

WhatsApp Username Feature: Why the Government Is Concerned About WhatsApp Usernames

July 5, 2026 • vajiramandravi.com



WhatsApp Username Feature Latest News

- The Indian government sent a notice to Meta. It asked the company to stop rolling out a new username feature on WhatsApp.
- The government fears this feature could increase online fraud and impersonation. This incident has raised a bigger question too: can the government stop a private app from launching a feature it wants to add?

About WhatsApp Username Feature

- WhatsApp is planning to let **users chat using a username** instead of their phone number. This is meant to be optional. If someone picks a username, new contacts will see only that username — not their mobile number.
- There is no search directory for usernames inside the app. This means a person cannot simply search and find someone by guessing a username. To message someone, you need to know their exact username.

- For extra safety, **users can also set a PIN**. Even if someone knows your username, they still cannot contact you without knowing this PIN too.
- The feature has not been launched yet. Meta says it will roll out slowly over the next few months, along with several safety features built in.

Why Is the Government Worried?

- The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) said that hiding phone numbers and showing only usernames could lead to more online fraud.
- It specifically mentioned risks like **phishing, digital arrest scams, and impersonation**.
- The government's main worry is that people could create usernames that look very similar to real people, companies, or government bodies. This could trick users into thinking they are talking to someone genuine.
- Some public figures have already reported this happening. MobiKwik founder Bipin Preet Singh said on social media platform X that variations of his name had already been taken by other users.
- He called the feature a bad idea, warning it could increase fraud and impersonation.
- The government also sent similar notices to other messaging apps — Telegram, Signal, and Arattai. These apps have had similar username features for a while already.

Response of WhatsApp

- WhatsApp says it has already “reserved” usernames belonging to well-known people and organisations. This is meant to stop imposters from grabbing those names first.
- This protection is said to cover public figures, celebrities, government bodies, and verified Meta accounts.
- WhatsApp also explained another safety feature: if a stranger messages you without showing their phone number, the app will still show you their country of origin. It will also tell you whether that number is already saved in your phone's contact list.
- A WhatsApp spokesperson said users can simply choose not to reply to strangers if they feel unsafe.

Can the Government Really Stop an App Feature?

- This is the most disputed part of the issue. The government argues that WhatsApp counts as a “**significant social media intermediary**” under India's **IT Rules, 2021**.
 - This classification applies to any platform with **more than 50 lakh** registered users in India. WhatsApp has around 80 crore users in India, making it a clear case.
- Because of this classification, the government says WhatsApp must follow certain due-diligence rules under law.
- The notice also referred to specific sections of the IT Act — **Section 66C** (identity theft), **Section 66D** (cheating by impersonation), and **Section 79** (which protects platforms from liability for what users post, as long as they act responsibly).
- However, digital rights groups have pushed back strongly. They claim that none of the laws cited actually give the government power to approve or block a feature before it's launched.
- They pointed out that Section 79 is only meant to decide when a platform can be held liable for user content — not to control what features a company can build into its own product.

Has This Happened Before?

- This isn't the first time the government has closely watched WhatsApp's operations.
- In October 2022, when WhatsApp faced a global outage, then IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw had asked the company to explain the reasons behind it.

Conclusion

- This dispute is really about where the line sits between a government's power to regulate for public safety, and a private company's freedom to design its own product.
- The government sees the username feature as a fraud risk that needs oversight before launch.
- WhatsApp and digital rights groups see it as a lawful product decision that no current law actually allows the government to block.
- How this plays out could set an important precedent — not just for WhatsApp, but for how much control the Indian government can exercise over global tech platforms operating in the country.

Source: TH | NDTV

Source: <https://vajiramandravi.com/current-affairs/whatsapp-username-feature/>

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