

Can WhatsApp save relationships?

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Whereas young people were born into the digital world, older generations have had to learn how to adapt to it. One such age cohort is Generation X (those born between 1965-1980), who acclimated to the digital world relatively late in life and are referred to as "digital immigrants."

A new study conducted by researchers from Reichman University—Dr. Gali Einav, researcher and faculty member of the Adelson School of Entrepreneurship, and Tal Nadel-Harony and Prof. Yair Galili from the Sammy Ofer School of Communications—examined how we conduct our relationships via WhatsApp, and whether it is similar or different from the way we handle them in real life. The study was published in *New Media & Society*.

The researchers found that the way we conduct our relationships offline is mirrored on WhatsApp, and that the app in fact offers an additional platform for conducting relationships—in other words, another place to fight and make up. Moreover, say the researchers, "Correspondence over WhatsApp not only offers another venue to conduct the [relationship](#), but it can also help save it."

The scholar John Gottman, a clinical psychologist and mathematician, recognized the importance of fighting in a relationship, and claimed that the ability to deal with conflicts is the foundation of a stable relationship. He also identified three patterns of conflict management in a relationship that can also help predict its stability.

The study's findings, that we replicate these patterns in our WhatsApp discourse, strengthen the conclusions drawn by Gottman. The researchers identified three patterns of conflictual behavior, reflected in WhatsApp communications, in stable relationships, corresponding with Gottman's distinctions:

(1) Avoidance—the "avoiders" displayed little interaction via WhatsApp in the day-to-day, and an absence of interaction during conflict. This behavior also reflected the partners' separate areas of interest and corresponded with the first category in Gottman's findings, characterized by the low level of interdependence that exists in relationships between [couples](#) who avoid conflict. WhatsApp may be used by "avoidant"

couples as an independent activity that they engage in separately from one another.

For example, in describing conflicts with his partner, A. from Tel Aviv told the researchers, "We fight in silence." E. from the Sharon region said that she "almost goes crazy" when her partner purposely does not respond to her on WhatsApp. T. from the south of the country said, "At home we don't fight, we go to sleep... and, in parallel, on WhatsApp it's a cold peace." In all these cases, the couple maintains active social interactions via the app with friends and family. The couple's avoidance of interaction during a fight, and low degree of availability to each other during routine, reflect a paucity of common interests and a reluctance to listen to one another other.

(2) Emotional—couples who had emotional conflicts tended to correspond more frequently both on a daily basis and during disagreements. These couples described mutual persuasion attempts that were conducted simultaneously on WhatsApp and face to face. This behavior corresponds to the second category in Gottman's findings, which is characterized by blurred boundaries between the shared and the personal space in the relationship.

H. from the south said that "When I fight with L. face to face, I shout and scream for the whole world to hear, and on WhatsApp I just don't let go... I can send endless messages and quite a lot of exclamation marks." Couples who described emotionally-charged arguments recounted how a fight that began in the morning at home can continue over WhatsApp, and sometimes even manifest in the family group chat. Cases were also described in which explosive topics that came up in the couple's WhatsApp correspondence spilled over into face-to-face interaction.

(3) Rational—Gottman's third category describes the ability of the spouses to listen to each other during a conflict. The moderate and

balanced graph of the couple's correspondence on WhatsApp, depicted in the body of the study, reflects this pattern, though conflicts that the couples chose not to deal with on WhatsApp may be absent from this category.

A. and A. from Modi'in explained that they learned how to fight over two decades of being together. "Our correspondence via WhatsApp is a language we have developed, and it helps us find a way to resolve things... sometimes by laughing at the fight with the right emoji, or at least putting it in proportion." R. from the north of the country added, "Sometimes re-reading the correspondence (during a fight) helps me understand my partner's motivation." In these cases, there is a high probability that the couple will also use the app during their attempts at reconciliation.

Observing the couple's interactions on WhatsApp along with their face-to-face communication may teach us something about the role we play in the relationship and help us achieve relationship stability through positive gestures and expressions of emotion.

The study's research method included interviews, conducted over a year, with 18 couples aged 35-50, who have been in a relationship for over five years. The interviewees were Israelis from different regions of the country and from various backgrounds (religious, secular, same-sex). The analysis of the content of the interviews focused on the ways in which the couple used WhatsApp; the researchers identified technical, practical, casual and emotional relationship patterns.

The article cites WhatsApp's potential for behavioral observation and the possibility of using it to change relationship dynamics.

More information: Tal Nadel Harony et al, Let's WhatsApp! Generation X couples' online and offline relationship patterns in the

digital age, *New Media & Society* (2021). DOI: [10.1177/14614448211043192](https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211043192)

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