pursue their education. Since in this present time, the community members started using the 'WhatsApp', they may understand the pros and cons of the media gradually

with their own time. It will help them to balance between the mainstream and their tradition by adopting the reasonable methods for empowering their community.

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