

Whatsapp for helpful social communities

11 August 2020, by David Bradley



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Dutch computer scientists have assessed the value of the Whatsapp mobile communication platform in the context of social support. The research seems rather pertinent in the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic that has forced countless people to work entirely remotely, usually at home, to engage with their doctor and other healthcare workers via online applications, and to work with educators to teach their children at home too.

Whatsapp is a free, cross-platform messaging and Voice over IP (VoIP) service provided by one of the most well-known of the social media companies, Facebook. Whatsapp users can send each other text messages and voice messages without paying the usual charges that might be required of SMS and [phone calls](#) by utilizing a Wi-Fi or internet data connection on their phone. They can also make voice and video calls, share images, documents, and other files, and even their location with other

users in end-to-end encrypted connections. Users can also build groups of collaborators, friends, and family to communicate and share among that community.

Writing in the *International Journal of Networking and Virtual Organisations*, Luuk Simons and Catholijn Jonker of Delft University of Technology in Netherlands and Wouter van den Heuvel of the Health Coach Program also in Delft, suggest that WhatsApp groups can be used as attractive social support systems augmenting existing electronic tools and personal coaching. Their exploratory study of a small number of young professionals revealed that they were all happy to engage with others using Whatsapp. Indeed, the app led to greater engagement than other social media tools.

The team demonstrated that the use of a Whatsapp group by these young professionals led to healthy behavior and health advocacy and confirmed the potential of the system for peer coaching. The research did show that there is a need to educate potential users on how to form relevant communities more effectively. They offer several ideas in their paper on how Whatsapp use might be improved. For instance, it is perhaps essential in a coaching community environment that at least one of the members of the group is an expert in that realm to ensure the quality of advice and discussions, to catalyze group interactions, to prompt users to act as health advocates within the group and to ensure that help is always given to participants when they need it.

More information: Luuk P.A. Simons et al. eHealth WhatsApp for social support: design lessons, *International Journal of Networking and Virtual Organisations* (2020). [DOI: 10.1504/IJNVO.2020.108857](https://doi.org/10.1504/IJNVO.2020.108857)

Provided by Inderscience

APA citation: Whatsapp for helpful social communities (2020, August 11) retrieved 15 June 2021 from <https://techxplore.com/news/2020-08-whatsapp-social.html>

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