

Why are there concerns over WhatsApp usernames?

What is the username feature that WhatsApp intends to roll out? How does it work and what privacy safeguards are built into it? Why is the Indian government asking WhatsApp to stop its roll-out? Can the government dictate an app's features?



The upcoming username feature on WhatsApp displayed on a smartphone against the backdrop of the Indian flag. - Photo: AFP

AROON DEEP,

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Meta says WhatsApp will display the sender's country of origin and indicate whether they are already saved in your phonebook

The story so far:

On July 1, 2026, the Union government sent a notice to Meta asking it to stop the rollout of WhatsApp's username feature, for which the Meta-owned messaging platform is currently taking reservations. In a notice to the social media platform, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) wrote that hiding phone numbers and only showing usernames may increase the incidence of online fraud, phishing, digital arrest scams and impersonation attacks.

What is the WhatsApp username feature?

WhatsApp advertises usernames as a way to chat without sharing phone numbers. Instead of a mobile number, new contacts will only see your chosen username. This is an optional feature.

There is no search directory of usernames within WhatsApp. To contact someone, you need to know the person's exact username. For those who are concerned that someone could guess their username, WhatsApp has said they would be able to set a personal identification number (PIN). In that case, even someone who knows your username will not be able to contact you if they don't know your PIN.

The feature is yet to be rolled out. Meta has said it will be made widely available over the next few months with multiple safeguards in place.

Why is the government concerned about the feature?

MeitY said in its notice, a copy of which was reviewed by *The Hindu*, that the feature could "facilitate impersonation and identity spoofing, including impersonation of individuals, public authorities, financial institutions, and government agencies, by permitting the adoption of usernames closely resembling those of genuine persons or institutions".

Echoing MeitY's concerns, some public personalities have said that variations of their names have already been reserved by users. In a post on X, MobiKwik founder Bipin Preet Singh said this had happened to him. He wrote: "Not a good idea at all. Will lead to proliferation of fraud and impersonation."

MeitY also said in its notice that the feature may materially increase the incidence of online fraud, phishing, digital arrest scams, and impersonation attacks, "by enabling bad actors to solicit and message victims."

Shortly thereafter, it sent similar notices to Telegram, Signal, and Arattai, which have had username features that allow phone number concealment for quite some time already.

What is WhatsApp's response to these concerns?

A WhatsApp spokesperson said that Meta had already "reserved" usernames of prominent personalities to prevent those handles from being claimed by imposters. As per its statement, prominent personalities include public figures, government entities, celebrities, and verified Meta accounts.

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WhatsApp officials met MeitY officials on July 3 to present these views. A written response to the government's notice was due on July 4.

Users can choose to avoid responding to strangers, a spokesperson said on July 1.

Can the government dictate an app's features?

It is unclear whether a feature on a privately owned and operated app such as WhatsApp can be vetoed by the government. "The notice treats the launch of a lawful feature as a wrong the company must justify," said the Delhi-based digital rights advocacy group, Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF), in a statement.

In its notice, the government said that WhatsApp is an "intermediary" and a "significant social media intermediary" within the meaning of Section 2(1)(w) of the Information Technology Act, 2000, read with Rules 2(1)(v) and 2(1)(w) of the Information Technology Rules, 2021. A significant social media intermediary is defined as a platform that has more than 50 lakh registered users in India; WhatsApp has an estimated user base of over 80 crore. The government said the platform is therefore squarely subject to the due-diligence and other obligations set out under the rules.

The notice also cited Sections 66C (identity theft), 66D (cheating by personation) and 79 (intermediary liability/safe harbour) of the Information Technology Act, 2000.

The IFF said that those rules do not permit such a notice. "MeitY does not name any provision that lets it approve a product feature before release or order one withdrawn, because there is none, and the provisions it does cite do not supply that power," the group said. "Section 79 of the IT Act, 2000 is a safe harbour that protects an intermediary from liability for what its users post, so long as it observes due diligence. It decides when a platform can be held liable. It is not a power for MeitY to decide what features the platform may offer."

WhatsApp is possibly the largest digital platform in the country and the government has scrutinised its operations in the past. For instance, when the app went down globally in October 2022, IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said the government had asked the company to share the reasons for the outage.