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# WhatsApp iconology: narratives on in-app photographic practices in (transnational) family communication

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## ABSTRACT

Sharing photographs and photo-chatting are common practices in doing family at a distance. This study looks at the processes of the production and circulation of photographs within the family network, analysing participants' narratives about their image-based communication in WhatsApp. The data was collected as an ethnographic enquiry into the digitally mediated (transnational) family communication of five Polish women and their children living in Finland. It consists of five auto-driven visual elicitation interviews with an interactive collage, three elicitation interviews, with the participant's smartphone used for fast reference to their in-app chats, and one semi-structured interview. The in-app photographs are explored as 'imagetext', that is, visual and verbal representations that create the WhatsApp 'iconology' of family visual communication. In participants' narratives, photographs are regarded as an obligation (always to be sent to somebody), evidence (of being somewhere or achieving something), or a form of visual co-presence with living-apart relatives. Photo-chatting entertains (images of pets), provides expertise (snaps of medication), or is used to show off (photos taken at competitions). Photo-chatting helps to maintain family relationships by showing affection, comforting, and caring over a distance.

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## Introduction

I recall my first encounter with Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (1981) as a great disappointment, due to the impossibility of seeing the photograph of his mother which Barthes so extensively talked about in his book. Only many years later did I understand what Hirsch (1997, 3) points out, that the photograph of Barthes' mother 'exists only in the words he [Barthes] uses to describe it and his reaction to it: the image has been transformed and translated into a 'prose picture', what W. J. T. Mitchell has called an "imagetext"<sup>1</sup>. The Winter Garden Photograph allowed Barthes (1981) to create narratives on visual memory, grief and emotional attachment, and on both the true and the false in photographic representation. Everything the reader can learn about Barthes' mother is revealed at the level of 'imagetext' – the "rapture, synthesis, relation" (Mitchell, 2015, 39) of text

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and image, visual and verbal representation. The ‘imagetext’ of the Winter Garden Photograph demonstrates the role of the narrative(s) created about an image, its context and content.

In 2019, I conducted an ethnographically driven study among Polish women and their children living in Finland. I researched their practices in digitally mediated communication with other family members. In addition to using Facebook, Skype, Messenger and traditional phone calls, participants also, and most frequently, used WhatsApp. During interviews, they eagerly shared with me their WhatsApp conversations, scrolling through archived chats. They always stopped at photographs, contextualising them, commenting and reflecting on them. Interestingly, only rarely did the actual images still remain as part of the WhatsApp chat archives, so they did not give me the opportunity to see the images myself. Instead, I was confronted with blurred squares, accompanied by the participants’ narratives on each photograph. In this way, I was (again) immersed in ‘prose pictures’ (Hirsch, 1997), ‘imagetext’ (Mitchell, 2015), the visual and verbal representations that created the WhatsApp ‘iconology’ of family visual communication. ‘Iconology’ is used here in the sense of the words, ideas and discourse of images and pictures (Mitchell, 1986).

In this article, my focus is on participants’ narratives about their photo-chatting practices with other family members in WhatsApp. This means that rather than analysing the photographs, I look at what and how the study participants talked about their photographic practices. In taking this approach, I aimed to follow Mitchell in *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (1986). In the interview, Mitchell explains that *Iconology* is a book about images for the blind, about pictures that one can imagine when hearing what others said about them (Wiesenthal and Bucknell, 2000). Therefore this article is ‘about the things people say about images’ (Mitchell, 1986, 1). I explore here photographic in-app practices without seeing and interpreting the actual images, and so without showing them to the reader. By analogy with the photograph of Barthes’ mother existing only in his elaborate descriptions in *Camera Lucida*, WhatsApp *iconology* is unveiled in this study through analysis of the participants’ narratives on their in-app visual communication. This approach has given me some insights into the theory and practice of digitally mediated photographic communication, for example with regard to image types, content, or their role and functions in family communication. At the same time, I consider that any attempt to formulate ‘a valid *theory* of images’ reveals a ‘*fear* of images’ (Mitchell, 1986, 3). Besides, any assumptions in this study are made on ‘what participants *think* they do’ in their WhatsApp photo-chats. This connects with the ephemeral character of digital images, which exist at the time of their creation and sharing but often remain unavailable for later reference.

### Smartphone photography, visual co-presence and digital kinning

The ubiquity of portable devices, constant internet connection, and a variety of mobile apps have had a considerable impact on family communication in recent years. The sharing of photographs, videos, memes, gifs and emojis is a key practice in smartphone communication. Camera phones have transformed the ways we communicate with photographs (Lehmuskallio, 2012; Lobinger, 2016), offering affordances to create, distribute and consume photographs of everything from everywhere at any time. Digital

technologies and their specific affordances are especially useful for maintaining family relationships in a transnational context (Abel et al., 2021; Baldassar et al., 2016; Cabalquinto, 2019; Madianou and Miller, 2012, 2013). Photo-sharing and photo-chatting have become a part of daily communication routines between family members living together, and it is even more intense with relatives living elsewhere (Cabalquinto, 2019; Kędra, 2021).

In an extensive ethnographic study among transnational families living in Australia and Japan, Sinanan et al. (2018) observe that exchanging photographs helps maintain familial bonds and facilitates a sense of co-presence across distance. Having analysed the photographic communication of Filipino overseas migrants, Cabalquinto (2019) proposes the term of *visual co-presence* – a way of being together over distance, mediated by photo-sharing practices. Visual co-presence adds a new dimension to the discussions on digitally mediated forms of co-presence in a transnational context, namely, virtual co-presence (Baldassar 2008, 2016), ambient co-presence (Madianou, 2016), and ordinary co-presence (Nedelcu and Wyss, 2016). To emphasise the role of new technologies in maintaining kinship relations and the circulation of care in transnational families, Baldassar and Wilding (2020, 2022) propose the concept of ‘digital kinning’. In-app photographic communication of Polish transnational families discussed in this article can be considered as part of the practices in ‘digital kinning’.

### Smartphone photography and imagetext

Personal photography, evolving from material pictures in family photograph albums to ephemeral images in digital devices, still remains ‘primarily a medium of communication’ (Chalfen, 1991, 5). This means that the photographs created with a camera phone are shared not only for what they depict, but for phatic purposes (Lobinger, 2016), initiating conversations and helping to stay connected with relatives living apart.

Referred to as the ‘fifth moment in photography history’ (Gómez Cruz and Meyer, 2012), smartphone photography is nevertheless something other than simply an interactive digital format of (family) photograph albums. As a medium of communication, digital photographs take the form of snap-chatting, for example, as an efficient way of asking a question or sharing the everyday. In this sense, it is unclear to what extent ‘photograph’ is still a justifiable name for images created (solely) for in-app chatting purposes. In a similar vein, Gómez Cruz (2016) discusses the act of ‘photographing’ with a camera phone, which does not always result in a photographic image but may be used, for example, to pay a bill or to scan a QR code. It is therefore not inappropriate to refer to WhatsApp photographs in participants’ narratives as ‘imagetext’, meaning that the concept of ‘imagetext’ refers to the photographs as being talked about, and thus, as they are ‘seen’ through participants’ oral narratives.

Research on smartphone photography has usually put a photograph – an image – at the centre of the investigation, paying less attention to its production and circulation processes (Larsen, 2008). Indeed, as Sandbye (2014) observes, ‘the history and theory of photography have been especially concerned with what a photograph *is*, rather than with looking at what a photograph *does*’ (p. 2). From this point of view, it is important to study what people *do* with photographs, and so to look at image production and circulation. Rose (2016) distinguishes the site of image circulation as an important aspect of

visual analysis, particularly when studying the social effects of images. In family photography, the circulation and movement of images is a key characteristic. Sontag (1979, 8) points out that family photographs have always been ‘a portable kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness’, especially when family members live apart. However, in the era of portable camera devices, only scant attention has been given to image circulation practices in transnational families (but see, for example, Prieto-Blanco, 2016). Most often, researchers look directly into available photographic data, making it the focus of study (e.g. Cabalquinto, 2019).

With the aim of bringing a slightly different perspective to studies on smartphone (family) photography, I therefore explore the *iconology* of in-app family photography, analysing participants’ narratives on their WhatsApp photographic practices. I understand ‘iconology’ as the study of both ‘what is said about images’ and of ‘what images say’ (Mitchell, 1986). Furthermore, the photographs – as they are talked about by the participants – are regarded here as ‘imagetext’ (Mitchell, 2015). During the interviews, I could rarely see the photographs, so I could not interpret their visual content, but I heard the stories about their circulation processes within the family network. These narratives on family photography in digitally mediated communication gave me an opportunity to look beyond the image content to focus rather on the less explored areas of image production, movement and circulation.

## Study context

### *Why Polish transnational families in Finland?*

There are a few points about the data used in this study that require some clarification. The first one is the choice of the context of digitally mediated communication in transnational families, specifically of Poles (mothers and children) living in Finland. Historically, for Polish migrants, the issue of connection and connectivity with distant family members has always played an important role (Kędra et al., 2021; Thomas and Znaniecki, 1927). As a result, the children of Polish migrants growing up in their parents’ host countries, often in multilingual and multicultural homes, are already from their earliest years immersed in the performativity of transnational family life, especially through digital media (Kędra, 2020, 2021; Share et al., 2018). Besides, sharing family photographs is one of the most common practices in doing family at a distance (Prieto-Blanco, 2016). However, in studies on digitally mediated family communication, few researchers have focused exclusively on family photographic practices (but see e.g. Cabalquinto, 2019; Sinanan et al., 2018). Cabalquinto (2019) explores the role of photography in transnational family display, looking at photographs as a form of visual co-presence with family members living apart. He analyses both the content of the photographs and the context of sharing, perceiving in-app photography as a form of kinkeeping at a distance, which can be referred to as ‘digital kinning’ (Baldassar and Wilding, 2020, 2022). In the current study, I also discuss the role of photo-chatting in maintaining family relationships, but above all I focus on what the participants think (and say) they do with photographs in their mediated communication.

The data for this study could have been collected among any participants who are actively involved in mobile (visual) communication in transnational context. However,

what strikes me most in the data I use here is the unusual richness of the narratives created by these participants about their photographic practices. In relation to these narratives, the photographs to which the participants refer seem to be of secondary importance. Thus this data, collected in a specific context (Finland, transnational familyhood) and from a certain group of participants (Polish female migrants and some of their children), may serve as an excellent point of departure for a discussion on ‘imagetext’ in the era of smartphone (family) communication. Furthermore, by applying theoretical lenses of visual culture studies (e.g. imagetext, iconology) to the analysis of in-app photographic communication practices of Polish transnational families, this study aims to contribute to the growing body of research on digitally mediated (transnational) family communication. In this article, I propose concepts and theoretical frameworks that can facilitate the analysis of (the role of) photographic communication in maintaining kinship over distance.

### **Why whatsApp?**

WhatsApp is currently one of the most popular mobile applications, used across any daily activities to help manage intimate family relations, whether for caring and tending (Matassi et al., 2019; Taipale and Farinosi, 2018) or to facilitate and organise duties at work. Because of its multitasking capability and its presence across different life contexts, Gómez Cruz and Harindranath (2020) suggest that WhatsApp can be called a ‘technology of life’. With its affordances for the exchange of text, voice and visual messages, WhatsApp allows for one-to-one and one-to-many communication. In the current study, participants named WhatsApp as the mobile application most frequently used for contact with family members, while Messenger was what they used with those family members who do not have WhatsApp (for details on participants’ family constellations and mobile apps usage, see Kędra, 2020).

WhatsApp is regarded here ‘as an environment of affordances’ (Madianou and Miller, 2013, 170) that allowed participants for certain practices in photography communication with other family members. By taking the polymedia perspective (Madianou and Miller, 2012, 2013) on digitally mediated communication, this study moves from the examination of how the mobile media are used for photo-sharing purposes toward understanding of the role that photographs play in digitally mediated transnational family communication. Following Lobinger (2016) and others, this study aims at taking images seriously. Hence the suggested theoretical framework of ‘imagetext’ and ‘iconology’ that brings the visual culture’s perspective to research on mobile media communication, offering relevant and useful concepts to examine visibility.

### **Methodology**

The data for this study was collected as part of an ethnographic enquiry into the digitally mediated (transnational) family communication practices of Polish women and their children living in Finland. I recruited the study participants (mothers) via two closed Facebook groups, of which I have been a member for several years as a Polish female migrant myself, living in Finland. These groups are: (1) Polki w Finlandii (Polish women in Finland), and (2) Matki Polki w Finlandii (Mother Poles in Finland). The women participating in the study have an established family life in Finland, a

non-Polish partner/husband, and one or two children, some of whom also participated in the study (see [Table 1](#) for details on methods and participants). Both mothers and children remain in constant physical contact (through frequent visits) and digitally mediated contact (through video calls, in-app chats, or photo-sharing) with their relatives in Poland. Prior this project, I did not know any of the participants, except of one. They were all informed that their participation is voluntary and that they can withdraw at any time; they all signed informed consent, which explained details of the study, forms of data collection and storage.

The data consists of nine audio-recorded interviews of three types: (i) auto-driven visual elicitation interviews with an interactive collage (discussed in more detail in [Kędra, 2020](#)), (ii) elicitation interviews, with the participant's smartphone used for fast reference to their in-app chats, and (iii) a semi-structured interview (see [Table 1](#)). The length of each interview was between about thirty minutes and one hour, with the average interview time of forty minutes. Interviews were conducted in Polish with occasional mixture of other languages, specific to families' linguistic repertoires, and so, including phrases in Finnish, French or English, especially in the interviews with children. All quotations from the interviews used in this article are my translations. Secondary data includes photographs of family collages (see details below) and field notes, written immediately after each interview. The multiply forms of data compensate for the small sample size.

In the auto-driven visual elicitation interviews, an adult participant created an interactive collage of her family constellations and communication practices. In the first part of this interview, the participant used coloured cards with adults' and children's silhouettes to visualise her family. Then she was given cards with mobile app icons to indicate which technologies she used to contact which family members. The participant could modify her collage throughout the interview. All the collage-based interviews were accompanied by stories about participants' in-app visual practices. In addition, in the case of one interviewee (Dorota, Family 5), she spontaneously took out her smartphone to go through concrete examples of her visual chats in WhatsApp. This interview therefore turned into an elicitation interview, with both an interactive collage in the first phase and a smartphone as an interview stimulus in the second.

With their smartphones to hand during the interview (Families 2, 3 and 5), participants in the elicitation interviews could scroll through their WhatsApp chat archives with family members and look into the family WhatsApp groups (Family 2). On some occasions the participants spent a few seconds showing me some of the photographs they had in the chats. However, photographs were not usually available for viewing and remained blurred squares in between text-based chats. Although I could not view all of the photographs, the participants always described them to me in detail, indicating the content and context of their creation and sharing. Sometimes, like in the interview with two sisters, Julia and Lidia (Family 2), the participants were looking for some actual images they wanted to show me, at the same time creating short narratives related to the content of the photographs they were searching for. In the one semi-structured interview that I conducted with Kasia (Family 1), although the participant could not make immediate reference to her WhatsApp chats, she was able to reflect on her visual communication with other family members, building a narrative on the role of photographs in her (distant) family relationships as well as in her life in general.



**Table 1.** Overview of the methods used in the study. Participants' names are pseudonyms; numbers in brackets indicate children's age, and the word in brackets (collage/phone) indicates the stimulus used in the elicitation interviews.

	Family 1		Family 2		Family 3		Family 4	Family 5
Participant	Ilona	Kasia (10)	Olga	Julia (10) & Lidia (8)	Anna	Sari (8)	Beata	Dorota
Method(s)	visual elicitation interview (collage)	semi-structured interview	visual elicitation interview (collage)	elicitation interview (phone)	visual elicitation interview (collage)	–	visual elicitation interview (collage)	visual elicitation interview (collage and phone)
	–	–	elicitation interview (phone)	–	elicitation interview (phone)	–	–	–

As I have said, opportunities to view the photographs as part of participants' in-app communication were limited. Therefore I decided to conduct an inquiry into digitally mediated photographic practices based solely on participants' narratives on these practices. I conducted thematic analysis (Ignatow and Mihalcea, 2018) of the interviews, transcribed (using mostly verbatim transcriptions) and manually coded in search for themes related to photographic practices. In this way, I could look into 'the things people say about images (...) the way we talk about the *idea* of imagery' (Mitchell, 1986, 1). This theoretical approach is also in line with Larsen's (2008) call for a closer look into the practices of *photographing*, and thus into the production and circulation of digital images, rather than solely focusing on photographic content and its analysis.

## Findings

In the participants' narratives, in-app photographs appear as fragmented practices of this and that, enabling the sharing of everyday and special occasions with other family members, both those living in close proximity and those living further afield. The participants have consciously chosen the mode of visual communication over text. The photographs, as evident from participants' narratives, fulfil certain functions in maintaining family relationships, for instance, by showing affection, kinkeeping, comforting and caring over a distance. Participants usually briefly describe the content of the photographs, but this often seems to be of secondary importance in keeping family relations across geographical distance than the phatic function (Lobinger, 2016; Rose, 2016) that the in-app visual communication fulfils.

### *What they say the photographs are about*

In the elicitation interviews which used a smartphone as a stimulus, when scrolling through their WhatsApp chats participants first identified the content of a photograph, often with just a keyword: mushrooms, brother's dog, our cats, a trip, my new coat, weather update, and so on. They followed this with more information about some of the photographs, usually by giving a reason for sending a particular photograph or the context in which they received it.

Interestingly, even without their phones to hand, participants referred to the content of some of the photographs by assigning recurring themes of visual communication to a particular family member. Ilona, for example, refers to the images usually shared by her sister:

ILONA: We have a group: ... mom, me and my sister. And I send [there] photos of [my] children, she [sister] gives photographs of horses, or of a cat – animals.

And Anna refers to visual communication with her brother:

ANNA: My brother sends me photographs of absolutely everything [*laughing*], really everything! ... where he was, what he bought for himself, what the weather is like, photographs of dogs, ... photographs of girls whom he is currently dating.

Photo-chatting about daily issues is a common practice in all of the participating families, doing it simply to maintain family life transnationally. Olga, when scrolling through the WhatsApp chat with her mother, who lives in Poland, refers to photographs of her

mother buying clothes and asking her daughter for advice by sending photographs of herself trying out the various outfits. Olga's mother frequently poses photo-questions, for example about gift ideas for her two granddaughters, Julia and Lidia. Anna's brother, who lives in Poland, has a similar practice when he goes shopping: Anna recalls that her brother always sends her photographs of clothes, asking her which ones he should buy.

In photo-chatting, visual content comes to the forefront: an image displays what needs to be asked or communicated more efficiently and more effectively than a usually time-consuming textual description. This last aspect is noticeable in the in-app chats between mothers and their children. Anna refers to photographs she receives from her daughter, Sari, playing with friends after school:

ANNA: Sari sends me photographs of friends when they're playing, because I usually come home around four – Sari is always earlier, she always comes from school with a friend, so she sends me photos of friends, what they're doing, what they're playing.

The photographs of Sari with her friends act here as evidence of a safe return from school and of enjoying herself with her friends.

### *The functions of in-app photo-sharing*

Using photographs as evidence for something is a common practice in participants' in-app communication. Dorota briefly shows a few photographs of her friends' flat, explaining that she sent these images to her son when she was away on a trip to Poland. Dorota's son worried about where his mother was. The photographs showed the place and provided evidence of being somewhere safe, and thereby helped to comfort the boy. A somewhat similar situation is brought up by Julia, Olga's daughter, who shows a photograph of her father, sent to her Polish grandmother (her father's mother-in-law):

JULIA: And here are the photographs when dad was in Los Angeles.

Researcher: I guess that dad sent it to you, yes? And then you sent it to grandma?

JULIA: Yes, because grandma and grandpa always want to know where dad is.

Again, the photograph of Julia's father is visual evidence for Julia's grandparents of the fact that her father is safe on his travels. The same photograph is also a form of visual report of the father's trip – a report that, due to its visual mode, can easily circulate between family members across geographical distance.

Photographs related to travelling and visiting interesting places can be found in the WhatsApp chats of all the participants. Anna sends her brother photographs of the trips she makes with her daughter Sari, while Olga receives a number of pictures of her parents travelling to various places. Some of these images initiate an exchange of messages about the location and context of the trip, but usually they act as digital postcards: sending greetings from here and there. In this context, Olga says that her WhatsApp visual communication is a kind of documentation, a visual record of who was doing what and when.

OLGA: Here, my parents sent [photos] from their outing. ... And such documentation really, there's a lot of such documentation of where we are, what we're doing. Something like, you know, postcards, greetings from somewhere: 'New Year's greetings from Turku' ... here: 'Greetings from the ice Santa in Mosina'. Like, you know, there's a snap and

often a comment on it. ... And here we were in the castle in Turku: ‘Here was Catherine Jagiellon’, this is a snap from that, here are the girls in the castle in costumes.

Interestingly, Olga underlines the documentary value of visual chats, even though not all of the photographs are still available for viewing (they could have been deleted) or their context is not entirely clear on the basis of the picture and the chat comment.

### *Analogue practices and family photograph albums*

Despite the ephemeral and momentary nature of digital photographing and photo-sharing, in-app photographs seem to be consumed in a similar way to analogue images, like looking at family photograph albums. In the participants’ narratives, many images appear to have been deliberately created to be shared and re-shared with relatives living elsewhere. These photographs usually show other family members, especially children – what they are doing or, as Ilona puts it, ‘what they’re succeeding in’. The photographs may depict milestones in family life (Beata and her husband building their first house), or someone’s achievements (a photo of Olga’s mother finishing second in the Nordic walking competition). The photographs circulate between devices, sometimes being preserved for later viewing. Some photographs undergo curation processes, which occur both before sending the picture and after receiving it. Beata explains that she decides which photograph to send and to whom, and that some of these photographs are further shared by her brother with his family:

BEATA: Then I usually send it to my mom, to my brother, and if I think that it will appeal to [my brother’s] children I send it to them too. But usually it happens that my brother anyway shows [the photo] to the whole of his family. ... Always when I send it to my brother then I already know that the whole family will see the photograph, so I don’t have to send it to each one.

In the participants’ narratives, the WhatsApp visual chats appear to be used like photograph albums. In this form, the photographs are shared with others in their material digital form by displaying them on a smartphone screen, rather than by re-sending them. In this context, Beata recalls her mother’s habit of showing Beata’s father all the photographs she has collected during the week:

Researcher: And do you send photographs to your father?

BEATA: Photographs, no. My mom always shares with him all the news about our life, because my dad works in another city, so he and my mom only talk on the phone. So when he comes home for the weekend, then my mom always shows him all the photographs from the whole week [*laughing*]; sometimes even, it depends, from some longer period, but she always shows him: ‘Look, here Beata sent a photo of her house, or something, or of Adam [Beata’s son].’

The situation described here of Beata’s parents looking at the photographs in a smartphone device, with her mother curating the process by briefly explaining the context, is reminiscent of the experience of family photograph albums being passed around the table during family gatherings. The digital, and thus, ephemeral and momentary is becoming material in a participatory viewing process in a physical context. Nonetheless, the situation is imagined, seen through Beata’s narrative. Most probably, Beata has never observed the event herself, but only heard about it from one or other of her parents. Here

again the phatic function of photographic communication comes to the forefront, strengthening family ties over distance.

In contrast, virtual photograph albums deliberately created as such, for instance in a family WhatsApp group, can cause tension between its members. Kasia, Ilona's daughter, refers to one such situation:

KASIA: My mom's younger sister posted an awful lot of photographs from her holidays: Monaco, Italy, France. And then grandma just got annoyed that [there were] too many photos. And so I reported on her that this is spam, and I said: I will throw you [all] out if you continue to argue, because it was not a group for that.

This family group is a virtual space, shared by Ilona and Kasia (living in Finland) and Ilona's mother and sister (living in Poland). The group was created by Kasia because she felt it would be more convenient to have one dedicated space in which to share photographs of the everyday, rather than sending the same image individually to each family member.

### *Kasia's narratives on (in-app) photographing*

For 10-year-old Kasia, smartphone photographing is a hobby and a way of overcoming sadness and forgetting about unpleasant situations, as she tells me. Kasia especially likes taking macro images because, as she explains, she must concentrate on the focus and light and so can easily forget about other issues that may be bothering her at the time. She shares some of her photographic work with her mother, and only when her mother has given her approval can she send these photographs to other family members. This is not because her mother wants to check the quality of the images, but because she wants to approve the visual content for further circulation. Kasia recalls one such occasion, which led to the creation of the family WhatsApp group, mentioned earlier:

KASIA: At first, it was that I would just give a photo of myself and Jaś [Kasia's 3-year-old brother], but later, when I sent it to mom, ... mom wrote something more under it, because she was on a course and I couldn't call her, and so we had to write. So, I just made a screenshot of it, and gave it, and I changed it so that there's me and Jaś, so that on the screen there's me and Jaś and a conversation between mom and me, and then it's something like a photo of that group. In this way, what it shows is more like a family.

In Kasia's narrative about the screenshot image, it is not clear if the image served as an avatar for the newly created family WhatsApp group or as the inspiration to establish the group – or maybe both. It is important, however, to note here the enthusiasm and energy with which Kasia told me this story and how proud she was of the whole idea. Although her mother took a gatekeeper role in Kasia's efforts to have photographic communication with family members, Kasia was able to create a space within which she could have more freedom to photo-share. This space has, however, over time been occupied by a lot of photographs posted by other family members which, on occasion, has caused conflict, like the one mentioned earlier that Kasia resolved.

### *Photograph as ...*

... an obligation, evidence, a form of visual co-presence contributing to fulfilling familial roles and duties. A photograph may comfort family members over geographical distance. It entertains (e.g. photographs of Dorota's cats (re-)sent among family members),

provides expertise (e.g. Olga's mother sending images of natural treatments against mosquitos), or can be even used to show off (e.g. Olga's father sending photographs to both Olga and Julia of the forest mushrooms he had just picked). Photo-chatting is a deliberate practice, with an intentional choice of the visual over the textual. Ilona points out that for her, it is often easier to send a photograph of her children or of a nice place they have been instead of giving relatives a call. She reasons that using a photograph as a communication tool is very common in contemporary culture because, as she says, photographs 'show what happened and why'. At the same time, however, she complains that photo-sharing with *all* the members of the family requires a lot of effort:

ILONA: All the time it's that always these [photographs] have to be sent to somebody – this is really an enormous job when one wants to send something to everybody.

Ilona's remark contrasts with the momentary character of in-app photographic practices. However, in the context of family communication, photographs are also used for kin-keeping purposes, and as such, they can be regarded as a familial obligation. An example of photo-chatting as obligation (and evidence) is the case mentioned above of Julia sending her grandparents in Poland photographs of her father's trip, because 'they always want to know where dad is'.

### *Photo-chatting and family relationships*

On the one hand, photo-sharing as part of family communication is perceived by some of the study participants as an obligation, but on the other hand it can be used for 'showing caring'. Olga refers to photographs that she received from her husband and children when she was away on a one-week trip abroad and they were without her for so long for the first time, as being of this kind:

OLGA: And here, it is that dad was buying them croissants for breakfast and that they have such a great [breakfast] when they stayed with dad.

Participants also created longer narratives about their photo-chatting practices, highlighting the contexts in which they used photographs to communicate with particular family members. In these narratives, the photographs appeared as a medium through which family relationships are built transnationally.

ANNA: With one aunt we always talk about animals, because she also has a cat, so we exchange photos of cats. Uncle, her husband, is a forester, a fisherman, so when I, for example, go picking mushrooms, or I buy some fish and I don't know how to prepare it, so then also to this aunt; and she asks uncle: 'what is this fish?', 'what are these mushrooms, what to do with them?'

Researcher: So you send photographs?

ANNA: Yes, photographs. Recently I sent her photos, I was at the market with a friend and there were, I think, at least four types of mushrooms that I didn't know and so I sent to aunt to ask uncle 'what are these mushrooms'. And the uncle recognized only one of them, he said, we don't have these others in Poland. So with this aunt these kinds of things.

Interestingly, Anna tells me about her photo-chatting practices with an aunt without showing me any images. The aunt to whom she refers lives in Poland and is one of

her late mother's sisters. In Anna's narrative, the remembered photographs that she shared with her aunt and uncle are transformed and translated into 'prose pictures' (Hirsch, 1997). The narrative about these images tells more about Anna's transnational family relationships than could have been read from the photographs alone. In this sense, the visuality of photographs (i.e. their content) seems to be less important to understand the role of photo-chatting in creating and strengthening family ties across geographical distance.

### Discussion: whatsApp iconology

WhatsApp iconology has been elaborated on here through words, ideas and a discourse of images (Mitchell, 1986); specifically, through the analysis of participants' narratives on their photographic communication with family members. The *iconology* has been discovered from the perspective of 'what is said about images' (Mitchell, 1986) as well as from the study of 'what images say'. The former is rather obvious, given the chosen methodology, that is, the analysis of participants' narratives and what the participants said about photographs. The latter is a consequence of the former – the in-app photographs, although neither shown here nor interpreted, may exist in one's imagination. These photographs take on agency in maintaining family relationships by showing caring or fulfilling kinkeeping obligations. They can also cause conflict, like in the case of the photo-sharing in a WhatsApp group in Ilona and Kasia's family. Thus, both the photographic content (sometimes imagined) and the various functions of the in-app photographic communication refer us to the latter aspects of iconology, that is, 'what images say'.

Sandbye (2014) argues for a more intense focus on 'what the photograph *does*' instead of the recurrent theme of 'what a photograph *is*'. However, in the case of in-app photo-chatting, these two aspects of smartphone photography are inextricably intertwined and, that being the case, the 'what' and 'why' need to be considered simultaneously. An example in this case could be the photo-sharing in Beata's family: the photo-chat between Beata and her mother was later collected and shared by her mother with Beata's father, taking a form resembling former practices with family photograph albums. These in-app photographs were usually snaps of the everyday, depicting Beata's son, or showing progress in their house building. However, the fact of geographical distance, both between Beata and her parents and between Beata's parents (her father works in another city), defines the role of photo-chatting in maintaining family relationships and thereby indicates 'what the photograph *does*'.

Similarly, in Anna's narratives on her photo-chatting with her aunt (and uncle), the photographs usually had a clear purpose, which determined their content: they were created to ask a question, in other words, in search of expertise. These seemingly meaningless images of mushrooms or a fish played a role in strengthening family relationships, both across geographical distance (i.e. between relatives living in Finland and Poland) as well as between relatives of rather distant kinship. This refers us back to the concept of 'digital kinning' (Baldassar and Wilding, 2020, 2022), which emphasises that the practices of care exchange using new media do not only help to maintain but also to create new family networks, including this with distant kin as in the case of Anna's communication practices.

Sinanan et al. (2018) point out that the affordances of camera phones make it easier for transnational families to display family relationships by means of image circulation, but

not without certain obligations. Baldassar and Wilding (2022) observe that while in the past it was acceptable to send occasional letters or make infrequent phone calls to distant relatives, in the presence of communication technologies, it is expected that circulation of information and care across the family network will be more frequent. Among the study participants, these kinds of obligations were identified, for example, by Ilona, who felt that she must always send some photographs to particular family members. Often, the exchange of photographs was regarded as a mutual obligation, although never explicitly formulated as such. The intense photo-chatting between Anna and her brother, or Olga with her mother, are examples of this.

## Conclusion

Given the prevalence of mobile devices with cameras, photographic practices are commonplace, but what we do with the photographs, and how we talk about what we do, often remains obscure. In this study, my aim was to focus on ‘imagetexts’ – the narratives that participants, members of Polish transnational families living in Finland, created about their in-app photographic communication. The analysis of these narratives, collected from five women and some of their children, led to sketching WhatsApp iconology. The photographs documented daily life: they showed children, hobbies and family activities, pets, and various everyday objects, especially when doing shopping, and they provided weather updates from the places where family members were at the time. They were shared for kinkeeping purposes (and consequently were often regarded as a family obligation), they provided evidence of being somewhere or achieving something or, as visual evidence, they could also comfort the other family member; and finally, they were visual reports from trips and other daily activities.

WhatsApp iconology has been drafted here mostly on the basis of ‘what is said about images’ (Mitchell, 1986), but also partly on the basis of ‘what images say’ although, in the latter case, I have relied mostly on ‘imagetexts’ (Mitchell, 2015) instead of the actual images. Research in digital photo-sharing and photo-chatting, especially in a family context, is still in the developmental phase. The analytical and theoretical approach that I have proposed in this study is another way for us to examine the affective role that digitally mediated photographs play in everyday life. In this context, the ‘imagetext’ may be a useful approach for researchers who are less experienced in visual methodologies, allowing them to look at practices in visual communication through participants’ eyes.

The findings in this study are entirely based on the analysis of what the participants said they do with the photographs in their WhatsApp family communication. It is possible that some parts of these stories do not precisely reflect reality, but there is no need to verify them: what matters most in the ‘imagetexts’ shared by participants is participants’ affection for their in-app photographic practices. In this sense, the study brings forward an often-overlooked aspect in (transnational) family communication, that is, the discussion over the practices in photo-chatting.

## Note

1. Actually, Hirsch mistakes here ‘imagetext’ with ‘image-text’ – the former being the literal manifestation of image and text, e.g., in comics, or in a collage, and the latter referring to



the relation of the visual and the verbal, e.g., the nesting of images such as metaphors or symbols inside discourse (Mitchell, 2015).

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