



# Let's WhatsApp! Generation X couples' online and offline relationship patterns in the digital age

new media & society  
2023, Vol. 25(12) 3370–3391  
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DOI: 10.1177/14614448211043192  
journals.sagepub.com/home/nms



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## Abstract

This article proposes that WhatsApp can offer insights into couples' relationships. Based on Gottman's therapy model, which mathematically analyzes marital conflicts, this study focuses on couples' WhatsApp correspondence and asks to what extent it reflects the offline relationships of Generation X. The research was conducted over a year using semi-structured interviews with 18 couples who have been in a relationship for at least 5 years. The couples described their discourse on WhatsApp and the dynamics of their relationship offline. The findings indicate that WhatsApp use mirrors offline relationships. The following four types of interaction were identified: (1) technical, (2) practical, (3) casual, and (4) emotional. In addition, the following three patterns of conflictual behavior that correspond with Gottman's distinctions were identified: (1) logical, (2) emotional, and (3) avoidant. The article cites WhatsApp's potential for behavioral observation and the possibility of using it to change relationship dynamics.

## Keywords

Couples relationship, digital interaction, gen x, mobile communication, offline and online dynamics, online intimacy, WhatsApp

## Couples' communication via WhatsApp

This article reviews the use that Generation Xers,<sup>1</sup> who are digital immigrants,<sup>2</sup> make of WhatsApp technology in their relationship. The study was held in Israel and conducted on

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native born Israelis. The research aims to shed light on the incorporation of a digital platform, WhatsApp, as a means of communication between those who experienced relationship building through traditional, face-to-face interactions. The socio-technological model of Lanigan (2009) has been used to set the first stages of research. Lanigan acknowledged the bidirectional effect of multifunctional technologies (such as cellular phones) and familial, extrafamilial, and individual characteristic on how technologies are used and perceived within the family context. Examining the characteristics of the technology, the personality of the user, and the nature of the relationship offline (Lanigan, 2009) helped to form a framework for the observations made on technology mediated online relationships.

Prensky claimed that the brain structure and thinking processes of “digital immigrants” differ from those born into the digital era whom he refers to as “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001). Digital immigrants may perceive relationship fundamentally different to digital natives (Musgrove, 2008). These differences render Generation Xers’ use of technology a fascinating area of research that has yet to be sufficiently explored. As smartphones and WhatsApp introduced a new standard of availability and immediacy, technology should be examined as another layer of relationship.

### *The nature of relationships*

Much research has been conducted on the nature of relationships. However, as relationships are complex by nature and multi layered, the variety of theories outlined in this article provide the base for examining relationships from different perspectives. Long-term relationships which are the focus of this study go through various stages. Whereas the early stage of a couple’s relationship is based on the projected illusion of a desired relationship, as the relationship evolves, it mirrors the couple’s expectations of each other (Halpern and Halpern, 1983). Research shows that passionate love turns into companionship in long-term relationships (Acevedo and Aron, 2009).

The article follows the lines of spousal research at the point of marriage. It wishes to focus on the time after the early stages of courtship when both individuals progress toward long-term commitment and transition to parenthood (Knapp & Daly, 2002). In total, 16 out of 18 couples interviewed for this article are parents. As the level of marital satisfaction changes across the developmental growth of the relationship, the article wishes to explore maintenance of interpersonal communication through digital lens.

Many seek to understand what it is that keeps couples together for long periods. Sternberg (1986) defined intimacy, passion, and commitment as being the three components that affect couples’ interactions. Johnson contends that emotional confidence is the secret to strong positive communication (Coleman, 2000). Together with Les Greenberg, Johnson later developed Emotional Focused Therapy (EFT), helping couples rebuild a sense of security by reflecting on their emotions. This study examines which fundamental elements of relationships can be illustrated by technology.

### *Technology adoption*

A turning point in the technological era is attributed to Apple’s introduction of the iPhone in June 2007, enabling truly mobile connectivity. Whereas Walther (1996) contended

that computer-mediated communication simply *differs* from face-to-face (Dennis and Kinney, 1998), the absence of nonverbal social cues therein is still perceived as critical by others (Daft and Lengel, 1986). The balance of power between the two channels of communication (online and offline) is the essence of this study.

Although research shows that we utilize short-form communication (Einav and Lipson, 2018), the pace at which our brain processes text and visuals is far faster than the updates on social networks (Nass, 2019). Technology has therefore been blamed for changes in relationships (Nass, 2019; Turkle, 2017), being a source of misunderstanding (Lee, 2019; Margalit, 2018), and is associated with relational satisfaction or lack thereof (Amichai-Hamburger and Etgar, 2016; Toma and Choi, 2016).

Today, people refer to their smartphone as their “lover” (Einav, 2014). This attachment explains their use of smartphones for maintaining intimate relationships. However, as texting through WhatsApp is a relatively new activity for Generation Xers, the “digital immigrants” it is legitimate to ask in what ways do Generation X couples express passion, commitment, and intimacy online (Sternberg, 1986), and does the WhatsApp channel contribute to their emotional sense of confidence in each other (EFT)?

### *Characteristics of the technology*

Launched in 2009, WhatsApp is a free mobile instant messaging application, which is regarded as more private compared to other social networks (Waterloo et al., 2018). WhatsApp’s popularity has tremendously increased worldwide and in Israel (Constine, 2018). It has been reported that 95% of Israelis use WhatsApp among which 78% believe it to be a necessity (Namer, 2018).

Church and De Oliveira (2013) stated that the visual feedback used in WhatsApp (the “√√” feature<sup>3</sup>), together with the status information, brings it closer to face-to-face communication. People feel more comfortable expressing negative emotions on WhatsApp than they do on other digital social platforms (Waterloo et al., 2018); and as negative emotional expression is considered more intimate (Walther, 1996), this might point to an authentic interaction on WhatsApp. The fact that people are more accessible to each other (Pescante-Malimas, 2012) contributes to previous findings of high levels of intimacy in computer-mediated communication (Rabby and Walther, 2003). However, do we perform intimacy and passion on WhatsApp as we do face-to-face? If we follow Johnson’s EFT model, which illustrates the need of both spouses to be “seen” by each other as a base for a mutual sense of security, one should ask in what way does WhatsApp contribute to spouses’ emotional confidence?

Although, WhatsApp offers the option for voice messaging, video chats, and visual expression such as emojis, graphics interchange format (GIFs), and stickers, this study focuses on WhatsApp text message exchanges. While texting might be considered limited when it comes to intimate expressions of love (Nass, 2019), history is full of examples of romantic relationships being maintained by passionate epistolary correspondence (Amichai-Hamburger, 2013).

### *The personality of the user*

Both Goffman (1956) and Jung (1953) spoke of the public versus the inner dimensions of personality. One's online persona changes according to how comfortable one feels expressing oneself online (Bargh et al., 2002). While people can play various roles online, a person will play similar roles offline and online when acting in familiar circles (Amichai-Hamburger, 2013). But can those who have difficulty expressing their "true selves"<sup>4</sup> online be expected to conduct meaningful relationships on WhatsApp? As people's interest have been found to play a bigger role than their personality traits vis-à-vis participation on digital networks (Bronstein et al., 2016), one can only hope that intimacy is a motivator for significantly using WhatsApp.

### *The nature of the offline relationship*

In 1982, Gottman called upon us to "free ourselves from individual functioning" (Robins et al., 2000). While Gottman did not minimize the unique contribution that each partner brings to the relationship, he recommended examining a couple's relationship as an independent entity. Expressions of intimacy and passion appear in different ways in couples' interactions. One way that may distill that true essence of the relationship is the interaction spouses have around conflicts. Gottman managed to predict divorce with high accuracy through observations he made of spouses during a quarrel (Gottman, 1979). He suggested defining couples' relationships according to how they resolve conflicts. After observing couples' problem-solving behaviors, he pointed to the following five types of couples: Avoiders, Volatiles, Validators, Unstable couples, and Hostile or Detached couples (Gottman, 1993). These types are defined as follows:

- (a) *Avoiders*. Couples who avoid conflict and enable expression of opinions, but do not express emotions.
- (b) *Volatile*. Couples who are highly engaged in the interaction and tend to have extreme emotional expression, both negative and affectionate.
- (c) *Validating*. Couples who respect each other while expressing opinions.
- (d) *Unstable*. Couples characterized by a high level of engagement and a high level of dispute.
- (e) *Hostile or Detached*. Couples exhibit a low level of engagement, and disagreement over trivial issues.

This research wishes to examine routine correspondence, emotional expression, and conflicts through the digital lens. The study seeks to compare couples' WhatsApp correspondence with their offline behavior in order to answer the following questions:

*RQ1*. In what ways do couples report using WhatsApp that is illustrative of couple's non mediated (face-to-face) relationships?

*RQ2*. How can couples identify relationship patterns by examining their interaction on WhatsApp?

## Methodology

This study employed semi-structured interviews with both spouses to get a feel for couples' relationship offline and to better understand the extent of the mirroring, if any, between their offline and online communication patterns.

An ad soliciting couples to participate in a study about relationships in the digital era was published on [r4you.co.il](http://r4you.co.il), a website that serves as a platform for publishing solicitations for participants in research. Twenty men and 16 women replied to the ad and were contacted by phone. The participants affirmed their use of WhatsApp in their daily interaction with their spouses. A 45- to 60-minute interview was scheduled with 18 couples (17 heterosexual couples and one same-sex couple). All couples have been in the relationship for above 5 years, and their ages ranged from 36 to 50. The couples were all living together and running a joint household. The participants were all Israelis, evenly spread geographically across Israel. The interviews were conducted in the presence of both spouses at a meeting place of their choice between May 2019 and February 2020.

Lanigan's socio-technological model (Lanigan, 2009) set the tone for the semi-structured interviews as questions were asked about the nature of technology, the use the participants make of it and the degree of affinity, in their opinion, between their use of technology, their personalities, and characteristics of their relationship. Participants referred to their attitude toward smartphones and how comfortable they felt using WhatsApp. The couples then described the nature of their spousal communication patterns offline, including the content and compared it to their behavior on WhatsApp. Much emphasis was placed on describing the couples' conflictual behavior offline and online. Their testimonies were used for collecting dyadic data regarding the length of the messages and the time of correspondence. The participants referred to the frequency of their correspondence, the nature of its content, and their emotions, while writing or receiving messages from their partner. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded by one coder. Categorizing the data emerged from repeating ideas cited on this article.

## Data findings

Most participants stated that WhatsApp played an important role in their lives. The participants spoke of their individual use of WhatsApp and their sense of comfort and dependency on it. Much time was dedicated to examining each spouse's availability and frequency of their interaction through this channel. The participants attested to a very little use of audio recordings and video chats between them, moderate use of visuals (emoji GIFs and stickers). The couples emphasized that most of their interaction on the app is textual. In their remarks, they referred to the content of their correspondence. The quotes that appear in the following chapters mark the different patterns of their discourse interaction that illustrates the nature of the relationship. This section will track routine spousal interaction on the app ("We") to examine changes in discourse dynamics over conflictual issues ("We quarrel") and address the classifications that Gottman made into five relationship types based on how couples manage conflict (Gottman, 1993). This two-step process will help answer the question: "In what ways do couples report using WhatsApp that is illustrative of couples non mediated (face-to-face) relationship?"

## “We”

Most couples drew parallels between how they interact face-to-face and on WhatsApp. Categorizing their interactions into various types might shed some light on when the two channels of communication are similar and when they differ and help answer the second research question: “Is it possible to identify a relationship pattern by examining couples interaction on WhatsApp?”

### *Practical interaction*

WhatsApp is a shopping list.

G (50) and H (43) said that WhatsApp is a functional tool that they use frequently for practical discourse. E1 (43) and R1 (49) said that running a household compels them to use the app functionally, as “there are things to do” so “WhatsApp is a shopping list.” A (39) and S (38) use WhatsApp mainly to send each other “life signals” during the workday and feel that WhatsApp accurately reflects changes in their relationship. These three couples agreed that although they mainly use WhatsApp for information, it also enables expressing affection, as A exchanges “romantic pictures” and E1 sends “hearts and kisses.”

The three couples mentioned here as an example, described differing frequencies of message exchange. Whereas some cannot text each other on their phones often during the day, using WhatsApp web on their browser, said A and S, enables them to keep in constant touch. Thus, the use couples make of WhatsApp and its reflection of their offline behavior is affected by momentary circumstances.

### *Technical interaction*

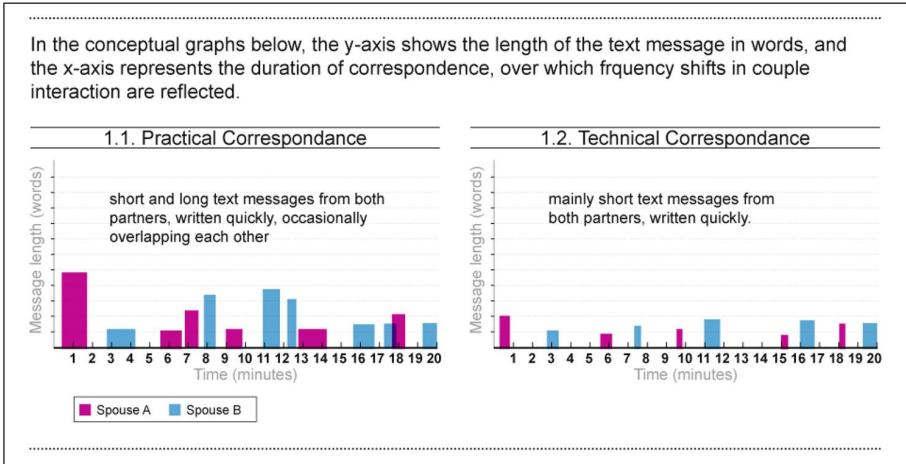
... except for necessities, we're silent on WhatsApp and strangers at home.

Q (40) and W (39) said that “technology helps maintain a relationship with very little need for communication” and suggested that WhatsApp holds “the recipe for a good marriage, as it requires minimum interaction.” They find both their WhatsApp and their offline interaction to be “90% technical.” X (47) said that they have spent very little of their married life being physically together, and although WhatsApp gives a sense of availability, they do not need to communicate often, so their message exchange is very low.

The nuance between practical and technical is vague. Self-described technical users did not relate to any emotional aspects of their relationship (Graphs 1.1 and 1.2). L and Z said that while their relationship is technical, underlying the informative message exchange is sincere mutual concern.

There is sometimes a discrepancy between how a couple perceives their own relationship and how others view it. Although L and Z's WhatsApp messages are brief, their exchange *frequency* shows high availability, which indicates a close relationship (Graph 1.1).

L (45) and Z (43) said, “In a dark period of stress and anger, we barely spoke and except for necessities, we were silent on WhatsApp and strangers at home” (Graph 1.2). Other couples reported frequency shifts in their exchanges that parallel their moods.



**Graph 1.1.** Practical Correspondence.

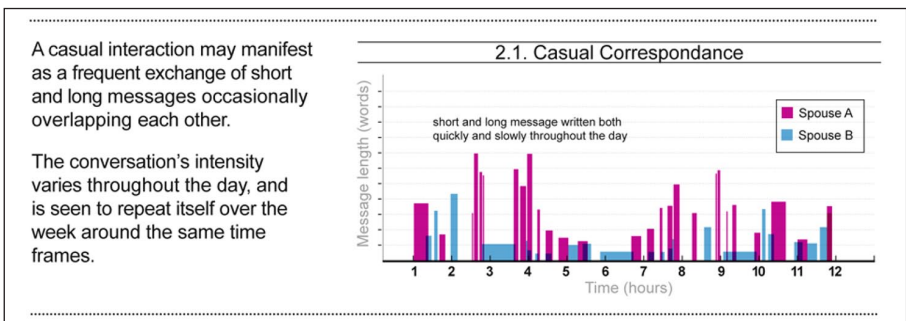
**Graph 1.2.** Technical Correspondence.

Thus, it appears that one should analyze the content alongside the frequency at which spouses’ text each other as a barometer of the changes in the relationship’s dynamics.

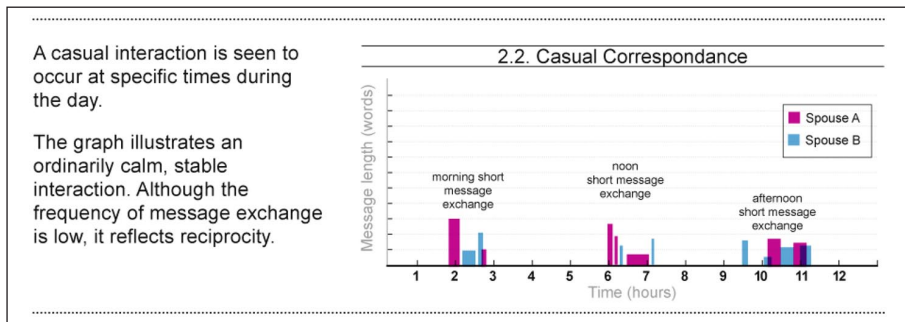
*Casual interaction*

WhatsApp enables us to have ongoing small talk.

Q1 (43) and W1 (41) love “talking philosophy and dreaming.” Similarly, they exchange links and ideas on WhatsApp. O (43) and P (43) said, “WhatsApp enables us to have ongoing small talk” where they discuss anything from gossip to serious issues (Graph 2.1). Multiplicity of text messages points to common interest and may reflect closeness in relationship.



**Graph 2.1.**



**Graph 2.2.**

However, low frequency exchange can also reflect tranquility. D (44) and F (44) said, “We won’t text each other open-ended questions during the day,” but attest to maintaining a WhatsApp group called “Back Burner,” where they share “cool things.” L (45) and Z (43) spend most days together, so their use of WhatsApp is minimal and limited to set timeframes. In both cases, the dynamics manifest in a routine, systematic exchange of brief messages (Graph 2.2).

These case studies suggest that set intervals of couples’ correspondence may reflect stability in the relationship.

*Negative emotions*

She never responds.

“Radio silence” can express both positive and negative emotions. E (45) and R (42) described a “roaring silence” between them, occasionally broken by tantrums. Their WhatsApp correspondence reveals erratic emotional behavior. R described repeatedly trying to “extend a hand,” sending pictures and clips, to which “she never responds,” or says that “most of it is sh\_t.” Misunderstandings in this couple’s dynamic trigger repeated quarrels and extreme emotional reaction. E’s disregard of R’s messages prompts R to “annoy her, repeatedly sending messages, and although I know it’s psychotic, sometimes I ring her and hang up in order to compel her to look at my message.” While they refer to their relationship as technical, they exhibit strong emotions. If we were to draw a graph of their WhatsApp correspondence, it would point to dominance of one player (Graph 3.1) and show extreme changes in the frequency and quantity of messages exchanged between the two in various timeframes.

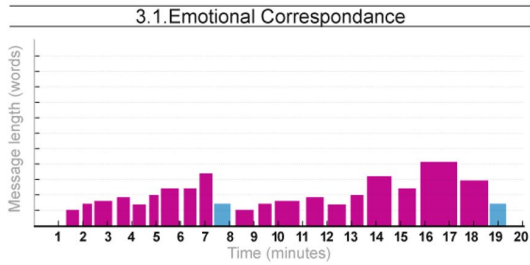
*Emotional interaction*

On WhatsApp we laugh loudly and sob bitterly.

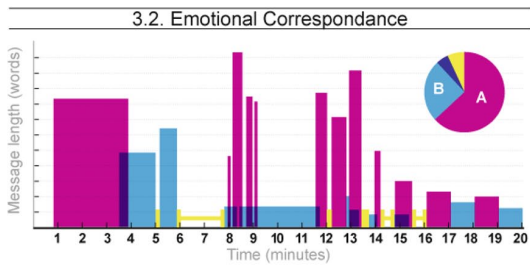
“On WhatsApp,” said T, (38) “we laugh loudly and sob bitterly.” T (42) expects high availability from Y saying, “I bombard him with messages, and if he doesn’t respond, I keep at it and send question marks.” Describing the rhythm of their correspondence, T



Spouse A dominates, reflecting their long face-to-face exchanges 'translating' to a sequence of short texts on WhatsApp.



An intense exchange over 20 minutes with only short breaks between messages, which often overlap. The graph shows that Spouse A plays a dominant role in the interaction.



Graph 3.1.  
Graph 3.2.

said that it could be a sequence of single-word messages “structured like a poem.” Although the nature of their relationship differs from that of E and R, described earlier, the repetitive behavior and its graph resembles E and R’s negative interaction (Graph 3.1).

While the patterns of both couples’ WhatsApp exchanges reflect high emotional involvement, it is the content of T and Y’s correspondence that reveals a positive interaction, as their lexicon on WhatsApp reflects their offline discourse. Y explained, “We communicate in visuals: Dog pictures show affection; a peacock symbolizes arrogance.” They feel that their WhatsApp communication reflects the core of their relationship, as it “mirrors the intensity and the mood.”

N (43) described her and M’s (48) relationship as “intense.” She texts extensively, sharing her poetry with M. She “is upset when M. doesn’t respond within a reasonable time after having opened my heart to him,” and complained that he writes few messages, containing single words. M reported a recent change in his behavior on WhatsApp, ending his messages with heart icons “because I understand [that] it’s important to her.” In doing so, he has acknowledged WhatsApp as another arena of spousal intimacy. They reported that the change in his behavior has contributed positively to their relationship both offline and on WhatsApp.

In cases of emotional spousal interaction, WhatsApp enables expression of a broad range of emotions, thus enabling it to closely reflect the couple’s face-to-face discourse; and can be potentially used to change the dynamics of the relationship (Graph 3.2).

*Exceptions.* J (37) and K (38), an Orthodox Jewish couple, are very verbal on weekends (Sabbath), when they abstain from using electronic devices and are physically proximate. In contrast, their use of WhatsApp on weekdays is low, and mostly technical and brief. As their weekday and Sabbath routines differ, their correspondence on WhatsApp cannot accurately reflect their relationship.

WhatsApp is also limited when it is not the main channel of communication. T1 (41) and Y1 (39) still use SMS for courting and intimate correspondence, whereas WhatsApp is “only for maintenance.” That is why, they said, their WhatsApp correspondence is mainly visual—“all kinds of smiles and hand gestures”—and brief: “The word ‘cool’ is frequently used.” As the two perceive WhatsApp as “the modern town square,” they use it for publicly expressing affection and intentionally comment on each other’s group posts, “prompting others to continue.” They agree that their use of WhatsApp is increasing, and they expect it to eventually reflect more aspects of their relationship.

### Summary

WhatsApp mirrors the intensity and the mood.

Most couples felt that their face-to-face dynamics are reflected in their WhatsApp communication, which was categorized into the following four types:

1. *Practical*—although mainly functional short messages and low-medium exchange frequency, there is still room for emotional expression (emoji, stickers, GIF or words of gratitude).
2. *Technical*—only functional brief correspondence, low frequency message exchange, and no emotional expression.
3. *Casual*—routine message exchange in set intervals or constant flow of short and long messages.
4. *Emotional*—high frequent and intense exchange of long and short messages.

There is not always a clear distinction between the categories. Silence, for example, can reflect either contemplation, or a technical relationship. This section pointed to the risk that lies in a limited analysis of content only without an in-depth examination of frequency and quantity of messages exchanged on various WhatsApp forums toward a better understanding of couples’ relationships.

### We quarrel

Same as life, just without the amplifier.

Most couples described their patterns of conflictual behavior in assembly to Gottman’s categories (Gottman, 1993): Logical, Emotional, and Avoidant. This section examines the rhythms of quarrels by following the message exchange and its similarity to couples’ face-to-face confrontations.

### *Logical disputes*

A second look at feelings allows you to nail down the motivation behind the argument.

“Logical couples” reported trying to avoid discussing sensitive issues on WhatsApp, thus their disputes on WhatsApp are limited to trivial issues and are self-moderated. They felt that WhatsApp is not appropriate for disputes and cited the low level of message exchange during times of strife. Those who argue logically offline pointed to phases in the development of the argument. Accordingly, as WhatsApp might reveal only part of the argument’s sequence, it may be incorrectly interpreted as avoidance (Graph 4.1).

P (43) and O (43) referred to their disputes as “disagreements,” and although both present their arguments, they often “hit a wall.” Whereas in real life, they “thaw out before they get practical,” WhatsApp plays an important role in facilitating an essential pause, and in such cases reflects the reasoning phase of the conflict (Graph 4.2).

U (48) and I (47) start arguing “at a boiling point,” then gradually cool down and turn to reason. U said, “A second look at feelings allows you to nail down the motivation behind the argument.” She relates to messages as feelings, and her analysis of them helps her to conduct a logical argument. They emphasized that while “WhatsApp doesn’t stop us from saying what’s on our minds,” the time it gives to process their thoughts before responding moderates the dispute (Graph 4.3). They suggested measuring the heat of a given dispute by their online availability in times of anger.

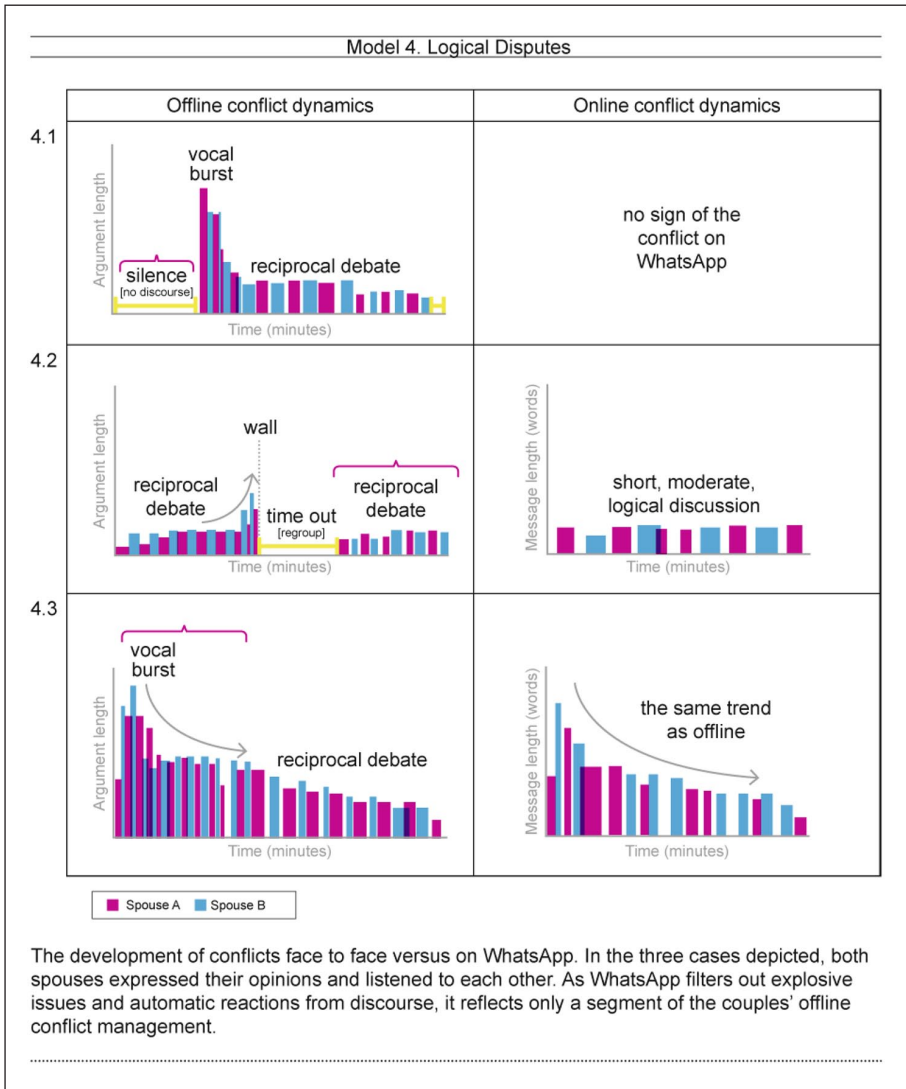
Similarity was found between couples that conduct logical disputes to Gottman’s definition of validating couples, whose interaction is “characterized by ease and calm.”<sup>5</sup> While the empathy that validating couples express toward each other does not show on the graph of logical disputes, the graph does depict reciprocity and mutual listening. In both environments (on- and offline), couples’ confrontations surround only certain topics, and the dispute will be mildly emotional, thus easy to end. The routine interaction on WhatsApp and high levels of availability during conflict points to a stable relationship.

### *Emotional arguments*

I . . . bark like a crazy dog . . . sending multiple exclamation marks . . .

Couples that engage in emotional conflicts extend their face-to-face arguments to WhatsApp (Model 5). T1 (41) and Y1 (39) still correspond on SMS, but due to the urge for immediacy in arguments, which is “fed” by the double ✓ feature, WhatsApp is where their authentic conflictual behavior is played out. Their disputes both offline and on WhatsApp are “a collection of accusations” that can start on either channel, over any issue. While their face-to-face raised voices will not be heard, as WhatsApp has no audio, the flow of conflict is, as they put it “synced with life.”

A (39) and S (38) reported sensitive issues triggering quarrels on both channels. They described their face-to-face fights as “loud and short.” On WhatsApp, they said, “We express ourselves responsibly,” but emphasized, “We don’t listen to each other any more than we do offline.” They raised two parameters that characterize both their online and



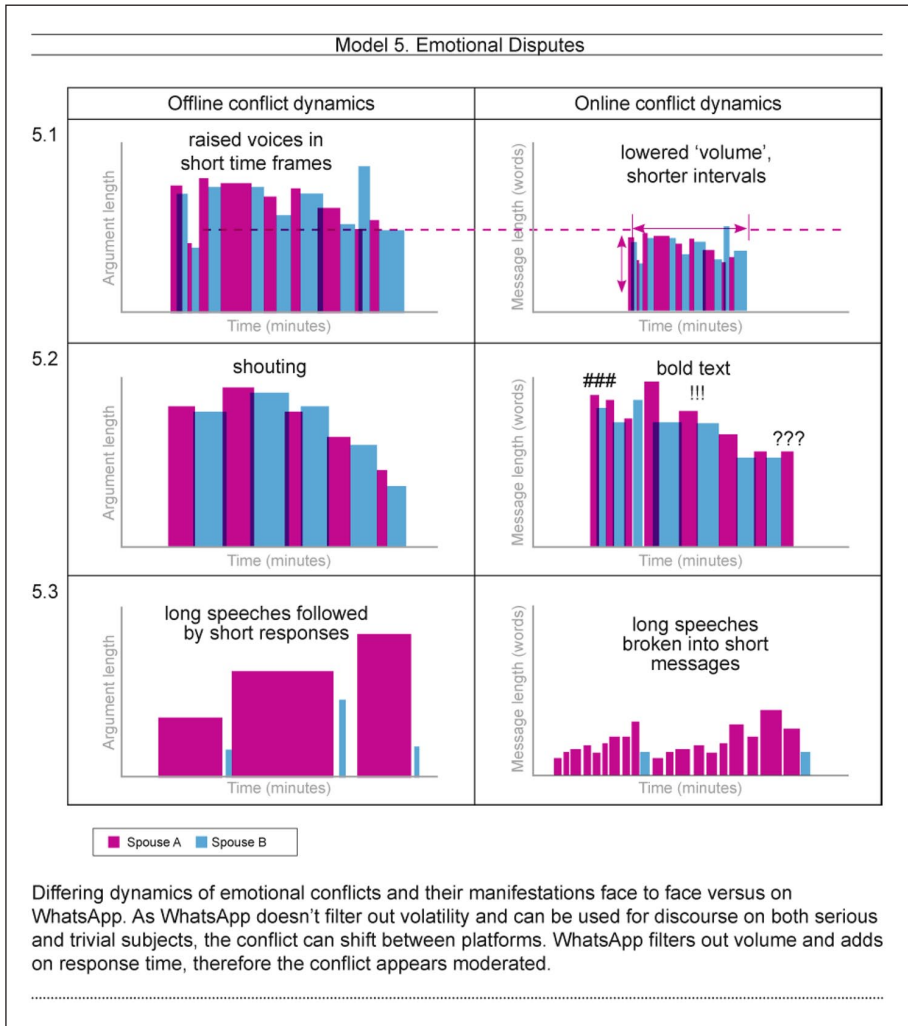
**Graph 4.1.**

**Graph 4.2.**

**Graph 4.3.**

offline conflict management: tone and timing. WhatsApp softens the tone, but reflects well the brevity of dispute.

E1 (43) and R1 (49) described their face-to-face quarrels as “bullets flying in all directions” versus on WhatsApp, where “it’s not heavy artillery.” While they can be unkind to each other on WhatsApp, the chances of a quarrel reaching fever pitch are low.



**Model 5.**

For them, WhatsApp reduces the volume of the dispute, yet covers the same issues over which they quarrel face-to-face.

Y (42) described his quarrels with T (38) as “layers of intimacy.” T said, “I shout, and I don’t care if the whole world is listening. I can bark and bite like a crazy dog without letting go.” On WhatsApp, T “nags” by sending multiple exclamation marks. For this couple, the drawn-out, vocal online disagreements appear on a graph as a burst of short messages, reflecting the dispute’s intensity.

Emotional arguments are engaged in by volatile couples. Gottman described this pattern of behavior as mainly persuasion attempts at a quarrel’s beginning that continue

throughout the exchange. This dynamic is mirrored in WhatsApp correspondence (Model 5) that reflects both intensity and extreme changes. Gottman described couples that enjoy the debate and accept it as part of their relationship, thus it also reflects their sense of humor (see Note 4). Emotional couples attested to a great resemblance between the discourse on WhatsApp and their intimate conduct at home. As their conflicts shift between the two platforms (online and offline), WhatsApp is perceived by them as the “backstage” of their relationship.

Emotional disputes can turn abusive and even violent. E (45) and R (42) said that their quarrels can be vocal and loud or silent and cold. They feel that their conflicts do not manifest on WhatsApp, as they do not put into writing the foul language that they use orally, and there is no volume to WhatsApp correspondence. They strongly oppose the use of voice messages. R said, “If I need to shout, I do so in others’ presence.” However, as “even a shopping list can trigger a fight,” the explosive potential is present on WhatsApp too. Although WhatsApp takes the language “down a notch” from verbal violence to sarcasm, it mirrors the conflict dynamics through repetitive messages on one hand, or avoidance on the other hand.

Gottman cited the positive-to-negative interaction ratio in volatile couples’ relationships as 5:1. He distinguished between volatile couples and hostile couples, and said that the latter can be disrespectful and insulting. Referring to volatile couples, he said, “While there may be a lot of negative affect expressed, there will be no contempt” (see Note 4). In these cases, observing couples’ communication fluctuations on WhatsApp alone without content analysis of their messages cannot accurately reflect their relationships.

### *Avoiders/silent*

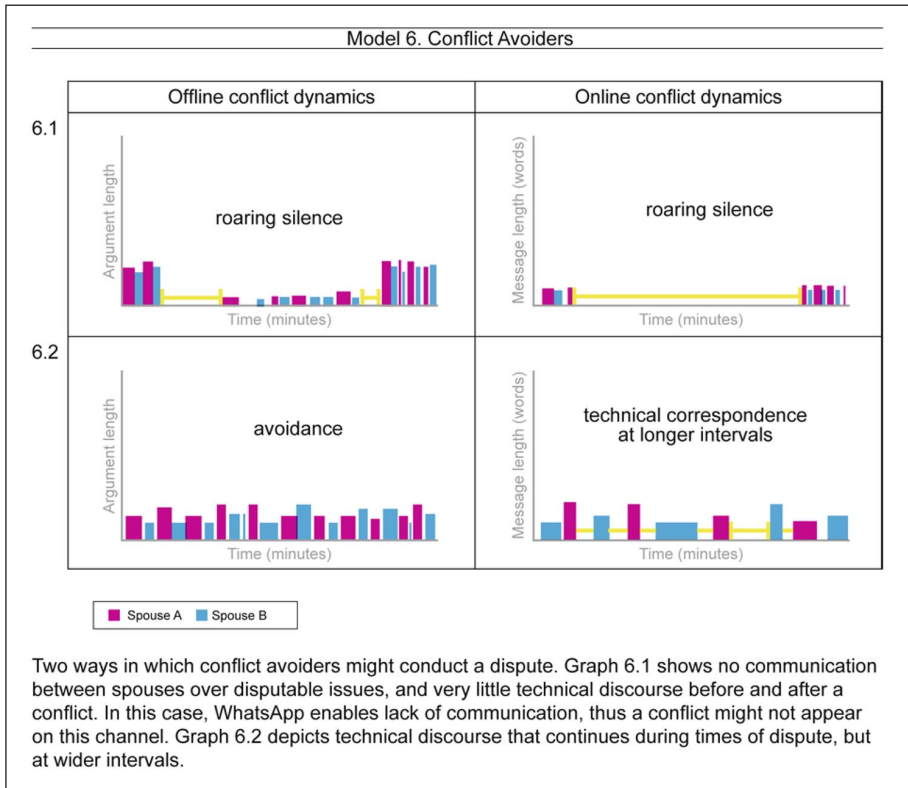
Most conflicts resolve themselves if you ignore them long enough.

Q (40) and W (39) described their offline interaction as technical, saying, “We fight in roaring silence, often being sarcastic.” Similarly, offline, they ignore each other’s communication bids in times of anger, and avoid discussing conflictual issues. For them, ignoring a message is part of a coping mechanism.

As Z (43) and L (45) are not conflictual types, their disputes are not likely to appear on WhatsApp, suggesting avoidance, as sensitive issues “will be discussed face-to-face only, or abandoned.” Such “silent couples” are those defined by Gottman as Conflict Avoiders who minimize persuasion attempts and instead emphasize their common ground (see Note 5). For them, WhatsApp offers a limited use only.

Some couples spoke of “no conflicts” and explained that their strength lies in their unity. Others, like G (50), felt that “most conflicts resolve themselves if you ignore them long enough.” In cases of pre-fight anger, WhatsApp enabled some couples to take a break and halt communication completely. In avoidant couples, we can see evidence of a conflict when there is a change in their routine of message exchange, that is, it does not follow the usual intervals, or ceases altogether (Model 6).

“Avoiding” couples illustrated a little activity in their spousal interaction on WhatsApp. However, WhatsApp was frequently used for social purposes. This reflects



**Model 6.**

their low spousal intimacy manifested through the boundaries they build around their individual worlds.

*Arguments' fluctuations on WhatsApp*

It's like a ping-pong game between unmatched rivals.

B (40) described disputes on WhatsApp as “a ping-pong game between unmatched rivals.” Having a differing attitude toward conflicts manifests on WhatsApp as uneven message exchange, as for some couples, an argument can flare up on this channel and for others, conflicts should not be engaged in over this channel. C (48) and X (47) described their WhatsApp disputes as “talking past each other,” as X writes extensively to prove her point, and C responds very briefly. Y (42) describes the dynamic of his fights with T (38) on both channels as being the same: “long tirades answered by few words, because when she argues, she doesn't listen.”

Many described set roles that they play in arguments. V (36) believes that it is she who sets the rhythm of discourse, “doing most of the talking face-to-face,” and similarly

on WhatsApp “writing lots of messages, leaving no room for response.” Her conduct on WhatsApp mirrors that in offline conflict. In another case, H (43), a dominant partner, reported that she “breaks up [face-to-face] monologues into anecdotes on WhatsApp.” Thus, her conflict behavior on WhatsApp is moderated, as Hs’ face-to-face arguments are not “anecdotalized” in this way (Graph 5.3). Spousal roles on WhatsApp might shift, as in this couple’s case, where the standard role is attenuated.

Moreover, WhatsApp can potentially moderate an argument. Y described a mitigation in his wife’s reactions on WhatsApp, saying, “Face-to-face she shouts, over the phone she barks, and on WhatsApp she yawns.” Y and T said that during conflicts, they are less available to each other on WhatsApp. In their relationship graph, wider gaps emerge between messages, and although their discourse contains similar content as when they are not in conflict, the intensity differs (Graph 4.3).

G (50) concluded, “There’s no sound to WhatsApp text messages, and that’s what keeps the argument . . . lower key. Many things we say instinctively won’t be written, as we aren’t indifferent to our choice of words.” Therefore, in his case, WhatsApp filters and tones down the dispute. G and H believe that WhatsApp makes it easier for them to conduct rational arguments, as “the force of the argument isn’t constantly being reignited by facial expressions.” The decline in intensity is a result of the time that arguers take to process their thoughts. The arguments in their case do not reach the same peaks, and the message exchange takes place over a longer period, therefore the graph that depicts relationships on WhatsApp will be accordingly moderated (Model 5).

**Reconciliation.** Gottman states that 69% of conflicts are not resolved, and the issues around which they revolve are unique to the couple’s dynamics. Couples whom he labels “relationship masters” will accordingly move the conflict from gridlock to dialogue.<sup>6</sup>

Most of the couples studied cited various roles that WhatsApp plays in reconciliation. Whereas for some it only echoed the end of the fight, for others it played a dominant part in reconciling. Many, like O1 (43), suggested that “it’s easier to apologize when not facing each other.” Gottman’s findings that 31% of conflicts are resolved when issues are addressed gently and responsibly (see Note 5) may correlate to WhatsApp’s aiding reconciliation attempts, as it filters out immediate reactions and moderates the dispute.

X (47) said, “It takes one funny remark on WhatsApp to assuage anger and dissolve the conflict before dragging it [out] for a whole day.” D (44) elaborated, “When I’m finished being right, I send something interesting to change the subject” and F (44) embeds songs into his reconciliation attempts on WhatsApp.

WhatsApp features can minimize misunderstandings and reduce the level of emotions in disputes. “A picture of the right sauce [to buy],” said E (45), “can prevent a fight from escalating.” U (48) uses texts from her spouse “to better understand his motivation.” Although documenting an argument on WhatsApp may help some settle a quarrel, most couples felt that records of previous disputes kept on WhatsApp do not affect new discourse in any way. This finding points to a difference between WhatsApp discourse and that occurring face-to-face, corroborating Gottman’s contention that any negative sentiment expressed will affect all future conflictual interaction (see Note 5).

Some couples felt very strongly regarding the inability to reconcile on WhatsApp. As Y (42) put it, “Generation Xers were born to speak face-to-face, and that’s the only way



to reconcile.” Y expands on the generational issue, saying, “While we can’t state [that] we’ll never make up on WhatsApp, I hope it will be some time before we do so.”

This section examined how couples’ interactions manifest on WhatsApp. It was found that WhatsApp mirrors spousal relationships most closely in couples who manage their conflicts emotionally (as per Gottman’s categories). WhatsApp reflects a moderated version of both routine dynamics and conflictual discourse for all couples. The section points to the potential inherent in WhatsApp for attenuating spousal conflict, as couples can use WhatsApp to change the positive or negative ratios of their interactions.

## Discussion

The aim of this study is to better understand how Generation Xers, who are digital immigrants (Prensky, 2001), interact on WhatsApp. By focusing on conflicts as manifested on WhatsApp, it seeks to discover (RQ1) in what ways do couples report using WhatsApp that is illustrative of couple’s non mediated (face-to-face) relationships? and (RQ2) how can couples identify relationship patterns by examining their WhatsApp interaction? The dyadic data collected from the interviews showed that patterns observed offline did reflect in generation Xers couples’ online communication and demonstrated the possibility to identify a relationship pattern by examining couples’ interaction on WhatsApp. Their use of WhatsApp is fascinating ground for research, as conducting a relationship on WhatsApp is relatively new to them.

Due to the differences found between how people reveal their real personalities online (Amichai-Hamburger, 2007), it was first established that most participants were comfortable expressing their “true selves” (as per Rogers) on WhatsApp. It was found that examining couples’ conflicts on WhatsApp provides a “backstage peek” at the relationship, and along with couples’ casual WhatsApp discourse, mirrors their offline dynamics.

Although much can be learned from analyzing peoples’ choice of words, we suggest that gauging mutuality and reciprocity on WhatsApp is more important for gaining insight into a relationship. Spousal discourse on WhatsApp, together with the couple’s availability to each other, reflects the intensity of their relationship. The intervals of correspondence form the rhythm of relationship, and by examining the quantity and peaks in casual and conflictual discourse, we can learn of the role each partner plays in the relationship and the “music they play” together.

In order to understand couples’ rhythms, we need to identify the existing signs and spot the ones that are absent from their discourse. The couples pointed to the number of messages, their length, their frequency, and response time as the main parameters according to which a diagram of a couple’s relationship can be drawn. While the frequency shifts observed between practical and technical correspondence (Graphs 1.1 and 1.2) can be subtle, as sampling a random correspondence might reflect only a small difference between the two types, examining WhatsApp use over longer periods reveals a pattern, which can more accurately elicit the spousal dynamics therein.

Gottman’s study of couples’ stability and happiness calculated mathematically the balance between positive and negative emotions in couples’ dynamics. This article analyzed the frequency and quantity of couples’ WhatsApp correspondence

through semi-structured interviews. Despite the difference in methodology, this research corroborates Gottman's findings and identifies the following three patterns of conflictual behavior among stable couples:

1. *Avoiders*. Avoiders reported lack of activity on WhatsApp in times of conflict, and little activity at other times (Model 6). Although making extensive use of WhatsApp in other social circles, spousal correspondence was infrequent, and availability low. WhatsApp use substituted for avoiders' low face-to-face communication, and their use thereof was mainly technical. As per Gottman's distinctions regarding the balance between avoiders' independence and interdependence, WhatsApp reflected avoidant couples' active individual worlds alongside their low intimacy.
2. *Emotional arguers*. Couples who are emotionally driven have noted that much text is frequently exchanged between them on WhatsApp both routinely and in times of crisis (Model 5). These couples felt very comfortable expressing their feelings on WhatsApp and treated this arena as the "backstage" of their relationship. Most emotional couples were highly engaged and available to each other on WhatsApp. They reported persuasion attempts shifted to WhatsApp allowing them to express anger alongside humor. Corresponding to Gottman's volatile couples, they set no boundaries around their individual worlds, thus conflicts were conducted offline and online simultaneously.
3. *Logical disputers*. Spouses who listen to each other during a conflict. Gottman labeled them "validating couples," citing the empathy that the partners feel for each other's views. The moderate graph depicting logic-based disputes on WhatsApp reflects the ease and calm with which WhatsApp messages are exchanged during conflict. In contrast to avoidant couples, logical couples do not refrain from emotional expression on WhatsApp, but, similar to Gottman's validating couples, they try to avoid using WhatsApp for discussing sensitive issues (Model 4). Observing the routine pace of correspondence at regular intervals alongside high availability reveals that these couples' use of WhatsApp during conflict reflects the stability of their relationships.

Gottman also cited unstable couples and hostile-detached couples. The small body of research and the limitations of self-reporting limited this study in gaining insights regarding these groups. Although one couple participating expressed high levels of contempt, and extreme negative sentiments, examining the quantity and frequency of their message exchange on WhatsApp is not sufficient basis for defining them as such. Content analysis is needed in such cases.

This article presented a visual depiction of how logical, emotional, and avoidant conflictual discourses manifest on WhatsApp. The models developed reflect differing interactions as the argument evolves, and together with casual dynamics, represent the rhythm of the given relationship. For couples who conduct conflicts emotionally, WhatsApp closely reflects their face-to-face disputes and overall relationship, whereas it might only partly reflect logical disputes or avoidance.

WhatsApp has less cues to rely on when compared to offline communication, but as exemplified by the participants of this study, WhatsApp communication is reflective of offline dynamics. While WhatsApp may not lay bare all layers of the relationship and mitigate reactions by adding on response time, in all models, though, the graphic depiction of WhatsApp exchanges can help us to understand couples' dynamics.

## Conclusion

Relationships are difficult to define. P1 (42) described a relationship as an "imagined entity," that is, relationships have an independent existence apart from the individuals therein. Many study participants reported that they imagine the tone in which a message is written on WhatsApp, and agreed that the assumptions that they make thereabout can greatly influence how they perceive their relationships. This article suggests using WhatsApp as a barometer of a couple's dynamics and a metronome to set a new rhythm to the relationship.

Research has discovered the potential of using text messaging in therapy for bridging gaps and disputes (Amichai-Hamburger, 2013). Consistent with Johnson's EFT model, WhatsApp correspondence can contribute to positive communication and in times of conflict move the disagreement from gridlock to dialogue. Mobile phone platforms have proved useful by therapists in collecting information, specifically in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2014). This study points to the potential inherent in WhatsApp for EFT, as it enables the couple to independently observe their relationship and home in on their emotions.

Gottman suggested a 5:1 ratio as the right balance between positive and negative interactions that healthy couples experience. As WhatsApp may tone down emotional expression, the study suggests expending its use in couple's interaction. It would seem logical that higher levels of positive sentiments demonstrated through this channel will positively contribute to couple's offline relationship.

WhatsApp's popularity points to the importance that users attach to the information transmitted thereon (Gazit et al., 2020). While Amichai-Hamburger recommends to put down our phones and create "islands of love" when we are together, this study suggests using our phones to strengthen our intimacy when we are apart, because what could be better than reminding your loved ones that you "see them" and "are there for them" even when you are not physically together?

As some participants were adamant concerning the possibility of using WhatsApp for reconciliation, the importance of face-to-face interactions should be stressed. For Generation X, whose cohort grew up with face-to-face intimacy, adoption of a new medium for spousal interaction must be built on the foundations of the couple's communication laid offline.

Future research should measure quantitatively the length of texts and the frequency of message exchange over periods of time to more accurately reflect couples' dynamics. This study also points to the need to examine additional instances of couple behavior on WhatsApp by sampling correspondence from differing times and contexts. The more we sample, the deeper our insights into the codes of the given relationship.

Content analysis of the interviews can shed light on recurring themes that arise, such as the dominant role that WhatsApp plays in a couple's life, the code of behavior that it

forms, and how it affects communication in various circles of belonging. Other issues that arose concern how WhatsApp affects self-representation, and people's attitudes toward WhatsApp's various features. While this study examined Generation X members, it will be very interesting to extend it and examine other generations' use of WhatsApp and compare it to their use of features such as voice messages, emojis, stickers, and GIFs. Future studies should delve deeper into the role of digital communication in our changing world.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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## Notes

1. Those born between 1965 and 1981 (Pew Research Center, 2015).
2. One who did not grow up in the digital age and was not technologically exposed from infancy (Vodanovich et al., 2010).
3. One ✓ at the bottom of a sent message indicates to the sender that the message was sent; two ✓s mean that it was received.
4. The term was defined by Carl Ransom Rogers, an American psychologist who was among the founders of the humanist approach, and who described three components of personality: "the self-concept," or how an individual perceives herself; "the true self," or the deepest part of our personality; and the "ideal self," or our aspiration (Amichai-Hamburger, 2007).
5. Retrieved from the Gottman Institute website 21 September 2020.
6. Retrieved from YouTube, *Making Marriage Work*, Dr. John Gottman, 21 September 2020.

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