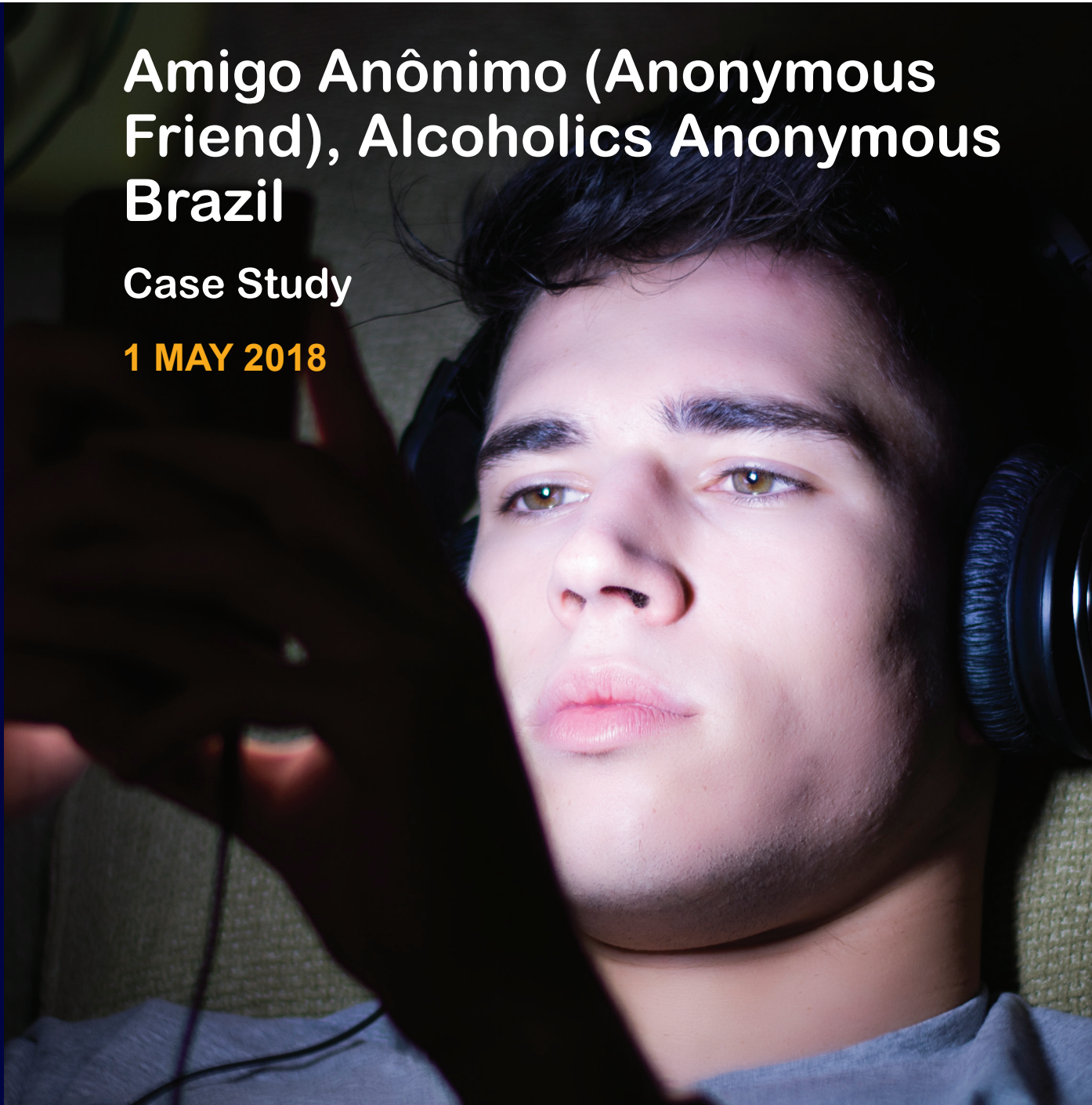


# Amigo Anônimo (Anonymous Friend), Alcoholics Anonymous Brazil

Case Study

1 MAY 2018



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## ABOUT ECHO MOBILE

**Echo Mobile** is a Kenyan technology and service provider that helps organizations across Africa succeed by engaging, influencing, and understanding their target audiences. Echo provides organizations with a powerful software-as-a-service platform for communications and information management, as well as strategic consulting and implementation services. [www.echomobile.org](http://www.echomobile.org)

## ABOUT DIAL

**The Digital Impact Alliance (DIAL)** aims to realize a more inclusive digital society in emerging markets, in which all women, men and children benefit from life-enhancing, mobile-based digital services. A partnership among USAID, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Swedish Government and the United Nations Foundation, DIAL's efforts help accelerate the collective efforts of government, industry and development organizations to realize this vision. <http://www.digitalimpactalliance.org>

## FOREWORD

This case study is one of six produced by DIAL and Echo Mobile in May 2018, by which point 3.6 billion people were using mobile messaging applications—nearly half of humanity.<sup>1</sup> DIAL commissioned Echo Mobile to research how and to what effect international development organizations have used these applications, with findings presented in three publications:

1. This case study and [five others like](#) it, which provide focused analyses of organizations that have deployed messaging apps for development;
2. a [Project Catalog](#), which briefly summarizes fourteen development initiatives that have deployed messaging apps for development; and
3. an in-depth [white paper](#), which synthesizes lessons from across the case studies and project catalog. The paper outlines common use cases for messaging apps in development while identifying essential considerations for successful project design and for selecting messaging apps.

These publications are based on over 50 interviews with development practitioners, digital development experts, technology providers, and entrepreneurs. They are free for download and discussion at [www.messengers.digitalimpactalliance.org](http://www.messengers.digitalimpactalliance.org). This website is designed to help both the development practitioners and entrepreneurs who use messaging apps and the technologists who develop them understand the following:

1. how and to what effect messaging apps have been used for development;
2. the circumstances and use cases where messaging apps have been most effective for development across different sectors, regions, and organizations; and
3. how messaging apps can be improved and made more effective for development.

The publications cover a diverse range of initiatives implemented by advocacy groups in Latin America and South Asia, social enterprises in Africa, private development firms in Central Asia, global multilaterals, and more. While the results of each case vary, they make clear that messaging apps have the potential to help development organizations inform, influence, support, and understand their audiences in new and powerful ways.

However, as outlined in the white paper and exemplified in this case study, realizing this potential depends not on the apps themselves, but on adaptive, user-centric project design and dedicated human, financial, and technical resources. In determining whether and how to use messaging apps, organizations must consider their audience, goals, and capacity, and select the channels or app that is most appropriate, rather than what is easiest or cheapest to implement.

<sup>1</sup> Nov 23, 2015, Stephanie Newman, "[The Messaging Phenomenon Has Hardly Begun](#)", Medium.

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## SUMMARY

Amigo Anônimo is a Facebook Messenger chatbot operated by Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) Brazil. It was launched in 2017 as part of a new AA campaign to address the rising rate of teen drinking and mark the organization's 70th anniversary in Brazil. The campaign was designed to increase AA's brand awareness and directly address issues of alcoholism among teens in order to increase their attendance at AA meetings. The AA chatbot achieved this by providing teens with the opportunity to take the first step toward seeking help through a familiar, nonpublic and impersonal one-on-one medium, without having to attend an AA meeting.

The chatbot quickly generated engagement from more than 100,000 users across Brazil, 60 percent of whom were teens. This engagement appeared to directly increase outreach to AA across other channels, including email and in-person meetings. Amigo Anônimo also generated new engagement from nonalcoholics seeking help for their loved ones, a demographic the organization had not previously served.

AA and its partners chose to use Facebook Messenger largely due to the popularity of Facebook among young Brazilians, Facebook Messenger's integration with the Facebook platform and its open API. While the chatbot was seen as a quick and unprecedented success for an otherwise low-profile organization like AA, its scalability and impact were constrained by the organization's limited offline support services, all of which were confined to a single city and not nationally oriented. The new digital format also raised considerable ethical questions about privacy and the ability to protect user anonymity in keeping with AA's founding traditions. While Facebook took helpful steps to prevent the disclosure of users' individually identifiable information, there remains an open question about the effect of Facebook's data policy on how advertising might be targeted to AA users based on their engagement with the chatbot.



## Key Lessons

1. YouTube and Vimeo videos are an effective way to drive teenagers to find chatbots and start conversations. Allowing teens to start the conversation gives them the sense that they are in control and are not being told what to do.
2. Facebook Messenger is a powerful and effective tool to bring more members to an organization, but it is constrained by an organization's offline capacity to support members beyond Messenger conversations.
3. Facebook policies limit the ability to make chatting with an organization totally anonymous for the end user.

## BACKGROUND

### Goals and Origins

Alcoholics Anonymous is an international nonprofit organization founded in Ohio in 1935. It describes itself as “a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism.”<sup>1</sup> Calling itself “an informal society,” the organization comprises more than 2 million recovered alcoholics who meet in more than 150 countries in local groups ranging from fewer than 10 people to many hundreds. AA Brazil was founded in 1947 in São Paulo.

AA Brazil has been represented on a pro bono basis by the Brazil office of J. Walter Thompson (JWT), an international advertising agency, for several decades. In 2017, JWT helped AA Brazil come up with innovative ways to mark its 70th anniversary, including the development of a new campaign to increase AA’s brand awareness among teens to encourage teen attendance at AA meetings in response to rising rates of teen drinking in Brazil.

### Digital Transition

Leveraging its digital transformation services, JWT sought to mark the 70th anniversary and conduct the teen drinking campaign online with a drastically new approach for AA, which has historically maintained a low profile and conducted its activities in person and spread its message through printed literature. JWT turned to Facebook, primarily due to its high penetration in the target teen demographic. Facebook and Facebook Messenger are two of the four most downloaded apps in Brazil, and the majority of the platform’s users are between 13 and 34 years old.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, the Facebook Messenger API provided an opportunity to experiment with chatbots, which both AA and JWT felt was a technology that aligned well with the organization’s commitment to shared experiences and support as tools for recovery. JWT ultimately contracted Chat Club to help develop an AA chatbot for teens struggling with alcohol abuse, and engaged the Facebook Brazil office and the Facebook Creative Shop for support. Facebook agreed to support the campaign with US \$10,000 of free advertising credit and significant free demographic and targeting insights based on analysis of user behavior.

While a chatbot on social media represented an entirely new medium and tool for AA, the organization did not want to replace its in-person meeting format. Instead, the chatbot was seen as a means to leverage a far-reaching and familiar channel to create a personalized yet private and unthreatening first step for young people to learn about alcohol abuse and seek help. The bot was also designed to broaden AA’s services, providing a one-stop resource not only for those abusing alcohol, but for their family, friends and partners as well.



1 [https://www.aa.org/assets/en\\_US/m-24\\_aafactfile.pdf](https://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/m-24_aafactfile.pdf)

2 “In Brazil Social Media Is for the Young.” *eMarketer*, 20 February 2015, <https://www.emarketer.com/Article/Brazil-Social-Media-Young/1012089>.



## IMPLEMENTATION

### Promotion

To drive adoption of the chatbot, JWT relied exclusively on social media, spreading short YouTube and Vimeo videos across different Facebook channels. The videos dramatically highlight the problem of teen drinking with stories of real alcoholics who found help through AA, then ask viewers if they know someone with a problem. At the end, each video issues a call to action for viewers to share the video and chatbot link and provides a button to push the link directly to a Messenger contact. According to a member of the JWT team, the idea was "to reach teenagers who don't take advice and can't be told what to do. We needed them to find the chatbot."

### User Experience



When users do find the chatbot, they are asked to select one of three choices: (1) I'm in treatment and had a relapse (2) I think I'm an alcoholic, or (3) My family member or friend is an alcoholic. Based on this initial response, the bot leads users through a structured conversation flow, which was designed based on 35 hours of in-person interviews with real alcoholics. No natural language processing is used. The interview questions and responses are based on each subsequent text dialog sent by the chatbot, and include multiple choice questions to guide the conversation and targeted guidance based on responses.

All users are ultimately led to a list of tips. Some are clickable and take the user to other AA resources. Tips encourage users to attend a meeting by enabling them to share their location directly within the bot, which then identifies the AA meeting location nearest to them. Users can then click further for details on the meeting location and hours. In the case of family members or friends seeking help for others, they can share the link directly to the person they are concerned about through Messenger.

# WHAT WORKED, WHAT DIDN'T AND WHY

## Successes

In Amigo Anônimo's first week of live chats, more than 100,000 people initiated conversations. By the end of 2017, the chatbot had hosted conversations between 546,000 people, 67 percent of whom were teenagers. In the same time period, incoming traffic to AA's email helpline increased from an average of three daily emails to 39, and AA groups reported an average increase in meeting attendance of 25 percent.<sup>3</sup> JWT also found that the chatbot had drastically expanded AA's reach across the country, with 30 percent of users coming from cities that did not have AA groups at the time. As a result, 97 new AA groups were created, which represented the first expansion for AA Brazil in a decade. JWT cites these results as evidence of a high return on investment for AA, but notes that its creative work was done pro bono, as were Chat Club's design and development services and Facebook Creative Shop's support services.

According to JWT, the majority of AA chatbot users are women, which was surprising, as past studies have found that alcohol abuse in Brazil is significantly more prevalent among men.<sup>4</sup> At the end of 2017, JWT had not yet compared this data against the breakdown of users who reported personal struggles with alcohol versus those who were seeking help for others. However, the team hypothesized that the large percentage of female users meant that the majority of users may not actually be alcoholics themselves, but friends or family members seeking guidance on how to help someone else. If this proves to be the case, it indicates that the chatbot format has been most successful at achieving AA's goal of broadening its services beyond those immediately struggling with or recovering from alcoholism.

## Challenges and Limitations

### Privacy

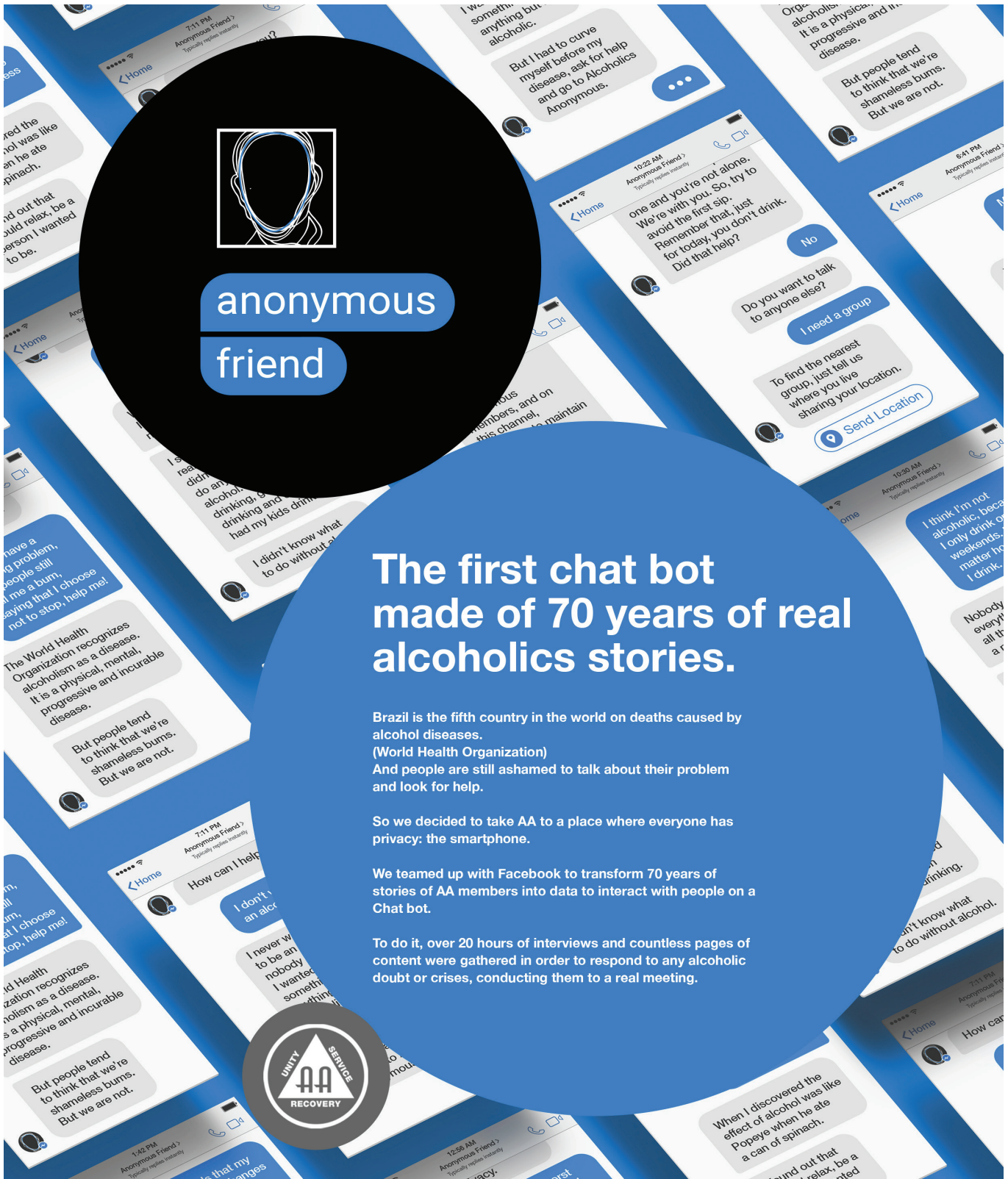
Early in its creative process, JWT identified user privacy as a critical challenge to the development of an AA chatbot. AA's traditions state: "Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity..." AA elaborates: "Traditionally, A.A. members have always taken care to preserve their anonymity at the 'public' level: press, radio, television, and films; today this extends to the Internet and digital technologies."

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<sup>3</sup> As a policy, AA does not track attendance. This was reported as an estimate.

<sup>4</sup> "Alcohol, Gender and Drinking Problems." *World Health Organization*, [http://www.who.int/substance\\_abuse/publications/alcohol\\_gender\\_drinking\\_problems.pdf](http://www.who.int/substance_abuse/publications/alcohol_gender_drinking_problems.pdf).





anonymous  
friend

# The first chat bot made of 70 years of real alcoholics stories.

Brazil is the fifth country in the world on deaths caused by alcohol diseases.  
(World Health Organization)  
And people are still ashamed to talk about their problem and look for help.

So we decided to take AA to a place where everyone has privacy: the smartphone.

We teamed up with Facebook to transform 70 years of stories of AA members into data to interact with people on a Chat bot.

To do it, over 20 hours of interviews and countless pages of content were gathered in order to respond to any alcoholic doubt or crises, conducting them to a real meeting.



...the **bot** leads users through a structured conversation flow...

While the Facebook chatbot concept aligned well with the goal of attraction rather than promotion, it did not totally align with AA's need for anonymity. When a Facebook Messenger user chats with another user or with a Facebook page or chatbot, the administrator of that Facebook page or chatbot can see the name of the user, and there is no way to mask the user's identity. The fact that the conversation took place is also known and cannot be hidden from people at Facebook. Unlike with Telegram and WhatsApp, which allow users to create aliases, nicknames or usernames instead of their legal name, Facebook policy states: "The name on your profile should be the name that your friends call you in everyday life. This name should also appear on an ID or document from our ID list."<sup>5</sup> This means that no one using Facebook, and thus Facebook Messenger, can truly be anonymous.

Nevertheless, according to JWT, Facebook was sympathetic to the importance of individual privacy for those visiting the AA Facebook page and using the AA chatbot via Facebook Messenger. While the AA Facebook page and chatbot would remain public for Facebook users to find and visit, Facebook agreed to adjust part of its advertising feature that might make individually identifiable information about visitors public to their Facebook network. According to Facebook's policies, the platform decides which advertisements to show users based on a range of criteria, which includes "Pages you and your friends like."<sup>6</sup> For AA's chatbot, this could mean that when a user visits and likes the AA Facebook page, that user's Facebook friends might later receive advertisements that indicate that the user "likes" AA. This would undermine the user's anonymity.

Chat Club and JWT also used features of Facebook Messenger API to help put users at ease with a perceived sense of anonymity, though not actual anonymity. The API enables developers to choose whether or not to personalize automated chatbot messages to users by pulling information, such as the user's name, from their profile.<sup>7</sup> AA and JWT elected not to personalize messages in order to maintain a feeling of anonymity and make users feel at ease. To avoid the impression that Facebook data was being used for targeting or that certain users were being "accused" of being an alcoholic, all Facebook ads for the service were framed to ask "Do you know someone who needs help?" rather than "Do you need help?"

However, despite both Facebook and AA's efforts to maintain the sense of anonymity and to avoid sharing individually identifiable data about AA chatbot users with their friends, those users are still subject to Facebook's general data policy. This policy states: "We collect information about the people and groups you are connected to and how you interact with them, such as the people you communicate with the most or the groups you like to share with." Most notably, it says: "We use all of the information we have about you to show you relevant ads." This data is only used and shared in aggregate form and not as personally identifiable information. Nevertheless, Facebook reserves the right to allow advertisers to target as a group users who visit, like or otherwise interact with the AA page or Facebook Messenger chatbot.<sup>8</sup>

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5 "What names are allowed on Facebook?" *Facebook*, <https://www.facebook.com/help/112146705538576>.

6 "About Facebook Ads." *Facebook*, <https://www.facebook.com/ads/about>.

7 "User Profile API." *Facebook*, <https://developers.facebook.com/docs/messenger-platform/identity/user-profile>.

8 "Data Policy." *Facebook*, <https://www.facebook.com/policy.php>.

## Integration with Offline Support Services

While the AA chatbot greatly increased AA Brazil's digital presence and reach, its impact and functionality were limited by AA's offline scale and capacity in Brazil. One of the chatbot's core objectives was to refer and efficiently connect users to further offline support services, yet unlike a chatbot, these services do not have nationwide coverage. For all of Brazil, AA has just one phone helpline and organizational infrastructure, which serve only the São Paulo area. AA considered having the chatbot share this number with users, but ultimately decided not to, fearing that by sharing it with the broader national chatbot audience, the line could be overwhelmed by users outside of São Paulo. This limited JWT's call-to-action options for the chatbot, which only offered web links, email contacts and meeting locations.

Ultimately, JWT's vision is to have a chatbot that can connect users to a team of volunteers for text or video chats on Facebook Messenger or for offline meetings. However, in light of the organization's current capacity and setup, it is not in the position to recruit, train and manage a team of human volunteers. Therefore, as of March 2018, the chatbot is limited to directing users to a generic email address or to local meetings, if they exist.

**AA chatbot greatly increased AA Brazil's digital presence and reach, its impact and functionality were limited by AA's offline scale and capacity in Brazil.**



## NEXT STEPS

Entering 2018, Amigo Anônimo was managed by AA's Facebook page administrator, with the broader campaign content still developed and managed by JWT. Together, the two organizations were exploring ways to make the chatbot user experience more personal, both through more natural conversation flows and by enabling direct peer-to-peer dialog.

In the long term, AA and JWT still hoped to enable the chatbot to facilitate connection between new users and real, current AA members, such as recovering alcoholics volunteering to provide online support to those in need or their loved ones. Because of AA Brazil's limited capacity, however, JWT did not expect to implement this concept in Brazil, and was actively seeking opportunities to extend the chatbot concept to AA USA, where more experimentation would be possible. JWT was also hopeful that Facebook might enable features that would allow users to submit voice recordings rather than text and receive automated audio responses within the Facebook Messenger dialog.



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