

FULL-LENGTH ARTICLES

Building Participatory Instant Messaging: Developing a Methodology for Online Workshops Using WhatsApp

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This paper describes an application of instant messaging to support extended online participatory workshops. We describe the development and application of Participatory Instant Messaging (PIM) within the context of two projects in Sweden, which both aimed to integrate migrant experiences into policy dialogues and societal awareness. The projects brought together artistic practice, research traditions and the active engagement of participants in self-expression. The methodology leveraged the communicative opportunities in a familiar instant messaging platform to facilitate remote participatory workshops, overcoming geographical and logistical barriers that can otherwise constrain workshops to particular localities. PIM was used to co-create narratives and media directly with participants, enriching our understanding of their lives and enhancing public engagement with migrants' stories, while remaining sensitive to participants' lives and other commitments. This paper discusses the iterative design of PIM, from pilot experiments to full-scale application, highlighting the methodological insights gained and the practical challenges addressed throughout these phases.

We drew on the concept of social affordances of technology, which foregrounds the space of potential interactions within participants' own use of instant messaging. Social affordances informed both facilitation strategies and the design of participatory activities through bricolage on existing media practices. Offering semi-synchronous workshop activities within a frame of online social interaction provided a rich opportunity for sustained participatory engagement. We discuss the opportunities this provides for both rich data collection and meaningful interaction, which in our case contributed to a deeper understanding of the participant's experiences and provided opportunities to publicly share content that reflects those.

In drawing together these reflections, we aim to contribute to the broader scholarship of participatory practice, both through an account of the method and through a discussion of the design principles underpinning the methodological development. We argue for nuance in appreciating how new technologies can align with the objectives of participatory methodologies, and offer some ideas and principles for process design in this context. The findings underscore the potential of PIM and other technologically mediated

methodologies to build on traditional participatory approaches within contemporary digital platforms, expanding the possibilities for civic engagement and collaborative knowledge production in increasingly digital societies.

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Authorship statement

Henrik Teleman had the original idea for a micro-documentation methodology using mobile phones. This was developed into PIM on WhatsApp by Chris High. All four authors have been involved in its application as coordinators, facilitators and participants in different constellations in different projects. This paper was drafted and edited by Chris High drawing on additional text from Henrik Teleman and Eleonora Narvselius. Henrik Teleman, Eleonora Narvselius and Batul Boshi have all contributed to manuscript revision and have read and approved the submitted version. Chris High redrafted the text based on feedback from the reviewers, after consultation with the other authors.

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Introduction

There are several accounts of the development of different participatory methodologies in the literature. They range from full-blown origin stories like the development of participatory video in the Fogo Island process (Crocker, 2003; Summers, 1970) to reflections on longer term transitions, such as the shift from rapid rural appraisal to participatory research and action (Chambers, 1994b, 2004). Such moments of innovation provide a space for reflection on participatory methodology more generally. In this paper, we discuss the ideas that underpinned the development of a particular novel methodology to contribute more generally to the scholarship of practice: an account of the principles and heuristics that give shape to participatory practice and of the development of critique in relation to both the means and the ends of practice.

This paper reports on an approach that used instant messaging as a platform for conducting remotely held participatory workshops, which we call participatory instant messaging (PIM). The development of PIM began with a series of pilots and was further refined through application in two funded projects: an ethnological art project and an artistic research project, which both focused on understanding the experiences of migrants to Sweden with an eye to public and policy impact. Instant messaging provided a communicative platform for social interaction and for the production and sharing of media. The resulting methodology is highly relevant to participatory practice where social connections are increasingly mediated digitally and where hybrid online and offline communities are increasingly normal (Maddox, 2015). We report on both methods (craft knowledge and practical considerations), and methodology (a more general contribution of principles to the scholarship of participatory practice).

Background

The impulse for developing the methodology was a need for remotely based participatory interaction to supplement fieldwork in *Vad Hände Sedan?* (*What happened next?*), an art project that ran from 2020 to 2022. The project had its roots in 2015 when the volume of asylum seekers arriving in Europe from the Middle East and Africa increased markedly (Percoco & Fratesi, 2018). Meeting some of these newcomers in a railway station turned into following them to the different places they were being housed and eventually an ethnological art project *I Telefonen finns hela människan* (*The mobile contains the whole person*). That project drew together material and inspiration from interviews and the images and videos from the mobile phones of 90 new arrivals to Sweden. The intention was to disrupt the image of migrants as the “other”, and instead to show them as diverse and human. The work was expressed through a book, an exhibition and a considerable amount of media work and publicity. *Vad Hände Sedan?* (VHS) returned to the same respondents five years later to see how their lives have changed based on interviews and found media from 30 of the contributors



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to the original project. As well as engaging with individuals, there was an ambition to actively collaborate with a group of participants to document their experiences. The narratives and images that resulted from the *VHS* fieldwork and PIM exercise were the basis for a book and an exhibition; conceptualized as a frozen film that assembled a spatial presentation of the stories, lives and feelings of the migrants for the public.

A subset of participants in *VHS* also took part in workshops and ethnographic interviews for the Swedish arm of a Nordforsk funded art research project called *MaHoMe* (Making it Home: An Aesthetic Methodological Contribution to the Study of Migrant Home-Making and Politics of Integration). This project included other participants, drawing in a wider circle of migrant experience than the asylum seekers who were the focus of *VHS*. *MaHoMe* explored how to understand and valorize different migrants' own understanding of the concept of home in their lives and how they go about the process of making a home in their destination country. The findings of *MaHoMe* express this scientifically and through public art, as well as identifying and influencing relevant policy processes. The two projects shared a set of '*laborations*': practice oriented reflective workshops that opened up the methodological processes and the emerging themes to a reference group of academic researchers, activists and art practitioners.

Both projects engaged with a geographically spread out set of participants and with full and busy lives. Their different patterns of availability and the high financial and time cost of travel made it difficult to bring participants together in person, limiting the opportunities for extended face-to-face creative processes. A desire to lower the threshold for meaningful participation suggested an approach that could work interactively at a distance. WhatsApp was selected as a medium after some early experiments with SMS. The platform was chosen for its popularity amongst an internationally connected group of participants and its technical advantages over SMS for managing both individual and group media.

Technologically mediated Participatory practice

Participatory methodologies form a very broad suite of approaches that seek to engage directly with individuals or groups of people on issues of concern to them. They have a long history (Fischer, 2009), and participatory approaches are found: both inside academic practice (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Brown, 2022; Fals-Borda, 1987) and outside in fields such as community development (Ledwith, 2020), international development assistance (Cornwall & Guijt, 2004; Guijt & van Veldhuizen, 1998; Paul, 1987; Willis, 2005), activist arts and participatory media practice (Gregory et al., 2005; Mitchell et al., 2012), labor history (Lindqvist, 1978, 1979; Michelson, 2000), civic engagement with politics (Arnstein, 1969; Fischer, 2003, 2009; Popovic & Miller, 2015) and many others. Much of this diversity has arisen directly from repeated cycles of application and reflection; with considerable cross-fertilization between different domains of application. For example, there are overlapping lineages of participatory video practice both



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within academic research (eg. Davies et al., 2022; Nawrath et al., 2024) and other domains (e.g. (Gandhi et al., 2007; Garthwaite, 2000; Muñiz, 2009)), and much interaction between academic and non-academic practitioners (cf. Mitchell et al., 2012; Roberts & Muñiz, 2018).

Different lineages of participatory practice emphasize different degrees and styles of participation yet there are many common features. Fischer (2009) observes that the origin of much participatory practice lies in an interest in opening spaces for self-expression and enhanced autonomy for non-experts in processes that are otherwise dominated by expert knowledge. Participatory methodology is therefore ideological core at its core (Carpentier, 2011) and often associated with an interest in issues of power. Many lineages draw explicitly or implicitly on the work of Marx, Gramsci, Ghandi, Freire and others (Ahluwalia & Zegeye, 2001; Diaz, 2012; Ghosh, 2019; Mayo, 2019) and the insight that the agency and consciousness of oppressed people is central to addressing the structural causes of their oppression. It follows that participants should not be considered only as contributors to the projects of others, but attention given to their own motivations and their sense of being participants in their own projects. Methodologies that recognize (Fricker, 2018; Thomas, 2012) participants as autonomous and that work through a logic of invitation rather than intervention (High et al., 2008) give

space for enthusiasm (Ison & Russell, 2000), engagement and interaction. This quality of affective context opens a space for re-assessing relationships, creating opportunities for conscientization, solidarity and collective action.

Participatory practice aims to achieve such qualities through a balance between the structure that enables and provides resources for participation and an openness to emergence, negotiation and discovery that engages with participants' diverse goals outside of the project frame. The tension between structure and emergence motivates a shift in professional focus to encompass the role of facilitator; someone that *"... engages the creative forces within persons which energize thinking and doing"* (White, 1999, pp. 18–19). Facilitation is central in many different traditions of participatory research and practice including action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2008), participatory research and action (Gaventa, 1998), social learning (Ison & Watson, 2007) and organization learning (Cohen & Sproull, 1996). The tension between expertise and openness to non-expertise inherent in the role of the facilitator has driven proposals for re-orienting facilitation to enable empowerment (Chambers, 1997; Wheeler et al., 2018) or to get beyond facilitation in order to address structural power (Mohan, 2006). They echo a wider critique of participatory practice and the consequent issues of power, control and liberation that it evokes (Hickey & Mohan, 2004; Milne, 2016). This raises important questions but does not obviate attention to facilitation as a practical and relational work in carrying out participatory methodologies.

There is a substantial literature that discusses the principles and relational aspects of facilitation (eg. Chambers, 2002; Hoyle & McGeeney, 2019; Pretty et al., 1995), along with participatory activities and games that a facilitator can draw on with a group. Sequences of activities are often tied together in the form of workshops, which have been defined as an *"...arrangement whereby a group of people learn, acquire knowledge, perform creative problem-solving or innovate in relation to a domain specific issue"* (Ørngreen & Levinsen, 2017, p. 71). Workshops thus comprise a sequence of successive interactions that build engagement over time, embedded in a context of social interaction. They have their roots in social constructivism and became popular and more widespread in the 1960s and on as *"as social constructivist ideas spread into a wide range of domains"* (ibid.). They are said to provide parallel heterogeneous (Jones & SPEECH, 2001) or communicative (Wicks & Reason, 2009) spaces alongside everyday life where sustained engagement (Ørngreen & Levinsen, 2017) and social learning (Brymer et al., 2018; Keen et al., 2005) are possible. Workshops and their encapsulated activities are thus conceptualized on one hand as structured and bounded in time and space, and on the other as opportunities for emergence and discovery through sustained, open engagement.

Technologically mediated participation

Within the broader field of participatory methodologies, there are a subcategory of traditions that employ technologies and material means to give focus to collective representation and analysis. For example, in Participatory

Research and Action (PRA), seasonal calendars and social maps (Chambers, 1994a; Mascarenhas & Kumar, 1991; Pretty et al., 1995) use local materials to build physical representations of aspects of community life as a point of reference for analysis and discussion. There are many other analogue forms of technologically mediated participatory practice, including drawing and diagramming (Kesby et al., 2013), and the use of cardboard (T. Gibson, 1996) or Lego (Roos & Victor, 2018). As digital technologies have developed, a growing subset of participatory methodologies draw on them to underpin social processes of sensemaking and interaction. There is an extensive literature on digitally enhanced participatory practice, such as participatory video (Mitchell et al., 2012), digital storytelling (Dunford & Jenkins, 2017; Lambert, 2013), participatory GIS (Dunn, 2007) and so on. In most of these methodologies, the digital technology supports structured activities that sit within the social context of a workshop.

New applications of technology in participatory tend to track the spread and availability of new technologies, and technological innovation can also change established participatory methodologies. For example, it has been observed that participatory video practice is shifting towards projects that use smartphones and tablets for film-making rather than specialist video-making gear (Roberts & Muñiz, 2018). As different kinds of communities increasingly combine online and offline social interaction (Maddox, 2015; Przybylski, 2020), the social media platforms and instant messaging apps that mediate hybrid social interaction have quite naturally become part of the repertoire of participatory practice. Hence new communication technologies are providing new spaces for the activities and the social aspects of workshops to take place, with applications including crowd science (Salter et al., 2009), organizing social movements (Candón Mena et al., 2018) and research (Hadfield-Hill & Zara, 2018).

More recently the pandemic drove a new appreciation of synchronous communication technologies such as Zoom for online workshop practice (eg. Shamsuddin et al., 2021). With relatively low bandwidth requirements, broad availability and flexibility across different forms of media, messaging apps such as WhatsApp also found new application in areas such as education (Motaung & Dube, 2020) and community organization (Kartikawati, 2021). There is thus an emerging potential for participatory methodologies that draw on the naturalistic ways that people interact online, yet it is not clear at present that this potential is being fully realized. For example, a review of the use of social media in e-participation found that social media is mostly used to share information rather than to facilitate interaction (Alarabiat et al., 2016). Hall et al. (2021) and Fouqueray et al. (2023) argue that practical, scientific and ethical challenges remain for remote research, while Marzi (2021) and Shamsuddin et al. (2021) point to some of the difficulties in developing participatory practice in online environments, mentioning time restrictions, fatigue, difficulties in facilitation and rapport, and a restricted space for action and reflection.

In the case of instant messaging, Colom (2022) argues that WhatsApp and other instant messaging services have largely been studied as objects of research rather than as a methodological space in their own right (eg. Bar et al., 2016; Montag et al., 2015). Methodological applications tend to focus on the use of messaging to facilitate information gathering in research, such as interviewing (K. Gibson, 2020) or surveys (Chang et al., 2014; Manji et al., 2021). There is some emerging work which draws on the communicative potential of messaging more deeply, such as for focus groups (Colom, 2022; Neo et al., 2022; Singer et al., 2023), ethnographic fieldwork (Van Doorn, 2013; Waltorp, 2018) or to provide a line of evidence and analysis of the sensemaking of groups engaged in participatory video (Boni et al., 2017). We argue that there are opportunities for deeper and more extended processes that broaden the current understanding of what instant messaging offers for participatory methodology. In developing such a process, we went back to first principles and worked with the strengths of the technology in relation to a particular group. The aim was to provide a space for social learning, co-production and the valorization of participant knowledge and identity through interwoven semi-naturalistic social interaction and organized activities. Our approach began with seeking to understand how participants use the particular technology in their own lives and building up from there, rather than from trying to convert successful in-person activities into an online form.

The Social affordances of technology

To examine the space of opportunity that technologies provide for participatory processes, we draw on the notion of social affordances of technology. The theory of affordances developed from biology and psychology (J. J. Gibson, 1977, 1979) to become a central concept in Human-Computer Interaction (Faith, 2016; Kaptelinin, 2014; Krippendorf, 2007). The concept points to the opportunities for interaction that an object or a technology offers, and as social affordances, the opportunities for action given by social practices and norms (Carvalho, 2020). The ecological heritage of social affordances highlights emergent interaction within an environment rather than simply function, albeit in this case the environment is social as much as physical. The social affordances of technology supports questions about the emergent and evolving use of technologies by people for social purposes (Bar et al., 2016). As facilitators working in a context shaped by a technology (eg. instant messaging), the social affordances of that technology draw attention to how participants could relate to one another and to us in that context. The perspective suggests that we have influence rather than control, and obliges attention to the expectations, agency and constraints experienced by participants in the social space defined by the technology.

In this paper we apply the idea of the social affordances of technology in two different modes: (i) to discuss how we investigated participants' own experience of social messaging while we were planning how to interact with them using the technology, and (ii) to analyze the emergent outcomes of the

participatory process. The first mode provides an analytical lens to investigate the naturalistic ways that particular technologies are used by particular groups of participants. In other words, how do the people we were working with use WhatsApp in their own lives and what did this mean for how we could use it in our work? The literature points to two qualitatively different sets of social affordances that the technology offers within the lives of migrants, above and beyond its general use. One set is the affordances of sharing information, such as intelligence on employment opportunities (Ruget & Usmanalieva, 2019) or migration routes (Dekker et al., 2018; Merisalo & Jauhiainen, 2021). There is also work that looks at more nuanced social or relational affordances, such as identity construction outside of the constraints of a host society (Mendoza Pérez & Morgade Salgado, 2020), the maintenance of family rituals across geographical distance (Caballero, 2018) and connectivity, solidarity and companionship (Eide, 2020). This suggests an approach that is founded not only on sharing information, but also in seeing messaging as an space for emotions (Mascheroni & Vincent, 2016; Reid & Reid, 2010) and hence relational work.

The second mode provides a lens to analyze what is afforded by technologically mediated participatory processes. In this perspective, the social affordances of a participatory technology are the types of emergent social interaction offered by designed processes. For example, participatory video (cf. Mitchell et al., 2012) can be analyzed in terms of social affordances highlighting the development of mutual responsibility (High & Faith, 2013) or the co-construction of shared meaning (Roberts & Muñiz, 2018). In the case of our work, what did using WhatsApp for participatory workshops give rise to and might this have been different if we had used a different technology? The actual unfolding of such social affordances arises within the agency of both facilitators and participants as they negotiate and perform participatory processes, as well as the environment that the social and technological context provides for their interaction. This complex causality suggests attention to the nature of the technology as co-constructed by participants and facilitators, to the social dynamics and expectations of the participants, and to the intentions and skill of the facilitators. There is of course also a strong element of luck.

PIM practice

PIM emerged from planning *Vad Hände Sedan?* where instant messaging was identified as a light-touch interactive medium for eliciting narratives and media following contact through ethnological interviews. As the idea was new, a set of pilot experiments were established in different contexts, allowing different aspects of the PIM process to be explored with small groups of participants (see [Table 1](#)). This allowed the development of i) an understanding of the activities and options for interaction within the space of WhatsApp, and ii) a set of processes for organizing PIM in the context of a distributed group of participants and project team members.

Table 1. PIM development process

PIM process	First pilot: What's in the Box	Second pilot: VHS test run	Third pilot: Field methods course pilot	First application: MaHoMe participatory workshops	Second application: VHS PIM
Context	Informal group	Art project - development	Education	Research project	Art project - application
Focus	Developing activities	Developing workflow and data management	Individual interaction and production of test material	Application in a research project	Application in an art project
Participants	Study group	Refugees and asylum seekers	Refugees and asylum seekers	Migrants	Refugees and asylum seekers
Initiation & completion	Discussed exercise during face-to-face workshop. Results reviewed by group.	Direct contact in interviews.	Participants contacted by project team. Individual follow-up afterwards	In-person workshops before and after	Online workshops before and after.
Duration	5 days	4-5 weeks (intermittent)	1-2 weeks	3 weeks	2.5 weeks
Institutional framing of ethics	Voluntary group	Art practice	Education	Research	Art practice
Participants	5	3	5	11	6
Facilitation	Single facilitator	Facilitator/ translator	Individual facilitation	Single facilitator with translation as required.	Coordinator and facilitator/ translator
Language	English	Swedish and Arabic	English and Arabic	Swedish, English, Arabic and Russian	Arabic, Swedish and English

The earliest pilot (*What's in the Box*) was informal, a week-long interactive exercise on WhatsApp with a group of students and colleagues, giving an opportunity to develop and test activities. A second pilot followed within the early phases of the *VHS* project, which engaged with a very small number of participants and focused on technology and workflows. Finally, a group of MA students undertook a third pilot as a group project in a methods course, which explored using WhatsApp within *VHS*. They developed different approaches with their own contacts and then individually with *VHS* participants, writing a report on their experience (Bruggeman et al., 2022).

The pilots along with the eventual application of PIM within the projects gave a wide range of contexts and experiences to reflect on its use. In general, the *VHS* pilots and project worked with participants who had come to Sweden as asylum seekers in the period 2015-2016. Only a subset of *VHS* participants (6 out of 30) took part in PIM. *What's in the Box* and *MaHoMe* both drew in a broader group, though still all with personal experience of migration. All participants were adult, with a roughly even mix of genders in each PIM process.

Grounding the process

In both projects, the PIM workshop process were bookended by an initial and a final synchronous workshop. In *MaHoMe*, these were held in person for a day each. Sharing food, chatting and washing up together created a context for a set of planned activities: warm-ups, group and individual tasks, and some preparation on storytelling and media production using mobile phones. In *VHS*, the bookend interaction took place online for 1-2 hours on Zoom. The initial interaction began with a round of introductions of participants and project staff, followed by an interactive demonstration of the process. In both projects, the initial synchronous workshops created a social context between participants and with the project staff, which can be characterized by mutual care. The closing synchronous workshops were opportunities for feedback and reflection, to express appreciation to participants for their contributions, and to look ahead to how the material would be used within the projects.

As can be seen in [table 1](#), the range of contexts presented a range of different institutional framings of ethics, requiring different procedures in establishing the process. For example, *MaHoMe*, as a research project, falls under national research ethics regulations. It required a formal research ethics application to the national authority, which specified a written information sheet and consent form (in both Swedish and English), which covered the use of derived media as well as of research data. In comparison, student projects are explicitly exempted from the national research ethics law and ethical oversight comes through methods training and regular tutorials during project work. In addition, in the case of the third pilot, each student signed a non-disclosure agreement with the *VHS* project, agreeing not to retain or share any materials derived from PIM. In *VHS*, written consent for the overall project had already been secured from each participant during the preceding phases of the project. As an art project, this process explicitly covered the conditions under which participant stories and media could be used. Consent for PIM was checked verbally with each participant on recruitment and again at the initial online workshop. In the finishing workshop for PIM, there was space for feedback from participants on the process and from the project leader on how different media from the process might fit into the book and exhibition.

Formal ethics procedures provided a necessary but insufficient framework, given the value-base of participatory work. We were working with participants whose identities and place in society are contested and paid attention to their own interests and projects, and hence our common approach beyond the different institutional framings of ethics was to take time and care with individual relationships. For example, we were very aware of the trade-offs between safeguarding participants as vulnerable migrants and a strong value within the projects of valorizing their individuality and agency as human beings. Unpacking this required an appreciation of each participants' needs and subjective understandings of their position, and carefully exploring with

them how we should behave with one another. Actively negotiating an idea of what we wanted from one another around the project took place over weeks and months rather than hours or days.

In *VHS*, all participants had experience of the preceding project and chose to take part in the PIM activities after extensive one-to-one discussions during the preceding phase of the current project. This was reinforced by the use of staged consent (Davies et al., 2022; Hansen & Colucci, 2020), with the right to complete withdrawal at any point prior to publication. Both the MaHoMe and VHS PIM teams included specialist facilitators with linguistic and cultural understanding of the participants, as well as migration experience of their own and professional experience of work with refugees and other migrants.

Activities and methodological bricolage

Over the course of developing PIM, a repertoire of different activities was produced and refined. A PIM activity consists of a planned interaction where participants are presented with a task or challenge designed to elicit an intended type of response. In WhatsApp, activities were initiated through text prompts, backed up individual discussion. The responses can then become part of the data in a research project or the pool of ideas and images in an art project. They are also a good basis for discussion and reflection amongst participants, whose responses to the results of the task (either one-to-one or in the group chat) then provides another layer of meaning.

An example set of PIM activity prompts that were used in the project is shared in [Table 2](#). The activities were structured to draw on particular affordances, sometimes in sequence. For example in “Out of the Window”, an act of recording and observation sets up subsequent reflection, supposing that reflections on where one is (actually or symbolically) are more natural after the describing what one sees. A window also evokes cultural responses; in Arabic culture for example, windows represent an element of expression and emotional connection with the outside world, a strong image in poems and songs as well as in media such as the Syrian series *Shababik* (Sama Fan, 2017). The result of the activity was a set of paired videos from each participant.

Thinking of PIM in terms of sequences of successive activities and layers of social affordances led to conceptualizing the process as an extended workshop. Working with a series of activities held together in a context of social exchange required some planning of interaction over time and attention to the path-dependency of participatory relationship building. For example, the sequencing of different activities was used to think about the relationship of the individual and the group chat. The group chat provided context and occasional shared tasks and the private individual chats were used for more sensitive topics (as with the second part of ‘Someone close, someone far’). In “Show and Tell”, the individual chat also set up the opportunity to invite individuals to share their choice of their individual tasks with the group. Overall cohesion was supported with a written plan shared between the team



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Table 2. Example PIM activities

Activity	Prompt	Notes
Out the window (Individual)	Record two videos looking out of your window. In the first video, show us the view out of your window and please tell us what you see. In the second video, show us the same view but tell us what it means to you.	Results in 2 videos with voiceover. The window seems important, providing a social affordances of observation, followed by reflection.
As you wake (Individual)	Leave a note next to your bed reminding you to record a short piece of audio when you wake up. The recording should be about what you are thinking about as you wake up.	Produces audio recordings. Sleepy voices are noticeably different than participants' everyday ways of expressing themselves.
Someone close, someone far (Task 1 – Group) (Task 2 – Individual)	Task 1: Who are the people you are close to in your life at the moment? Please send photos of as many of them as you would like. For each photo, please add a short text saying who this is and what their relationship is to you. Task 2: Thanks for everything you sent yesterday. Today's task builds on that. Most people have someone in their past that they were close to, but who they can't talk to anymore. Think of someone who you would love still to be able to talk to. Think about one such person, and then record an audio message or a video (no more than 120 seconds), saying what you would like to tell them about your life now. If it upsets you to think about that person, then don't feel you have to do the task. But do let us know how you are feeling.	Produces a sequence of photos of people along with descriptive text in task 1, and an audio or video message in task 2. Several participants spontaneously shared a photo of their far person. The sequence builds from a simple social affordance of sharing current connections to a more intimate mode that activates memory and missing.
Show and tell (Group)	Choose a picture, video or recording from the tasks this week that you are happy with and post it in the group chat. What is it that you like about it?	Produces a variety of media. This activity was used for building collective interaction around the individual tasks, and provide an social affordance of group interaction, and often expressions of solidarity

that laid out the sequencing of tasks and the intended relationship between the individual and the group chats, as well as ongoing private messaging and regular online meetings between the project team.

Technology and facilitation

WhatsApp allows the sharing of a wide range of different media forms between individuals and within groups. This includes creating text, photos, videos and audio from within the app, sharing media from the phone or from online sources, as well as quoting and commenting on messages in a thread. Emojis give a color and tone to messages and responses that many users weave into the rest of their communication on the platform. The result is a broad space of opportunities for interaction when constructing activities, albeit with some constraints. For example, at the time of writing there are limits on the file sizes of media such as video that can be shared depending on the bandwidth of the host device, which translates into limits on the length of videos that can be made for tasks. In addition, images and videos are compressed when sent and this can affect the quality of the images received. There are also helpful features for organizing data collection: Chats can be

archived in the mobile version of the app, producing a zip file containing all media and a time-stamped transcript of the chat with markers showing the position of media.

As well as technical affordances that support media production, sharing and archiving, WhatsApp offers social affordances that build a social context for workshop processes. Messaging reshapes time as well as space (Tagg & Lyons, 2018) and combines synchronous and asynchronous communication (Colom, 2022). Interaction can take place in real-time or fit into people's lives with pauses, give space for both spontaneity and reflection. Participants carry the workshop in their pockets and bags and pay attention to it according to their interest and what else is happening around them. PIM thereby offers blend between the immediate energy of live interaction and the more reflective quality of asynchronous communication, in way that individuals are already quite familiar with managing in their own communications. This affordance of semi-synchronicity becomes a methodological resource, allowing participants to retain more control of how and when they take part. Combined with private messaging this stretches out the group process so that there is more room to attend to individual experiences than is often the case in purely synchronous workshops. On top of this, live calls offer deeper engagement, providing the intimacy of a one-to-one interview or conversation in parallel to other processes, and supporting meaningful staged consent and care.

While sharing visual material generally appeared to be a pleasant and undemanding task for many participants, writing and sharing text narratives seemed more of a challenge. This could have been because of the greater depth of reflection required by text or because of the demands of working in multiple-language environment. Lower levels of engagement through text is a common theme in participatory processes with migrants, both because of the multilingualism of many migrant-host interactions and also because of social barriers such as the embedding of facilitators' thinking and expression in expert jargon (Inge et al., 2023). In *VHS*, we mitigated this by having the process led in Arabic by a facilitator/translator, with use of Swedish and English in the group chat as well. *MaHoMe* combined Swedish and English, with some Arabic and Russian. One unanticipated benefit of using WhatsApp was that the desktop app allowed text to be easily read in translation using the Google translate widget in Chrome. The coordinator was able to understand and respond to messages in Arabic in real time without help from the facilitator, especially as the messages were short and contextual.

Nevertheless, language is more than a matter of vocabulary and basic linguistic competence, and careful thought was needed in presenting the tasks in different languages. In the pilots, a crucial insight around language was the observation that better engagement arises when the tone of the communication is consistent with the use of messaging in social contexts. WhatsApp is used with friends and family, generating many useful social

Table 3. PIM outcomes

PIM process	First pilot: What's in the Box	Second pilot: VHS test run	Third pilot: Field methods course pilot	First application: <i>MaHoMe</i> participatory workshops	Second application: <i>VHSPIM</i>
Participants	5	3	5	11	6
Group messages	No group chat	No group chat	No group chat	190	397
Individual messages	~100 in 5 chats	6	~220 in 5 chats	251 in 11 chats	446 in 6 chats
Photos	5	2	40	92	125
Videos	4	0	12	36	23
Audio recordings	2	0	2	15	20

affordances: it is chatty and playful, supported by snapshots, stock gifs and emoticons. The student pilot demonstrated the value of taking an empathetic register and building relationships compared to a focus on data and information. A conversational tone and the adoption of familiar expressions and tropes used by respondents in their own communications within their own social contacts seemed to relate to some of the differences in response rates. Finally, WhatsApp is most often used reciprocally and so project staff took part in the activities too, helping to construct a more mutual and inviting space for communication. Such micro-strategies of inclusion and the dispersal of authority are relevant to many other participatory methodologies too.

Outcomes

The quality of participatory methodology ultimately depends not only on who participates but also how and why. We have argued that a central aspect of participatory practice is to see that everyone has their own projects and motivations and that what participants seek in taking part in common activities is different than the requirements of *our* project. Ethical facilitation therefore comes from responsive attention to the motivations of participants and to their social construction of our joint activity. As facilitators we suggest that we do not have to surrender our own motivations, but rather hold them lightly enough to seek compatibility with the multiple motivations of others. The sustained enthusiasm of participants over weeks with PIM, and over years across different projects is evidence that the commitments made to them through the projects had some traction. Across both projects, participants expressed a lot of interest in PIM and gave various responses when asked why they were taking part. For some it was about having their experiences witnessed: to see that their lives were meaningful to others. For others, the opportunity to work with creatively with media was important. For several it was an opportunity to interact with others in similar life circumstances.

In our projects, an important aim was to elicit media, narratives and research data that express how migrants themselves understand their lives and experiences. The material produced included text, images, video and audio

(see [Table 3](#)), which in turn provided visual and narrative inspiration for expressing migrant experiences publicly. In *VHS*, some were used directly in the book and exhibition (*Dreams on the Moon*), while others provided the basis for fictionalizations and recreations, including audio narratives. The lengthy engagement with participants contributed a stable base for artistic interpretation and re-assembly, providing presence and authenticity in the design. But the exhibition and book offered a mediated rather than a direct public manifestation of private experience, and it was the responsibility of the artist to bridge between material and the societal challenges and opportunities that informed the project while keeping contact with the underlying experiences. The authenticity of the result hinged on mutual trust and accountability, seeking that participants should be able to identify with the end result as well as with their own material. A strong basis for this was that participants had been part of the previous project and were aware of the ambition of this one; indeed some took part specifically so their stories might again be told to the broader public. The resulting exhibition has been directly experienced by more than 28,000 people across three installations in different parts of Sweden, and media impact includes airtime on national televisions and radio and spreads in national newspapers, with a combined reach of more than 600,000. PIM participants were included in the launch of the exhibition and received copies of the project book.

Many of the images and videos collected were of a relatively low resolution, yet this only rarely affected the artistic result and many of the images themselves were aesthetically strong. Considered as a whole, the material from PIM was perhaps not as artistically strong as that collected during interviews – perhaps because of the lower intensity of interactive feedback compared to the embodied interest of an interviewer looking at pictures on a participant's phone. The narrative material from the interviews similarly had more depth. Yet much good material was produced through PIM and became part of the outputs of the project. In future applications of PIM in artistic work, there could be more to learn about which type of activities produce stronger aesthetic results.

Beyond the material itself and our objectives within the project, PIM provided an opportunity for participants to engage in a collective context rather than in a one-to-one mode with the project team. As an interactive medium, PIM provided opportunities for participants to interact with one another, to express solidarity with one another's struggles and to build an appreciation of their commonalities and differences. In the development of many participatory methodologies such relational outcomes have become much of the point of using them. In our projects there was some evidence at least for PIM's deeper participatory potential, building on the social affordances of the platform for intimacy, playfulness and informal communication to support interaction and building relationships. This connective glue gave the process energy and provided opportunities for ongoing and future engagement. Contact with and between participants



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persists, ranging from holiday greetings to follow-up queries about circumstances that were exposed during the process, to questions about further study and joining activist networks. Not all that comes out of such a process is the responsibility of the facilitators. However, seeing such outcomes as relevant to the process fits with a model of long-term work, where different projects become a string of pearls held together by ongoing solidarity, trust and relationships.

Conclusion

In this paper, we describe a novel methodology that uses instant messaging for participatory media production and social engagement. PIM served as an extended workshop mediated through WhatsApp, leveraging the naturalistic social affordances of the platform. We have shared practical details to support replication and have also discussed the methodological concepts and principles that helped us in designing PIM activities. This contribution to the scholarship of practice includes discussions of semi-synchronicity, methodological bricolage on the social affordances of technology, and relational ethics.

The result is a technologically mediated participatory methodology that works across time and space in a different way than in typical in-person workshops. WhatsApp presents both opportunities and constraints due to its technological nature and participants' habits. PIM is peripherally present in



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the everyday life of the participants and offers structured activities combined with naturalistic communication. The semi-synchronicity of the platform was an important advantage. It lowers participation barriers, sustaining interest without demanding excessive time or energy. The application of PIM was a rich opportunity for data gathering, interactive sensemaking, and media generation. It engaged participants over weeks, providing space for reflection without losing the opportunity for spontaneous interaction. Nevertheless, interaction was less intense than in-person and there were constraints on the technical quality of media that can be produced.

So how participatory is participatory instant messaging? The development of PIM took place in the context of projects that focused on art, the lived experience of migration, and public expressions of private experiences, rather than traditions such as participatory action research. Our participants engaged in individual expression and collective sensemaking, and it is this that we characterize as participatory rather than the projects themselves. Nevertheless, we worked with a participatory ethic throughout and aligned our project with participants' collective interests and individual life projects. Bringing participants together to engage with one another through PIM elicited evidence of horizontal learning and the development of peer

solidarity, and hence our application of PIM provides a proof-of-concept for deeper relational work. Further exploration in other contexts will help to surface limitations as well as the strengths. For example, it is possible to anticipate that it might be harder to maintain the sustained engagement required to collectively produce material over longer periods. Equally, moments of conflict or distress in a group may be harder to respond to as a facilitator, without the reinforcement of presence.

Reflecting on the development of PIM surfaced ideas that are pertinent to more general thinking about the challenges of constructing participatory processes in online and hybrid spaces. As new technologies lead to new opportunities for configuring participatory processes, we argue that the resulting social spaces provide methodological opportunities that are different to unmediated ones in important ways. Adapting or creating methods in new technological (and social) spaces is therefore not simply a matter of translating methods and activities to a different medium. Instead, working in new social environments requires thinking about how to operationalize the purpose behind an existing method within the new environment.

In this respect, the social affordances of technology offered a dual perspective for working with methodology: it was useful for planning as well as for making sense of the outcomes of the process. We suggest that technologies mediate spaces for participatory processes through the social affordances they provide, and this provides an opportunity for methodological bricolage. This provided important ideas for activities and also for facilitation that worked with the social affordances of the medium, which we then piloted and tested to see what worked. Social affordances also drew attention to the ecological and emergent nature of interaction, which matched our open, relational approach to participatory ethics. As facilitators, we could respond and adjust within the structure of interaction provided by the medium and we learned much as a result. Further refinement of PIM could improve it as a research tool, for the elicitation or co-creation of media for public presentation, and as a social space for building solidarity. Using it with other groups, over a longer period or with a different technological base would also broaden the ideas presented here and provide further opportunities for reflection about social affordances, participation and the scholarship of practice.

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