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The Big Meaning of Small Messages: The Use of WhatsApp in Intergenerational Family Communication

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Abstract. This study explores the use of WhatsApp instant messenger in extended families in two countries, Finland and Italy, that represent different family and communication cultures. Qualitative research material was collected in 2014/2015 from families consisting of three or more generations and living either in the same or different households. A directed approach to qualitative content analysis was applied in the analysis of the research data. The results of the study show that WhatsApp is considered to facilitate family interaction across generations. The success of WhatsApp in the family context accounts for two main factors: first, for the possibility to reach the whole family at once; and secondly, for its capacity to promote “phatic communion” via small messages. While utilizing various communicative modalities of WhatsApp (text and voice messages, photos, videos), family members take into account others’ preferences and communication skills.

Keywords: Extended family · WhatsApp · Instant messaging · One-to-many communication · Phatic communion · Reach · Intergenerational relations

1 Introduction

This study investigates instant messaging as a form of everyday family communication. Particular focus is given to the use of WhatsApp which is currently one of the most popular instant messaging applications in many countries [1]. The study seeks to answer the question: What is the importance of small messages exchanged via WhatsApp for the sense of social coherence in extended families? In this research, extended families consist of family members representing two or more generations who may live in the same or differ households [2, 3]. What makes WhatsApp an attractive communication tool for such families is that it allows both one-to-one and one-to-many interaction, and provides multiple modalities for intergenerational family communication (e.g. voice, text, photos, and videos).

The study argues that the big meaning of small WhatsApp messages emerges from both its technical properties and social affordances. WhatsApp makes it possible to reach more than one family member at time, sometimes the entire family. Multiple modalities allow the choosing of the most suitable mode of communication according to personal and joint preferences of the sender and the receiver(s). Second, the study argues that extended families have harnessed WhatsApp especially for daily phatic communion [4]. That is to say that instead of the exchange of highly relevant and important information, small WhatsApp messages helps to sustain the social bonds between family members whose daily agendas and schedules are often incompatible.

Empirical evidence provided in the study is drawn from qualitative research material collected from Finland and Italy in 2014-2015. Finland is a Northern European country where families and households are characteristically smaller than in Italy that is located in Southern Europe. Both countries were among the forerunners in the adoption and use of mobile phones in Europe. The research material is analyzed following the principles of a directed approach to qualitative content analysis.

The next section provides a short overview of the WhatsApp application and its recent success. Thereafter, prior research of instant messaging in families is presented and definitions for the key theoretical concept of the study are provided. Qualitative methodology and data used in the study are presented before the results section. The study concludes by summarizing the answers to the research question and discussing the limitation of the study.

1.1 WhatsApp's Growth and Success

WhatsApp is an instant messaging application that runs on mobile communication devices equipped with an Internet connection. It allows sending text, picture, voice and video content, for one person at a time or to several persons using chat groups. WhatsApp can be categorized as a real-time – or near-real-time – communication tool.

In addition to these primary functions, WhatsApp makes possible following the success of a message delivery, such as checking when contacts are available and when they are typing messages. WhatsApp indicates with a 'tick' mark when the message has been successfully delivered and with two 'ticks' when it has been received and read. Similarly, WhatsApp shows whether other users are currently online and when they last were logged in. The user, however, can disable the latter feature. Previous studies have documented that this micro-scale peer-monitoring is commonly used to check whether a person is available, without a real intent to contact them [1, 5].

Following the release of WhatsApp in 2009, its popularity has grown globally. According to Statista [6], the total number of WhatsApp users elevated from 200 million to 1.3 billion between April 2013 and July 2017. However, available user statistics are somewhat diverse, incompatible, and unavailable for some countries, despite consistently demonstrating an increase in user rates.

In the context of Nordic countries, the Audience Project [7] report shows that WhatsApp was clearly more popular in Finland than in any other Nordic country in 2016. In Finland, WhatsApp was ranked as the most popular social media tool, while in other countries it did not come close to the top. In the last quarter of 2016, 68 percent

of smartphone owners in Finland were reported to use WhatsApp. Finns were also very active WhatsApp users, as 49 percent stated using it several times every day and 29 percent at least once every day. In comparison, in Sweden the same figures were 25 and 16 percent, respectively. The same report shows that women (42 %) used WhatsApp more than men (32 %) in Finland, and that WhatsApp was the most popular social media in all age groups. The penetration rates varied being the highest among 15–25 year-olds (70 %), and the lowest for 56+ year-olds (18 %). In fact, the growth in the number of users is pronounced compared with 2014, when just more than a third (37 %) of Finns reported using WhatsApp [8]. For Italy, the penetration numbers are not so readily available. According to Cosenza, 22 million Italians used WhatsApp in 2017, which is about a third of the total population. While the profile of users is diverse, ranging from the young to the old, the average time spent on WhatsApp in Italy was 11.5 hours a month. However, those who use WhatsApp several times a day were typically between the ages of 15 and 24 [8]. Deutsche Bank estimated that the penetration rate of WhatsApp among Italian smartphone users was 68 percent in 2015 [9].

1.2 Instant Messaging in Families

Online instant messengers remained for a significant time a communication media mainly utilized by teenagers for peer-to-peer communication and young adults for work-related interaction [11–14]. Recent studies have also continued to highlight children's preference to communicate with their peers (and not parents) through mobile and social media tools [14]. As WhatsApp is sneaking into the technological reservoir of older family members, its untapped potential for family communication across generational boundaries begins to unfold.

A majority of prior research deals with the gratifications of instant messengers and similar media tools [15]. Church and de Oliveira [18] studied 20 to 60 year-old Spaniards, and found that immediacy, a sense of community and free use were considered as the main gratifications of WhatsApp, although SMS was still regarded more reliable, invoking less privacy concerns. O'Hara et al. studied the use of WhatsApp among 17 to 49 year-old Britons with various occupational backgrounds including both individuals and couples [1]. They suggest that WhatsApp is constitutive of commitment and faithfulness included in social relations, and serves the needs of social bonding more than functional exchange of information.

The migration of instant messengers from desktop computers and laptops to smartphones multiplied the total number of users and diversified their socio-demographic profile. Smartphones did not only add mobility to instant messaging but they also extended a range of available modalities from sole text-based messaging (e.g. IRC and AOL's Instant Messenger) and voice calls to photos, voice messages and Internet calls [17-18]. The possibility to choose between various modalities makes WhatsApp a suitable tool for connecting people with differing communicative preferences, and by so doing it may help to overcome social differences between family generations.

In extended families instant messengers have to be positioned into intricate parent-child relationships. On the one hand, these relationships reflect children's opposing

needs for autonomy and parental care. Studies show that mobile communication in general serves both ends; they work as an “umbilical cord” between children and parents and as a medium to gain a bigger degree of independence [19]. On the other hand, the social roles of parent and child are easily inverted in relation to digital technology use. Daily family practice reflects parent’s dependency on their children’s technological assistance and caretaking [3].

A possibility to sustain and nurture family connections from afar has caused researchers to argue that new communication technologies and social media have produced “networked families” or new relational families [21-25]. However, studies exploring the ways in which families use mobile instant messengers, and their group chat functions in particular, to stay connected are few. One of the few comes from Rosales and Fernández-Ardèvol, who show that while WhatsApp is commonly used across all age groups in Spain, the ways in which smartphones are used relates to interests and communication needs that change as we grow older – more than to age-differentiated skills [26]. Siibak and Tamme argue that Estonian families appreciate new web-based communication tools especially because they offer a way to feel close [27]. The same authors remind that web-based communication technologies serve family relations also when people live in the same household. Portable communication devices and applications are widely used to coordinate activities and share information in the physical proximity of others [27].

Siibak and Tamme maintain that Estonian families favor synchronous chat groups and other closed online spaces in family communications. This is an important observation since prior research reiterates that face-to-face conversations and telephone calls predominate family communication and local relationships [29-31]. However, it begins to unfold now that some new forms of social media facilitate more group and small community interaction than early forms of social networking sites, in which multiple audiences easily collapse into one and compromise the privacy of conversations [32].

Therefore, compared with traditional person-to-person communication channels (like voice calls and SMS) instant messengers are particularly useful for staying in touch with closely related people and communities that favor enclosed and private communication spaces to public or semi-public social media platforms [16]. Close-knit communities, like families, do not seek to reach vast audiences, but are neither limited to private one-to-one communication.

1.3 A technology of middle reach and phatic expression

Baym argues that the success of social networking sites is based on their wide, but selective reach [31, p. 30]. She has borrowed the notion of reach from Gurak, who describes it “as the partner of speed” and maintains that digitized contents cannot only travel with speed, but they can also reach large audiences. As Baym acknowledges, media technologies vary in their ability to attain, support, or reach audiences of different sizes. The reach of face-to-face contacts is the narrowest, but the qualities of in-person communication, are also insurmountable. In-person communication involves a range of nonverbal, facial, and bodily cues that are difficult to mediate to their fullest extent using any technological mean. Personal mobile communication tools allow both

narrow reach of the closest friends and family members (using phone calls and SMS), but also a wide reach of acquaintances and even strangers (through Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and so on.)

But as Graham notes, Byam's observations are based on early forms of ICT and social media [33]. Instant messaging applications like WhatsApp, that feature a closed group chat function, seem to fall in-between these two ends; WhatsApp makes it possible to reach, sustain, and manage middle reach audiences as well. The extended family serves as a good example of such a middle-range community, since it typically involves both close family members, (like siblings and parents), but also distant family members and relatives, (like stepparents and half-siblings), in addition to grandparents living further away. Previous research that relies on rather straightforward distinctions between weak and strong ties easily views contemporary families as a weak nexus of individually networked family members; families that have to make more of an effort to stay connected than the previous generations did [24].

WhatsApp and similar mobile instant messengers have introduced a new layer to mobile communication, which allows easy communication within families. WhatsApp affords a possibility for rather secure communication for dyadic family relationships and for the entire family communities, who want to discuss private family matters, to exchange emotions, provide care and support without revealing this intimacy in public. Family WhatsApp use does not bring separate individual networks together, but it conjoins family members who all know each other.

In this connection, the "sharing as caring" mantra obtains perhaps a deeper and fuller meaning than anywhere else. While small acts of sharing, such as social media status updates, "post sharing", and "liking", might be sufficient to establish and maintain weak ties in Twitter, Instagram, or Snapchat, strong family ties are never established purely online. The strength of family ties is based on a great amount of time, emotion, intimacy, and reciprocal services family members invest in intra-family relationships [34]. Family WhatsApp groups offer a particular channel to maintain and nurture these strong family ties whether near or afar, providing both synchronous and asynchronous modes of communication that helps the juggling of individual daily agendas and timetables. Considering that the notion of sharing points to a set of values that are typically feminine, such as openness, and mutuality [35], it is not so surprising that WhatsApp is used more widely among women than men.

These affordances of closed WhatsApp chat groups resonate well with the particularities of contemporary extended families, which are geographically dispersed, non-hierarchical, and change their composition over time. These affordances have made WhatsApp a very fit medium for one-to-group communication, and allowed constant family connectivity [15]. Family members, who used to, as Rainie and Wellman write, "mostly dance solo but take part in a few duets and household ensembles" [24, p. 162], can now use a WhatsApp chat group to keep their own band together and play their joint favorite songs non-stop.

The meaning of sharing photos, video clips, and exchanging small text and voice messages is perhaps best captured through the concept of phatic communion. The term was coined by Malinowski, who showed that seemingly meaningless and purposeless

talk, greetings, and small talk have an important social function establishing, maintaining and renewing, social bonds between interlocutors [4]. More recently, Miller argued that online media cultures promote mainly social and networking-driven communication at the expense of functional and informational contents, and dialogic intents [37]. In fact, the design of many social media platforms encourage the use of only a short expression by limiting the number of characters a user may use (e.g. on Twitter). This promotes the use of visual material, and provides new ways of expressing emotion with one-click. Wittel pessimistically argues, that in the end all this contributes to the flattening of communication and even to the flattening of social bonds [36].

2 Method

2.1 Data collection procedure

The data was gathered using the Extended Group Interview (EGI) method [3, 38]. The EQI was designed to study intergenerational relations in extended families, and it was premised on the collaborative nature of the ethnographic enquiry. The “extended” refers to the study of extended families instead of nuclear families. It also points to the need for various methods of conducting interviews, ranging from in-person to electronically mediated ones, in geographically dispersed extended families. EGI allows reaching a number of family members by stretching out the interviews from one specific place and time into a series of interviews.

In this study, college students (hereafter, *key informants*) were given the assignment to first observe ICT-related communication in their families for one week and then interview at least five of their family members (hereafter, *informants*) on ICT usage. The key informants were instructed to interview at least one of their parents and one grandparent, if that was possible. They were free to choose the three remaining interviewees as long as that they were of different ages. Some key informants extended the interviews to cover their cousins, aunts and uncles, especially in Italy, and others interviewed their spouses and own children. The limitation of the EGI method had been reported in earlier publications [3, 38].

Based on the fieldwork, the key informants wrote three reports, with a minimum of 300 words each, in which they were asked to describe: (1) what ICT tools and applications were used to stay in touch with family members; (2) how the key informants consider their ICT skills in relation to one another; (3) how ICT shapes the roles within their family. ICT was defined broadly as different kinds of digital communication devices or services that are used to stay in contact and communicate with family members (e.g. mobile phones, e-mails, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram).

2.2 Informants

The empirical research data consists of 66 student reports based on extended group interviews (EGI) collected from Finland, Italy and Slovenia in 2014/2015. In Slovenia, WhatsApp was largely concentrated on peer-to-peer usage at the time of data collection.

Only one Slovenian family reported using it for family communication. For this reason, the analysis is limited to Finnish and Italian families (N=43).

College students from three universities served as key informants. In Finland, the key informants were social sciences and communications studies students at the University of Jyväskylä, who were recruited through university e-mailing lists. In Italy, the students were undergraduate and graduate students of the Multimedia Communication study programme, who likewise were invited to take part in the study via email. In Slovenia, the key informants were students of the Social Informatics graduate programme at the University of Ljubljana. Unlike in other countries, Slovenian key informants completed interviews and reporting as a compulsory assignment as part of an ongoing course.

Table 1. Characteristics of key informants and informants by country

	Finland	Italy	Slovenia
Key informants (n)	22	21	23
Gender (n)			
• Male	3	10	8
• Female	19	11	15
Age (years)			
• Range	20-38	21-28	23-30
• Mean	28	24	28
Informants (n)	111	104	115
Gender (n)			
• male	50	51	61
• female	61	53	54
Relationship with the key informant (n, (mean distance))			
• parent	36 (150 km)	31 (111 km)	42 (58 km)
• sibling/step sibling	26 (217 km)	18 (219 km)	27 (141 km)
• grandparents	10 (239 km)	21 (164 km)	22 (90 km)
• others	39	34	25

The key characteristics of the participants of the study are included in Table 1. The total number of informants in this study is 397, including the 66 key informants. A majority of the key informants were females (45). Their ages range from 20 to 38, being slightly higher on average in Finland (28) than in Italy (24). The key informants interviewed and observed altogether 162 female and 168 male family members. The key informant also provided information on whether or not they shared the same household with their family informants. A geographical distance between the key informants and informants was required to estimate the need for electronically mediated family communication, and to discern country differences in the dispersion of family members. The distances between family members were slightly shorter in Italy than in Finland, where the key informants most often lived in their own households.

2.3 Method of analysis

The research material was analyzed following the principles of a directed approach to qualitative content analysis [39]. This method is based on a deductive category application and is also known as theory-driven approach because it usually starts with a theory or prior incomplete research findings as guidance for initial coding. During the analysis, the parts of the report that dealt with instant messaging and WhatsApp in particular were extracted. The notion of “reach” and “phatic communion” provided an initial coding frame and helped focus on parts of the reports that were relevant in terms of the aims of the study. These initial categories were then reanalyzed to promote clustering around common themes. What was found to be constructive of “reach” and “phatic communion” in the context of family WhatsApp use emerged straight from the research material without any specific pre-determined categories. When reporting results, pseudonyms are used to guarantee the anonymity of the informants. The ages of informants were manually inserted afterwards by the researcher, and they are presented within parentheses.

3 Results

3.1 Reaching the family

National differences in the use of WhatsApp for intra-family communication are pronounced. They relate to different communication cultures and housing arrangements, such as a higher age of moving out in Italy when compared with Finland. These are directly connected to physical distances between grown-up children, their parents, and grandparents. The physical distance reinforces the need for electronically mediated family communication. In addition, a prevalent pricing model for wireless internet connection may encourage or hinder the shift from voice calls and SMS to online-based communication. In Finland, mobile broadband connections usually includes an unlimited amount of data transfer at a flat rate, while the flat rates in Italy typically include a limited amount of data transmission. Despite these differences, a common incentive for using WhatsApp in family communication was cost saving. Several key informants reported that in their families sending messages and making voice calls via WhatsApp was considered free-of-charge, and hence a cheaper option than making normal phone calls or sending SMS/ MMS which can be charged as per use (e.g., In Finland, Carla, 23 and Ella, 24; In Italy: Alice, 23 and Elisa, 26).

In Italy, a large part of family WhatsApp use took place between younger family members of approximately same age. Furthermore, this communication was not restricted to the closest family member only (e.g. the key informants Alessandro, 20; Bruno, 27; Matteo, 24), but WhatsApp was also used to reach cousins and second cousins (Silvia, 25), and in some cases also uncles and aunts, who were typically less than 20 years-older than the key informant (Melissa, 25; Monica, 25; Enrico, 24).

Families in which everyone uses WhatsApp were most numerous in Finland. Many Finnish key informants described WhatsApp as a new daily mode of family communication (e.g. Jenny, 28; Sara, 25), although they had typically created a family chat group

quite recently. One of them is Emma (24), who describes the pivotal role of the WhatsApp group for daily family communication as follows:

Me and my core family's (parents, 52 and 53, sister, 19) main channel of communication is nowadays a WhatsApp chat group. We created this group about half year ago, and it has become very active. Someone sends photos and messages every day for the group and everyone follows it actively. The biggest difference to the past is that my parents have learnt to use the instant messaging service WhatsApp.

A major advantage of WhatsApp chat groups is that they allow the majority of the family to be reached at once. Finnish key informant Emilia (24) express this as follows: "Recently, we created a WhatsApp chat group for the family, through which we can easily reach the entire family when we need to contact everyone at once." WhatsApp had clearly become more common in Italian families as well. Monica (25) from Italy describes WhatsApp as something novel for her family that is mainly used by her mother (53) and all the children (25 and 19):

We all use WhatsApp, the smartphone application, primarily for instant messaging. My father (58) is a geek and enjoys technology. He likes to keep up to date but, due to his age or to scarcity of time, is not able to use this application as proficiently as the others. To my mother (53), although she is not the oldest of the respondents, WhatsApp is a novelty because a smartphone was bought for her only recently. My aunts and uncles, instead, regularly use WhatsApp with family and friends, and also for sending photos... I personally use WhatsApp with all the respondents but especially with my mother, because I want her to learn the use of this application and I wish to share with her some parts of my life, since we live far away from each other.

The end of this quote illustrates the "sharing as caring" aspect of family WhatsApp communication. Perhaps not so surprisingly it is a practice that mostly occurs between mothers and their daughters. This gendered aspect of WhatsApp communication is illustrated by several Finnish key informants too. For example, the Finnish key informant Emma (24) describes that her mother (52) was for a long time against acquiring a smartphone. But when she finally got a smartphone from her employer and learnt to use, it was the mother who "initiated the idea of creating a WhatsApp chat group for the family". Another Finnish key informant Emilia (24) encapsulates the central role of mothers in family WhatsApp communication writing: "No longer mom (52) needs to call once a week to ask news from her offspring, as we exchange news every day".

The mother's central role in family communication is also accentuated by comparing it to father's limited communication skills and practices. While Finnish key informant Julia (21), her sister (19) and mother (54) praise "that WhatsApp is the best communication means, as it can be used to send messages for free over a mobile network, and what's best, sending photos is easy and free", they have chosen other ways to stay in touch with the father (59). According to Julia, she, her sister and mother "always call

[him] as he has not installed WhatsApp on his smartphone and his messages in general are unclear". Julia specifies that her father does not punctuate the messages, he makes spelling mistakes and sends jokes others do not understand. Some Italian key informants also elaborate the differences between mothers and fathers with respect to their WhatsApp communication. The Italian key informant Silvio (21) writes that:

To keep in touch with my mom (50) I can use calls, SMS, WhatsApp and email, since she has been able to integrate herself almost completely into the world of technology, also using a smartphone. My dad (54), on the other hand, is still at a lower step, and I can communicate with him only through calls, SMS and more recently with emails.

These extracts indicate that even in the cases where the entire family can be reached through WhatsApp, mothers are typically considered as the main operators of family communication. At the same time, it is also considered problematic that fathers remain a bit distant if they do not use instant messengers (e.g. in Finland, Teresa, 26). In this light, WhatsApp family communication appears as a new form of immaterial labor, in particular of care work, which still involves more women than men [40].

The importance of WhatsApp communication for the social coherence of family is clearly articulated by both Finnish and Italian informants; WhatsApp facilitates inter-generational connections and togetherness within the extended family. A younger brother (11) of Finnish key informant Sofia (24) expresses this as follows: "Thanks to WhatsApp, we write and stay in touch with each other more". Similarly, the Finnish key informant Emma (24) summarizes her interviews writing that "We discussed that all have noticed how we are much more in touch with other family members after adopting WhatsApp than before it." Even a nine-year-old sister of the key informant Maria (24) maintains that the advantage of WhatsApp chat group is that "you can know how other family members are doing, even if they are afar".

In some families where parents had not started using WhatsApp, it was anticipated that their presence in this platform "would facilitate family communication", like the little brother (12) of Finnish key informant Marika (29) puts it. A sister (21) of Finnish Sofia expresses the same concern as follows: "parents (51 and 48) are excluded, we have own small circle. Parents are bitter as that they don't see the pictures... The relationships would be saved, if they only had WhatsApp."

3.2 Short, fast and trivial

The role of WhatsApp as a medium of phatic communion emerges strongly from the reports of both Finnish and Italian key informants. Most often, it appears implicitly as downplaying of the importance of small WhatsApp messages, which in practice, however, seems to form the backbone of electronically mediated family communication. The report of the Finnish key informant Ella (24) is illustrative in this sense. She writes that "at times, the contents of messages are not really important and full of information, and then WhatsApp is the best choice". Similarly, the sister (25) of Finnish key informant Teresa (26) feels that "WhatsApp has made us closer as we can speak about trivial

matters and have fun even if we are physically in different places.” While the benefits of reaching the entire family are perhaps most pronounced when geographical distance prevents regular in-person contact, WhatsApp is also actively used for intra-household communication. For instance, Italian key informant Claudia (21) writes that WhatsApp is the principal application when a “simple and fast application” is considered for daily communication with relatives sharing the same household with her.

Another characteristic of phatic expression via WhatsApp relates to its adaptability to different kinds of communication needs and preferences. Family members can accommodate each other’s favorite communication modes when they want to facilitate intra-family communication and keep the family connected.

With my partner (23) and little brother (23) we communicate with a mobile phone mainly using WhatsApp messages and Facebook Messenger... WhatsApp messages among a younger generation are usually the easiest and fastest ways to connect. Also the free use of the given application is a major reason for its usage. (Karin, 27, Finland).

It must be said that WhatsApp makes everybody agree, and in my opinion, it acts as a connection between different generations, because it allows short and fast communications, those preferred by my mother, but also longer casual chats with a lot of links and images, the kind of communication preferred by my sister. (Monica, 25, Italy).

The two extracts above show that WhatsApp promotes, on the one hand, short and fast communication often valued by younger generations. Such expression typically includes chat jargon and the use of emoticons. On the other hand, WhatsApp does not exclude longer forms of expressions either like some other social media platforms do (c.f. Twitter’s 140-character limit). Furthermore, the extracts reveal individual variation and thus challenge some stereotypes of generation-specific communication styles. As in Monica’s family, it is sometimes the members of the older generations who favor short and fact-based expression, while children go for longer chats.

3.3 Multimodality spiced by playfulness

A great deal of the popularity of WhatsApp accounts for its ability to transmit different types of contents. Sometimes, this seemingly purposeless exchange of photos and other media contents between family members is the easiest way for social bonding and feeling together. In Finland, key informant Carla (23) explains that in her family “WhatsApp is preferred especially when one wants to send photographs to another”. Parents have also eagerly started exchanging photos and video clips to stay connected as the following extracts from Italy demonstrate:

Lately, especially in relation to the festive seasons, I have noticed an increase in the use of WhatsApp by my parents (both 52), although they still employ it

only for communications of minor importance or the exchange of photos and funny videos (Antonio, 30, Italy).

With my sister, the cousins of my age, and my mother (51), I also sometimes use WhatsApp, it is very popular, convenient, and easy to use for sending videos and photos. (Mario, 24, Italy).

This multimodality of communication brings about some new aspects to family communication. First, the use of one's own voice in messages and self-taken photos makes communication a bit more personal compared to texting. Italian key informant Alice (23) describes this by writing that even though her "parents (55 and 56) didn't immediately understand the meaning of WhatsApp groups, they found voice messages a new way to send a message more personal than a text message". Second, there is a certain playfulness that is included in the exchange of funny videos and photos, which encourages social bonding that is the ultimate end of phatic expression. For example, Italian key informant Francesco (25) writes as follows:

I installed WhatsApp upon request by my father (n.a.), who wanted to clog my smartphone with "fun" videos... It is interesting to note that while I use WhatsApp for any kind of communication, the generation of my father and my mother (57), instead tends to view it more as a "game" in the sense that they employ it almost exclusively for communication of scarce importance or for the sharing of entertainment contents, relying on SMS and calls for everything else.

Parents' engagement in multiple new communication modalities provided by WhatsApp may also indicate their willingness to connect with their children. Similarly, children's willingness to take part in family WhatsApp groups and children's readiness to adjust their communication manners to those of the parent speaks for the same aspiration to reconnect. In closed family WhatsApp groups, intergenerational communication can be less reserved and deficiencies in one's own communication skills can be more easily revealed to other family members than in public online forums, where the risk of "losing face" is more likely. Hence, it is "quite common to send greetings and funny videos to smile together" as Italian key informant Claudia (21) summarizes the use of WhatsApp in her family.

4 Conclusion and Discussion

This study analyzed WhatsApp as a technology of "middle-reach" that can potentially serve the social coherence of extended families and intergenerational family relations. The research material provided many answers to the question: What is the importance of small messages exchanged via WhatsApp for the sense of social coherence in extended families?

First, WhatsApp provides a functional platform for facilitating intergenerational communication, especially between young people and their late-middle age parents, as it allows reaching the whole family at once. As parents have begun sending photos, video clips, and voice messages, it can be even argued that WhatsApp is marking a shift away from the straightforward division between “texting teenagers” and their “talking parents”. Especially the mothers of the key informants have keenly engaged in instant messaging with their grown-up children in Finland and Italy, extending their role as family caregiver, to the electronically mediated communication and online world. The role of fathers in WhatsApp communication is much more limited, yet still existent.

Second, the importance of small messages relates to WhatsApp’s capacity to promote “phatic communion”. In family WhatsApp communication, social bonding via multiple modalities, such as small text messages, photos, and video clips, often appears as a superior form of communication to the exchange of messages with a high information value. In dyadic family relations, WhatsApp’s many modalities allows the choosing of the most desired and most suitable mode of communication for every family member individually. Furthermore, WhatsApp provides a relatively safe environment for one-to-group communication. According to the informants, especially WhatsApp group chats facilitate intra-family communication and strengthen the social cohesion of geographically dispersed families. Sometimes small WhatsApp messages do have also functional value. They are utilized to exchange information and coordinate daily agendas and schedules among the family members living under the same roof.

It is worth noticing the interviews did not reveal any evidence about skipped-generation communication, in which children and grandparents would be directly in contact with one another via WhatsApp. While some grandparents and children exchange messages via WhatsApp on one-to-one basis, family chat groups have mainly remained as a communication channel for two successive family generations at time. Future research should be targeted to explain to what extent the relative lack of grandparent-grandchildren interaction and the absence of multigenerational WhatsApp groups accounts for the lower digital skills of grandparents, or is this current situation just a reflection of the pre-digital forms of intergenerational communication in which relations with own parents are naturally more intense than those with grandparents.

Lastly, the design of research material collection entails also some limitations that should be kept in mind while reading and interpreting the results. While the key informants were able to gain information that might not be accessible to an outside interviewer, their double role as co-researchers and the members of the studied families is not problem-free [38]. It is also likely that the self-selection of the key informants has bearings on the contents of the research material. Furthermore, the collected research material does not represent the whole diversity of social class backgrounds as college students tend to come from highly educated families.

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