

Chapter 7

The Big Meaning of Small Messages



Abstract Here, instant messaging as a mode of everyday communication in digital families is taken up for examination. We look, in particular, into the qualities that make WhatsApp an attractive communication tool for extended families: it allows both one-to-one and one-to-many interactions and provides multiple modalities for intergenerational family communication (voice, text, photos and videos). Empirical evidence and qualitative data collected in Finland and Italy in 2014–2015 are drawn upon and analysed in advancing the argument that the success story of WhatsApp in the family context is related to way it enables reaching the whole family at once and promotes ‘phatic communion’ via small messages.

Keywords Extended family · Instant messaging · Intergenerational relationships · One-to-many communication · Phatic communion · WhatsApp

This chapter takes up instant messaging for examination as a mode of everyday communication in digital families. The investigation focuses on one particular communication application, WhatsApp, which, at the time of the data collection for this study, was one of the most popular instant messaging applications in many countries (O’Hara, Massimi, Harpe, Rubens, & Morris, 2014). This was the case also in Finland and Italy. What makes WhatsApp an attractive communication tool for extended families is that it allows both one-to-one and one-to-many interactions, and provides multiple modalities for intergenerational family communication (voice, text, photos and videos). The question is raised whether, to what extent, and in which ways small messages exchanged via WhatsApp might contribute to the sense of social coherence in extended digital families. The discussion draws upon empirical evidence and illustrations derived from qualitative data collected in Finland and Italy in 2014–2015. The chapter also briefly considers the reasons why, at the time of this study, Slovenian families, compared to those in Finland and Italy, had far less enthusiastically embraced the possibilities offered by the WhatsApp application.

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WhatsApp's Growth and Success

WhatsApp is an instant messaging application that runs on mobile communication devices equipped with an Internet connection. WhatsApp allows sending text, picture, voice and video content to either one person at a time or several persons participating in chat groups. In 2017, after the data collection for this book had already been completed, a new feature was introduced in WhatsApp that allowed users to post customized photos and videos timed to automatically disappear after 24 h. The application can be categorized as either a real-time or a near-real-time communication tool.

Other prominent (and popular) features of WhatsApp are that it enables the user to follow the delivery of the message and see when one's contacts are available and when they themselves are busy typing messages. To indicate that a sent message was successfully delivered, a check mark will appear next to it, while two check marks, of varying colour, tell that it has been received and read. Similarly, WhatsApp shows whether other users in one's contact list are currently online and, if they are not, when they have last logged in; this last seen timestamp feature, however, can be disabled by the user. Research has already shown this micro-scale peer monitoring to be commonly used to check the availability of others without, however, any actual intention of contacting them (e.g. Karapanos, Teixeira, & Gouveia, 2016; O'Hara et al., 2014).

Released in 2009, WhatsApp's worldwide popularity has increased rapidly ever since. According to Statista (2017), the total number of WhatsApp users multiplied more than sixfold over the last four years or so, going up from 200 million in April 2013 to 1.3 billion by July 2017. The quality of the available user statistics is, however, somewhat variable, as data is, for instance, not available for all countries and, for those that it is, not always comparable. In any case, what seems clear from overtime comparisons is that the number of the application's users has constantly increased and keeps increasing still today.

Of all the Nordic countries, as the AudienceProject (2016) report shows, WhatsApp was clearly the most popular in Finland in 2016. There, it ranked as the number one social media tool overall, while failing to make it anywhere near the top in any of its Scandinavian neighbours. In the last quarter of 2016, 68% of all Finnish smartphone owners reported themselves using WhatsApp. Finns were, however, also very busy users of the application, with 49% of those with using it claiming to do so several times a day and 29% every day. In comparison, the corresponding figures for Sweden in the same time period were 25 and 16%, respectively. Moreover, as the same report shows, Finnish women were slightly more frequent WhatsApp users than Finnish men (42 and 32%, respectively), and WhatsApp was the most popular social media application in all age groups in the country. Its penetration rate in the country varied, being the highest among those aged 15–25 (70%) and the lowest among those aged 56 or over (18%). The increase in the numbers has indeed been remarkable in terms of speed and the sheer size, as just two years earlier, in 2014, no more than basically one in every third Finn (37%) reported using WhatsApp (Taloustutkimus, 2014). In

the other two countries in this study, the penetration numbers were not as readily available (for Slovenia, no reliable statistics were available in general). According to a Deutsche Bank estimate in 2015, however, the penetration rate of WhatsApp among Italian smartphone users was 68% (Stern, 2015).

Family Instant Messaging

A glance back at history reveals that, for a good while, online instant messengers remained a communication media utilized mainly by teenagers for peer-to-peer communication and young adults for work-related interaction (Bouhnik & Deshen, 2014; Grinter & Palen, 2002; Johnston et al., 2015; Lenhart, Rainie, & Lewis, 2001; Nardi, Whittaker, & Bradner, 2000). Also, recent studies point to children's preference for communicating with their peers, not parents, through mobile and social media tools (e.g. Nag, Ling, & Jakobsen, 2016). Even if most of young people's mobile communication might then be with their peers, it does not mean that they would systematically exclude their parents—or even grandparents—from their instant messaging activities, however. As a matter of fact, the ways in which WhatsApp communication is creeping into the everyday life of extended families is still an unexplored territory.

The majority of the relevant research conducted in the area thus far deals with the gratifications of instant messenger and other social media tool use (e.g. Ling & Lai, 2016). Church and de Oliveira (2014) compared the way people use SMS and WhatsApp in Spain, employing both qualitative and quantitative methods. What they discovered was that, among the Spaniards aged 20–60 that they studied, WhatsApp was strongly associated with immediacy, a sense of community and free use, and that these were considered as its main gratifications. On the other hand, text messaging was still felt to be more reliable and entail fewer privacy concerns. In the United Kingdom, O'Hara et al. (2014) studied WhatsApp use among Britons aged 17–49 who came from a variety of occupational backgrounds and included both persons living alone and couples. For the group they studied, WhatsApp was frequently seen as a means enabling one to 'dwell' with others: it was constitutive of the kind of commitment and faithfulness characterizing social relationships, in general, and served the needs of social bonding more than any functional purpose of merely exchanging information.

The migration of instant messaging from desktop computers to smartphones has diversified the socio-demographic profile of service users. Smartphones, with their pre-installed applications and easy-to-use application stores, have introduced instant messengers to an ever-wider group of potential users. They have not only added mobility to instant messaging communication but also extended the overall range of available modalities from text-based messages (as in IRC and AOL's Instant Messenger) and voice calls to photos, voice messages and Internet calls (see, e.g. Baron 2010; Ling & Baron, 2007). This very ability to choose from among many different modalities is what makes WhatsApp and other instant messengers like it suitable tools for connecting people with different communicative preferences. In offering

something for everyone, WhatsApp allows users to adapt to one another's communication preferences, habits and manners and, by so doing, helps family members overcome social differences between family generations in that regard.

In extended families, instant messengers need to be positioned into the matrix of the intricate parent–child relationships, which also reflect children's mutually contradictory needs for autonomy and parental care. As previous studies have shown, mobile communication devices, in general, serve both ends here: they serve to maintain an 'umbilical cord' between children and parents and function as a medium enabling children's greater degree of independence (Ling, 2007). Somewhat along the same lines, Ribak (2009) has looked at the mobile phone as a kind of transitional object in family life, one that can be viewed as a materialization of the parent–child nucleus around which the relationship between the two is continuously communicated, negotiated and redefined. In the family context, however, the social roles of parent and child are also easily inverted. In parents' use of mobile communication tools, also their dependence on their children's technological assistance and care-taking is manifested (Taipale, Petrovčič, & Dolničar, 2018). The same concerns the relationship between grown-up children and their ageing parents, whose dependence on others, in general, only increases with age.

The ability to sustain and nurture family connections from afar that mobile communication has meant has prompted researchers to argue that new social media and digital communication technologies have given rise to 'networked families' or new relational families (Horst, 2006; Lim, 2016; Madianou & Miller, 2011; Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Wilding, 2006). Yet, there are only a handful of studies exploring the actual ways in which families use mobile instant messengers and their group chat functions, in particular, to stay connected. One of them is by Rosales and Fernández-Ardévol (2016), who have showed how in Spain, where WhatsApp is commonly used across all age groups, the way smartphones are used, rather than being only based on age-differentiated skills, typically reflects the users' interests in technology use and communication needs that change as one grows older. Elsewhere, Siibak and Tamme (2013) have studied how various web-based communication channels are used in Estonian families, finding these new communication tools to be appreciated by families, especially for their ability to offer a sense of closeness among family members. This function of theirs was especially valued among older family members who lived apart from their children, while for younger people also their ability to act the same way in one's peer relationships was important.

Siibak and Tamme (2013) went on to argue that web-based communication technologies serve family relationships when family members live in the same household. Although the mobile devices and applications the families in their study used were highly portable, they were to a notable extent also deployed to coordinate activities and share information in relatively close proximity of other family members, individuals who were sometimes even located within the same household and including in entirely non-mobile situation (cf. Fortunati & Taipale, 2017). Indeed, based on their findings, too, it appears that the newer forms of social media can support group and small community interaction to a higher degree than older one-to-one technologies and earlier social networking sites, in which multiple audiences easily collapsed into

one, jeopardizing individuals' privacy (see, e.g. Marwick & Boyd, 2011). For this very reason, Siibak and Tamme concluded, Estonian families favoured synchronous chat groups and other closed online spaces for their intra-family communication. This is an important observation, as, according to previous research, it is face-to-face conversation and telephone calls that have predominated as modes of family communication and in the maintenance of local relationships (e.g. Baym, 2015; Chen, Boase, & Wellman, 2002; Quan-Haase, Wellman, Witte, & Hampton, 2002).

All in all, compared to traditional person-to-person communication channels such as voice calls and short text messaging (SMS), instant messengers are particularly useful as tools helping people to stay in touch with closely related others and create and maintain communities based on closed communication spaces instead of public or semi-public social media platform use (Church & de Oliveira, 2014). Close-knit communities like families do not aim to reach large audiences, but are not limited to private one-to-one communication, either. Its ability to help users reach middle-range audiences, consisting of the significant others who all know one another, is thus one of WhatsApp's strengths.

Reaching the Family

The key informant reports in this study revealed marked country differences in the use of WhatsApp for intra-family communication. Some of these differences had to do with communication cultures and housing arrangements characterizing the context, such as a higher proportion of multigenerational households in Slovenia and a later home-leaving age in Italy, compared to Finland. The differences were, accordingly, directly related to physical distances between adult children, their parents and their grandparents, which were notably greater in Finland than in Italy and Slovenia. Physical distance from one another can thus be assumed to reinforce the need for electronically mediated family communication.

Another factor that can be presumed to either encourage or discourage the shift from voice calls and short text messaging to online-based communication is the prevailing pricing model for wireless Internet services. In Finland, mobile broadband subscriptions have typically included unlimited data transfer at a flat fee, while the rates in Italy and Slovenia are, as a rule, for limited service. Notwithstanding such differences, a common incentive for using WhatsApp in family communication in all the countries examined was cost saving. As several key informants reported, sending messages and making voice calls via WhatsApp were in their families considered free of charge, and hence a cheaper option compared to normal phone calls or conventional text/multimedia messaging that are often charged per-use (e.g. key informants Carla, aged 23, and Ella, aged 24, in Finland; Alice, aged 23, and Elisa, aged 26, in Italy).

At the time of this data collection, WhatsApp usage in Slovenia was largely confined to peer-to-peer communication: only one family of those surveyed in the country reported using it for intra-family communication. A couple of the Slovenian key informants, however, reported Viber, another instant messenger, as being used in

their families, although mainly for the purposes of contacting distant relatives. Due to this, very limited role that WhatsApp played in the Slovenian families studied, the discussion below is confined to Finnish and Italian families.

In Italy, much of the family WhatsApp use reported took place among younger family members of approximately the same age. This communication, furthermore, was not restricted to closest family members only (e.g. key informants Alessandro, aged 20, Bruno, aged 27 and Matteo, aged 24), but was also resorted to reach cousins and second cousins (Silvia, aged 25) and, in some cases, also uncles and aunts, who, however, were normally less than 20 years older than the key informant (Melissa, aged 25, Monica, aged 25 and Enrico, aged 24). This pattern is in apparent agreement with the notion of the family that in Italy is broader than in Finland.

Families in which all family members used WhatsApp were clearly more common in Finland. Many Finnish key informants described WhatsApp exchanges the new daily mode of family communication in the families they reported on (e.g. those of Jenny, aged 25 and Sara, aged 25). This, to be sure, was still something of a new phenomenon in the families, as the family chat groups used for the purpose had been set up quite recently. One of the Finnish key informants reporting daily WhatsApp use in their families was Emma (aged 24), who spoke of the pivotal role a shared WhatsApp chat group played in her family's daily communication routines as follows:

Me and my core family's [parents, aged 52 and 53, and sister, aged 19] main way of communicating is nowadays a WhatsApp chat group. We created this group about half a year ago, and it's come to very busy use ever since. One of us posts photos and messages for the group every day—and all the others follow them enthusiastically. The biggest difference with how we had it in the past is that now also my parents have learnt instant messaging on WhatsApp.

A major advantage of WhatsApp chat groups is that it allows reaching the entire or almost all of the family at once. The Finnish key informant Emilia (aged 24) made a point of noting this: 'Recently, we created a WhatsApp chat group for the family, so that we can easily reach all of us when we need to contact everybody at the same time.' Although the use of chat groups was not as common in Italy as it was in Finland, WhatsApp was clearly becoming more common in families there, too. Monica (aged 25) from Italy told that WhatsApp was something quite new to her family, and that it was mainly her mother (aged 53) and her siblings (aged 25 and 19) who used it:

For instant messaging, we all use mostly the smartphone application WhatsApp. My dad [aged 58] is kind of a geek who likes technology. He tries to keep up to date with it but, because of his age and lack of time, he is not able to use WhatsApp as proficiently as the rest of us. To my mother [aged 53], although she's not the oldest of my respondents [family members], WhatsApp is a bit of a novelty as she got a smartphone only very recently. My aunts and uncles instead use it regularly, to chat with family and friends and to send photos to people.... I myself use WhatsApp with all my respondents, although especially with my mother, because I want her to learn how to use it and because I want to share parts of my life with her, since we live far away from each other.

The end of this quote illustrates well the sharing-as-caring aspect of WhatsApp-based family communication. Perhaps not so surprisingly, it was mostly visible in interactions between mothers and their daughters. This gendered aspect of WhatsApp communication was manifested in the reports of several Finnish key informants as well. Emma (aged 24), for instance, described how her mother (aged 52) long resisted the idea of acquiring a smartphone. When she finally received one from her employer and learnt to use it, it, however, quickly became her, the mother, who actively began putting it to collective use; it was then also she who ‘came up with the idea of creating a WhatsApp chat group for the family’. Another Finnish key informant, Emilia (aged 24), captured the central role that mothers usually had in family WhatsApp communication, recounting how ‘mom [aged 52] no longer needs to call her kids once a week to ask how they are doing, as now we exchange news every day’.

This pivotal role of mothers in family communication became all the more clearer when juxtaposed to fathers’ more limited communication skills and practices. While the Finnish key informant Julia (aged 21), her sister (aged 19) and her mother (aged 54) all praised WhatsApp for being ‘the best communication mean as it can be used for free to send messages all over the networks and, what’s best, sending photos is so simple and costs nothing’, they had nevertheless chosen another way to talk with the father in the family (aged 59). According to Julia, she, her sister and her mother ‘always call [him] since he has not installed WhatsApp in his smartphones and his messages anyway are so messy and hard to read’, as the father did not use punctuation in his messages, made lots of spelling mistakes and sent jokes the others did not understand. Also, some of the Italian key informants spoke of similar differences between mothers and fathers in WhatsApp communication. As Silvio (aged 21), for instance, reported:

To keep in touch with my mom [aged 50] I can make phone calls or use texting, WhatsApp messages, or email, since she has been able to integrate herself almost completely into the world of technology, including using a smartphone. My dad [aged 54], on the other hand, is still at a lower step, so I only talk to him by phone, or I send him SMS’s or, more recently, emails.

As these quotes clearly indicate, even when the entire family could be reached through WhatsApp, mothers were typically the main agents of family communication. Relatedly, there was frequently a fear that fathers would end up being left out if they did not learn or want to use instant messengers (e.g. by Finnish key informant Teresa, aged 24). In this sense, WhatsApp family communication, as it were, emerged as a new form of immaterial labour, in particular, care work, which still today remains more of a domain of women than men (cf. Fortunati, Taipale, & de Luca, 2013; Hochschild, 1983).

The importance of WhatsApp communication for the social coherence of family was clearly articulated by both Finnish and Italian informants: it facilitated intergenerational connections and togetherness within extended families. Sauli, the brother of the Finnish key informant Sofia (aged 24), testified to this: ‘Thanks to WhatsApp, we write to and keep in touch with each other more often now’. Similarly, the key

informant Emma (aged 24), also from Finland, reported that '[w]e spoke of how all of us had noticed how, after adopting WhatsApp, we have been much more often in touch with other family members than before.' Even a very young sister (aged 9) of the Finnish key informant Maria (aged 24) was able to notice the benefits of having a common WhatsApp chat group for her family: 'you know better how the other family members are doing, even when they are far away'.

In some families where the parents had not yet embraced WhatsApp, the children nevertheless felt that their doing so 'would make family communication easier', as a younger brother (aged 12) of the Finnish key informant Marika (aged 20) put it. A sister (aged 21) of the above Finnish key informant Sofia made the same point a little more concretely:

my parents [aged 51 and 48] are excluded, so we have own small circle. The parents are a bit bitter because of this, as that they don't get to see the pictures we're sending each other.... Our relationships would be saved if only they, too, joined WhatsApp.

A Technology of Middle Reach

In her book *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*, Baym (2015) argues that the success of social networking sites is owing to their wide, but selective, reach. The notion of reach here is borrowed from Gurak (2003, p. 30), who describes it as 'the partner of speed': digitized contents not only travel with speed, but they can also reach large audiences. As Baym rightly notes, media technologies vary in their ability to attain, support or reach audiences of different sizes. The reach of face-to-face contacts is obviously the narrowest, while the qualities that in-person communication can mediate are by far most. In-person communication involves a range of non-verbal (facial and bodily) cues that are extremely difficult to mediate in full detail using technological means. Mobile media and communication technologies allow both a *narrow reach*, confined to one's closest friends and family members (when using phone calls, short text messages), and a *wide reach*, extending also to acquaintances and even strangers (through Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and so on).

However, as Austin (2017) has pointed out, Baym's observations on electronically mediated interpersonal relationships concern fairly early forms of ICT and social media. Instant messaging applications like WhatsApp that feature closed group chat functions seem to fall between the two extremes of narrow and wide reach. What they do, namely, is to enable one to create, access, sustain and manage a *middle-reach* audience. The extended family serves as a good example of such a middle-range community since it typically involves not only very close family members like siblings and parents, but also more distant family members and relatives such as step-parents and half-siblings, or grandparents living further away. Research relying on rather simple distinctions between weak and strong ties all too easily views today's families as loose nexuses of individually networked family members who merely need to make more efforts than those in the past to be able to stay connected (e.g. Rainie & Wellman, 2012).

In this chapter, my argument is that WhatsApp and similar mobile instant messengers have, in fact, introduced a whole new layer to mobile communication, one that helps to make this laborious task of families easier to accomplish. Family WhatsApp use does not simply bring together separate individual networks or conjoin family members who all know each other already. It also provides a relatively private communication space suitable for the sustenance and maintenance of both dyadic family relationships and entire family communities, allowing family members to discuss private family matters, exchange emotions and provide care and support to one another while keeping their exchanges and actions hidden from the larger public.

Here, the activity of sharing-as-caring attains then a deeper and fuller meaning. While minor acts of sharing, such as 'sharing' and 'liking' contents on Twitter, Instagram or Snapchat, might be sufficient to establish and maintain weak ties between users, strong ties are seldom, and family ties never, established purely online. Strong family ties require a great amount of time, emotion, intimacy and reciprocal services invested by family members in their intra-family relationships (Granovetter, 1973). What private family WhatsApp groups do is offer a particular channel to maintain and nurture strong family ties from afar and near, allowing both synchronous and asynchronous modes of communication that help family members juggle their individual daily agendas and timetables. Furthermore, considering that sharing, as an activity, in itself manifests values that are typically feminine (such as openness and mutuality; see, e.g. Johns, 2013), it is unsurprising that WhatsApp is used more widely by women than by men.

All in all, such affordances provided by closed WhatsApp chat groups resonate well with the particularities of contemporary extended families that are geographically dispersed, non-hierarchical and change their composition over time. Its new communicative properties have made WhatsApp and comparable applications extremely well suited for one-to-group type of communication, offering a platform for constant family connectivity (Hänninen, Taipale, & Korhonen, 2018; Ling & Lai, 2016). Thanks to them, family members who, to borrow the words of Rainie and Wellman (2012, p. 162) used to 'mostly dance solo but take part in a few duets and household ensembles' can now keep their own band together and play their joint favourite tunes non-stop if they so wish.

The larger meaning of sharing and exchanging small messages, photos and video clips, not forgetting nanolevel interaction such as pressings of 'like' and 'favourite' buttons (Eranti & Lonkila, 2015), is perhaps best captured by the concept of *phatic communion*. The term was used first by Malinowski (1923), who coined it to refer to apparently purposeless speech acts such as polite small talk and trivial pleasantries that nevertheless have an important social function in establishing, maintaining and renewing social bonds between interlocutors. As Miller (2008) has argued, online media cultures promote similar kind of, mainly social and networking driven, communication at the expense of functional and informational contents and dialogic intents. The design of many social media platforms, for instance, encourages short expression by limiting the number of characters that can be used for text input (e.g. Twitter), favouring the use of visual material and introducing new ways to graph-

ically express emotions with one click. To critical voices such as Wittel's (2001), however, this has sounded like inviting a flattening of communication and even of social bonds.

In contrast to such more pessimistic predictions about the effects of the digitalization of also family communication on group cohesion and contacts, extended families in Finland, and increasingly in Italy as well, have discovered the positive potential of WhatsApp. For them, it has been a useful tool helping them to reach and keep in contact with their members, sustain family connection and maintain a sense of togetherness. Instead of making them stay only loosely connected and work even harder than before to keep in touch, family members have found multimodal communication and group chats via WhatsApp to facilitate intra-family communication and make it easier to reconnect with family members elsewhere. In other words, WhatsApp has helped in refreshing and reactivating social bonds between family members, and in so doing it has effectuated the transposition of the original function of phatic communion to the online environment.

Short, Fast and Trivial

Indeed, the role of WhatsApp as a medium of phatic expression was widely recognized in both Finnish and Italian families in this study. Most often, this recognition was indirect, expressing itself through a downplaying of the importance of the small messages one sent via WhatsApp, which nevertheless appeared to in many ways act as the basics of people's everyday family interaction. The report by the Finnish key informant Ella (aged 24) spoke of the suitability of the application for this purpose: 'at times, the contents of messages are not really important and full of information, and that is when WhatsApp is the best choice'. Similarly, a sister (aged 25) of the Finnish key informant Teresa (aged 24) opined that, in their family, 'WhatsApp has made us closer as we can speak about trivial matters and have fun even if we are physically in different places'

Another characteristic of phatic WhatsApp-mediated expression involved its adaptability to different kinds of communication needs and preferences. To facilitate intra-family communication and keep everybody in the family connected, family members often faced a need to accommodate everyone else's needs and preferences and adapt themselves to others' favourite communication modes. This they could more easily do with WhatsApp, as, among others, the Finnish key informant Karin (aged 27) and the Italian key informant Monica (aged 25), respectively, testified:

With my partner [aged 23] and my little brother [aged 23], we communicate over our mobile phones, mainly by WhatsApp messages and through Facebook Messenger.... WhatsApp messages are usually the easiest and fastest ways to connect, if you want to talk to people belonging to a younger generation. Another major reason for why people use it is that it's free.

It should say that WhatsApp is something everybody agrees about, and in my opinion, it connects between different generations, as it allows the kind of short and fast communications my mother prefers, but also longer casual chats with lots of links and images, the kind of communication my sister likes.

As the Finnish Karin notes above, WhatsApp lends itself well to, and even promotes, short and quick communications favoured by younger people. Those communications can, furthermore, make use of emoticons and chat slang. At the same time, however, as the Italian Monica points out, unlike, say, Twitter with its 140-character limit, WhatsApp does not exclude any longer forms of expression, either. What Monica's account also reveals, however, is that our stereotypes regarding generation-specific communication styles do not need to always hold: among the families partaking in this study, there were situations that considerably differed from, or even reversed, them. In Monica's family, for instance, it was, in fact, her mother who favoured short, matter-of-fact-like exchanges, while the children enjoyed engaging in longer discussions.

Multimodality Spiced with Playfulness

A great deal of WhatsApp's popularity appears thus to be due to its ability to effectively and quickly transmit different types of contents. Sometimes, a seemingly purposeless exchange of photos and other media contents between family members may, in fact, provide the easiest way to engage in social bonding and share a sense of togetherness. In Finland, for instance, the key informant Carla (aged 23) told that, in her family, 'WhatsApp is what we choose, especially when we want to share photos with one another'. In many families, also parents had enthusiastically begun to exchange photos and videos to stay connected with the rest of the family, as in the following cases reported by the Italian key informants Antonio (aged 30) and Mario (aged 24), respectively:

Lately, especially during the holiday seasons, I have noticed how my parents [both aged 52] have begun to use WhatsApp more than before, although they still only use it for communications of minor importance or to share some photos and funny videos.

With my sister, my cousins who're my age, and my mother [aged 51] I sometimes also use the application WhatsApp, which is a very popular, convenient, and easy-to-use way to end videos and photos.

Such multimodality of family communication brings out some new aspects of it. First of all, the use of one's own voice and self-taken photos in messages makes communication more personal than what 'pure' texting is capable of achieving. The Italian key informant Alice (aged 23) described this effect when reporting that even though her 'parents [aged 55 and 56] didn't immediately understand the point with WhatsApp groups, they found in voice messages a new possibility to make their communications more personal compared to text messaging'. Second, the certain playfulness involved in the sharing of comical photos and videos for its part, too,

contributes to the attainment of the ultimate outcome in all phatic expression, which is social binding. This could sometimes be reflected in what we could call the ‘social division of labour’ between different communication modes in the families, as had happened in the Italian key informant Francesco’s (aged 25) case:

I installed WhatsApp upon the request of my father [age N/A], who then began to flood my own smartphone with ‘funny’ videos he kept sending.... It’s interesting to note that whereas I use WhatsApp for all communication, those in my father’s and mother’s [aged 57] generation tend to rather view it as more of a ‘game’, in the sense that they use it almost exclusively for unimportant things or to share entertainment. For everything else they do SMS and ordinary phone calls.

That parents, as in this quote, often try to engage many of the new communication modalities offered for users by WhatsApp and other applications like it suggests a willingness on their part to connect with their children more. Correspondingly, children’s willingness to participate in family WhatsApp groups and their readiness to adapt their communication methods and styles to those of their parents speak of a similar desire to connect. When the audience consists of close persons of middle reach, such as those included in the closed family WhatsApp groups, intergenerational communication is quite immediate by nature and the risk of losing one’s face is relatively low. In such a safe environment, it is then ‘quite common to send greetings and funny videos, just so you can smile together’, as Italian key informant Claudia (aged 21) summarized the purpose of using WhatsApp in her family.

Connecting Distributed Families

This chapter has examined WhatsApp as a technology of middle reach that serves the ends of social cohesion in extended families and intergenerational family relationships through its many modalities suited for phatic communion. In family WhatsApp communication, social bonding through small messages, endless everyday images and comical video clips are often more consequential or valued than any exchange of substantive information. In dyadic family relations, WhatsApp’s many modalities allow family members to individually choose the method of communication most desired and suitable for each one of them. Perhaps even more importantly, however, WhatsApp provides a relatively safe environment for one-to-group communication. As a consequence, the informants in this study could report WhatsApp group chats to have clearly facilitated intra-family communication in their families and strengthened the cohesion of their geographically distributed extended families.

To conclude, WhatsApp appears to provide a well-functioning platform for facilitating intergenerational communication in families, especially between still young family members and their late-middle-aged parents. To the extent that parents, too, have begun using it to send photos, video clips and voice messages, it might, moreover, even be argued that WhatsApp is marking a shift away from any clear-cut distinction between ‘texting teenagers’ and their ‘talking parents’. Especially, the mothers of the Finnish and Italian key informants in this study had embraced instant

messaging as a means to communicate with their grown-up children, extending their role as family carers to the domain of electronically mediated communication and the Internet. What was also interesting to note, however, was that some parents, especially fathers in Finland, could also feel themselves excluded from online family communication (for more on this, see Hänninen et al., 2018). At the same time, it did, to be sure, also become obvious that instant messaging had not yet reached the oldest members of the extended families. Grandparents were hardly ever mentioned as active players in family instant messaging.

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