Using text-Based WhatsApp vs face-to-face interviews to understand early school dropout

A comparison of the qualitative data collected from a sample of adolescent early school leavers using two different methods: text-based WhatsApp and traditional face-to-face interviews.

Everyone has the right to basic education, which includes adult basic education, as well as the right to higher education, which the government is required to gradually make affordable and accessible through reasonable means. Despite this, many schools in South Africa remain in poor condition, resulting in thousands of learners dropping out.

The General Household Survey, 2021, published by Statistics South Africa, shows that while the majority of learners aged 18 and 19 were still enrolled in secondary school, nearly three out of 10 pupils aged 18 years (29,3%) and 4 out of 9 (46,3%) of 19-year-olds had dropped out of school. The General Household Survey (GHS) also indicates that poverty and income shocks, and family responsibilities, migration, and health issues are the leading causes of school dropout. Other underlying causes of dropout include poor learning foundations, academic challenges, inadequate school resources and facilities, ineffective teaching and school management, and limited access to schools.

The early school dropout rate is particularly concerning, since it results in fewer possibilities for job opportunities and limited access to higher education.

Methodology

This study compared the qualitative data collected from a sample of adolescent early school leavers using two different methods: text-based WhatsApp and traditional face-to-face interviews. Interviews were conducted amongst South African early school leavers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of early school leavers in South Africa using WhatsApp (n = 9) and face-to-face (n = 27), followed by a focus group discussion with interviewers. The Mann-Whitney U and chi squared tests were applied for assessing associations.

Key findings

Considering that the interviews included both verbal and text communication, the study discovered that face-to-face interviews and WhatsApp text-based interviews each offered advantages and disadvantages.

Using strategies suitable for the interview style, rapport was successfully established in both instances. The number of rapport-building statements used in the face-to-face and WhatsApp interview conditions was equivalent; however, the face-to-face condition and significantly more off-topic statements started by the interviewer, were present in
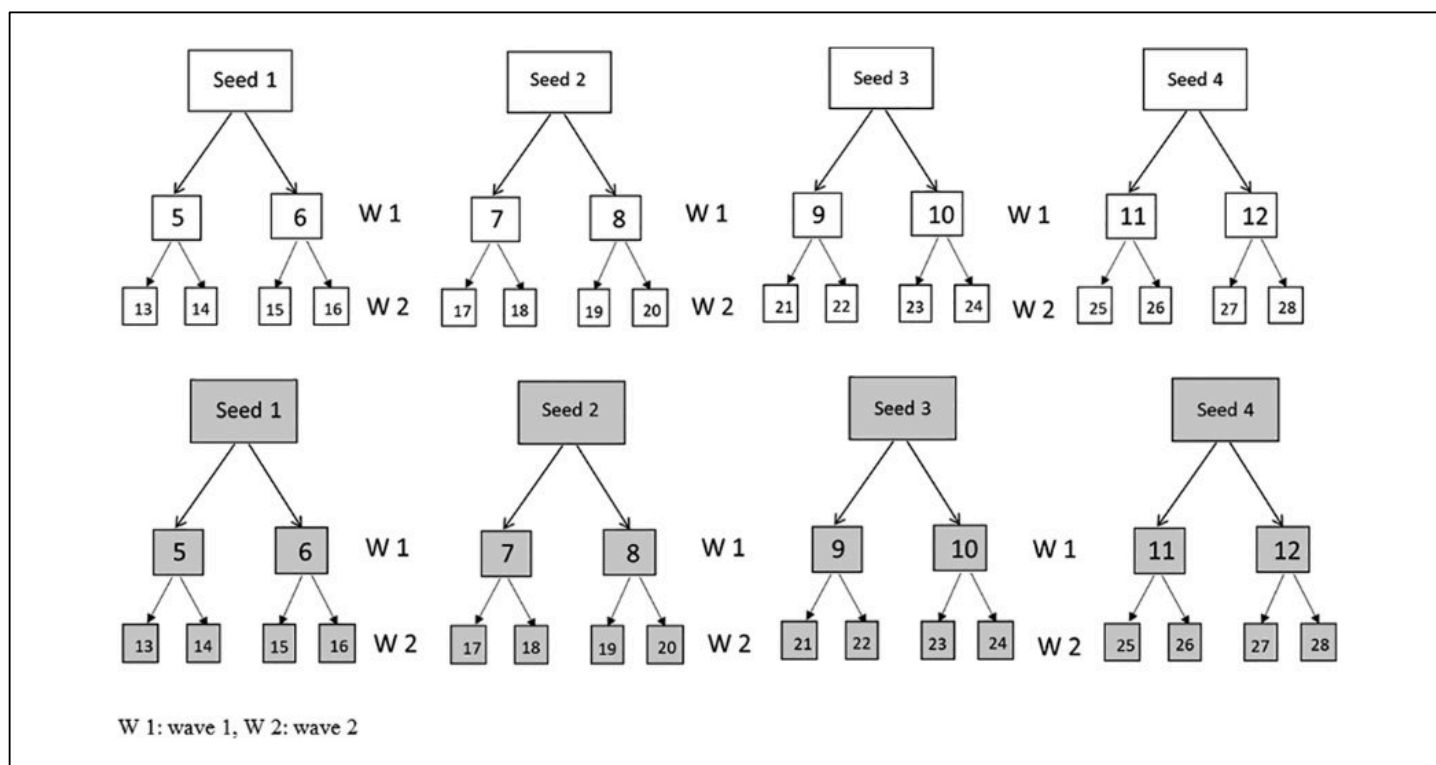
Figure 1: Respondent-driven sampling for out-of-school youth—a schematic representation of four seeds.

the WhatsApp condition. According to previous studies, establishing rapport during instant messaging required more time and more rapport-building remarks from the interviewer than face-to-face interviews. (Jowett et al., 2011; Kazmer & Xie, 2008; Shapka et al., 2016).

We also found, in accordance with previous research, that the anonymity and distance between the interviewer and participant in the WhatsApp condition obscured power differentials, enabling rapport building (Cleary & Walter, 2011; Shapka et al., 2016).

The qualitative findings also show that participants in the face-to-face condition felt that they could relate more easily to interviewers from similar socioeconomic backgrounds.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the body of research that compares online text-based and face-to-face interviewing techniques empirically. It is recommended that the WhatsApp interview protocol be adapted to include, for instance, an open-ended question sent to participants once a week over approximately a month, even though the duration of the WhatsApp condition was a concern. This will shorten the interview period, increase interest, and enable a real-time analysis of the responses to that question. The WhatsApp interview may also include other multimedia elements like voice or video, as well as internet jargon. Giving participants the option to select how they want to be interviewed is also important, since this may increase interest in the study and response rates.

1st Floor, School of Public Health,
University of the Witwatersrand
York Road, Parktown,
Johannesburg 2193,
South Africa

Director: Prof Shane Norris

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