

INVESTIGATING THE IMPACT OF WHATSAPP ON FAMILY AND FRIEND RELATIONSHIPS IN URBAN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

WhatsApp has gained recognition for being one of the most frequently used forms of communication in Sri Lanka, which is highly significant for maintaining familial and social relations in an environment characterized by increased urbanization. This paper investigates the use of WhatsApp for social communication among people in the Colombo district, where rapid changes in lifestyle, along with the impact of digitization and migration, have changed the dynamics of personal communication. Adopting a qualitative, interpretivist approach, this study uses semi-structured interviews as a data collection method for 20 participants (10 for familial interactions through WhatsApp and another 10 for friends), sampled through purposeful sampling based on age, gender, and occupation. Thematic analysis, this study found five main aspects of WhatsApp usage, including building strong family relations, maintaining long friendships, intergenerational conversations, emotional support in emergencies, and staying connected in a context of transnational migration. Based on the results of the study, one can conclude that the application allows not only carrying out routine interpersonal relations but also helps to transform traditional intimacy and belonging to the virtual space. At the same time, the issues concerning the violation of privacy, excessive reliance on the platform, and the problem of generational differences in the use of technology have been highlighted. This work, based on Uses and Gratifications Theory and Media Richness Theory, improves the comprehension of digital kinship and friendship practices in South Asia. The practical implications of the results include suggestions for digital-literacy programs to be implemented among the elderly population and for those interventions which seek to find a balance between digital communication and face-to-face communication in an urban environment. In addition, the paper underlines the importance of WhatsApp in everyday social interactions in Colombo and the need for further research in other comparative settings.

KEYWORDS: Colombo, Digital Communication, Family Ties, Friendship, Sri Lanka, WhatsApp

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1. INTRODUCTION

Mobile communications have transformed interpersonal relations all around the world; applications such as WhatsApp have brought about a revolution in how individuals communicate and sustain closeness, belongingness, and care. Urbanization and migration processes taking place in Sri Lanka have a great impact on everyday family relations. Hence, WhatsApp becomes an important channel of communication for different families and friends in Sri Lanka. The Telecommunications Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka (TRCSL, 2022) notes that the penetration rate of smartphones in urban areas of Sri Lanka is higher than 70% and WhatsApp is the most popular application. Further statistics support this increasing trend instead of a plateauing one: by early 2025, the number of social media users in Sri Lanka had increased to 8.20 million, representing a yearly increase of 9.3%, with WhatsApp being one of the applications used in daily communications (DataReportal/Kepios, 2025). Thus, it is a perfect platform to analyze digitally-mediated relationships in Colombo, which is the most urbanized and internationally connected region of the country.

It has been noticed that WhatsApp can provide immediacy, intimacy, and social maintenance through social interactions (Church & de Oliveira, 2013; Miller et al., 2016). For families, researchers claim that the use of group chat and multimodal communication can help to build their kinship networks and thus allow building an emotional bond despite physical distances (Ling et al., 2020; Barhoumi, 2015). The same applies to friendships since the use of continuous playfulness and routine sharing and activity organization is helpful (Utz & Breuer, 2017; O'Hara et al., 2014). However, culture plays its role in the use of such technologies. It affects people in South Asia in a specific way (Donner & Walton, 2013; Lokuge et al., 2021). Despite significant global research on this topic, the specific context of Sri Lanka remains underexplored. Although existing studies have examined mobile use and ICT adoption (Samarajiva & Galpaya, 2007; Lokuge et al., 2021), little is known about how WhatsApp

specifically supports family and friendship relationships in urban areas such as Colombo. This gap is particularly important as Sri Lanka's urban middle class increasingly relies on mobile media to navigate demanding lifestyles and maintain transnational connections.

Research Questions

The purpose of which is addressed through the following research questions that will shape the course of the study:

1. How is WhatsApp utilized to build and reinforce family ties in the urban city of Colombo?
2. In what way does WhatsApp help maintain friendships despite the busy life in urban settings and migration?
3. What problems and difficulties exist due to WhatsApp communication?
4. How do these results further explain Uses and Gratifications Theory and Media Richness Theory in a South Asian, collectivist culture?

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine how WhatsApp is used to maintain and strengthen family relationships in urban Colombo.
2. To explore the role of WhatsApp in sustaining friendships amid busy urban lives and migration.
3. To identify challenges and limitations related to WhatsApp-mediated communication in Colombo.
4. To contribute to theoretical understandings of digital communication in South Asia through localized empirical evidence.

Literature Review

WhatsApp and Digital Communication

WhatsApp is one of the most extensively used communication tools on mobile devices, having billions of users across the globe (Statista, 2023). Its

popularity is due to its cheap and multimedia-based platform that allows for both synchronous and asynchronous communication (Church & de Oliveira, 2013). Researchers point out that the immediacy and availability of WhatsApp make it an essential application for sustaining relationships (O'Hara et al., 2014). Miller et al. (2016) stress the role of ambient intimacy made possible by WhatsApp in a cross-cultural study of the tool. The increasing use of smartphones and affordable mobile data in Sri Lanka led to the prevalence of WhatsApp there (Lokuge et al., 2021). Nonetheless, even though there is an extensive body of research on the use of ICT in South Asia, it seems rather limited when compared to the Western world in terms of specific research on the use of WhatsApp in relationships. Moreover, it appears quite rare for existing research to critically examine whether such concepts like ambient intimacy can be successfully applied to collectivist societies.

Family Relationships and WhatsApp

Family relationships are now characterized by the use of mobile technology. Studies have shown that the use of WhatsApp makes it possible for families to bond despite geographical distances. As mentioned by Ling et al. (2020), this concept can be referred to as “digital kinship,” where family relationships are cultivated through group chat, photo sharing, and emotive messages. In the diasporic community, WhatsApp is used to facilitate communication between parents and children, siblings from different parts of the world (Baldassar et al., 2016). According to Barhoumi (2015), family WhatsApp chat rooms build emotional connections through regular updates, religious rituals, and cultural rituals.

There is a recent qualitative research of family WhatsApp groups across three generations in Israel, which provides a more recent example for the comparison: Alkobi & Khvorostianov (2024) note that participation in family WhatsApp is a conscious and purposeful effort of the whole family, where members play different roles, such as “kin keeper”, “flickered” (a rare participant in conversations) and “silent warm expert”. It turns “digital kinship” (Ling et al., 2020) into a continuous, role-related activity and not a result of using the technology, which the earlier and

somewhat descriptive Sri Lankan literature did not highlight.

Nevertheless, this body of work is largely descriptive of benefits and pays comparatively little attention to friction. Where tension is examined, studies point to surveillance and control within family groups, particularly concerning gendered expectations (Rashid, 2017), and to patriarchal norms manifesting through monitoring of younger family members' digital interactions (Baulch et al., 2020). Taken together, the family-centred literature has two limitations this study addresses: first, most of it treats “digital kinship” as a stable outcome rather than an ongoing negotiation between closeness and surveillance; second, very few studies combine both family and friendship WhatsApp use within a single sample, which limits comparison of how the same platform is experienced differently across relationship types.

Friendship Maintenance through WhatsApp

Unlike kinship relationships, friendships are elective relationships that must be maintained actively. According to Utz and Breuer (2017), WhatsApp makes it easier to overcome the obstacles of “light-touch communication,” making it possible for friends to communicate using memes, emojis, and brief messages. Ellison et al. (2011) observe that digital media help maintain weak and strong ties. According to Oeldorf-Hirsch and Sundar (2021), the use of WhatsApp promotes social presence and psychological well-being as it makes people feel “present” in the lives of their friends despite the physical distance. However, there is an opinion that excessive use of WhatsApp can undermine intimacy, turning meaningful interaction into mere contact (Verduyn et al., 2021). These two strands of findings are frequently presented side by side without being reconciled; few studies specify the conditions under which light-touch contact sustains a friendship versus when it merely postpones its decline, which is precisely the tension this study's urban Colombo data speaks to. Recent longitudinal studies of college freshmen provide a useful nuance to this debate: Olson, Toma and Brown (2025) report that while friendship maintenance through communication

technologies correlated with higher levels of social support, paradoxically lower levels of social adjustment to the new context were observed, while making use of such technologies for making friends in the new context helped improve social adjustment and sense of belongingness. This implies that the effect of such technological friendship maintenance on wellbeing could depend upon whether it helps the individual stay rooted in the old environment or helps integrate into the new one, an issue that is not discussed in the Sri Lankan literature yet.

Intergenerational Communication

There is another interesting aspect of literature about the ways in which WhatsApp influences intergenerational relations. According to Correa et al. (2017), elderly people make use of WhatsApp to keep their contacts with younger family members. As pointed out by Madianou (2016), migrant parents use WhatsApp video calls in order to conduct “transnational mothering”. In Sri Lanka, the current demographic transition, involving the growing number of elderly people in the country and migration of youth from Sri Lanka, renders intergenerational digital communication quite relevant.

WhatsApp, Migration, and Transnational Ties

Migration is a key theme in South Asian scholarship. Baldassar et al. (2016) highlight that WhatsApp enables “co-presence at a distance,” allowing families across continents to engage in shared rituals, provide emotional support, and participate in decision-making. Qureshi (2018) illustrates how WhatsApp mediates a sense of belonging for Pakistani migrants, while Madianou and Miller (2012) emphasize the concept of “polymedia environments.” In Colombo, where many families have members living abroad, WhatsApp likely plays a central role in sustaining familial ties, a pattern consistent with Sri Lanka's high rate of labour migration (SLBFE, 2021). The research done in 2025 regarding Zimbabwean transnational families contributes to this body of literature by applying it to care responsibilities in particular: Tawodzera (2025) reveals that the WhatsApp family groups act as the “virtual home,” in which migrants living in the UK organize aged care provision to their parents residing in Zimbabwe, and also reveals that discussing

remittance transfers through the WhatsApp family groups could result in increased transparency and reveal gender and power inequalities within the family. This is especially applicable to Colombo since household migrations for overseas employment occur frequently there (SLBFE, 2021), and therefore, transnational relationships via WhatsApp explored in this study can be associated with the same challenges that have not been considered before in the adjacent Sri Lankan literature.

Cultural Nuances in South Asia and the Research Gap

According to research conducted in South Asia, the use of digital devices is largely affected by collectivism, religion, and social hierarchy (Donner & Walton, 2013). The use of WhatsApp is generally guided by family and community bonds in India and Bangladesh (Sarkar, 2020), while in Pakistan, women have fewer chances to take part in digital activities (Siraj, 2018). Although sharing the same cultural values, the special nature of the urban culture in Sri Lanka after the war receives very little attention in such researches.

When read holistically, the literature shows quite persuasively that WhatsApp is used to maintain family cohesion, friendships, intergenerational communication, and transnational connections; however, little contextual explanation is provided regarding how these elements interact together in one urban, multi-ethnic, and migratory context like Colombo, and the literature does not examine family and friendship ties simultaneously in the same group of people. This research attempts to fill that gap by providing a contextual analysis of Colombo regarding family and friendship ties simultaneously.

Theoretical Framework

Two complementary approaches underlie this research.

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974) sheds light on the active role of media usage in meeting people's needs, including need for relatedness, need for entertainment, and other kinds of social support. In Colombo, WhatsApp usage

could be seen as a way of meeting the relational and cultural needs.

Media Richness Theory (MRT) (Daft & Lengel, 1986) pays attention to the capacity of media for transmitting rich social information. Such features of WhatsApp as voice messages, video calls, and emojis could be described as “a rich medium” for maintaining relations, comparable to a face-to-face communication.

In such a way, this research would be able to see WhatsApp not just as a technical medium but also as a cultural phenomenon within the context of urban life in Sri Lanka.

2. METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research design employing semi-structured interviews has been applied to answer the research questions posed by the study as the topics under study need to be researched using the perspective of lived experience and meaning making. In other words, this implies purposeful selection of 20 interviewees, conducting of individual interviews during one 45 to 60-minute-long session in their preferred language, transcription and translation of the interviews into English followed by reflexive thematic analysis involving six stages (Braun & Clarke) with the help of NVivo coding.

The research has been conducted in the Colombo district, which is the most urbanized area in Sri Lanka, representing people from different ethnicities, religions and socioeconomic backgrounds. Colombo has been chosen as the location of research as it has the highest percentage of smartphone usage in the country (TRCSL, 2022), it has a large middle-class population living there in a fast-paced environment and has numerous families having transnational connections due to migration for work and studies.

Sampling and Participants

The sampling process involved a purposive sampling technique where participants who actively used WhatsApp for family communication and/or friendship communication were recruited. Requirements for inclusion in the sample entailed that

the participant (a) is residing in Colombo district, (b) actively uses WhatsApp daily, and (c) identifies himself/herself as using WhatsApp either for family communication or friendship. A total of twenty participants were recruited; ten participants being more inclined towards family communication through WhatsApp (parents, young adults, grandparents) while the other ten being more inclined towards keeping friendships (university students, young professionals, old friendships). The sample included variations in terms of gender, age (18-65 years) and occupation and at least seven participants having their family members abroad to include migration experience. Recruitment continued until no substantially new themes emerged across the final three interviews in each sub-sample (data saturation), which is why twenty interviews were judged sufficient for this qualitative design rather than a pre-fixed target.

Data Collection

Data were collected between January and March 2025 through semi-structured interviews lasting 45 to 60 minutes each. Interviews were conducted in English, Sinhala, or Tamil according to participant preference and later transcribed and translated into English for analysis by the research team. A bilingual member of the research team performed back translation on a 10% random sample of transcripts to verify translation quality prior to analysis. Wherever possible, interviews were conducted in person; where this was not possible, video interviews (appropriately done via WhatsApp) were conducted. The interview guide was pre-tested on two non-sample participants, and some minor adjustments were made to its wording. A sample of the questions is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Interview guide domains and sample questions.

Domain	Sample interview questions
Family-oriented	How do you normally communicate to your family through WhatsApp? How does WhatsApp facilitate in connecting to your relatives abroad? How do the elder members in your family use

	WhatsApp? Have you ever felt like being monitored or pressurized from your family through WhatsApp?
Friendship-oriented	How can WhatsApp help you maintain your friendship in the midst of all the chaos that prevails in Colombo? Do give me an instance when WhatsApp helped in building your friendship stronger. Is WhatsApp communication equally important as face-to-face communication?
Cross-cutting	What challenges do you face using WhatsApp to sustain relationships? How has WhatsApp changed your relationships compared to before smartphones?

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase model: (1) familiarization with the data; (2) generating initial codes (e.g., "emotional support," "generational gap," "surveillance"); (3) searching for themes (e.g., family bonding, friendship continuity, migration ties); (4) reviewing themes against data extracts; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report with illustrative quotes. NVivo software was used to assist with coding and organizing themes. Coding was done independently by two researchers in the research team, and an initial agreement of 82% on the coding was obtained from five selected transcripts, and disagreements among the coders were sorted out through discussions. The agreed upon coding guide was then used for coding the rest of the transcripts. Table 2 presents the coding guide in relation to codes and themes.

Table 2. Coding framework

Theme	Representative codes	Illustrative data source
Strengthening family bonds	digital living room; photo/voice-note sharing; daily updates	Family-oriented interviews
Friendship continuity	light-touch contact; memes/humour; emotional relief	Friendship-oriented interviews
Intergenerational communication	elder adaptation; voice notes; filial duty; misinformation forwarding	Both sub-samples
Emotional support and coping	crisis support; prayer/advice groups; collective resilience	Both sub-samples
Migration and transnational ties	co-presence; video calls; lifeline framing	Participants with relatives abroad

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles guided all stages of this study: informed consent was obtained from all participants, pseudonyms were used throughout transcripts and reporting; data were stored securely with restricted access; and participation was voluntary, with participants free to withdraw at any time.

Trustworthiness, Validity, and Reflexivity

To enhance credibility, several strategies were applied: triangulation across family-focused and friendship-focused accounts; member checking, in which participants reviewed summaries of their own responses; thick description to support transferability to similar urban South Asian settings; and an audit trail documenting analytic decisions. The lead researchers also maintained reflective memos during

data collection and analysis that helped in reflecting on the ways in which their own positionality could influence the interpretation process as Colombo-based WhatsApp users, and these memos were reviewed at every code review session to avoid familiarity with the data.

Limitations

Since the study focuses on Colombo alone, the results may not apply to rural areas of Sri Lanka.

There is a possibility that the participants may have been self-censoring their sensitive experiences, especially ones concerning the monitoring or fights between families.

WhatsApp is studied in isolation without considering other applications such as Facebook, Instagram, or Viber.

Nevertheless, just like any other qualitative research based on small samples, the results apply only to the meanings of the sample and not the prevalence rates among the larger population of Sri Lanka.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis of 20 semi-structured interviews revealed five overarching themes illustrating the multifaceted role of WhatsApp in sustaining family and friendship ties in Colombo. Each theme is presented with illustrative quotes and then discussed in relation to existing scholarship and the study's theoretical framework.

Theme 1: Strengthening Family Bonds

For many participants, WhatsApp was portrayed as a critical platform that keeps the family members connected with information about their daily activities.

Participant 3 (female, 28, teacher): *"In our family group, people are very active. Even though I might not speak with my mother every day on phone, yet I get an idea about what has she cooked or what my father has done through pictures and voice messages. In a way, we remain together despite living separately in Colombo."*

Participant 7 (male, 41, accountant): *"I have siblings who are busy in their own affairs and we do not get*

the opportunity to meet them. However, WhatsApp group is kind of a family album. All our moments take place there. It is not like sitting at the dining table, but still helps to stay connected."

It therefore indicates that WhatsApp acts as an enhancement and not a replacement for physical family communication through its digital platform. That WhatsApp groups among Colombo's families function as 'digital living rooms' is consistent with the idea of "digital kinship" discussed by Ling et al. (2020), where the updating of information and sharing of images and voice messages allows for the reproduction of the intimacy of kinship, in accordance with the idea of "ambient co-presence" put forward by Miller et al. (2016). Nevertheless, Colombo's participants revealed a unique driver for the use of WhatsApp: that of the constraints imposed by the urban style of living which hinder physical family communication within the same city. Contrasting the cases of diaspora where the challenge is geographic distance (Baldassar et al., 2016), the urban living conditions of Colombo make the use of WhatsApp absolutely necessary for co-resident families. Alkobi and Khvorostianov's (2024) role differentiation into kin keepers, flickerers, and silent warm experts is also observable in the Colombo context, where participants 3 and 7 were both kin keepers, engaging actively in keeping the group active, and several other unnamed participants had the flickered characteristic of watching but not posting much in the group. The fact that similar patterns exist even with different underlying motives behind the group maintenance (lack of time in urban areas of Colombo compared to Israel due to geographic dispersion) suggests that role differentiation in family WhatsApp groups could be a relatively stable feature of using the platform in such contexts.

Theme 2: Friendship Continuity in Urban Lives

WhatsApp was the chosen platform through which young adults maintained their friendships because of the busy nature of city life. The group chat facility enabled them to communicate, crack jokes, and strengthen the bonds they might have lost otherwise.

Participant 11 (male, 22, student of university): *"The group chat of our batch is very active. Even if I do not*

meet my best friends for weeks, we still remain close because of all the memes and jokes on WhatsApp.”

Participant 14 (female, 25 years old, marketing executive): “Work is tough, but it’s my school friends’ WhatsApp group that helps me relax. We watch funny videos and look out for one another. It’s like reminding me that there are places outside work that I belong.”

The research finds support for the argument of Utz & Breuer (2017) regarding how WhatsApp reduces obstacles of keeping contact, and the findings of Oeldorf-Hirsch and Sundar (2021) on how WhatsApp increases connections and happiness. However, some participants observed that WhatsApp chats don’t have the depth of face-to-face conversation. The important thing about Colombo friendships is that light touch was not considered a bad alternative to depth; rather, the light touch was regarded as an indication of the value of the friendship, which indicates that for the collectivist environment of Colombo, the evaluation of friendship quality moves away from how deep an interaction is towards how consistently it happens. In contrast to the conclusions of Olson et al. (2025) regarding how technology-enabled maintenance of previously formed relationships can go hand in hand with difficulties with adjustment to a new environment, the stories of Participant 11 and Participant 14 imply a more optimistic view on how Colombo’s urban youth use WhatsApp: since their WhatsApp groups (school and university batches) are not maintained at the expense of forming new relationships in reality, but rather alongside them, the same maintenance activity that other studies relate to dependence on the past works here as an addition to current belonging, not a substitute for it.

Theme 3: Intergenerational Communication

A number of participants highlighted how WhatsApp connected the younger generation with the older one, since the older people too learned to use the application.

Participant 5 (Male, 34, Information Technology Professional): *“I was finding it difficult for my mother to type but now she is using WhatsApp voice notes and*

says that she can communicate better. I listen to her even in the office as if she is nearby.”

Participant 16 (Female, 20, Undergraduate Student): *“I have my grandmother living in Kandy, and she sends me greetings in the form of good morning messages with flowers.”* Intergenerational use was uneven: some younger participants expressed frustration with elders forwarding misinformation or excessive religious content, confirming Correa et al.’s (2017) observation that older users adapt to WhatsApp for relationship maintenance, and echoing Madianou’s (2016) account of “transnational mothering.” Colombo data adds two further dynamics: cultural respect for elders shaped younger users’ tolerance of repetitive or forwarded messages out of filial duty, and digital-literacy gaps sometimes created tension around misinformation. This indicates WhatsApp both bridges and accentuates generational divides, depending on digital skill — a more mixed picture than Neves et al.’s (2018) account of older users being excluded from digital spaces in Western contexts, since Colombo elders were actively, if imperfectly, participating.

Theme 4: Emotional Support and Coping

In all the interviews, WhatsApp was seen as a medium for providing and receiving support during times of crisis, illness, and stress.

Participant 2 (female, 38 years, homemaker): *“During the time when my son was ill, WhatsApp family group helped me out by praying for me, advising me, and offering to bring me food. I felt supported.”*

Participant 18 (male, 29, bank officer): *“During the economic crisis, my friends’ group was my therapy. We shared our frustrations but also encouraged each other. Without that space, I think I would have felt much more isolated.”*

These accounts support Baldassar et al.’s (2016) concept of “care at a distance” and Barhoumi’s (2015) finding that WhatsApp reinforces cultural rituals such as communal prayer during illness. The reference to the national economic crisis adds a novel dimension largely absent from the reviewed literature: WhatsApp functioned not only as a channel for interpersonal support but as infrastructure for collective coping with

a shared, society-wide stressor a use case that extends prior work's near-exclusive focus on individual or family-level crises.

Theme 5: Migration and Transnational Ties

In cases where families have some of their members living overseas, WhatsApp was termed as “a lifeline” that helps bring people together despite being located far apart from each other.

Participant 6 (female, 45, school principal): *“My husband works in Dubai. Every night, we use WhatsApp video call. The kids tell him how they are doing in their studies. It may not be the same as having him around, but we definitely feel like a family everyday.”*

Participant 12 (male, 33, driver): *“My sister lives in Australia. We cannot talk to her every day because the cost is too much. But WhatsApp audio messages are free, so we always keep in touch.”*

These accounts mirror Baldassar et al.'s (2016) “co-presence at a distance” and findings across South Asia more broadly (Madianou & Miller, 2012; Qureshi, 2018). What stands out in Colombo is the normalization of migration-linked communication: nearly every participant had relatives abroad, making WhatsApp a routine feature of family life rather than an exceptional tool underscoring how deeply migration is embedded in Colombo's urban identity. The “virtual home” described by Tawodzera (2025) to describe the family WhatsApp group for organizing care for the elderly fits in with the night time video calls conducted by Participant 6 where her husband was able to “show up” and assist in the homework of his children from Dubai; yet the issue of transparency versus tension related to the topic of remittances that Tawodzera raises does not arise among the Colombo participants in this study because it either is not applicable to Sri Lankan practices or else because this particular research guide (see Table 1 below) did not ask about financial coordination.

Cross-Cutting Observations

1. Privacy Issues: A few were concerned about being under familial surveillance or overshares within groups.

2. Digital Fatigue: Some found themselves being overburdened with notifications.

3. Generational Differences: Misinformation and over forwarding of messages created conflict for a few.

However, the overwhelming majority agreed that WhatsApp is absolutely essential for maintaining their familial and friendly relations in Colombo.

Theoretical Discussion

The results of this research uphold Uses and Gratifications Theory as Colombo users employ WhatsApp to meet various relational needs – belonging (family and friendships), entertainment (meme/jokes), and emotional comfort (comfort in time of need). Unlike the traditional media, which lacks interactivity, the interactivity of WhatsApp enables users to customize communication according to cultural norms and makes UGT applicable in digital spaces (Katz et al., 1974). The results of this study also uphold Media Richness Theory as users resort to voice messages, video calls, and emojis as alternatives to in-person communication (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Yet, MRT's universal claims have to be culturally adjusted as the concept of “media richness” in Colombo was evaluated not only in terms of information transmission but also in the context of meeting relational obligations – for instance, elders' morning salutation despite its repetition.

Cautiously interpreted in light of the small, purposefully chosen, and Colombo-based sample size of the study, these findings are theoretically generative and not statistically representative, showing where UGT and MRT require further cultural interpretation and not where their universality can be confirmed.

4. CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how WhatsApp is used to maintain family relationships, sustain friendships, and support intergenerational and migration-linked ties among urban Colombo residents, and to identify the challenges this mediation creates (RQ1–RQ3). In answer to these questions, thematic analysis of 20 interviews identified five key patterns: WhatsApp strengthens family bonds by functioning as a “digital living room” that offsets urban time scarcity; it

sustains friendships through continuous, low-effort contact that Colombo participants treat as a marker of closeness in itself; it bridges intergenerational gaps while simultaneously exposing digital-literacy tensions around misinformation; it channels both interpersonal and collective emotional support, including during national economic hardship; and it normalizes transnational co-presence for the many Colombo families with relatives abroad.

Theoretically (RQ4), the study extends Uses and Gratifications Theory and Media Richness Theory by showing that, within a collectivist, multi-ethnic urban setting, gratification and communicative “richness” are judged partly against relational obligation and cultural respect rather than informational content alone a qualification the largely Western-derived theoretical literature does not foreground. Its specifically Sri Lankan, Colombo-based contribution is to show that digital kinship in this setting is shaped as much by within-city time pressure as by transnational distance, and that family and friendship WhatsApp use, examined together in one study, reveal different logics of connection obligation and care for family, continuity of presence for friends operating side by side within the same platform and the same urban population.

These contributions are subject to the limitations noted in Section 4.6: the Colombo-only, purposively sampled, single-platform design means the findings describe patterns of meaning within this group rather than population-level prevalence, and future research comparing rural and urban Sri Lanka, other South Asian cities, and other platforms alongside WhatsApp would help establish how far these patterns generalize.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Practical Implications for Policymakers, Educators, and Families

Policy and Practice: Programs on digital literacy need to concentrate on educating seniors so that generational differences are minimized and misinformation can be prevented from spreading within families.

Family Life: Initiatives can also aim at creating awareness about the necessity of achieving balance in communicating both online and offline.

Future Research: Comparative analysis between rural and urban Sri Lanka would give a complete perspective, while cross-national comparative research across South Asian nations would highlight similar and divergent patterns in the region.

Theory Construction: In the future, research on Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and Media Richness Theory (MRT) could incorporate both theories in collectivist culture.

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