

Examining The Impact of Whatsapp on Family Interactions Among Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z in Urban Southwest Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how WhatsApp influences family interactions among Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z in urban Southwest Nigeria. Guided by Family Communication Patterns Theory and Media Richness Theory, it investigates the role of WhatsApp in promoting emotional closeness, maintaining family contact, and facilitating intergenerational communication. Adopting a quantitative approach, data were collected from 172 respondents through structured questionnaires and analyzed using SPSS, employing descriptive statistics, correlation, regression, chi-square, and ANOVA tests. Findings indicate that emotional closeness and perceived connectedness are significant predictors of family bonding, whereas frequency and duration of WhatsApp use do not significantly affect interactions. Notably, Generation X communicates more with extended family, while communication with parents and siblings remains strong across all generations. The study concludes that WhatsApp enhances meaningful family interactions through its multimedia features and suggests that digital tools can be strategically leveraged to strengthen family cohesion in contemporary African societies.

Keywords: emotional closeness, Family Communication Patterns Theory, family interactions, intergenerational relationships, Media Richness Theory

INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of digital communication technologies has profoundly reshaped interpersonal dynamics, particularly within family systems. Among these technologies, WhatsApp launched in 2009 has become one of the most widely used mobile messaging platforms globally, with over two billion active users as of 2023 (Backlinko, 2023). Its diverse features, from text and voice messaging to video calls and broadcast messaging, offer new ways to sustain familial ties in an era characterized by globalization, urbanization, and increasingly mobile lifestyles (Church & De Oliveira, 2013).

In urban settings where fast-paced routines limit face-to-face interaction, WhatsApp functions as a key channel for coordination, emotional support, and daily communication. However, its affordances extend beyond convenience. Broadcast messaging, for example, allows parents to maintain frequent contact with children but may be perceived by younger generations as impersonal or emotionally detached (Taipale & Farinosi, 2018). This reflects an emerging tension between communicative efficiency and emotional connection within digitally mediated family relationships.

In Nigeria, where communal values, extended kinship, and hierarchical structures remain central to social life, the digitalization of family communication introduces new socio-cultural complexities. Udeze et al. (2022) observe that digital platforms are gradually reshaping family hierarchies by giving younger members greater communicative autonomy. While this enhances agency, it can also challenge traditional expectations of respect and deference central to African family systems. Moreover, research suggests that although WhatsApp enhances accessibility, it may reduce emotional depth due to the absence of nonverbal cues essential for empathy and intimacy (Omipidan & Sanusi, 2024; Imam et al., 2023).

Despite WhatsApp's ubiquity in Nigerian households, few empirical studies have examined its intergenerational effects. Most existing work either generalizes digital communication or focuses on social media broadly, often drawing from Western or Asian contexts (Ashraf et al., 2023). This leaves a gap in Africa-specific analyses that consider local cultural dynamics.

To address this gap, the present study investigates the influence of WhatsApp on family interaction among Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z in urban Southwest Nigeria. These generational cohorts differ in digital literacy, communication patterns, and familial expectations. The study aims to: (1) assess how WhatsApp use affects emotional closeness and connectedness within families, (2) examine generational differences in communication patterns, and (3) identify key predictors of family bonding in a digital context. The findings are expected to contribute to the growing discourse on digital communication, intergenerational relationships, and social cohesion in African societies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Family Communication in the Digital Age

Digital communication technologies have redefined how families sustain connection and cohesion. Traditional face-to-face interactions, once central to family life, are now supplemented by computer-mediated communication (CMC). Valkenburg and Peter (2011) note that digital media foster constant connectivity and new forms of intimacy across distances. However, these affordances also introduce challenges concerning message interpretation, emotional depth, and authenticity (Baym, 2015).

Within families, digital platforms serve both instrumental and affective functions. Instrumentally, applications like WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger enable coordination of daily tasks and information sharing (Coyne et al., 2018). Affectively, they allow expressions of care and emotional support across physical and generational boundaries (Karraker, 2022). Yet, as Ledbetter (2021) cautions, frequent but brief exchanges can diminish communicative quality, with efficiency replacing reflection and empathy.

WhatsApp and Family Interaction

WhatsApp's widespread use and versatile features instant messaging, multimedia sharing, group chats, and broadcast lists make it a dominant platform for familial interaction, particularly in regions where mobile connectivity exceeds broadband access (Donner, 2015). Studies from Asia and Latin America report that WhatsApp enhances family cohesion through daily contact and reassurance (Miller et al., 2016; Madianou, 2020). However, Baym (2015) warns of "ambient intimacy," where continuous connectivity may give the illusion of closeness without deep emotional engagement.

In African contexts, WhatsApp has become a crucial space for sustaining kinship and collective decision-making among geographically dispersed families (Chib et al., 2021; Uwalaka & Watkins, 2022). Nonetheless, disparities in digital literacy and communication styles among generations often influence how effectively the platform supports familial interaction. For instance, older users may value informational exchange, while younger members prioritize quick, expressive messaging.

Intergenerational Communication and Generational Differences

Generational cohorts differ in their communicative orientations due to technological exposure and social experiences. Generation X values direct, pragmatic exchanges; Millennials prefer participatory and multimodal interaction; and Generation Z digital natives integrate media seamlessly but often favor speed and visual expression over-elaboration (Bolton et al., 2013; Prensky, 2012; Turner, 2015). These differences can both bridge and strain family communication.

Correa et al. (2017) observe that platforms like WhatsApp help grandparents, parents, and children maintain emotional proximity despite distance. Conversely, Taipale and Farinosi (2018) found that mismatched communication preferences such as text-heavy versus emoji-

based messages can cause misunderstanding or emotional detachment. These findings highlight the need to explore how generational traits mediate digital family relationships.

RESEARCH GAP AND CONTRIBUTION

Despite extensive research on digital communication within families, most studies focus on Western or Asian contexts and often treat social media in a generic way, without examining the unique features of specific platforms such as WhatsApp. Empirical investigations into how WhatsApp shapes intergenerational family dynamics in African settings remain limited, even though the platform is widely used and holds significant cultural relevance in Nigeria. This lack of context-specific understanding leaves a gap in knowledge about how digital tools influence family relationships across generations in African societies.

This study addresses this gap by examining the impact of WhatsApp on family interactions among Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z in urban Southwest Nigeria. It contributes to scholarship by extending theoretical discussions on digital family communication to an African socio-cultural context, highlighting generational differences in WhatsApp-mediated family bonding, and providing practical insights into how digital platforms can foster emotional connectedness and strengthen social cohesion within contemporary families.

Research Design

This study adopted a **quantitative, cross-sectional survey design** to examine how family interaction patterns influence WhatsApp use among Generation X (1965–1980), Millennials (1981–1996), and Generation Z (1997–2012) in urban Southwest Nigeria. The design was suitable for identifying generational differences and relationships among communication variables within a single timeframe.

Theoretical Framework and Operationalization

The study was guided by Family Communication Patterns Theory (FCPT) (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002) and Media Richness Theory (MRT) (Daft & Lengel, 1986). FCPT conceptualizes communication through conversation orientation and conformity orientation, while MRT explains how media differ in their ability to convey richness and immediacy.

These dimensions were operationalized into measurable constructs, including conversation and conformity orientation, perceived media richness, emotional closeness, and family bonding. All variables were measured using five-point Likert-type scales adapted from established instruments (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002; Walther, 2011). Higher scores indicated stronger orientations or perceptions.

Sampling and Data Collection

A purposive sampling method was used to ensure representation of the three generational cohorts in urban centers such as Lagos, Ibadan, and Akure. Eligibility required participants to be active WhatsApp users who regularly communicated with family members via the platform.

Of 200 questionnaires distributed, 172 valid responses were obtained (86% response rate), meeting sample size adequacy guidelines for statistical analysis (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). Data were collected through a structured questionnaire comprising four sections: demographic information, family communication patterns, WhatsApp usage behavior, and perceived emotional closeness. A pilot test with 20 respondents confirmed clarity and reliability, with all Cronbach's alpha coefficients above 0.75.

Variables and Measurement

- **Independent variables:** conversation orientation, conformity orientation, perceived media richness, WhatsApp usage frequency, and time spent on WhatsApp.
- **Dependent variable:** perceived family bonding (measured through emotional closeness and connectedness).
- **Control variables:** gender, marital status, and education level.

Each construct was assessed using composite mean scores derived from corresponding Likert-scale items.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data were analyzed using SPSS (Version 26). Descriptive statistics summarized demographic data and WhatsApp usage patterns. Correlation and multiple regression analyses identified predictors of family bonding, while ANOVA examined generational differences in communication patterns and media perceptions. Chi-square tests were used for categorical comparisons. Statistical significance was determined at $p < .05$.

This methodology was most appropriate for achieving the study objectives as it provided a systematic approach to quantifying generational variations and testing relationships among key communication variables.

RESEACRH FINDINGS

Descriptive Findings

Of the 385 questionnaires distributed, 172 valid responses were analyzed (44.7% response rate). The sample was predominantly Generation Z (50.6%), followed by Millennials (36.0%) and Generation X (13.4%). Males represented 75% of respondents, consistent with documented gender gaps in smartphone ownership in Nigeria (GSMA, 2022). Most participants were students (57.6%) with tertiary education (71.5%) and postgraduate qualifications (22.1%), indicating high digital literacy (Akinfemisoye, 2019). Geographically, respondents were concentrated in Osun (53.5%) and Lagos (26.2%), reflecting the study's urban scope.

Table 1. Descriptive Findings (n = 172)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Generation	Generation X (1965–1980)	23	13.4
	Millennials (1981–1996)	62	36.0
	Generation Z (1997–2012)	87	50.6
Gender	Male	129	75.0
	Female	43	25.0
Education Level	Tertiary degree	123	71.5
	Postgraduate degree	38	22.1
Occupation	Student	99	57.6
	Self-employed	35	20.3
	Public sector	21	12.2
	Private sector	16	9.3
State of Residence	Osun	92	53.5
	Lagos	45	26.2
	Others	35	20.3

WhatsApp Usage Patterns

Respondents strongly agreed that WhatsApp helps them “keep in touch” ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 0.61$) and “improves emotional closeness” ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.65$), highlighting its central role in maintaining family ties. However, perceptions were neutral toward “replacing face-to-face contact” ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 1.11$), suggesting integration rather than substitution of physical interaction consistent with Baym’s (2015) concept of *ambient co-presence*.

Contact patterns showed the nuclear family as the primary focus: parents (43%), siblings (28.5%), partners (17.4%), and extended kin (11%). This aligns with findings from polymedia studies emphasizing emotionally immediate relationships in digital communication (Madianou & Miller, 2013; Mesch & Talmud, 2021).

Table 2. WhatsApp Usage Patterns

Item	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Interpretation
WhatsApp keeps me in touch	4.35	0.61	Strongly Agree
WhatsApp improves emotional closeness	4.21	0.65	Strongly Agree
WhatsApp replaces face-to-face contact	3.05	1.11	Neutral

Item	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Interpretation
Most Contacted Family Members			
Parents	43.0%	—	Most frequent contact
Siblings	28.5%	—	
Partners/Spouses	17.4%	—	
Extended kin	11.0%	—	Least frequent contact

Emotional Closeness Across Generations

ANOVA results revealed no significant generational differences in emotional closeness, $F(2,169) = 1.86$, $p = .160$, $\eta^2 = .02$. Mean scores Gen Z ($M = 4.31$), Millennials ($M = 4.21$), and Gen X ($M = 4.09$) indicated similar affective benefits across cohorts. This supports Pew Research Center (2022), which found comparable emotional outcomes across age groups, and studies by Kim and Kim (2020) and Olatunji and Yusuf (2023), which highlight media affordances, not age, as the key determinant of emotional connectedness.

Table 3. Emotional Closeness Across Generations (ANOVA Results)

Generation	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	F-value	p-value	η^2	Interpretation
Generation X	4.09	0.59	1.86	.160	.02	No significant difference
Millennials	4.21	0.63				
Generation Z	4.31	0.58				

Predictors of Perceived Family Bonding

Multiple regression analysis confirmed that the model was significant, $F(8,163) = 6.49$, $p < .001$, explaining 23% of the variance ($R^2 = .23$) in perceived family bonding. Emotional closeness ($\beta = .264$, $p = .003$) and staying in touch ($\beta = .190$, $p = .036$) emerged as the strongest predictors, while frequency of use, screen time, and message overload were non-significant. These findings suggest that quality of interaction, not quantity, fosters stronger family bonds. This aligns with Family Communication Patterns Theory (FCPT), emphasizing emotion-rich dialogue in sustaining familial relationships, and Media Richness Theory (MRT), which posits that multimodal features (text, voice, visuals) enhance meaning-making and emotional connection.

Table 4. Predictors of Perceived Family Bonding (Multiple Regression Analysis)

Predictor Variable	Standardized Beta (β)	t-value	p-value	Significance
Emotional closeness	.264	3.03	.003	Significant
Staying in touch	.190	2.12	.036	Significant
Frequency of WhatsApp use	.062	0.74	.462	Not significant
Average daily screen time	.041	0.59	.558	Not significant
Message overload	-.055	-0.69	.492	Not significant
Model Summary	R² = .23	F(8,163) = 6.49	p < .001	—

Limitations and Implications

While limited by its cross-sectional design and urban focus, the study underscores WhatsApp's integrative role in maintaining family cohesion across generations. Future research should explore longitudinal patterns and include rural contexts for broader generalization.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study investigated how WhatsApp facilitates emotional closeness and family bonding among Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z in urban Southwest Nigeria. The findings demonstrate that the quality of communication, rather than its frequency, is most crucial in sustaining familial relationships. While respondents across all generations reported high emotional closeness, no significant age differences were found, indicating that WhatsApp's emotional affordances transcend generational boundaries.

Grounded in Media Richness Theory (MRT) and Family Communication Patterns Theory (FCPT), the results show that multimodal features such as voice notes, video calls, and emojis effectively convey emotional nuance and foster relational intimacy. Regression analysis confirmed that emotional closeness and staying in touch significantly predicted perceived family bonding, whereas usage frequency and screen time did not. These outcomes affirm that emotionally expressive and intentional communication strengthens family cohesion more than habitual contact.

In the Nigerian urban context, WhatsApp thus operates as both a technological connector and a relational space that complements traditional family communication. The study contributes to digital communication scholarship by evidencing how mobile media support intergenerational connectedness in collectivist societies.

Future research should extend these insights to rural or cross-cultural settings and explore other messaging platforms. Overall, this study underscores that WhatsApp, when used mindfully, enhances emotional presence and reinforces family bonds in the digital age.

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