



Social Emotional Support on One-on-One and Group Family WhatsApp. Do Gender Differences Exist?

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ABSTRACT

WhatsApp is one of the more popular messaging applications used in interpersonal relationships, often providing participants with emotional social support. As Eagly and Crowley (1986) posit that gender plays a salient role in social interactions, the present study examined gender differences in Family WhatsApp usage and whether emotional support is more frequently a goal for women than for men. Using a snowball approach, graduate students in family studies and behavioral science were asked to complete questionnaires concerning their family WhatsApp usage (N=298). Findings showed that women use WhatsApp more than men and, particularly for individual emotional support. It appears that gender differences are being preserved and carried on from the offline to the online settings and are more noticeable in the private form of the platform, as it may encourage more intimate emotional expressions.

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One of the salient needs of individuals is social support, both in good and bad times [1]. Recently, on-line communication technologies, including messaging applications [2] are becoming a popular means for providing such support [3]. Although WhatsApp is one of the more popular messaging applications used in interpersonal relationships, only a few studies have examined its use as a medium to provide emotional support [2]. WhatsApp for family use is quite popular [4], both in one-on-one interactions and in small groups. Although a typical family social interaction has a strong gender component [5], evidence of the role gender plays in WhatsApp usage is rather limited. As such, the study here focuses on social support in WhatsApp interactions and the role of gender in explaining behavioral differences in one-on-one and group family WhatsApp usage.

Social support and family WhatsApp Social support is defined as the availability of interpersonal resources [6] in terms of tangible and intangible assistance from friends, family, and others in one's social circle. Social support enables individuals to feel loved, esteemed and valued, and thus reduces stress and enhances wellbeing [7]. One of the most frequently studied aspects of social support is the emotional component, i.e., expressing empathy and offering advice, feedback and understanding [8], including in the on-line media [9]. For example, on one recent study, online social support was found to manifest itself in a similar fashion and with accompanying positive impact as offline support [2].

In particular, WhatsApp, one of the world's most popular

internet-based multimodal communication messaging application tool, includes features that allow for more natural communications [10], and sharing life events by nearly real time [11]. These create a high sense of presence in communications [12], a sense of togetherness, care and intimacy [5] and a channel for meaningful and emotional exchange between people [11]. It is therefore especially suited for use with closely related contacts and family members [4]. WhatsApp can be used with one family member at a time, providing individual support, or with number of family members, as it creates micro-communities which help foster a supportive network [13].

Family WhatsApp Social Support and Gender

Eagly and Crowley [1] posit that gender plays a role in social interactions and support exchange. Women are typically more involved in interpersonal activities, in particular familial, and demonstrate higher social skills compared to men. Those are learned through socialization processes and are preserved and transferred to the online sphere [6]. Indeed, women use technology for social connectivity more than men [14], and talk more frequently and longer [15], including on WhatsApp [16]. Frequency of communication, in turn, was linked to the emotional intensity of the relationship [16]. Women also tend to express their feelings more than men online, post more personal status messages and readily develop meaningful online relations [17]. Further, as women are more focused on relational bonding, they prefer one-on-one interactions or smaller groups [18] and report a higher number of single WhatsApp chats [19]. When in family groups, women tend to

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take the gender-bound role of "kin-keepers" where they hold the informal responsibility of helping the family keep in touch with one another and providing supportive information to one another [20]. Men, in contrast, are more focused on collective bonding, prefer group communication and report higher number of WhatsApp group chats [20].

However, not much is known about how gender roles manifest themselves in social support within the different forms of family WhatsApp. Two research hypotheses were postulated to examine these issues:

H1: The use of one-on-one Family WhatsApp is more frequent for women than men. In contrast, there are no gender differences in using Family WhatsApp group.

H2: The use of both one-on-one and group family WhatsApp for emotional support is more frequent for women than for men.

Method

Participants

Data from 298 participants, ranging in age from 15 to 73 years old ($M = 35.23$, $SD = 13.54$, $Mdn = 30.00$) were analyzed. About 49% ($N = 145$) were female and 53.6% ($N = 158$) had an academic degree with 48.4% married ($N = 143$) and 45.5% reported below the average income ($N = 134$).

Instruments

Frequency of using WhatsApp in family setting

Participants were asked to choose one family member and one family WhatsApp group and answer "How often do you communicate with your family member within one-on-one WhatsApp and within family WhatsApp group?" Items were rated on a 1 (less than once a year or never) to 9 (a few times on one day). The values 1-5 were united (reflect low frequency of use) and values 6-9 (high frequency of use).

WhatsApp usage for emotional-social support in family setting Participants completed a six-item scale indicating the extent to which they use WhatsApp as emotional support in a family setting both with one other family member and as part of a family group. Two example items were: "How often do you use WhatsApp chats for emotional support and giving an advice" and "How often do you share daily life activities with a family member"? Each item was scored from 1 (not at all) to 5 (a great deal). This measure was derived from the Intergenerational Support Index (ISI) [8] that examined offline one-on-one family interactions, from findings from Love et al. [10] who explored exchanging emotional support on group WhatsApp, and from Montag et al. [17] study on WhatsApp as a means to communicate daily activities. Cronbach alpha for Family WhatsApp emotional support for one-on-one use was .85 and for the family group, .78.

Procedure

Graduate students in family studies and behavioral sciences were asked to complete the survey via an internet link. Using a snowball approach, the students invited family members and acquaintances to participate in the study. Likewise, the link was distributed via WhatsApp groups and Facebook. Participants

were informed that the questionnaires were anonymous, and that participation was voluntary.

In total, 825 subjects responded. As the total number of women was much greater than men, a random sample of women (every fifth female) was selected. In the analysis reported below, 153 males and 145 females were used. When comparing the profiles of the total respondents and the group analyzed here, few differences on education, marital status, and income were observed. For example, the percentage of respondents below average on income in the larger group was 51% and in the present sample 46%. Except for gender, similar differences were observed for all the other demographics in the study.

Results

In analyzing the first hypothesis, the frequency of using one-on-one family WhatsApp (low or high) differed by gender, as the chi-square test showed significant differences ($\chi^2 = 11.32$, $p < .001$). The frequency of one-on-one family WhatsApp for women was higher for women (97.7%) than for men (86.3%) and confirmed our first hypothesis. On the WhatsApp family group, no significant difference by gender was found ($\chi^2 = 1.19$, $p = .275$).

To test the differences by gender for the two dependent measures, individual and group emotional-social support, Hotelling's-T² test was used. Results were significant (Hotelling's $T = 10.8$; $p < .01$). Post hoc tests showed that women (Mean = 3.88, $SD = 0.91$) were higher than men (Mean = 3.45, $SD = 0.93$; $t(253) = -3.85$, $p < .01$) on individual emotional support and not on group emotional support, $t(-0.19)$, $p > .05$.

To determine whether the sampling procedure affected our conclusions, we compared the means of individual and group emotional support by gender for all the students who responded to the survey ($N = 825$). The significance tests confirmed the conclusions derived from the sample. Again, women were significantly higher on individual emotional support, $t(682) = -2.80$, $p < .01$, but no gender difference was observed for group emotional support, $t(588) = 0.65$, $p > .05$.

Discussion

WhatsApp has become an important family communication medium, allowing intimacy and support-exchange [5]. The current study explored gender differences in the use of one-on-one and group family WhatsApp for social support, a less explored venue. Supporting our first hypothesis, women were found to be more active on one-on-one family WhatsApp than men. This indicates that women's family WhatsApp use is in line with their more general tendency to focus on relational bonding, their preference of [19], and actual involvement in one-on-one interactions [20].

Gender differences were not found in group family WhatsApp, suggesting that family groups may satisfy both genders' needs. Its collective nature, based on group communication, makes a comfortable setting for men, while its small size and intimate nature suits women [19]. The tendency to take the role of Keen-Keepers [21] may also contribute to women participation in family group-WhatsApp.

As postulated in the second hypothesis, the use of one-on-one family WhatsApp for emotional support was significantly higher among women. Beyond women's tendency for becoming engaged in emotional and social support exchange and their preference for one-on-one relationship, the frequency of contact, which is higher for women, is related to the emotional intensity of the relationship and may very well lead to a connection between people that is likely to allow the exchange of emotional support [16].

No significant difference was found in group family WhatsApp, however, suggesting that gender roles act differently in group family settings, and that the group setting may meet different gender needs. Men feel comfortable in group settings and are also likely to invest more time and energy to support their own family groups. Women, when in group settings, and in particular small groups, are geared towards providing support to others, and in particular to family members. However, their preference for and investment in one-on-one interactions may allow less time and resources for providing support in the group and thus appear similar in usage to men.

Overall, findings suggest that gender differences are being preserved and carried on from the offline to the online but are more salient among the private form of the platform, as it encourages more intimate emotional expressions and exposure [21]. More research is needed to elucidate the impact of different family group sizes and the types of social support exchange that occurs within them.

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