

# WhatsApp's Influence on Social Relationships of Older Adults

Veronika Hämmerle, Cora Pauli, Rhea Braunwalder and Sabina Misoch

*Institute for Ageing Research, University of Applied Sciences FHS St. Gallen, Rosenbergstrasse 59, St. Gallen, Switzerland*

**Keywords:** Mobile Instant Messaging, WhatsApp, Older Adults, Social Relationships, Digital Divide.

**Abstract:** Ageing societies and digitalisation are two prominent topics in industrialised nations. This also applies to Switzerland, where the share of older adults using smartphones and instant messaging services is constantly rising. The effects of instant messaging services in terms of social needs have been studied mainly regarding younger and middle-aged adults. According to socioemotional selectivity theory, however, older adults have different motivations and needs regarding their social relationships. Therefore, the results of studies on younger population groups cannot be transferred to older population groups. To bridge this research gap, we conducted a qualitative study with 30 older adults (65+) in Switzerland. We investigated the effects of using WhatsApp on their subjectively perceived quality of social relationships and examined whether the socioemotional selectivity theory is still valid in the face of digital communication. We conclude that using WhatsApp is in line with the socioemotional selectivity theory and has an intensifying effect on social relations of older users. WhatsApp is used very consciously to achieve positive ends by allowing older users to select and invest time in meaningful relationships.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Digitalisation and ageing societies are two prominent topics in industrialised nations today. In Switzerland, instant messaging services, offering online communication with text, video and audio functions, are wide-spread and more and more older adults use mobile internet and smartphones (Y&R Group Switzerland, 2017).

In this paper, based on a qualitative study conducted in 2019, we consider how using the instant messaging service WhatsApp impacts the subjective perceived quality of social ties of older adults aged 65+ in Switzerland.

The effects of instant messaging services on social relationships have been studied mainly regarding young adults. However, according to the socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, Fung, & Charles, 2003), motivations in constructing social relationships change throughout the life span. Thus, these results do not apply to older adults.

In this paper, we examine whether the socioemotional selectivity theory remains valid in the face of digital communication services and more precisely how the instant messaging service WhatsApp is used for selection processes described in the theory. After briefly describing the context and

theoretical background we present preliminary results of our qualitative study on the subjective influence of WhatsApp on social relationships of older adults. In the discussion, we consider limitations and draw further conclusions from our findings. Our data shows that WhatsApp has a positive effect on the subjective experience of the relationships of older adults. We reflect on how this has implications regarding debates on social inclusion, exclusion and participation of older adults in the digitalised age.

## 2 BACKGROUND

The Swiss Federal Council sees digitalisation as an opportunity for the Swiss society and has set itself the goal to ensure the participation of the whole society in information and communication technology (Bundesamt für Statistik, 2017). Studies show that there still is a difference in adoption and use of the internet depending on age, older adults using digital services less than their younger counterparts (Friemel, 2016; Just, Latzer, Metrevelli, & Saurwein, 2013; Seifert & Doh, 2016; Seifert & Schelling, 2015). In literature, this gap is called the “digital divide”. However, recent studies show that the number of older adults using the internet is on the rise

(Seifert & Doh, 2016) and thus the question can be asked if the digital divide has “grown old” (Friemel, 2016).

We concentrate on the use of the instant messaging service WhatsApp by older people, as according to data on Switzerland, WhatsApp was the most popular App installed on smartphones in Switzerland in 2017 (Y&R Group Switzerland, 2017). Various studies examine how, why and to which extent people use smartphones and instant messaging services. Ariel et al. found that the main motivation for young Israeli adults to use their smartphone was the wish to socialize with family and friends, especially contacts living further away (Ariel, Elisha-Malka, Avidar, & Levy, 2017). In their study on the needs that Facebook and WhatsApp fulfil, Karapanos, Teixeira and Gouveia (2016) found that for their participants, aged on average 27, the need to feel related to other people was decisive in the frequency of use of WhatsApp, demonstrating how WhatsApp allowed geographically distant family members to be present or offer reassurance (ibid.). However, we found that studies on the use of instant messaging mainly focus on young adults and adults and that there is a research gap on how older adults use instant messaging services and the effect they have on their social relationships.

The importance of considering age in research on smartphone usage is emphasised by Rosales and Fernández-Ardèvol in their study on smartphone usage of older adults in Spain (Rosales & Fernández-Ardèvol, 2016). They state as that needs and values change in the course of the lifetime and as social norms influence ageing, the dimension of age should be considered in studies (ibid.).

According to the socioemotional selectivity theory, priorities set in the maintenance of social relationships differ according to the amount of time an individual believes he or she has left to live (Carstensen, Fung, & Charles, 2003). Since time is perceived as more limited with increasing age, older adults mainly invest their cognitive and social resources in emotionally rewarding (inter)actions (Carstensen & Mikels, 2005; Barber, Opitz, Martins, Sakaki, & Mather, 2016; Lang, Staudinger, & Carstensen, 1998). This strategy allows them to achieve as much emotional gratification as possible in their remaining lifetime. Older adults focus on the quality of a fewer number of close relationships and are better at regulating emotions in everyday life (Carstensen, Fung, & Charles, 2003). Thus, the results of the aforementioned studies cannot be transferred to older adults without consideration and

there is a gap in research concerning older users of instant messaging.

We examine the use of WhatsApp of people aged 65 and over in Switzerland in detail. Although we do not deny the danger of older adults being excluded from society by digitalisation, contrary to Friemel (2016), we believe that speaking of a “digital divide” is “growing old”. We focus on those individuals who do participate in digitalisation to find out how they appropriate digital means in their constitution of social relationships and which effect WhatsApp has on the subjective experience of social relations of people over 65 in Switzerland.

### 3 STUDY

To support our position, we use first insights from our qualitative and explorative study “Instant messaging and social relationships: Effects of using WhatsApp on the subjective quality of social relationships of people 65+” funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation and currently in the phase of analysis.

Data collection was based on two methodological elements: the creation of ego-centered network maps, situating all social contacts of the informant within three concentric circles from close to distant (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980), and qualitative, semi-structured face-to-face interviews. The interviews focused on the content, frequency and form of messages exchanged over WhatsApp, the history of use, advantages and disadvantages concerning WhatsApp and the subjective experienced effects of WhatsApp on social relations. We also asked for misunderstandings and topics our informants would not discuss via WhatsApp. All interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. The data is currently being analysed by qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2015). After project completion, the anonymized transcriptions of the interviews will be made accessible through a data repository of our choice.

Our sample consisted of 15 men and 15 women aged between 66 and 84 (average age: 72.5). One-third had followed schooling up to secondary education, two-thirds had completed tertiary education. We included people with (22) and without children (8) and grand-children (19 with grandchildren, 11 without grandchildren) and living alone (9) or with their spouses/partners (21). Participants were required to be over 65 years of age, German-speaking and to have used WhatsApp within the last three months.

## 4 PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Our data shows that using WhatsApp has a positive effect on the constitution and the subjective perception of the social relationships of older adults. In this section, we describe data that acts as evidence to this, focusing on aspects such as upholding social relationships, intensifying social relationships, increasing a sense of belonging to groups, the practical aspect of WhatsApp and the general emotions associated with WhatsApp.

### 4.1 Upholding Social Relationships

Our interviewees described how WhatsApp made it easier to maintain relationships and keep in touch with other people. Many stated that they sent sporadic greetings to friends and family, checking up on them when they were on their minds, asking them how they and their families were. Some were inspired to contact people they had not contacted in a while by scrolling through their WhatsApp chats. Users said that they could write a message without worrying about bothering their counterparts at an inappropriate time. The messages were door-openers to arrange face-to-face meetings, which were felt to be preferable for longer and complex or emotionally deep exchanges. Sending a WhatsApp message was assumed to be less disturbing than calling and involved less effort than writing an e-mail, card or letter.

The use of WhatsApp to simplify the maintenance of relationships was especially salient in case of family members or friends living abroad or on holiday. Informants described how they appreciated receiving information from their children about their whereabouts and safe arrival at home or the holiday destination. Sharing holiday impressions or impressions from every-day life in the form of pictures, videos or texts made the geographic distance bridgeable and allowed for the continuation of relationships to people abroad. Further aspects addressed were costs and the time difference, which both could be ignored while sending WhatsApp messages to other countries.

In maintaining relationships with already close family members and friends, WhatsApp allows for spontaneity and synchronous as well as asynchronous communication, which can be adapted to either sides time constraints and schedules, to be unintrusive but still direct and easy.

### 4.2 Intensifying Social Relationships

Our participants often described that WhatsApp exchanges not only allowed them to maintain relationships but also to intensify relationships and strengthen the feeling of relatedness to individuals and groups. Through exchanging small and everyday events as well as emotional milestones, like grandchildren's first steps, our informants gained insights into the day to day lives of their family and friends and which made them feel closer to them. Especially thanks to the various functions of WhatsApp used by our interviewees in different intensity (text messages, pictures, videos, voice messages and emojis) a multi-dimensional exchange was created, which could be shaped according to personal preference.

In addition to the broad scale of possibilities in expressing themselves, our interviewees stated that the frequency of exchanges with social ties had increased by using WhatsApp. This increased the feeling of intensity of relationships, as the contacts were present and closer to our interviewees day to day lives.

### 4.3 Belonging to a Group

Not only regarding individuals, but also groups, WhatsApp seemed to have a positive effect on the perception of closeness and sense of belonging of our informants. WhatsApp group chats amongst siblings, friends and hobby or club groups were widely used, mostly for planning and coordinative purposes. While exchanges in group chats were sometimes perceived as uninteresting or irrelevant, especially in groups located in the outermost circles of our informant's network maps, the exchanges with groups involving close friends and family made our informants feel more included. Most used were family WhatsApp groups, which included the informant, their spouse, their children and in case old enough, grandchildren. Here, information, extraordinary and every-day occurrences, greetings, pictures, thoughts, jokes and memories were exchanged.

Regarding WhatsApp groups with social contacts our informants listed in the inner two circles on the network map (usually family and close friends), our informants felt more included and a stronger sense of belonging and community.

### 4.4 Organising and Planning

Next to subjectively perceived emotional aspects, informants also described a mainly practical aspect of

WhatsApp. WhatsApp was described as a very practical tool for coordinating and organising social life. Whether this meant arranging to go to the cinema with a friend, inviting their children to dinner, going on a day trip with a group of friends, managing a shared holiday home, coordinating telephone calls, the care of grandchildren or confirming attendance to club events, WhatsApp was widely used to arrange appointments of all sorts. Group chats were especially mentioned as practical to organise and coordinate reoccurring or one-time events. Another use and motivation of family chats was the coordination of the care for a sick or older family member.

Speed and immediacy were other positive practical aspects of WhatsApp. The rapidity allowed informants to send spontaneous invitations to their children, let them know they were dropping by, or ask their spouse to buy some groceries on the way home. Many of our informants were able to use WhatsApp with mobile data, allowing them to quickly let other people know if they were running late for an appointment.

WhatsApp was stated to be quick and practical in coordinating between several people and had the benefit of being unintrusive, leaving the receiver the time to answer at his or her convenience. The inhibition to contact other people, for fear of disturbing them was low.

#### 4.5 Enriching Everyday Life

In general, WhatsApp was associated with light, interesting and pleasurable contents. Informants stated that they would never discuss sensitive matters over WhatsApp. They were unanimously of the opinion, that conflicts and serious discussions should be discussed face-to-face “at a table” or at least on the telephone, where they would be able to hear their counterpart's voice. Some reported forwarding jokes, funny pictures or videos to others, after careful consideration, whether the recipient would be interested in the content or not. Irrelevant or inappropriate content they received was ignored or immediately deleted. Taken together, our informants stressed the positivity and the pleasure of messages received and sent.

Our interviewees mentioned only a few negative experiences with WhatsApp, including handling problems and misunderstandings caused by autocorrect mistakes. Some interviewees further mentioned that feeling pressured into answering messages as soon as possible. Taken together, these negative aspects did not seem salient in our

participants' memories and didn't lead to giving up, or not using WhatsApp.

## 5 DISCUSSION

Our results show that older adults' communication via WhatsApp focuses strongly on socio-emotionally meaningful interactions. Older adults use WhatsApp to create, maintain and intensify meaningful ties. Not only the relation to their conversation partners but also the shared content is predominantly positive, of interest and emotionally meaningful to older users. These findings are consistent with Carstensen's theory of socioemotional selectivity. The older adults reported almost no misunderstandings or conflicts carried out via WhatsApp, an indication of the capacity to successfully regulate emotions and not get carried away (Carstensen, Fung, & Charles, 2003).

Receiving a WhatsApp message is a sign of attention and stills the need to be seen or noticed. One of our informants described it as a “digital caress”. WhatsApp fulfilled the need for belonging and relatedness and in the role of both receiver and sender, our informants spoke of pleasure and lightness. Previous studies draw upon theories of human needs, to explain the popularity of WhatsApp among younger adults (Karapanos, Teixeira, Gouveia, 2015; Kim, Wang, & Oh, 2016). Sheldon lists relatedness, pleasure-stimulation and popularity as universal human needs (Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, & Kasser, 2001). Our findings reveal, that WhatsApp use can satisfy these human needs for older adults.

All our informants navigated a mix of mediated communication channels mainly including e-mails, telephone calls (landline and mobile), SMS and more rarely letters, greeting cards, social media and other instant messaging services. In comparison to these, WhatsApp was described as unintrusive, spontaneous, light, quick and easy, but only for consciously chosen and fitting occasions and relationships. WhatsApp was thus used to arrange phone calls, which without prior arrangement might be disturbing or pushy.

By using WhatsApp interviewees discover new ways of maintaining contacts and communication, nonintrusive, spontaneous, light, quick and delightful ways of communication. Making a phone-call or writing an e-mail is in comparison to this an act of communication, that demands more time, calm and attention. The possibility to exchange snapshots of one's day to day life easily leads to a stronger feeling of relatedness and intensity of a relationship without however changing the character of the relationship

itself. We see WhatsApp as a medium for phatic communication (Taipale & Farinosi, 2018) since the social function of communication is essential. Phatic communication is an essential resource for managing quasi-continuous social relationships by exchanging short but expressive messages that have an impact on maintaining or strengthen social bonds (Licoppe & Smoreda, 2005) and WhatsApp seems to be an appropriate instrument for this end.

What our research equally shows, is that older people are open to using new technologies (see also Czaja & Lee, 2007; Pelizäus-Hoffmeister, 2013), if the use is meaningful to them and related with a clear added value. In the case of older adults' use of WhatsApp the benefits are of practical (organising and planning) and emotional nature (intensifying and maintaining social relationships and increased feelings of belonging).

## 6 LIMITATIONS

In our explorative and qualitative study, we focused on older WhatsApp users and their perspectives to gain deep insights into this specific user group. Interviews with younger members of our informants' networks would have allowed for more multiperspective insights into the topic. The inclusion of non-users of WhatsApp would have been beneficial to shed light on differences in the construction of social relationships of users and non-users of the service. Further, our small sample size and recruitment process do not allow for a generalization of the results. These limitations are a starting point for further research on older adults and their use of WhatsApp in shaping social relationships.

## 7 CONCLUSIONS

We conclude that the use of WhatsApp is in line with the socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, Fung, & Charles, 2003) and can intensify emotional bonds between users. At the same time, our findings indicate that digital communication services do not fundamentally change the way older people shape their social networks and the priorities they set.

Further, our research shows how our informants consciously used WhatsApp to achieve positive personal ends and that instant messaging services can positively impact the social relationships of older persons. The use of instant messaging services like WhatsApp can be seen as a potential added value to

older adults, allowing them to achieve goals of selecting and investing time in socially meaningful relationships.

Contrary to studies purporting isolation and social exclusion of older adults due to a “digital divide”, we show that older adults are willing and capable of adapting new technologies if the uses and benefits are clear to them and thus should be considered as active participants in digitalisation.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors thank all participants for their openness in sharing their experiences on using WhatsApp. This study received funding by the Swiss National Science Foundation (no. 10DL11\_183117 / 1).

## REFERENCES

- Ariel, Y., Elishar-Malka, V., Avidar, R., & Levy, E.-C. (2017). Smartphone usage among young Israeli adults: A combined quantitative and qualitative approach. *Israel Affairs*, 23, 970–986.
- Barber, S. J., Opitz, P. C., Martins, B., Sakaki, M., & Mather, M. (2016). Thinking about a limited future enhances the positivity of younger and older adults' recall: Support for socioemotional selectivity theory. *Memory & Cognition*, 44(6), 869-882.
- Bundesamt für Statistik BFS (2017). *Medienmitteilung, Internetnutzung in den Haushalten 2017*. Neuchâtel.
- Carstensen, L.L., Fung, H., & Charles, S. (2003). Socioemotional Selectivity Theory and the Regulation of Emotion in the Second Half of Life. *Motivation and Emotion*, 27(2), 103-123).
- Carstensen, L. L., & Mikels, J. A. (2005). At the intersection of emotion and cognition: Aging and the positivity effect. *Current directions in psychological science*, 14(3), 117-121.
- Czaja, S. J., & Lee, C. C. (2007). The impact of aging on access to technology. *Inf Soc*, 5, 341-349. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10209-006-0060-x>
- Friemel, T. N. (2016). The digital divide has grown old: Determinants of a digital divide among seniors. *New Media & Society*, 18, 313–331.
- Kahn, R. L., & Antonucci, T. C. (1980). Convoys over the life course: Attachment, roles, and social support. In P. B. Baltes & O. G. Brim (Eds.), *Life-span development and behavior* (pp. 253–286). New York: Academic Press.
- Kim, Y., Wang, Y., & Oh, J. (2016). Digital media use and social engagement: How social media and smartphone use influence social activities of college students. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking*, 19(4), 264–269. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2015.0408>.

- Karapanos, E., Teixeira, P., & Gouveia, R. (2016). Need fulfillment and experiences on social media: A case on Facebook and WhatsApp. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 55, 888–897.
- Lang, F. R., Staudinger, U. M., & Carstensen, L. L. (1998). Perspectives on socioemotional selectivity in late life: How personality and social context do (and do not) make a difference. *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 53(1), 21-30.
- Licoppe, C., & Smoreda, Z. (2005). Are social networks technologically embedded? *Social Networks*, 27(4), 317-335. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socnet.2004.11.001>
- Mayring, P. (2015). Qualitative content analysis: Theoretical background and procedures. In *Approaches to qualitative research in mathematics education* (pp. 365-380). Springer, Dordrecht.
- Pelizäus-Hoffmeister, H. (2013). *Zur Bedeutung von Technik im Alltag älterer: Theorie und Empirie aus soziologischer Perspektive*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.
- Rosales, A., & Fernández-Ardèvol, M. (2016). Beyond WhatsApp: Older people and smartphones. *Romanian Journal of Communication and Public Relations*, 18, 27–47.
- Seifert, A., & Doh, M. (2016). Internetnutzung im Alter – Diffusion, Alltagsrelevanz und Kompetenzvermittlung. *Report Psychologie*, 41, 394–402.
- Sheldon, K. M., Elliot, A. J., Kim, Y., & Kasser, T. (2001). What is satisfying about satisfying events? Testing 10 candidate psychological needs. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 80(2), 325.
- Taipale, S., Farinosi, M. (2018). The Big Meaning of Small Messages: The Use of WhatsApp in Intergenerational Family Communication. In J. Zhou & G. Salvendy (Eds.), *Lecture Notes in Computer Science: Vol. 10926. Human Aspects of IT for the Aged Population. Acceptance, Communication and Participation: 4th International Conference, ITAP 2018, Held as Part of HCI International 2018, Las Vegas, NV, USA, July 15-20, 2018, Proceedings, Part I* (pp. 532–546). Cham: Springer International Publishing.