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Costa, Elisabetta; Esteve Del Valle, Marc; Hagedoorn, Berber

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Scalable Co-presence: WhatsApp and the Mediation of Personal Relationships during the COVID-19 Lockdown

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Elisabetta Costa , Marc Esteve-Del-Valle , and Berber Hagedoorn

Abstract

This article sheds light on how adults in Barcelona (ES), Groningen (NL), and Milan (IT) utilized WhatsApp to compensate for the lack of face-to-face interactions and to fight social isolation during the first 2 months of the COVID-19 lockdown. We argue that practices of WhatsApp usage have multiplied and diversified experiences of co-presence at distance and made group socialities even more important than before. Building on the concepts of “scalable socialities” and “polymedia,” the article formulates the concept of “scalable co-presence” to account for ways in which WhatsApp has enabled multiple experiences of proximity to others across different scales of sociality, from one-to-one to large groups interactions. In this article, we also argue that the concept of “scalable co-presence” is relevant to bring the study of mediated co-presence out of media and migration studies into the broader field of media and cultural studies. With reduction in mobility, increased social distancing, and ubiquitous connectivity, the role of communication technologies in mediating proximity at distance has become crucial for many more people around the world outside the context of transnational migration. The concept is also relevant to acknowledge the increased importance of mediated group interactions and communications in (post)-pandemic digital societies.

Keywords

WhatsApp, mediated co-presence, scalable socialities, polymedia, personal relationships

Introduction

“I would have died without WhatsApp. Really! I don’t know how I could have survived without it. My smartphone was with me all day and night.”

Giorgio,¹ Milan, Italy

The study of mediated personal relationships has grown significantly in the last two decades, with mobile phones and social media platforms becoming part of people’s everyday life all around the globe. The idea that people can create and maintain enhanced and enriched relationships at a distance informed the earliest scholarship on the Internet (Castell, 1996; Rheingold, 2003) and mobile phones (De Gournay & Smoreda, 2003; Ito et al., 2005). Since then, a growing interdisciplinary body of literature on mobile communications and social media have investigated different forms of mediated friendships, family, kinships, romances, networks, and more formal connections (see, for instance, Baym, 2010; Costa 2016a; Costa 2016b; Esteve-Del-Valle & Smit, 2021;

Gershon, 2010; Hill et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2016). Some studies revolved around traditional sociological questions on the evolution of sociality from groups toward more individualism (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Others developed theories of mediation according to which media technologies and social relationships are mutually constructed (Couldry, 2008; Madianou & Miller, 2012). Other research has focused on media and transnational migration and highlighted the role of communication technologies in facilitating intimacy, feelings of co-presence, and affection among family members in the context of physical distance (see, for instance, Baldassar, 2008; Baldassar et al., 2016; Cefai & Couldry, 2019;

University of Groningen, The Netherlands

Corresponding Author:

Elisabetta Costa, Centre for Media and Journalism Studies, University of Groningen, 9712 EK Groningen, The Netherlands.
Email: e.i.g.costa@rug.nl



Madianou & Miller, 2012; Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016; Smets et al., 2019).

This article draws from this latter body of research and from the notion of mediated co-presence to shed light on how people utilized WhatsApp to compensate for the lack of face-to-face interactions and to fight social isolation and psychological distress during the first 2 months of the COVID-19 lockdown in three European cities. While it served multiple purposes before the pandemic, from organizing face-to-face gatherings and events to sharing pictures of trips far from home, during the first weeks of social isolation due to the COVID-19 outbreak, WhatsApp was used to compensate for isolation and to experience the presence of others. We argue that WhatsApp enabled different forms of “scalable co-presence,” the experience of proximity to others across different scales of sociality. We further argue that this concept is relevant for two main reasons. First, it brings the concept of mediated co-presence out of media and migration studies into the broader field of media and cultural studies. With the pandemic outbreak and the associated reduction in people’s mobility, the role of communication technologies in mediating relationships at distance has become crucial for many more people around the world. Although the material that informs this article focuses on the period of strict lockdown, the reduction in mobility, and increased social distancing has impacted people’s lives up to now and will likely continue to do so in the near future. Second, the concept of “scalable co-presence” stresses the role of social media in facilitating mediated proximity within groups of different scales (Miller et al., 2016). In lockdown, WhatsApp has multiplied and diversified experiences of co-presence at distance and made online group socialities even more important than before. Sociality refers here to the multiple sets of social relationships people engage with, what Marilyn Strathern (1996) defined “the relational matrix which constitutes the life of persons” (p. 64).

The choice to study one single platform has been made for the following reasons. First, preliminary data suggested that WhatsApp was by far the most-used social media platform among our research participants during lockdowns in 2020. Second, WhatsApp is a configuration of different affordances that enable different group sizes and multiple modes of communication: asynchronous and synchronous sharing of audio and video, text, memes, photos, and emojis. Therefore, WhatsApp can be viewed as “polymedia” in its own rights (Madianou, 2014; Madianou & Miller, 2012). It is an integrated environment of affordances that are relationally defined. It is also a “scalable sociality” (Miller et al., 2016), a configuration of digital places with different degrees of privacy that are inhabited by groups of different size. Viewing WhatsApp as a “polymedia” and a “scalable sociality” allows us to show how different communication modes were used to express different emotions, feelings, and desires for being together, on the basis of what users considered to be appropriate to different types and scales of group

sociality. When forced to socially distance, and experiencing lack of physical interactions and immobility, people used WhatsApp to experience and express feelings of proximity, love, and affection, and they did so by choosing the communication mode that they viewed as being the most appropriate to sustain and experience the company of others in each form of scalable sociality, from one-to-one conversations to interactions within large groups. In the following pages, we show how people appropriated the multiple communicative opportunities available on WhatsApp to experience co-presence at distance across different scales.

Sites and Methods

This article examines WhatsApp interactions among “middle-class” White adults in the age group 25–50 years in three European cities—Barcelona (Spain), Milan (Italy), and Groningen (the Netherlands)—during the time period of March and April 2020 when the three countries were under strict lockdowns. At the beginning of March 2020, the authors were inundated by hundreds of text messages, videos, audios, memes, and video calls from friends and family members living in these three cities. These initial data suggested that WhatsApp was the most-used platform during lockdown in these cities, and for this reason we decided to carry out a single platform study. Our findings from the interviews and the literature confirmed our initial assumptions. In March 2020, the Guardian stated that the usage of WhatsApp around the world grew by 40% to 1.6 billion users (Guardian Weekly/The Guardian, 10 July 2020). And a study conducted on more than 25,000 WhatsApp users in 30 countries showed that, between 14 March and 24 March 2020, WhatsApp was the platform that saw the greatest increase in the number of users (Kantar, 2020). Furthermore, even before the start of the pandemic, Italy, the Netherlands, and Spain had topped the list of WhatsApp users in Europe in 2018 and 2019 (eMarketer, 2020). We aimed at studying one single platform as an environment of polymedia (Madianou, 2014), and the choice of Barcelona, Groningen, and Milan served these purposes. Also, we selected these three cities because we had easier access to the research participants, considering that the pandemic has made physical presence of the researchers in the field-sites and face to face interviews impossible.

We conducted 30 semi-structured, in-depth interviews, 10 in each city. To make our sample more homogeneous, and because we wanted to investigate the use of digital technologies outside the context of transnational migration, we focused on adults from a White middle-class background and did not include ethnic and racial minorities nor people with mixed or migratory origin. We combined purposive and snowball sampling that started with the personal contacts of the three researchers. In each city, we had a similar gender ratio and included participants living in different types of households: single individuals and couples with and without

children. The semi-structured interviews were carried out between mid-April and mid-June 2020 in the following four languages: Catalan, Dutch, Italian, and Spanish. All original quotes in this research article were translated freely to English by the authors. The interviews were analyzed through a thematic approach that identified the main practices of WhatsApp usage for personal communications. They were also analyzed at meetings in which the three researchers compared and discussed the findings from each city. Although the initial overarching research interest revolved around the different uses of WhatsApp during the first 2 months of the pandemic in three different European cities, a detailed and comprehensive comparative account, despite its relevance, falls outside of the scope of this article. The article rather aims at developing a theory that accounts, at the same time, for the multiplicity and diversity of media practices, and for the emergence of a transnational normativity that very quickly imposed upon WhatsApp usage under the exceptional circumstances of lockdown.

Co-presence and immediacy

“Co-presence” has become a central concept in the literature on mediated relationships in the context of transnational mobility (Alinejad, 2019; Baldassar, 2008; Baldassar et al., 2016; Madianou, 2016; Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016; Wilding & Gifford, 2013), and refers to the feeling of experiential proximity enabled by digital platforms when people are physically distant from each other. The scholar to first introduce the concept was Licoppe (2004), who formulated the term “connected presence” to highlight the ways in which a person who is physically absent gains presence through a growing number of mediated forms of communications, such as mobile phone and email. Since then, the concept of “co-presence” mostly informed the literature on media and transnational migration, which identified different types of proximity at distance in the context of a growing variety of digital communication technologies and forms of migration. Baldassar (2008) identified three forms of mediated co-presence: the “proxy co-presence,” which results from the exchange of objects; “imagined co-presence,” the feeling of being together even when no actual communications take place; and “virtual co-presence,” which is constructed through real time synchronous communications and the uses of hearing and sight. Nedelcu and Wyss (2016) developed the notion of “ordinary co-presence” to describe the formation of communicative routines that reproduce the “normal” functioning of the family among transnational migrants in Europe. Madianou (2016) used the expression of “ambient co-presence” to account for the peripheral awareness of distant others enabled by the always-on culture of ubiquitous connectivity. Alinejad (2019) formulated the concept of “careful co-presence” to highlight the emotional experiences of intimacy enabled by the careful shifting between different modes of communication. All these concepts accounted for

the multiple experiences of proximity to other family members enabled by a large variety of digital media in the context of transnational migration. Very little work examined experiences of mediated proximity outside the context of migration, one example being Cefai and Couldry’s (2019) research on mediated intimacy among adults in the United Kingdom.

With the COVID-19 lockdown, the use of digital technologies to maintain a sense of togetherness across distance became an essential part of our participants’ ordinary lives outside the context of transnational migration and diaspora. WhatsApp was welcomed as the main way out from loneliness, stress, and anxiety. When forced to sit at home far from friends and relatives, people moved to WhatsApp—in some cases for several hours a day—to compensate for the lack of face-to-face interactions, oral conversations, hugs, smiles, and ordinary communications. However, unlike transnational migrants who have mostly used digital platforms to sustain relationships with other family members living far away, our research participants used digital platforms to replace many different types of social relationships, including those with intimate friends, friends from hobbies, family members, and colleagues. All these relationships were disrupted by the sudden lockdown, and became dependent on digital technologies. Thus, the multiple experiences of co-presence enabled by WhatsApp created what we call “scalable co-presence,” which accounts for the experiences of proximity to others within a variety of scalable socialities and groups of different sizes, and includes elements from all forms of mediated proximity previously described by the literature.

WhatsApp was by far the most-used social media for interpersonal and group communications among the majority of our research participants. Its usage occurred to the extent that, when people could not type on their phones anymore due to pain in their fingers, or when they wanted to be connected while working, they moved beyond smartphones to using WhatsApp on laptops and computers. WhatsApp usage in lockdown created a situation of “always on” (boyd, 2012) connectivity that enabled an awareness of others and produced experiences of co-presence at distance (for how ubiquitous connectivity produces feelings of co-presence, see Madianou, 2016). An important element characterizing WhatsApp communication in that period was the experience of “immediacy” (Bolter & Grusin, 2000). The concept of “immediacy” was formulated by Bolter and Grusin (2000, p. 272) to describe “the style of visual representation whose goal is to make the viewer forget the presence of the medium” in opposition to the concept of “hypermediacy,” which was defined as the “style of visual representation whose goal is to remind the viewer of the medium” (Bolter and Grusin, 2000, p. 272). WhatsApp conveyed the idea that the user and not the platform was the main actor shaping communications and interactions with others. In this context, immediacy refers to the platform rather than the content shared in the platform. The words “immediate,” “simple,” “easy,” “accessible,” “fast,” “not-invasive,” “practical,” and “intimate”

were often used by our participants to describe WhatsApp. WhatsApp was described as a non “social media” in opposition to the “hypermediacy” of Facebook or Twitter, platforms in which the users viewed themselves as not being in control of the content and its circulation. For example, Carlo, one of the interviewees from Milan, became particularly excited in explaining to us that on WhatsApp, he could chat in a group while simultaneously engaging in a one-to-one conversation with a member of the same group without letting the other group members know about it. He was in control of multiple interactions in different groups as if the platform did not play any role in shaping them. And he really loved this. He also loved the way in which WhatsApp resembled offline interactions. He added, “On WhatsApp I can create the same communication settings of a dinner outside with friends, on Facebook I cannot!” Michiel, an interviewee from Groningen, loved WhatsApp for its accessibility, which was also related to the handiness of the smartphone. In addition, some of our interviewees preferred one-to-one video calls on WhatsApp over Skype or Zoom because WhatsApp was perceived as being simpler, faster, and easier and could be immediately and comfortably used on the phone too. The possibility to produce online communications that closely reminded users of existing face-to-face interactions was mentioned as one of interviewees’ favorite aspects of WhatsApp communication. People craved face-to-face contact, and WhatsApp was the platform that more effectively resembled that type of communication. These examples show that, in the context of social isolation and forced immobility, this platform conveyed immediacy, the feeling of being in direct contact with others without the interference of the platform, which in turn created a sense of closeness to others. One particular affordance of WhatsApp conveyed immediacy more than others—the possibility to actively modulate and control different scales of sociality. Unlike other platforms, such as Facebook or Twitter, people on WhatsApp appreciated the possibility to be part of groups of different size, something that reminded them of offline interactions and socialities. The conveyed experience of immediacy, in turn, contributed to the creation of feelings of proximity to others.

Multimodal scalable sociality and polymedia

This article and the concept of “scalable co-presence” also build on the notion of “scalable sociality” (Miller et al., 2016), which emerged from a comparative research project on the uses and consequences of social media around the world. “Scalable sociality” understands social media as a configuration of digital places with different degrees of privacy that are inhabited by groups of different size. WhatsApp is a scalable sociality because affords multiple modes and genres of communication with different size of groups that vary from 2 to 256 members. “Scalable co-presence” also builds on the concept of “polymedia” (Madianou

& Miller, 2012), according to which different platforms, or different functions within the same platforms, are to be understood as an integrated environment of communication. “Polymedia” was formulated to account for the multiple ways in which people make use of differences between media (or functions within the same media) to express different emotions in personal communication. This article integrates these two concepts to highlight that several communicative possibilities have been exploited by users to express needs for different forms of sociality and emotions, and experience different typologies of co-presence at distance. From among the multiple possibilities on WhatsApp, our participants chose the genre, mode, and size of group that best satisfied their relational needs during the weeks of forced immobility and social isolation. They could choose from a large variety of visual content, such as memes, pictures, and videos, but also text and audio, and from a large variety of group socialities, with each choice reflecting their ideas about the appropriateness for each specific form of sociality and co-presence. Whereas, “polymedia” was formulated to shed light on how users “exploit differences between media to express emotions and manage mediated relationships” (Madianou, 2014, p. 667), “scalable co-presence” accounts for the ways in which people exploited differences between modes of communication to construct co-presence with others along different scales of sociality. Thus, for example, the choice of an emoji, rather than extensive text or picture, becomes constitutive of the experience of proximity within dyads or groups.

Although we identified many individual variations in the use of WhatsApp across the three field-sites, we also recognized practices that were common to all participants. Overall, Milan and Barcelona share more similarities with each other than they do with Groningen. For example, the participants interviewed from these two cities received and sent more memes and expressed more distress and suffering during the strictest lockdown months than the research participants in Groningen. This can be explained by the presence of more strict governmental measures in Milan and Barcelona in March and April 2020, where majority of people could leave their houses only for serious health reasons or to go to the supermarket, which made the experience of lockdown more severe. It could also be explained by the presence of more commonalities in the expression of emotions in the two southern European countries compared to the Netherlands.² However, a comprehensive comparative investigation to show differences and similarities between mediated relationships in the three cities falls outside of the scope of this article. The article rather aims at showing the emergence of common experiences of digital co-presence during lockdown. Thus, the sections below illustrate the media practices that characterize the use of WhatsApp the most across the three cities. Each section shows the most common mode(s) of communication within each scale of sociality, and how they contribute to create co-presence: (a) one-to-one video

calls, (b) information sharing in one-to-one interactions and small groups, (c) photos, videos, and memes in small and large groups, and (d) emojis across all scales.

One-to-one video calls

In all three cities, but especially in Barcelona and Milan, one-to-one video calling was one of the main novelties in the use of WhatsApp. While most research participants often made voice calls on WhatsApp before lockdown, and during lockdown they preferred other platforms like Zoom or Google Meet for group video calls, WhatsApp was largely used for one-to-one video calls. Synchronous communications through video and audio were especially important for communication between our research participants and their parents or very close friends. In Barcelona, nurse Beatriz described how important video calls became in her communication with her mother. At the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, and with the strict lockdown measures, they communicated every other day through video for a few weeks. Her mother, who did not even know how to use WhatsApp video at the start, became a master of it. As Beatriz put it, “With the lockdown we have learnt a lot about many things, but about technology too.” Although Penelope felt sick and exhausted from video calling because she had to do it all day long for work, she also found she could no longer handle calls from her friends without video. In Groningen, Tom, a married 41-year-old man living together with his wife and their child, also used video calls a lot, particularly with his parents so they could see, and communicate with, their grandchild. Antonio, a cook from Milan, engaged in video calls with his parents and best friends for several hours a day during the entire period of lockdown (almost 2 months), only stopping when he returned to work again.

Despite individual differences in the use of video calls, and their greater frequency of use in Milan and Barcelona compared to Groningen, most of our research participants were using this form of communication on WhatsApp for the first time and mostly to keep in touch with their parents, close relatives, and best friends. Not surprisingly, many participants explained that they used this communication mode because it most resembled face-to-face interactions and because they wanted to check on their parents and older relatives’ health when they were worried about them. This form of mediated co-presence resembles what Baldassar (2008) defined “virtual co-presence,” which is constructed through the sense of hearing and sight through real time communication.

Video calls also entailed a larger investment of time and energy than asynchronous text communication and audio calls. For example, video calling someone without having neat, clean hair and proper clothes on would have been considered inappropriate. Many participants also claimed that video calls tended to last longer than their usual calls. This mode of communication is also more suitable to intimate

relationships because the video could disclose private corners of the house that not everybody is keen to show to more distant friends. The major investment of energy and time and the exposure of private spaces of the house as background also explain why people considered this communication mode appropriate for their most important relationships. Video calling someone was in itself an act that expressed care and love. Among all the other communication tools available on WhatsApp, this was the one that required more commitment and expressed a person’s need to feel close to the other person. Our research participants chose video calls from among the multiple communication opportunities available whenever they wanted to express intense care, affection, and proximity to their closest friends and parents. They did not video call more distant friends and colleagues whom they usually met in public places. Video calls instead “remediated” (Bolter & Grusin, 2000) those interactions that took place in the private spaces of the house and involved more intimate and private conversations. Video calling was chosen as the most appropriate media practice to feel in the company of parents and best friends in dyadic relationships. “Virtual co-presence” (Baldassar, 2008) made the presence of loved ones tangible and enabled the expression of care and love more than text or memes could do at that time.

Information sharing in one-to-one communication and small groups

The first few weeks of the COVID-19 outbreak were characterized by an information crisis and information overload. Most of our research participants were constantly searching for reliable knowledge that could help them make sense of COVID-19-related events and cope with their new everyday problems, while others also felt overwhelmed by an excess of information. In this context, WhatsApp not only facilitated information sharing and discussion, it also turned information into a key exchange object that expressed care toward others, strengthened personal and small group relationships, and created experience of proximity.

A large amount of interdisciplinary work has focused on the study of journalism and news in the era of social media. A few recent studies have shown that users have increasingly moved to private online environments to access and discuss news (Newman et al., 2017; Swart et al., 2019). During the strictest weeks of lockdown, information on WhatsApp fulfilled the purpose of maintaining relationships with others and shaped the ways emotional proximity was experienced and perceived. We identify one main trend in information sharing that was common to the following three cities: our research participants tended to share pieces of information that were appropriate to specific individuals or small groups. They shared news or links to opinion pieces that they knew would be liked and that expressed a common understanding on a specific issue or a common interest. Thus, information was mostly shared in one-to-one chats or small groups. Large

groups were avoided most of the time to refrain from possible divisive debates.

Luca, a 33-year-old social worker from Milan, was active in 20 different WhatsApp groups of different sizes, but he only shared information about COVID-19 in one-to-one chats and two small groups. For example, when the Italian government started to ease the restrictions on physical movements, Luca shared news about it in the “mountain group” with his hiking friends to find out if, and how, they could go hiking again. He did not like discussions on WhatsApp and preferred to avoid group conversations on sensitive topics. During lockdown, Leonardo, a 44-year-old communication consultant from Milan, shared an average of three or four pieces of information every day to different individuals, but only very rarely to groups. He described news sharing as a gesture of affection and love toward others:

I have to read news every morning for my work anyway. I then choose the most interesting stories and share them with the friends I know can understand and appreciate that specific news. It would be too frustrating if they do not like the same things I do!

Leonardo muted a large group with 15–20 members due to ongoing heated political conversations on the responsibilities of the governor of the Lombardy Region. He needed care and affection rather than contentious discussion, and on WhatsApp he had a preference for one-to-one conversations through text or calls with selected individuals. For the same reason, during the COVID-19 pandemic, he significantly decreased his use of Facebook. He loved WhatsApp for giving him full control on the selection of the audience. One-to-one news sharing became his way to express ideological affinity and emotional proximity to his best friends and to solidify his relationship with them by drawing boundaries with others who were not viewed as deserving his time during difficult times. Daniela from Milan was active in 14 different WhatsApp groups with friends and at least five work-related groups, but she mostly received and shared COVID-19-related news in just two groups. One included six mothers of her 5-year-old child’s schoolmates. Here, they shared news about school followed by jokes and complaints about the conditions of women doing remote work while looking after their children. The second group included four couples who shared the same left-wing political views. In this group, they shared opinion pieces from international newspapers and links to Facebook pages and expressed their opinions on the poor health and emergency management of the Lombardy region. In both cases, information was shared and discussed within small groups of people that she knew well and trusted. Michiel, a 37-year-old scholar living with his girlfriend in Groningen, describes sending occasional breaking news in the first weeks of lockdown. For instance, he shared updates about the opening of countries in a group with 10 friends with whom he had booked a house abroad for

a vacation, together with memes, newspaper cartoons, and silly jokes about corona too. Tom from Groningen is in groups with friends on WhatsApp but has a strong preference for using one-on-one communication for sharing news or striking information (“something that amazes you”). Respondents in all the three cities expressed annoyance when flooded by too much or irrelevant news in large groups. For this reason, some participants actively removed themselves from some larger groups, including Matthijs from Groningen, who restricted WhatsApp use to specific ties with very close friends. Whereas in Milan, it was rather common to ignore irrelevant information, fake news, and political discussions going on in large groups.

Sources of news and information were multiple among our research participants, including more public social media like Facebook and Twitter, websites, and online national and international newspapers, but on WhatsApp they enjoyed sharing and discussing information with loved ones. On WhatsApp, sending information expressed and mediated care and affection, and this was perceived as someone’s affective and emotional act; its value, relevance, and trustworthiness were determined by the relationship the individual had with the person who shared it. When detached from a relevant relationship, a piece of information was treated as one among many other anonymous pieces of data circulating across multiple platforms and creating information overload. The meaning of specific information was subsumed by the relationship within which the piece of information was exchanged but was also determined by the general WhatsApp media ideology (Gershon, 2010) during lockdown. WhatsApp was perceived and used as a place for emotional support and proximity. One research participant in Milan eloquently claimed, “At the moment, on WhatsApp, information is relationship.” Information has been used as a *proxy* for loved ones and generated “presence by proxy” (Baldassar, 2008) mostly in dyadic and small group interactions.

Photos, videos, and memes in small and large groups

This section focuses on another type of co-presence by “proxy.” It describes the role of visuals—photos, videos, and memes—in creating experiences of co-presence in groups of different sizes. The typology of content “remediated” (Bolter & Grusin, 2000) pre-existing modes of interaction and communication styles of offline socialities; in the three cities, photos and videos depicting people’s everyday life were more common in family groups or small groups of friends, while humorous memes and clips were shared mostly in larger groups. Marina’s description of her WhatsApp communication is quite representative of this trend. On WhatsApp, she had 13 active groups: six with friends, one with family, four with colleagues, and two specific to her hobbies. All these groups were active before the pandemic

and became significantly livelier during the first 2 months of strict lockdown. In large groups with friends and colleagues, she received tons of memes and clips every day. These were all humorous memes and clips that she immediately deleted to avoid filling the memory of her smartphone. She also received memes in the smaller WhatsApp groups with friends, but less frequently, as well as receiving and sharing pieces of news and photos. In her family WhatsApp group, she mostly receives photos and videos—that she never deletes—portraying her niece and nephew.

Photos and short videos portraying people's everyday life in lockdown were mostly shared within families and small groups of friends. These included photos of plants, food, bread, pizza, clothes, or children. Visual content became a way to share information about everyday lives. Fernando from Barcelona explained that the WhatsApp group he had with his family members went from a check-in space to know "how the papas were doing" to a "social network group inside WhatsApp" where his brothers and sisters continuously shared photos of their meals, kids, and lockdown sport routines. Anouk from Groningen described how content shifted with the start of the pandemic, with specific family group chats on WhatsApp now becoming more devoted to sharing photos of their children and of moments from everyday life. Photos from everyday life created feelings of co-presence with small groups of loved ones. The important role of visual material within family and small groups confirms the findings of previous research on relationships at distance (Ahlin, 2018; Miller et al., 2021), which showed that visual communication expresses affection and care and that content often matters less than the act of the communication itself. Similar findings were also presented in Costa's (2016a) description of social media usage among family members in southeast Turkey who sent photos to each other several times a day whenever they could not see each other face-to-face.

By contrast, humorous memes and clips mostly characterized large group socialities. They remediated offline styles of interaction that usually center around fun and jokes in large groups. Text communication was less relevant in these kinds of interactions, and it was common for people to either reply to a meme with a laughing emoji or another meme, or not to reply at all. Within these large groups' sociality, humor played an important role in coping with the loneliness and stress of lockdown, but there were differences between the three cities. In Milan, large WhatsApp groups became more active. Some research participants from Milan said that humor memes in large groups helped them feel less lonely. Others claimed to be tired of receiving so many memes and shared very little or no content at all within large groups. Nevertheless, no research participants from Milan ever left any large groups, which points to the fact that they appreciated the feeling of being part of large unities of socialities such as old friends from university, inhabitants of the same apartment building, or a few dozen colleagues from the same office. In contrast, most research participants from Barcelona

stated that interactions in large groups decreased. In the context of fear and anxiety, people in Barcelona preferred to engage in WhatsApp communication with their families and close friends and to reduce their interactions with acquaintances in large groups. Several participants explained that the content of the communications in large groups was "too jokey," something that made them lose interest in the group's activity. Sharing of memes in large groups was also important in Groningen, where Anouk, a 34-year-old married woman with kids, indicated that memes were an important aspect of group socialities under lockdown. She explained,

We used to share images regularly in our friend group on a certain day of the week, so we would all save up and share many memes on that day, but in corona times we "lifted" this rule [says this jokingly], because we immediately wanted to share corona-memes of course!

Large group sociality dominated by humorous memes and clips created the experience of "ambient co-presence" (Madianou, 2016), which Madianou (2016) defined as "the peripheral, yet intense awareness of distant others" (p. 183) that complemented other forms of more intimate and private socialities. The experience of "ambient co-presence" mediated by humorous visual content created a sense of belonging to larger forms of sociality. People felt part of the actual groups but also of larger "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1991). For example, in Milan, many memes included jokes about local and regional traditions that highlighted cultural and social differences between Italian cities and localities.

While people tended to share more photos in small groups and more memes in larger groups, a significant impact of WhatsApp in the weeks of social isolation was to strengthen the role of group socialities and their dependence on visual communication. Daniela from Milan elaborated on this very thoroughly:

In these weeks, friendship on WhatsApp is very much about groups. It does not happen so often that a friend texts me "How do you feel?". She would rather call me on the phone and talk, exactly liked we did before [. . .] But groups have been so important to me in this period [. . .]

The sharing of visual content generated different forms of co-presence by *proxy* (Baldassar, 2008) that strengthened socialities in groups of multiple sizes. In the next section, we describe another important form of visual communication—emojis—which were used to add an emotional component to text across all scales of sociality.

Emojis and new ways of being together across all scales of sociality

During strict lockdown, the use of emojis increased, especially in Milan and Barcelona, and was perceived as playing an important role in expressing emotions, care, and love

within all scales of sociality. Most interviewees voiced the need to create more empathic and emotional connections with others and felt limited when doing so through text communications, calls, photos, or humorous memes. In this context, emojis enabled the expression of emotions and their communication to others and generated experiences of emotional proximity. As many interviewees pointed out, the need for online emotional connections was strong. Interestingly, the main similarity among the research participants across the three cities was the increased use of the “heart” and “kissing faces” emojis. Jennifer, a woman from Groningen, explained that her use of emojis changed considerably during lockdown, with the “heart” becoming one of three emojis she used the most. The use of the “heart” reflected her increased appreciation for others and her stronger need to express emotional support toward friends and relatives.

Luca, a 45-year-old man living in Milan, confessed to me that he sent tons of “heart” emojis every day. “I am getting old!” he added. He implied that the expression of affection and tender emotions did not particularly fit into local forms of standard masculinity among men of his age. He described the use of the “heart” emoji as part of a more general trend characterizing WhatsApp communication in lockdown, which was the presence of sweeter and kinder communication with others:

On WhatsApp the communication became much sweeter. We missed human contacts, and the fear of death was also there. Even among us, men in their forties, the willingness to be less mean and nasty with others became so important. Some of us lost their relatives. I also lost people I knew. And it is terrible. [...] I tried to share words and images that would not bring conflict or confrontation, and I only shared those things that I knew could resemble a cuddle or a hug.

WhatsApp facilitated the expression of love and affection through emojis to the point of generating practices that clashed with socially acceptable conduct. For example, Marina, a 41-year-old elementary school teacher living in Milan, once received a “heart” from a student’s mother at midnight while Marina was in bed with her partner. The mother wanted to thank Marina for the support she had given to her daughter during online class that day. However, Marina was annoyed not only by the intrusion of work into private life, but also by the use of “the heart” emoji, which she felt was inappropriate for professional relationships. Pablo, in Barcelona, also sent more “kissing faces” to communicate tenderness and affection to friends and relatives, but he also specified that the “heart” emoji alone would be too cheesy to communicate with friends. Likewise, Beatriz told us that she used the “heart” emoji a lot with “family and important friends” during lockdown.

Whereas the importance of the “heart” emoji was common across the three cities, a significant difference between them was the use of emojis for expressing positive feelings

in Groningen and for expressing negative ones in Milan. For example, the two emojis most-used by Lucia in Milan were the “heart” and the “crying face.” She sent the latter to express lockdown-related frustrations, such as not being able to go out or to plan holidays abroad. Daniela often shared the “angry faces” when reading disappointing news, such as news about the shortage of COVID-19 tests, and the “poo” when she thought, “we are in the shit!” In contrast, most research participants from Groningen did not list emojis that expressed feelings of sadness, anger, or frustration in their top three most-used emojis. They mostly preferred positive emojis, like the “winking” and “smiling”. Among Matthijs’s top three emojis used during the Corona crisis were the “blushing” emoji with big eyes and the emoji with the magnifying glass. He also stated that, during the lockdown, he deliberately used fairly positive emojis (e.g., heart eyes, smiles, face emojis, mustache, wine, or palm tree) to cheer other people up. Roos from Groningen also preferred cheerful emojis like smiles, flowers, and other nature-related emoticons. She explained that emojis are inappropriate for sad and serious messages. In Milan, participants maintained proximity with their family and friends by sharing with them their feelings of fear, sadness, and anger. In Groningen, they did so mainly by cheering them up. This difference might reflect variations in the modes of interaction and socialities, as well as the different impact of the pandemic on people’s life in the two cities. Yet, across the three cities, the increased use of emojis during lockdown reflected a global trend of heightened importance of visual communication to express “care at distance” (Miller et al., 2021; Stark & Crawford, 2015; Walton, 2021). It also demonstrates that emojis facilitated experiences of emotional co-presence and proximity with others at all scales of sociality.

Conclusion

It is now well-documented that social media and digital technologies have transformed the ways in which people stay together and experience co-presence when separated by distance. Scholarship on media and migration has extensively shown how digital media shape relationships, facilitate proximity, provide emotional support, and construct intimacy (Alinejad, 2019; Baldassar, 2008; Baldassar et al., 2016; Costa & Alinejad, 2020; Madianou & Miller, 2012; Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016). This article builds on this body of literature to shed light on the multiple ways in which people experienced co-presence and proximity on WhatsApp during the weeks of strict lockdown at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. When forced into social isolation and physical distancing, people remained connected to others through communication technologies, and WhatsApp was by far the platform most often used to do so. Building on the concept of “scalable sociality” (Miller et al., 2016) and “polymedia” (Madianou & Miller, 2012), this article shows which forms of communication and

scales of sociality people engaged with the most to experience proximity during the difficult days of social isolation. WhatsApp functioned as a polymedia and scalable sociality, an integrated environment of digital places that enabled different scales of sociality. At the same time, it was perceived as having a little agency over the communication process, and, as such, it conveyed the idea that the user was in control of the relationships. WhatsApp conveyed immediacy, which in turn helped to strengthen experiences of proximity to others. Unlike the notion of scalable sociality (Miller et al., 2016), which was developed to describe the different scales of mediated interactions that did not necessarily involved feelings of emotional proximity in the context of physical distance from others, “scalable co-presence” stresses the ability of digital platforms to generate feelings of being together when physically apart.

Our key finding has been that people used WhatsApp to experience co-presence and proximity with others within multiple scales of sociality, with the main novelty being the important role of groups. We formulated the concept of “scalable co-presence” to capture the multiple experiences of co-presence within groups of different sizes, enabled by different modes of communications. We also showed that new normative conditions (Horst & Miller, 2012) of WhatsApp usage have quickly emerged across the three cities. Despite differences between individuals and between sites, our interview material shows the presence of common trends. First, video calls were used to express love and affection toward the closest and most intimate relatives and friends in one-to-one conversations. Second, the sharing of tailored information strengthened interpersonal relationships and expressed care in one-to-one conversations and small groups. Third, photos or videos portraying everyday life were mostly used to make someone’s presence tangible to others within small groups, such as those with family members and close friends. Fourth, people used humorous memes and videos mostly to engage in large group socialities. Finally, emojis were used extensively across different types of groups to express multiple feelings and emotions, but mostly affection, love, and support, as exemplified by the “heart” emoji.

WhatsApp made group socialities more important than ever and provided people with manifold modes of communications to express their feelings, experience proximity, and negotiate their presence within groups of different sizes. During the weeks of strict lockdown and social isolation, WhatsApp generated multiple forms of co-presence and proximity at distance that compensated for the lack of interactions in physical contexts. To an unprecedented extent, people outside the context of transnational migration had to rely on communication technologies to feel in presence of others. The concept of “scalable co-presence” not only captures the multiple forms of mediated proximity enabled by WhatsApp during strict lockdown. It might also account for the ways many ordinary adults around the

world stay and feel together in (post)pandemic digital societies characterized by ubiquitous connectivity, limited mobility, and increased social distance.

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ORCID iDs

Elisabetta Costa  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9697-9342>

Marc Esteve-Del-Valle  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4407-1989>

Notes

1. All participant names in this article are pseudonyms.
2. On the large varieties of emotional experiences across cultures and how emotions are not purely private affairs but also observable in practices, see, for example, Beatty (2019).

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Author biographies

Elisabetta Costa (PhD, University of Groningen) is an Assistant Professor in Media Studies at the University of Groningen (the Netherlands). She is a social anthropologist and media scholar researching social media, personal relationships, politics and gender in Turkey, the Middle East, and Europe.

Marc Esteve-Del-Valle (PhD, University of Groningen) is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Media and Journalism Studies at the University of Groningen (the Netherlands). His research and teaching interests lie at the intersection of digital communication networks and social change, with a particular interest in online political networks.

Berber Hagedoorn (PhD, University of Groningen) is an Assistant Professor in Media Studies & Audiovisual Culture at the University of Groningen (the Netherlands). Her research interests revolve around screen cultures (representations and crossmedia storytelling practices) and audiovisual cultural memory in Europe.