

WHATSAPP USAGE PRACTICES OF OLDER ADULTS IN ISTANBUL: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

İSTANBUL'DAKİ YAŞLI BİREYLERİN WHATSAPP KULLANIM PRATİKLERİ: NİTEL BİR ARAŞTIRMA

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to contribute to the literature on digital communication and aging by examining the WhatsApp usage practices of individuals aged 65 and over living in Istanbul. Designed as a qualitative study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 40 participants, consisting of 26 women and 14 men. Data were collected with ethical committee approval and evaluated through descriptive analysis. The findings revealed that WhatsApp has become one of the primary digital communication tools for older adults due to its user-friendly interface, multiple communication affordances, and widespread adoption within society. Furthermore, it was found that older adults receive support from family members during the process of learning the application, and this support plays an important role in older adults' adaptation to digital communication technologies. The study also found that older adults predominantly preferred text messaging, tended to avoid contentious topics in group chats to prevent conflicts, and limited their use of status updates due to privacy concerns. Finally, it was determined that while WhatsApp usage strengthened older adults' social ties, it also contributed to a reduction in face-to-face communication.

Keywords: Digital communication, Digital adaptation, Instant messaging, WhatsApp, Elderly population

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, İstanbul'da yaşayan 65 yaş ve üzeri bireylerin WhatsApp kullanım pratiklerini inceleyerek dijital iletişim ve yaşlılık literatürüne katkı sunmayı amaçlamıştır. Nitel olarak tasarlanan araştırmada, amaçlı örneklem ile seçilen 26 kadın ve 14 erkek olmak üzere toplam 40 katılımcıyla yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiştir. Veriler, etik kurul onayı alınarak toplanmış ve betimsel analizle değerlendirilmiştir. Bulgular, WhatsApp'ın kullanıcı dostu arayüzü, çoklu iletişim imkânı ve toplumda yaygın kullanımı nedeniyle yaşlı bireyler için temel dijital iletişim araçlarından biri haline geldiğini ortaya koymuştur. Ayrıca, yaşlı bireylerin uygulamayı öğrenme sürecinde aile bireylerinden destek aldıkları ve bu desteğin yaşlı bireylerin dijital iletişim teknolojilerine uyum süreçlerinde önemli bir rol oynadığı tespit edilmiştir. Bunun yanı sıra, yaşlı bireylerin WhatsApp'ta en çok yazılı mesajlaşmayı tercih ettikleri, grup sohbetlerinde çatışmaları önlemek için tartışmalı konulardan kaçındıkları ve mahremiyet kaygısıyla durum paylaşımını sınırlı kullandıkları görülmüştür. Son olarak, WhatsApp kullanımının yaşlı bireylerin sosyal bağlarını güçlendirdiği ancak yüz yüze iletişimin azalmasına yol açtığı saptanmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dijital iletişim, Dijital uyum, Anlık mesajlaşma, WhatsApp, Yaşlı bireyler

INTRODUCTION

The advent of the internet and the expansion of social networking platforms have facilitated the emergence of instant messaging applications, which have induced profound transformations in individual communication practices. These applications not only enable rapid and continuous interaction but also diversify and enhance the dynamism of engagement through functionalities such as media sharing, group chats, voice and video calls, and status updates (Sulistiani and Al-Amin, 2025). Presently, WhatsApp sustains its position as the most widely adopted instant messaging application, with over two billion active users (Kemp, 2025). This application is extensively utilized by individuals aged 65 and above. A substantial body of international literature has examined WhatsApp usage among older adults. These studies have demonstrated that WhatsApp facilitates communication between older adults and their family and friends, strengthens social ties, enhances digital competencies, and mitigates experiences of loneliness, while also indicating that older users encounter difficulties related to device and Internet access, perceive certain functionalities of WhatsApp as complex, and experience negative impacts on overall user experience. Additionally, concerns regarding privacy, security, and the dissemination of misinformation have been identified as salient sources of apprehension among older users (Martins et al., 2021; Moreira et al., 2024; Oliveira et al., 2022; Sádaba et al., 2023; Saleh et al., 2020).

An examination of the national literature reveals that, although several studies have investigated the Internet and social media practices of older adults in Türkiye (Akbuğa, 2023; Bayram and Arıcı, 2021; Görgün Baran and Öztekin Alpaydın, 2020; Özgür, 2024; Şamilova and Ayhan, 2022), research specifically addressing their engagement with instant messaging applications, and WhatsApp in particular, remains markedly limited (Arun et al., 2022; Özgür, 2021). In Türkiye, approximately nine million individuals aged 65 and above constitute a growing segment of the country's population of roughly 86 million (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2025). This demographic transformation underscores the increasing importance of investigating the digital communication practices of older adults. The present study aims to examine the WhatsApp usage practices of individuals aged

65 and above residing in Istanbul. Building upon the general body of literature on WhatsApp use and digital communication (Calvo et al., 2024; Holly et al., 2023; Martins et al., 2021; Moreira et al., 2024; Morsidi et al., 2021; Mudavadi et al., 2025; Oliveira et al., 2022; Pang and Woo, 2020; Pratiwi and Wijayanti, 2025; Sádaba et al., 2023; Saleh et al., 2020; Suárez-Lantarón et al., 2022), the research questions were formulated to address how older adults appropriate and engage with the platform. Accordingly, the study primarily asks for what purposes and in what ways older adults utilize WhatsApp. More specifically, it investigates with whom they communicate and through which modes of interaction they preferentially engage, the types of groups they join and the predominant topics of discussion within these groups, as well as the nature of the content they share via WhatsApp status updates. In addition, the study explores the challenges they encounter in using the application and their concerns regarding privacy and security.

In this study, the existing literature on the use of instant messaging applications was examined, and research questions were derived accordingly. Based on these questions, the study's methodological design, techniques, sample, and limitations were established. Following the approval of the ethics committee, this qualitative research included 40 participants aged 65 and above residing in Istanbul, who were selected through purposive sampling, and conducted semi-structured interviews regarding their practices of WhatsApp use. Through a semi-structured interview protocol developed in light of the literature, data were collected on a wide range of topics, including participants' initial adoption processes, frequency and purposes of use, communication partners, types of shared content, employed features, group participation, topics of discussion within groups, practices of status updates, experienced challenges, concerns related to privacy and security, and the perceived impact of WhatsApp on their social lives (Calvo et al., 2024; Holly et al., 2023; Martins et al., 2021; Moreira et al., 2024; Morsidi et al., 2021; Mudavadi et al., 2025; Oliveira et al., 2022; Pang and Woo, 2020; Pratiwi and Wijayanti, 2025; Sádaba et al., 2023; Saleh et al., 2020; Suárez-Lantarón et al., 2022). These data were analyzed and presented using descriptive analysis. In the conclusion, the research findings were summarized, and their theoretical and practical contributions to the field were discussed.

Furthermore, the limitations of the study were considered, and recommendations were provided for future research, with particular emphasis on how such inquiries may address existing knowledge gaps.

1. ELDERLY ENGAGEMENT WITH WHATSAPP: A LITERATURE REVIEW

The evolution of the Internet and social networking platforms has facilitated the emergence of instant messaging applications. Diverse applications, including WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Telegram, and WeChat, have induced substantial transformations in individuals' communicative practices. Instant messaging applications, in addition to enabling rapid and uninterrupted communication, have augmented and diversified user interactions through functionalities such as media sharing, group chats, voice and video calls, and status updates (Akyuni et al., 2024; Sulistiani and Al-Amin, 2025). An examination of national and international scholarship indicates a substantial corpus of research addressing the modalities through which individuals engage with instant messaging applications. Certain studies have demonstrated that users employ these applications not solely for social interaction but also for media and file sharing, voice and video communication, participation in online meetings, collaborative endeavors, expedited access to information, engagement with digital communities, and financial transactions (Haryati and Prayuna, 2020; Nkemdilim, 2025; Thomas and Bhat, 2022; Tuncer, 2021; Yıldız and Demir, 2024; Zhang et al., 2023). Conversely, other investigations have indicated that while instant messaging applications expedite communication, reinforce social ties, and facilitate information accessibility, they may concurrently engender adverse outcomes, including violations of privacy, digital addiction, attentional fragmentation, reductions in face-to-face interactions, social pressures, performance anxiety, digital identity security concerns, misinformation proliferation, cyberbullying, deleterious effects on mental health, and the surveillance of personal data through targeted advertising (Akyıldız and Büyük, 2022; Ariel and Levy, 2024; Atılgan and Tailiaiti, 2020; Gangneux, 2021; Gülşen, 2025; Küçük et al., 2023).

According to We Are Social and Hootsuite's Global Overview Report (Kemp, 2025), WhatsApp continues

to constitute the most widely utilized instant messaging application globally, with approximately two billion active users. The application was initially developed in 2009 by Jan Koum and Brian Acton and originally provided only text-based messaging services. Over time, functionalities such as voice and video calling, voice message transmission, media sharing, group chats, status updates, and end-to-end encryption were incorporated, thereby enhancing the overall user experience (Baydili, 2024). A review of the literature indicates a substantial body of research addressing individuals' practices of WhatsApp usage. Certain studies have demonstrated that users employ WhatsApp for a diverse array of purposes, including maintaining connections with family and friends, conducting voice and video communications, instantaneously sharing media content, engaging in social interactions within group chats, exchanging work-related information, organizing meetings and events with colleagues, conducting commercial activities, accessing healthcare services, disseminating educational content, planning travel, fulfilling shopping needs, and obtaining information regarding social or political events (Calvo et al., 2024; Holly et al., 2023; Morsidi et al., 2021; Pang and Woo, 2020; Pratiwi and Wijayanti, 2025; Suárez-Lantarón et al., 2022). Conversely, other investigations have indicated that excessive use of WhatsApp may precipitate digital addiction, violations of privacy, the proliferation of misinformation, social isolation resulting from excessive online social engagement, reductions in face-to-face communication, burnout induced by continuous work-related connectivity, threats to the security of personal data, psychological pressures and anxiety among younger users, attentional fragmentation, superficial relational bonds, disruption of sleep patterns, and declines in overall quality of life (Coulibaly, 2023; Çakıcı, 2024; El-Masri et al., 2022; Mudavadi et al., 2025; Tuncer, 2021; Yılmazsoy et al., 2020).

According to the United Nations, as of 2023, the global population aged 65 and over is approximately 761 million, with projections indicating it will reach around 1.6 billion by 2050 (UN, 2023). In Türkiye, approximately 9 million individuals, out of a total population of 86 million, are aged 65 and above (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2025). The elderly population in Türkiye is increasing rapidly. This demographic shift makes the examination of internet and social media

usage patterns among this group critical. The rising proportion of the elderly necessitates an understanding of their integration into the digitalization process and the impact of the digital divide on this population. A review of international literature reveals numerous studies on the use of social media platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, by the elderly (Ghosh, 2023; Hsu et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2022; Rahayu and Hartati, 2024; Spineli Silva et al., 2020). Furthermore, the literature also identifies a significant body of work focusing on the use of instant messaging applications by older adults, particularly WhatsApp (Martins et al., 2021; Moreira et al., 2024; Moretti et al., 2022; Oliveira et al., 2022; Rosales and Fernández-Ardèvol, 2016; Sádaba et al., 2023; Saleh et al., 2020), as well as other platforms like Telegram, WeChat, and Facebook Messenger (Cirilli and Nicolini, 2020; Cui et al., 2024; Hosseini, 2023; Song, 2022; Swandi et al., 2021). These studies highlight that instant messaging applications facilitate social connections and the development of digital competencies among the elderly. However, they also underscore challenges such as difficulties in accessing technology, the complexity of applications adversely affecting user experiences, and concerns regarding security and stress linked to technology use. In the national literature, while there are studies on the internet and social media usage of the elderly in Türkiye (Akbuğa, 2023; Bayram and Arıcı, 2021; Görgün Baran and Öztekin Alpaydın, 2020; Özgür, 2024; Şamilova and Ayhan, 2022), research specifically focused on the use of instant messaging applications by this demographic remains limited (Arun et al., 2022; Özgür, 2021). This study aims to examine the WhatsApp usage practices of individuals aged 65 and over residing in Istanbul, with the goal of addressing gaps in the literature concerning digital communication and aging studies.

2. METHOD

In Türkiye, individuals aged 65 and above are defined as older adults (TÜİK, 2025). This study aimed to examine the WhatsApp usage practices of older adults residing in Istanbul, thereby contributing to the national literature on digital communication practices among older populations. Considering that older adults' engagement with digital communication technologies involves not only observable behaviors but also subjective experiences, motivations, and personal

meanings, a qualitative approach was deemed the most appropriate method for this research. Accordingly, the study was designed as a qualitative study and adopted a phenomenological research design. Phenomenology is a qualitative approach that seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of individuals' experiences from their subjective perspectives (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). In this study, phenomenology was employed to elucidate the personal significance of WhatsApp usage experiences for the participants and to explore the effects of these experiences on their daily lives and social interactions. Consequently, this approach enabled a comprehensive understanding of the impact of WhatsApp usage on social connections, communication habits, and everyday life from the participants' perspectives.

The study group was determined using criterion sampling, one of the purposive sampling methods, to ensure that participants possessed the characteristics necessary to address the research objectives. The selection criteria included residing in Istanbul, being aged 65 or older, and actively using WhatsApp, as these criteria allowed the study to focus on older adults' experiences with digital communication through this specific application. To ensure diversity in participant profiles and capture a range of perspectives, gender variation was also considered; accordingly, the study included 26 women and 14 men. Purposive and criterion sampling methods are widely employed in qualitative research to deliberately select individuals with relevant knowledge and experience (Patton, 2015; Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2018). Data collection continued until data saturation was achieved, meaning that additional participants no longer provided new insights into the research questions (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Guest, Bunce, and Johnson, 2006; Saunders et al., 2018). Ultimately, a total of 40 participants meeting these criteria were included in the study.

To ensure compliance with ethical standards, ethical approval was obtained from the Non-Interventional Research Ethics Committee of Üsküdar University (Approval No: 61351342/020-759; Date: 31/12/2024). Throughout all stages of the research, participants were provided with detailed information regarding the study objectives, procedures, and confidentiality measures, and both verbal and written informed consent were obtained.

A semi-structured interview form was employed as the data collection instrument. The form was developed based on relevant literature and included questions addressing participants' initiation into WhatsApp usage, usage frequency, purposes, communication partners, content sharing practices, group interactions, status update practices, encountered challenges, security and privacy concerns, and the application's impact on social life (Calvo et al., 2024; Holly et al., 2023; Martins et al., 2021; Moreira et al., 2024; Morsidi et al., 2021; Mudavadi et al., 2025; Oliveira et al., 2022; Pang and Woo, 2020; Pratiwi and Wijayanti, 2025; Sádaba et al., 2023; Saleh et al., 2020; Suárez-Lantarón et al., 2022). The collected data were analyzed descriptively, with findings organized under pre-determined headings to summarize participants' experiences and usage practices. The findings are presented under the headings initial experiences, motivational drivers, and support networks in WhatsApp usage; usage intensity, communication networks, and content sharing on WhatsApp; WhatsApp group participation, conversational themes, and opinion expression; WhatsApp status sharing practices and dynamics; and challenges, privacy concerns, and social impact of WhatsApp usage.

Through the assistance of university students, 40 participants with diverse sociodemographic characteristics were reached, and each participant engaged in a 45-60-minute semi-structured interview conducted face-to-face. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and fully anonymized. The resulting data were analyzed using descriptive analysis in MAXQDA software. Descriptive analysis identifies and articulates the content and themes within qualitative data (Patton, 2015; Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2018). Within this framework, multiple dimensions, including usage frequency, purposes, communication patterns, group interactions, and content-sharing practices, were organized and presented transparently. Descriptive analysis facilitated the clear and systematic reporting of findings obtained through the phenomenological design, aligned with the study's objectives.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Code	Age	Gender	Occupation	Education Level	Marital Status
P1	67	Male	Employed	Master's Degree	Married
P2	66	Female	Unemployed	Primary School	Married
P3	68	Female	Unemployed	High School	Married
P4	65	Female	Unemployed	Primary School	Married
P5	68	Male	Retired	Bachelor's Degree	Married
P6	69	Male	Employed	High School	Unmarried
P7	65	Male	Retired	Bachelor's Degree	Married
P8	68	Female	Retired	High School	Unmarried
P9	65	Female	Employed	Master's Degree	Married
P10	65	Female	Unemployed	Primary School	Married
P11	67	Female	Unemployed	Secondary School	Married
P12	71	Female	Unemployed	Primary School	Married
P13	68	Male	Employed	High School	Married
P14	66	Male	Retired	High School	Unmarried
P15	65	Female	Employed	Bachelor's Degree	Married
P16	71	Female	Retired	Bachelor's Degree	Married
P17	68	Female	Employed	High School	Married
P18	68	Female	Employed	Bachelor's Degree	Married
P19	68	Male	Employed	Bachelor's Degree	Married
P20	65	Female	Unemployed	Primary School	Married
P21	72	Female	Unemployed	Primary School	Unmarried

P22	68	Male	Employed	Secondary School	Married
P23	67	Female	Employed	Associate Degree	Unmarried
P24	68	Female	Unemployed	High School	Married
P25	66	Male	Employed	Secondary School	Unmarried
P26	70	Male	Retired	Bachelor's Degree	Married
P27	68	Male	Employed	Primary School	Married
P28	69	Female	Retired	Secondary School	Married
P29	65	Female	Unemployed	High School	Married
P30	73	Female	Unemployed	High School	Married
P31	68	Male	Employed	Bachelor's Degree	Married
P32	70	Female	Retired	Primary School	Unmarried
P33	66	Male	Employed	Bachelor's Degree	Married
P34	71	Male	Retired	High School	Married
P35	69	Female	Unemployed	Primary School	Married
P36	65	Female	Employed	Primary School	Married
P37	65	Female	Retired	High School	Unmarried
P38	66	Female	Employed	Associate Degree	Married
P39	68	Female	Retired	High School	Married
P40	67	Female	Employed	Master's Degree	Unmarried

The demographic characteristics of the participants are summarized in Table 1. Participants were aged between 65 and 73 years, with 11 retirees, 12 unemployed, and 17 actively employed individuals. In terms of marital status, 31 participants were married, and 9 were single. Educational attainment varied: 10 participants had completed primary school, 4 had completed middle

school, 12 had completed high school, 2 held an associate degree, 9 held a bachelor's degree, and 3 held a master's degree.

3. FINDINGS

In this study, the findings derived from the interviews are presented under five main headings. The first section presents the reasons behind the participants' initiation of WhatsApp usage, their initial experiences with the application, and the individuals from whom they sought support during this process. The second section describes the frequency of WhatsApp usage among the participants, the individuals with whom they communicate on the platform, the types of content they share, and the features they prefer. The third section outlines the participants' levels of engagement with WhatsApp groups, the communication dynamics within these groups, and the ways in which they express their individual opinions within these contexts. The fourth section discusses the participants' practices related to sharing status updates. Finally, the last section explores the challenges faced by participants while using WhatsApp, their concerns regarding security and privacy, and the impact of the application on their social lives.

3.1. Initial Experiences, Motivational Drivers, and Support Networks in WhatsApp Usage

This section presents the findings related to the primary research question of the study. It was determined that when participants were asked about instant messaging applications, WhatsApp was the first application that came to their minds, and it was found to be the most frequently used application in their daily lives. The participants preferred WhatsApp for several reasons, including its cost-free usage, a broad user base, its widespread application in both professional and everyday contexts, its provision of voice, text, and video communication options, rapid content transfer capabilities, and its user-friendly interface. Additionally, it was determined that a minority of participants also used alternative instant messaging tools, including Facebook Messenger, Telegram, SMS, and email, alongside WhatsApp. Furthermore, a small subset of participants regarded Instagram as an alternative instant messaging application and used it as well. These findings suggest that while WhatsApp is

the predominant instant messaging tool among older people, some also utilize other messaging platforms.

The majority of participants reported having commenced using WhatsApp, which was launched in 2009, after 2015, following the acquisition of their first smartphones. This finding underscores that technological infrastructure constitutes a fundamental prerequisite for the adoption of the application. However, it was further observed that the usage of WhatsApp is not exclusively influenced by individual preferences or the inherent features of the application but is also shaped by social dynamics. Participants indicated that WhatsApp is extensively utilized across their professional, educational, and familial spheres. According to the statements provided by the participants, this extensive usage has transitioned WhatsApp from being an individual choice to a social obligation. Participants specifically noted that WhatsApp has become a standard communication tool within various contexts such as workplace correspondence, parental communications within school groups, and intra-family communications. This widespread adoption has engendered a strong societal pressure compelling participants to acquire and actively engage with the application. Additionally, WhatsApp's expediency, practicality, and cost-effectiveness were identified as significant factors that further intensified this societal pressure. Collectively, these findings elucidate that the utilization of WhatsApp is not solely a matter of personal preference; rather, it is a consequence of broader societal, technological, and cultural conditions that have rendered its usage a necessity. Participants expressed this situation as follows:

In professional life, we are constantly directed towards WhatsApp. Teachers create WhatsApp groups once children start school. The same occurs when we attend courses; WhatsApp groups are created. Society, in a way, forces us to use this application. You cannot remain indifferent. Everyone is using this application (Personal communication, P7, February 8, 2025).

I can reach everyone through this application, regardless of time or place. Its interface is very easy to use, and the application is extremely popular among people of all ages, which makes it convenient for maintaining contact with family, friends, and acquaintances (Personal communication, P34, February 10, 2025).

The vast majority of participants, irrespective of their educational backgrounds, reported that they acquired the skills necessary to use WhatsApp through support from their social environment. In particular, children, grandchildren, nieces, spouses, and colleagues played a pivotal role in this learning process. This finding underscores the dependence of older users on social support mechanisms during their adaptation to digital tools. Participants mitigated their technological knowledge gaps through the assistance provided by their immediate social circles. One participant expressed this situation as follows: "I initially began using WhatsApp with my son's assistance. He showed me how to download the application and how to send messages. Even now, I consult him whenever I encounter an issue" (Personal communication, P31, January 22, 2025).

Conversely, a small number of participants reported that they learned to use WhatsApp entirely on their own. It was determined that self-directed learning in these participants was driven by their individual motivations and prior technological experiences. This group was able to manage the learning process independently without the need for external assistance. One participant expressed this situation as follows: "When I got the phone, WhatsApp was already installed. I opened it, tried it, and learned by experimenting. I didn't seek help from anyone" (Personal communication, P36, January 22, 2025).

3.2. Usage Intensity, Communication Networks, and Content Sharing on WhatsApp

This section presents the findings pertaining to the primary research question and the first sub-question. It has been ascertained that a substantial majority of participants engage with WhatsApp on a daily basis. The frequency of WhatsApp usage among participants varies, ranging from checking the application multiple times a day to remaining continuously online throughout the day. A minority of participants, however, reported accessing the application only when necessary or upon receiving a message. These findings indicate that WhatsApp has become an entrenched component of the participants' daily routines. One participant expressed this situation as follows: "I access WhatsApp several times a day. As soon as a message arrives, I check it. WhatsApp has become an integral part of my daily life" (Personal communication, P31, January 22, 2025).

The majority of participants have indicated that they use WhatsApp primarily for communication with their families. For those whose children and grandchildren

reside at a distance, WhatsApp has emerged as a pivotal communication tool for maintaining emotional bonds and ensuring the continuity of familial solidarity. While employed participants also engage with their colleagues via the application, such usage remains subordinate to familial interactions. These findings underscore that WhatsApp is primarily employed by older people as a means to sustain familial communication and preserve familial ties. One participant expressed this situation as follows: "I can see my son and my grandchildren live through the app. Observing their movements and behaviors, it feels as though they are right beside me. This enhances the emotional connection between us" (Personal communication, P40, January 6, 2025).

The findings reveal that the vast majority of participants predominantly engage in written messaging on WhatsApp. Written messages were preferred due to their practicality, rapidity, and the advantage of being revisitable for subsequent reading. Furthermore, it was observed that participants frequently shared family photographs, images of their grandchildren, and photographs related to special occasions, such as religious holidays. A subset of participants preferred voice messages due to their time-efficient nature, whereas others explicitly avoided using voice messages, perceiving them as an impolite form of communication. These findings suggest that older people predominantly utilize written messages on WhatsApp, while visual and voice messages are employed as supplementary forms of communication.

Additionally, the findings indicate that participants primarily opt for video calls on WhatsApp when communicating with family members, including children, grandchildren, and close relatives. Video calls, in particular, were more commonly utilized during special occasions, such as holidays, for connecting with relatives residing abroad. However, the majority of participants stated that they do not prefer using this feature for routine communication.

3.3. WhatsApp Group Participation, Conversational Themes, and Opinion Expression

This section presents the findings pertaining to the primary research question and the second sub-question. The results reveal that nearly all participants are members of at least one WhatsApp group, with only two participants not being members of any group. Family

groups emerged as the predominant type of group to which participants belong. A significant majority of participants actively engage with WhatsApp groups for the purpose of communicating with their families. One participant expressed this situation as follows: "In our family group, we are in constant communication. During holidays, special occasions, or any situation, we immediately use it to communicate. My children, grandchildren, siblings... We are all there" (Personal communication, P36, January 22, 2025).

In addition, it has been ascertained that, alongside neighborhood and community groups, friend groups also hold significant popularity, with employed participants particularly forming groups with their colleagues. Moreover, certain participants were identified as being members of groups related to specific hobbies, such as mountaineering, or to social assistance activities.

It has been determined that participants predominantly share and discuss matters pertaining to family issues and daily life within their WhatsApp groups. Among the family-related exchanges, health concerns, birthdays, holiday celebrations, and photos related to special occasions were identified as the most frequently shared topics. Furthermore, a portion of participants was found to share messages concerning their children's academic and personal achievements, as well as the health statuses of elderly family members. In the professional groups consisting of employed participants, communication predominantly revolved around work-related and task-oriented matters. In these groups, information related to work processes, official announcements, and notifications regarding organizational activities were shared. Within the apartment and neighborhood groups, communication focused mainly on quotidian matters such as building management, maintenance fees, common area issues, and security concerns. It was observed that participants consciously refrained from engaging in discussions regarding politics and current affairs within their WhatsApp groups. Participants expressed a preference for maintaining cordial and apolitical relationships within the group. It was concluded that participants aimed to preserve close interpersonal relationships among group members by steering clear of political discussions, thus mitigating the potential for conflict. One participant expressed this situation as follows: "I

refrain from engaging in political topics within my WhatsApp groups. I avoid such discussions. I prefer the relationships within the group to remain more intimate and apolitical” (Personal communication, P5, January 12, 2025).

It has been observed that participants’ experiences in sharing their opinions within WhatsApp groups exhibit considerable variation. A significant number of participants reported that they feel comfortable expressing their opinions, particularly within family groups. In contrast, a more cautious approach has been adopted within friend and professional groups. Participants indicated that they feel more at ease within their immediate circles but exercise greater caution in larger or more formal groups, particularly when engaging in discussions related to political topics. Some participants further noted that debates occasionally escalate to the point of conflict, leading them to avoid participating in such exchanges. In general, the sense of freedom in sharing opinions was found to vary depending on both the group dynamics and the nature of the subject matter under discussion. One participant expressed this situation as follows:

I am able to express my opinions within the WhatsApp groups of my close circle. However, I am reluctant to comment on every topic in work-related or larger groups. I am particularly cautious with sensitive subjects such as politics because I fear that discussions may escalate and become unpleasant. Consequently, I often prefer to remain silent (Personal communication, P22, January 30, 2025).

3.4. WhatsApp Status Sharing Practices and Dynamics

This section presents the findings related to the primary research question and the third sub-question. The results indicate that the majority of participants rarely, or never, engage in status sharing on WhatsApp. Among those who do share status updates, the primary motivations appear to be the celebration of special occasions, the strengthening of emotional bonds, or the display of personal achievements. In contrast, participants who refrain from sharing status updates typically avoid disclosing aspects of their private lives and perceive such activities as a waste of time.

The findings reveal that participants predominantly share content related to their personal lives in their WhatsApp stories. These shared contents include daily activities, travel photographs, birthday celebrations, cooking recipes, and messages associated with special occasions. Moreover, some participants have been found to share cultural content, such as messages related to religious holidays, national holidays, and emotional messages directed at family members. Additionally, a portion of participants expressed their identities by sharing motivational quotes, images of their sporting activities, or visuals related to their hobbies.

A substantial proportion of participants was found to actively utilize privacy settings in their story-sharing activities. It was specifically noted that restrictions were applied to prevent individuals from work environments or distant relatives from viewing the participants’ stories. These privacy settings were utilized by the participants with the aim of protecting their privacy and maintaining equilibrium in their social relationships. One participant expressed this situation as follows:

I share my stories only with close friends and family members. I do not wish for individuals from my workplace or unfamiliar people to view them. Particularly, individuals within my professional circle may intrude excessively into my personal life. Therefore, I adjust the settings to prevent them from viewing my posts (Personal communication, P31, January 22, 2025).

The vast majority of participants were found to consistently view the stories of others. Among the motivations for engaging in story viewing, the desire to stay informed about the current lives of friends and family emerged as a key factor. Furthermore, it was observed that some participants refrained from commenting while viewing stories, choosing to keep their interaction solely at an observational level. It was determined that the act of viewing stories functions to maintain social connections and to stay informed about ongoing developments.

3.5. Challenges, Privacy Concerns, and Social Impact of WhatsApp Usage

This section presents the findings pertaining to the main research question and the fourth and fifth sub-questions. It was determined that participants

initially encountered certain difficulties in their use of WhatsApp. Challenges were noted in tasks such as group creation, adding members, sharing locations, sending voice recordings, and uploading photos. Additionally, temporary difficulties in adjusting to new features following application updates were observed. The processes of adding music and photos to status updates were perceived as complex. Due to the volume of messages within groups, significant messages were sometimes overlooked. It was also found that some participants faced difficulties during video calls within groups. In conclusion, while the majority of participants reported that they could effectively utilize WhatsApp, they indicated occasional need for assistance during the adaptation process to new features. One participant expressed this situation as follows:

There used to be feature phones, and they were easier to use. Adapting to the new generation was challenging, but I learned it out of necessity. Now, I can only use messaging and video calls. I don't really understand the other features. When I face an issue, I ask my children for assistance (Personal communication, P10, January 30, 2025).

The participants' perceptions of WhatsApp security were primarily categorized into two distinct groups. A subset of participants regarded WhatsApp as a secure platform and did not experience discomfort when sharing personal information. These individuals considered the platform's security measures adequate, asserting that the control over shared data remained entirely in the hands of the users. Conversely, another group of participants expressed concerns regarding privacy on WhatsApp. These participants indicated apprehensions about the inadvertent dissemination of their messages to unintended recipients, or the potential exposure of their personal data due to security vulnerabilities within the platform. It was determined that participants' security perceptions were influenced by factors such as social media insecurity, deficiencies in technological knowledge, and concerns regarding privacy.

Finally, the findings suggest that the use of WhatsApp has made a substantial contribution to the social lives of the participants. A significant number of participants reported that the application facilitates communication and enables swift interaction with

individuals located at a distance. They indicated that, through the features provided by WhatsApp, they have been able to strengthen familial ties, thereby enabling more frequent communication with family members and friends residing at remote locations. Furthermore, it was observed that the sharing of information and event announcements within WhatsApp groups had led to time savings for the participants. However, some participants expressed that WhatsApp usage had led to a decline in face-to-face interactions within the family, with communication predominantly taking place in virtual environments. Additionally, it was underscored that the time spent within groups had restricted personal time, and this situation was found to be a source of discomfort for some participants. In conclusion, while WhatsApp usage has been identified to accelerate communication and reinforce social bonds, it has also engendered negative implications, such as the superficialization of social relationships and the limitation of personal time.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine the WhatsApp usage practices of individuals aged 65 and older residing in Istanbul and to contribute to the literature on older adults' digital communication practices. The findings revealed that WhatsApp is widely utilized among older adults, primarily due to its free access, intuitive interface, and multiple communication options, including text, voice, and video messaging. These results are consistent with prior research highlighting usability, accessibility, and multifunctionality as key determinants in older adults' adoption of digital technologies (McGaughey et al., 2013; Rosales and Fernández-Ardèvol, 2016). In addition, the social environment emerged as a significant factor influencing adoption. Participants reported initiating WhatsApp use not solely for its functional benefits but also due to its widespread usage among family members, friends, and peers. This aligns with research emphasizing the critical role of social influence and intergenerational guidance in technology adoption among older adults (Görgün Baran and Öztekin Alpaydın, 2020; Xiong and Zuo, 2019). Most participants indicated that their children and grandchildren provided hands-on assistance during the learning process, which underscores the importance of familial support in facilitating older adults' adaptation to digital

communication technologies. Collectively, these findings suggest that adoption decisions are shaped by both the practical affordances of the platform and the broader social context in which older adults are embedded.

Daily engagement with WhatsApp was highly prevalent among participants, with interactions occurring multiple times throughout the day. Text messaging consistently emerged as the preferred communication channel, while features such as photo sharing, voice messaging, and video calling were utilized selectively according to specific needs or contexts. This pattern confirms prior evidence indicating that older adults prioritize simple, direct communication methods while incorporating advanced features in response to situational demands (Martins et al., 2021). Regarding group participation, nearly all participants belonged to at least one WhatsApp group, with family groups being the most common. Discussions within these groups focused primarily on familial matters, health-related updates, celebrations, and personal achievements. In contrast, friendship and work-related groups saw participants generally avoid contentious topics such as politics or current events to maintain social harmony and group cohesion. Interestingly, this observation contrasts with Sánchez-Valle (2023), who reported that older adults actively engage in political discussions within WhatsApp groups. This discrepancy suggests that contextual, cultural, and demographic factors may shape how older adults navigate sensitive topics in digital group interactions, highlighting the need to account for local norms and social expectations in analyses of digital communication practices.

Participants demonstrated limited use of the WhatsApp status-sharing feature, citing privacy concerns as a primary factor influencing their behavior. While some participants expressed confidence in the platform's security measures, others reported apprehensions, illustrating the heterogeneity in older adults' perceptions of digital safety. These findings correspond with Akbuğa (2023), who emphasized that privacy considerations are a significant determinant in older adults' social media engagement. Furthermore, although WhatsApp facilitated social connectivity and strengthened existing bonds, participants reported a concurrent decline in face-to-face interactions. This dual effect aligns with prior research suggesting

that while digital communication can enhance social inclusion, it may also alter traditional patterns of interpersonal interaction, potentially reducing direct social engagement (Omipidan and Sanusi, 2024). Such insights underscore the complex interplay between technological adoption, social cohesion, and communication behaviors in later life.

By focusing specifically on older adults' WhatsApp usage practices in Istanbul, this study addresses a significant gap in the literature, which often generalizes digital technology adoption without exploring detailed daily practices or the social implications of usage. The study contributes to a nuanced understanding of how older adults integrate digital communication into everyday routines, navigate group dynamics, and balance technological benefits with privacy considerations. Importantly, the findings offer actionable insights for social policies aimed at promoting digital inclusion, highlighting the roles of accessible interface design, familial support, and privacy management in enhancing engagement. Future research should conduct comparative studies across diverse geographic, socioeconomic, and cultural contexts to examine variations in instant messaging adoption and usage patterns. Additionally, investigations comparing alternative platforms such as Telegram, Signal, and Facebook Messenger would provide further insight into perceived accessibility, usability, and security from older adults' perspectives. Addressing these research gaps will deepen understanding of older adults' digital communication experiences and support evidence-based interventions to facilitate their social inclusion, technological literacy, and digital well-being.

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