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Students Perception of WhatsApp as a Tool for Parental Control and Surveillance

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Abstract

This study examined Students Perception of WhatsApp as a Tool for Parental Control and Surveillance. A study survey was conducted among 313 students of 200 level and 300 level of the department of Mass Communication, Faculty of arts, University of Jos who were selected through simple random technique. Questionnaire was the primary instrument of data collection for this research work. Likert scale was employed for data analysis in line with frequency distribution analysis. Panoptic theory was used as the theoretical framework for this investigation. Findings revealed that WhatsApp is a formidable tool for communication. Due to the massive number of users of the app on daily basis. Findings revealed that features like last seen, read receipts and status updates are major components of surveillance and monitoring on WhatsApp. It also revealed that students of the department of mass communication University of Jos had parental guidance on WhatsApp usage due to family presence on the app. The researcher recommended that: Parental control on WhatsApp status updates should promote gatekeeping of immoral content, such as pornography and hate speech, among students. It was also recommended that educators and parents should monitor the use of WhatsApp among students and educate them on the responsible use of mobile messaging applications.

Keywords: Students, perception, WhatsApp, parental control, Surveillance

Introduction

The rise of social media and mobile messaging applications has significantly transformed how individuals communicate, including within families. In Nigeria, WhatsApp is the most widely used messaging platform, with over 90 million users relying on it for both social and familial communication (Nigerian Communications Commission, 2022). Its popularity is closely linked to affordability, ease of



use, and accessibility across different devices, making it a preferred choice for families who want to remain connected despite distance, financial constraints, or busy schedules.

In today's digital age, communication has evolved beyond traditional face-to-face interactions into instant, mobile-based exchanges. WhatsApp is no longer limited to texting; it now supports a wide range of features, including voice and video calls, group chats, and the sharing of multimedia such as images, videos, documents, and voice notes. These diverse functions make it especially attractive for students who live away from home but wish to maintain close ties with their families. Through the platform, families can celebrate milestones, share daily experiences, and resolve conflicts in real time, thereby bridging geographical and emotional distances. Family communication, understood as the exchange of thoughts, emotions, and information among family members, is widely regarded as crucial for maintaining healthy relationships (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2020). As (Galvin et al. 2022) observed, effective family communication fosters trust, emotional support, and relational stability, while poor communication can create misunderstanding, conflict, and emotional distance. Thus, WhatsApp has become more than a convenience; it is now a central platform for sustaining family cohesion in modern society.

Ademilokun and Olateju (2020) assert that, in most Nigeria families, WhatsApp plays a particularly significant role in maintaining family communication, especially for students studying away from home. Its affordability compared to traditional phone calls and SMS has made it the dominant platform for both casual and formal interactions across different age groups.

However, Ademilokun and Olateju (2020) affirm that the same features that foster closeness can also become instruments of parental control and surveillance. WhatsApp's status updates, last-seen indicators, and read receipts provide parents with continuous access to their children's online activities, subtly monitoring their availability and social engagements. Family WhatsApp groups, while intended to enhance inclusivity, may also function as spaces of regulation, where students are expected to respond promptly and justify periods of silence or absence. Similarly, frequent calls and instant messaging create expectations of constant availability, which may restrict students' sense of autonomy. For students of the University of Jos, who are digital natives, WhatsApp not only sustains emotional bonds but also introduces new forms of parental authority within the digital space. Examining these dynamics is therefore crucial in understanding how technology simultaneously strengthens family ties and reinforces parental power in the everyday lives of young people.

However, (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2020) assert that while WhatsApp fosters connectivity, excessive reliance on the applications has introduced new challenges. Studies have shown that overuse of digital communication can lead to misunderstandings, conflicts, and a decline in face-to-face interactions, potentially weakening the depth of personal relationship.

Studies have found that mobile communication technology like WhatsApp significantly affect family and interpersonal communication structures, particularly among digital natives like university students (Hertlein & Ancheta, 2021). Being the biggest messaging app with more than 2 billion monthly active users globally, WhatsApp has become a top digital communication technology. While it promotes simple and immediate communication, an overdependence on instant messaging has been argued to reduce the depth of face-to-face relationships and undermine deeper interpersonal communication (Hertlein & Ancheta, 2021). Furthermore, after optimizing the perception of WhatsApp usage, suggestions given by previous researchers, unexplained variances in WhatsApp usage among users and parental control. Features like last seen, read receipts, and status updates allow parents to monitor students' activities in real time easily, often blurring the lines between control and care. However, this research work will investigate parental control and surveillance of WhatsApp among students of University of Jos and also



contribute to an enhanced understanding of how digital communication technologies configure contemporary family interactions.

The main objective of this study is to assess students' perception of WhatsApp as a tool for parental control and surveillance. Thus, the Objectives of this study be;

1. To examine WhatsApp as a tool for parental control in family communication among students of the University of Jos,
2. To analyze the role of WhatsApp features such as last-seen, read receipts, and status updates in enabling parental surveillance among students of the University of Jos.
3. To investigate how family WhatsApp groups serve as spaces for surveillance and regulation among students of the University of Jos.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is Panoptic Theory, which finds its origin in the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault. In his seminal 1975 book, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault used the panopticona prison design conceptualised by English social theorist Jeremy Bentham in the late 18th century_as a powerful metaphor for the operation of power in modern disciplinary societies. The original circumstance of the theory was an architectural plan for a circular prison with a central watchtower, allowing guards to observe all inmates without the inmates knowing whether they were being watched at any given moment. Foucault's critical insight was that this uncertainty would lead prisoners to internalise the surveillance gaze, ultimately regulating their own behavior and conforming to institutional norms without the need for overt force or constant supervision. In relation to mass media, the panopticon model traditionally described a top-down, centralized form of surveillance where institutions like governments or corporations could observe populations through collected data or broadcast messages that normalized certain ideologies. Mass media acted as a kind of central tower, disseminating information and shaping public behavior from a position of authority. However, the rise of interactive digital platforms has significantly complicated this dynamic, moving from a one-way broadcast model to a networked, participatory one where surveillance is decentralized and mutual.

This shift is precisely where Panopticon Theory becomes acutely relevant to WhatsApp and family communication. The platform's affordances such as read receipts, last seen timestamps, persistent chat logs, and the group broadcast feature create a digital environment of constant visibility that strongly echoes the panopticon prison. In the context of the family, as the empirical studies show, this leads to internalise surveillance and self-regulation. Family members, aware that their messages, photos, and online status are visible to the entire group, begin to self-censor, avoid conflict, and perform idealized roles to project an image of harmony, much like inmates moderating their behaviour under the imagined gaze of the guard. This dynamic explains the findings from Chile and Israel, where conflict was silenced and rules were enforced to maintain an "untroubled family" image. Surveillance becomes lateral, with each member acting as both the watcher and the watched, monitoring each other's well-being, activities, and adherence to family norms through shared photos and messages.

Method

The survey research design was employed for this investigation. this due to the fact that this approach enables the measurement of respondent's opinions regarding a particular subject (Creswel,2018).200 and 300 level students of the department of mass communication, faculty of arts, university of Jos, made up 313 students of the population; according to records of the examination office in 2026,to reach who are directly involved in the use of WhatsApp as a tool for communication. The purposive sampling method



was used for every element in the sample. The researcher used this method because he works at the department and will have easy access to available data. At this stage, the researcher through the class representative was able to distribute 313 questionnaires to respondents (students) online. The criterion for selection was that you must be from 200 or 300 level of the department of mass communication, where the instrument is being distributed. They were assured of keeping their identities confidential. A student in the department of mass communication university of Jos face validated the questionnaire used to gather information. Likert scales using the following scales were used to construct questionnaire items; (1) strongly disagree (2), disagree (3), agree (4) and strongly agree. for appropriate guidance, every item was organized in line with research purpose. Three weeks was given for administering the questionnaire. Descriptive analysis was employed to examine the data obtained from the field.

Findings

The result presented below were based on the analysis of data generated from 313 copies of questionnaire distributed and return form the 200 and 300 level students of the Department of mass communication, Faculty of arts, University of Jos. There was 100% return from online respondents.

Research question 1: What are the perceptions of WhatsApp as a tool for parental control in family communication among students of the University of Jos?

Table one: Respondents response to examine WhatsApp as a tool for parental control in family communication among students of the University of Jos.

Options	SA	A	D	SD	Mean Score	Decision
WhatsApp communication enhances family bond	55	163	47	48	2.71	Accepted
Family communication depends largely on WhatsApp	19	20	94	180	1.61	Rejected
WhatsApp communication limit students' ability to explore	81	140	47	45	3.01	Accepted
Most family do not use WhatsApp to communicate to their children	42	177	79	57	2.92	Accepted
Grand mean					2.56	

Source: Field Survey (2026)

Data of analyzed table above reveals that a grand mean of 2.56, examine WhatsApp as a tool for parental control in family communication among students of the department of masscommunication, university of Jos. This implies that students of department of mass communication, university of Jos, use WhatsApp as a tool for family communication.

Research question 2: What is the role (s) of WhatsApp features such as last-seen, read receipts, and status updates in enabling parental surveillance among students of the University of Jos?



Table two: Respondents response to analyze the role of WhatsApp features such as last-seen, read receipts, and status updates in enabling parental surveillance among students of the University of Jos.

Options	SA	A	D	SD	Mean Score	Decision
WhatsApp features provide security for monitoring student on campus activities	55	107	103	48	2.53	Accepted
WhatsApp features do not guarantee students safety	82	163	46	22	2.97	Accepted
WhatsApp features expose student activities while on campus	39	44	154	76	2.14	Rejected
WhatsApp features help parents to know if students have travelled outside the state.	42	57	177	79	2.46	Rejected
Grand mean					2.52	

Source: Field Survey (2026)

The results of the table above with the grand mean of 2.52, shows that WhatsApp features such as last-seen, read receipts, and status updates in enabling parental surveillance do not guarantee safety of students of department of mass communication the University of Jos.

Research question 3: How does family WhatsApp groups serve as spaces for surveillance and regulation among students of the University of Jos?

Table three: Respondents response to investigate how family WhatsApp groups serve as spaces for surveillance and regulation among students of the University of Jos.

Options	SA	A	D	SD	Mean Score	Decision
Most family adopt WhatsApp group for easy communication with students on campus	64	137	38	74	2.61	Accepted
WhatsApp group helps to checkmate students' activities to ensure their safety on campus	72	45	141	56	2.43	Rejected
family WhatsApp groups does not guarantee surveillance of students on campus	66	177	44	26	2.90	Accepted
Students block their family members from viewing their status on WhatsApp to avoid being monitored	64	71	106	72	2.40	Rejected
Grand mean					2.58	

Source: Field Survey (2026)

Analysis of the table above with a grand mean 2.58 shows that family WhatsApp groups do not serve as spaces for surveillance and regulation among students of the University of Jos. This implies that family WhatsApp groups does not guarantee surveillance of students of the department of mass communication, university of Jos.



Discussion

The findings from this study examine WhatsApp as a tool for parental control in family communication among students of the University of Jos. The overall mean score 2.56 suggests that 'Most family do not use WhatsApp to communicate to their children,' suggesting that most families do rely on WhatsApp to communicate with their children in school. However, while respondents acknowledged that WhatsApp communication enhances family bond, the study also highlighted a gap in the fact Family communication does not depend largely on WhatsApp group as seen, but rather tries to maintain relationship while the students are still on campus. Another finding shows that students do not block their parents from viewing their status. The study also reveals that WhatsApp communication does not limit students' ability to explore, reason being that students can use WhatsApp features to hide their activities in order not to be disturbed by their parents because the school environment gives them freedom to do what they can't do at home freely. These findings align with Branje, Laursen, & Collins, (2020) who defined family communication is described as interaction that focuses open and honest sharing where members participate freely and comfortably. This kind of communication supports identity formation and emotional well-being, especially by balancing openness and conformity orientations to aid adolescent development. Moreover, family communication patterns theory is defined as a framework that explains communication styles based on two core orientations: conversation orientation, which encourages broad and deep communication, and conformity orientation, which emphasizes agreement and obedience to shared family beliefs.

The second research question further analyses the role of WhatsApp features such as last-seen, read receipts, and status updates in enabling parental surveillance among students of the University of Jos. The key finding was that WhatsApp features do not guarantee students safety on campus. With a mean score of 2.52, demonstrating that WhatsApp feature serves as a guide for parents to know the whereabouts of students. However, there are concerns that WhatsApp features do not expose student activities while on campus but rather help the parents to have an idea about students' activities on campus. The study suggests that students should have guardians within the school environment as alternative to checkmate their activities while campus, rather than depending on WhatsApp for surveillance. This research goes in line with (Ouagal, et al 2018) who states that, surveillance is viewed as an active process rather than passive observation. It engages in the collection, recording, and interpretation of detailed data to regulate or influence behaviour. This process obligates those observed to modify their behaviour, often in anticipation of being watched, which makes surveillance a dynamic mechanism for social control

The study also investigated how family WhatsApp groups serve as spaces for surveillance and regulation among students of the University of Jos with a grand mean score of 9.0. The finding here was that family WhatsApp groups does not guarantee surveillance of students on campus with a mean score of 2.58, demonstrating how WhatsApp is not a yardstick for surveillance of student's activities. However, there are concerns that WhatsApp group does not help to checkmate students' activities to ensure their safety on campus. Reason being that students can decide to block their parents on WhatsApp in order not to be monitored. As the study works with data, we can't deny that students partially do these things so that their parents won't mount pressure on them to know about their whereabouts on campus. The findings align with Cheung and Cheah (2025) which describes this form of control is often characterized by parents' pressure, intrusion, and domination concerning children's thoughts, feelings, and behaviour. Moreover, parental control is defined as the use of limit-setting, supervision, and decision-making by parents regarding their children's activities and social interactions. This encompasses parental monitoring and firm enforcement of rules, along with involvement in children's lives to guide behaviour and maintain discipline.



Conclusion and Recommendations

The study confirms that both parental monitoring and open communication are essential protective factors against excessive social media use and poor among students of University of Jos. The findings on the research questions adopted for this study is significantly and independently predicted students' social media use and adjustment. Furthermore, their combined influence accounted for a meaningful proportion of the variance in these outcomes. These results underscore the continued relevance of parenting practices for university students. Even as young people assert greater independence in WhatsApp usage, the study highlights the importance of a balanced approach that combines appropriate supervision with open, empathetic dialogue. Such an approach not only mitigates excessive or harmful social media engagement but also fosters healthier emotional and behavioral adjustment. In the context of Nigeria's evolving digital landscape and cultural dynamics, the study affirms the urgent need to strengthen parent-students' relationships through intentional strategies that align with the realities of modern digital age.

Relating the 'Panoptic theory' to this research, original circumstance of the theory was an architectural plan for a circular prison with a central watchtower, allowing guards to observe all inmates without the inmates knowing whether they were being watched at any given moment. It is good for parents to adopt this frame work for students but in a different approach whereby they monitor their activities in school. But at the same time student know how to use these gadgets more than their parents, so the find a way to apply those features if they are being pressured by surveillance. So, parents should learn how to strike a balance between family communication and surveillance in other to push the students into more danger.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made.

1. To ascertain the perceptions of WhatsApp as a tool for parental control in family communication among students of the University of Jos:

Family communication, understood as the exchange of thoughts, emotions, and information among family members, is widely regarded as crucial for maintaining healthy relationships. Family communication should not only be done on WhatsApp, but rather parents should find alternative means of communication like visiting and checking on students' time to time to know how they are coping with realities of school environment.

2. To ascertain the roles of WhatsApp features such as last-seen, read receipts, and status updates in enabling parental surveillance among students of the University of Jos:

Surveillance or parental control by families should be done systematically, and observation on WhatsApp update should be done using social dynamic mechanism in order to promote social change.

3. To ascertain you if family WhatsApp groups serve as spaces for surveillance and regulation among students of the University of Jos:

Parents should learn to have a good relationship with lecturers to help them check and know the whereabouts of students at every point in time. The Parental control on WhatsApp status updates should promote gatekeeping on immoral content, such as pornography and hate speech, among students. The study recommended that educators and parents should monitor the use of WhatsApp among students and educate them on the responsible use of mobile messaging applications.

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