

# Instant Messaging meets Diary Studies: Employing WhatsApp in Audio Diary Research with Female Journalists in Burkina Faso

*Viviane Schönbächler*

**Abstract:** This paper discusses the challenges and opportunities of using instant messaging (IM) technologies for diary studies. The discussion shows that IM as well as diary methods are both highly adaptable and flexible tools for qualitative data collection. In combination, they allow for innovative designs that might overcome limitations of more widely used data collection methods. The paper presents in detail and reflects upon a mixed online and offline design of an audio diary method with ‘hard-to-reach’ research participants in Burkina Faso. It ends with discussing further methodological and ethical aspects such as reach, temporalities, media formats, conversation styles, confidentiality/anonymity, technical aspects, as well as interaction and power sharing between the researcher and participants in order to spark methodological reflections when designing an IM diary study.

**Keywords:** online data collection, diary studies, qualitative research, instant messaging (IM), journalism

## Tagebuchverfahren per Instant Messaging: WhatsApp-Forschung mit Journalistinnen in Burkina Faso

**Zusammenfassung:** In diesem Beitrag werden die Herausforderungen und Möglichkeiten von Instant-Messaging-Technologien (IM) für Tagebuchstudien diskutiert. Die Diskussion zeigt, dass sowohl IM als auch Tagebuchmethoden sehr anpassungsfähige und flexible Werkzeuge für die qualitative Forschung sind. In Kombination ermöglichen sie innovative Designs, die die Einschränkungen traditioneller Datenerhebungsmethoden überwinden können. Anhand eines konkreten Beispiels in Burkina Faso wird die Anwendung einer Audio-Tagebuch-Methode detailliert und kritisch reflektiert. Daraufhin werden weitere Aspekte wie Reichweite, Zeitlichkeit, Medienformate, Konversationsstile, Anonymität/Vertraulichkeit, technische Überlegungen, sowie Machtverteilung und Interaktionen zwischen Forscher:innen und Teilnehmenden diskutiert, um methodologische Überlegungen beim Design einer IM-Tagebuchstudie anzuregen.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Online-Datenerhebung, Tagebuchstudien, qualitative Forschung, Instant Messaging (IM), Journalismus

# 1 Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic raised new challenges to field-based research around the globe. Online tools replaced, at least temporarily, face-to-face data collection instruments. However, online methods and remote tools for data collections are not new and have already been used prior to the outbreak of the pandemic in various fields and under different circumstances. The use of WhatsApp and other digital technologies for data collection is still novel<sup>1</sup> and needs more systematic and transparent discussion (Herron et al. 2019; Manji et al. 2021). This paper wants to contribute to systematising literature on instant messaging (IM) as tools for data collection in qualitative research, illustrated by a concrete experience that employs IM in an audio diary method under conditions of rising insecurity and the Covid-19 pandemic in Burkina Faso.

The paper provides an overview of current literature on qualitative diary studies and embeds the literature on digital data collection in this broader debate. In this sense, the paper examines how a relatively old method, the diary method<sup>2</sup>, used through comparatively new technologies, such as IM through smartphones, poses challenges and offers opportunities for qualitative research when access to the field is constrained.

The paper draws from the experience of integrating IM as part of the methodology to study how female journalists in proximity radio stations<sup>3</sup> contribute to conflict transformation processes in Burkina Faso. The approach presented is relevant for current discussions in several ways: firstly, the approach was developed in consequence of the drastic deteriorations in the security situation that impeded access to most of the radio stations in the sample adding onto the challenges regarding health risks and travel restrictions posed by the Covid-19 pandemic; secondly, the research participants reside in ‘hard-to-reach’<sup>4</sup> areas and enjoy only limited mobility due to security concerns, Covid-19 constraints, but also due to family care responsibilities; thirdly, the area under study provides restricted information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructures as it is located outside the capital city where internet connection and even mobile phone coverage are unreliable. Thus, this paper contributes to closing the literature gap on mobile IM tools used in qualitative data collection with ‘hard-to-reach’ participants (Herron et al. 2019, P. 1006; Twis et al. 2020, P. 41) and under challenging infrastructural, social, health and security-related conditions.

The underlying assumption of the paper presumes that technologies are not neutral but influence the data collection process as well as the data itself. In its final chapter, the paper calls for a methodologically driven reflection when designing and conducting diary studies using IM technologies. Through reviewing relevant literature, eight overarching themes are proposed to guide such methodological reflection, namely reach, temporalities, empowering participants, multimedia, conversation style, involvement of the researcher, anonymity and confidentiality, as well as technical and infrastructural implications.

---

1 In between submission and publication of the present article, new research on WhatsApp use for qualitative research has been published. See for instance Humphries et al. (2022), Mavhandu-Mudzusi et al. (2022) and Mwanda (2022).

2 Diaries have been used as research methods since the 1930s, but social scientists have been using them increasingly only for the past 40 years (Kunz 2018, P. 69).

3 Based on the French *radio de proximité* that refers to a geographical, cultural or socio-professional closeness to its audience (Ba 2003, §2).

4 The term ‘hard-to-reach’ is used with single quotation mark to highlight the complicated use of the term. As Douedari et al. (2021) argue. “The very categories of ‘lack of access’ and ‘hard-to-reach’ have arisen from the domination of the ‘foreign gaze’ in humanitarian studies” (P. 1)