"That's the only place where you can get this information today!" An exploratory study on Parenting WhatsApp Groups with a sample of Italian parents

Davide Cino

Assegnista di ricerca – Università Cattolica di Milano

Alessandra Gigli

Associata di Pedagogia generale e sociale – Università di Bologna

Corresponding author: alessandra.gigli@unibo.it

Silvia Demozzi

Associata di Pedagogia generale e sociale – Università di Bologna

Corresponding author: silvia.demozzi@unibo.it

Abstract. This paper studies Parenting WhatsApp Groups (PWGs) as interactional loci parents can join to be involved in their children's academic life, building on the quantitative and qualitative results of an online survey administered to a sample of 302 Italian parents recruited through convenience sampling. First, PWGs are positioned within the broader literature on offline/online parent involvement, parents' peer interaction via social media, and technological peculiarities of WhatsApp. Second, quantitative results from a binary logistic regression are reported to explore possible predictors of PWG's membership among our sample, as well as quantitative and qualitative findings investigating parents' perceptions/opinions of and experience with PWGs. Finally, limitations, future directions, and implications of this study are discussed.

Keywords. Parenting WhatsApp Groups - Parent involvement - Family-school communication - Digital Parenting

1. Introduction

Using parenting websites, blogs, and forums for information- and support-seeking is a common trend among parents in socially and economically developed countries, especially for mothers (Lupton et al., 2016). This phenomenon has been positioned by scholars within the "intensive parenting" framework (Blum-Ross and Livingstone, 2017), a middle-class childrearing philosophy considering parents accountable for most of their children's outcomes in life (Shirani et al., 2012). Scholars have speculated that in the digital age this

ideology has developed into "transcendent parenting," which goes "beyond traditional, physical concepts of parenting, to incorporate virtual and online parenting and how these all intersect" (Lim, 2016, p.21). As an example of that, several studies have found in Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) with peers one of the ways for parents to orient themselves and discuss a wide variety of topics concerning the offspring to perform parenting effectively, such as health, diet, and parenting ideologies (Brady and Guerin, 2010).

In the realm of school-family interactions, transcendent parenting can take place through the use of Parenting WhatsApp Groups (henceforth PWGs), as platforms affording parents to share information with peers concerning "homework, school-related activities, as well as social events involving their children" (Lim, 2016, p.123). Given the emphasis placed on academic performance and children's school experience (Schneider and Coleman, 2018), as well as the abovementioned ease in using digital parenting resources, parents may use technology to monitor their children's lives as they unfold within interacting micro-systems, the school being one of the first they have experience of (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In this sense, related to the intensive parenting myth is the discourse surrounding *parent involvement* which indicates a climate of enhanced participation of parents in the child's school life, framing the "good parent" as the one who fosters partnership with school and promotes the overall child's wellbeing and success (Bartolomeo, 2004; Contini, 2012; Daffi, 2006; Lamarca, 2005; Levorato, 2001; Gigli, 2007, 2011, 2012, 2016, 2017; Gopnik, 2016; Schleicher, 1992).

While the literature on parenting has investigated multiple platforms parents can use to communicate with peers to find social and emotional support while building on bridging and bonding social capital (Drentea and Moren-Cross, 2005; Pedersen and Lupton, 2018), very little is known about the use of WhatsApp groups gathering parents of children in the same classroom/school to discuss students' school life. As the discourse on the topic becomes of interest for laypeople (Lavenia, 2018), educationalists can provide empirical data to better frame this phenomenon.

This contribution makes a step in this direction by investigating whether and to what extent a sample of Italian parents use PWGs to communicate with peers (i.e. other parents) about their children's academic life. WhatsApp is the most used Instant Messaging App in Italy (VincosBlog, 2017), affording the possibility of engaging in synchronous group-based communication which, differing from standard texts, allows for new dynamics to develop between wide groups of users (Church and de Oliveira, 2013). In this sense, we argue, it is important to locate its use within the context of the wider literature on digital families (Mascheroni et al., 2018). Little to no data, however, is available concerning this phenomenon in Italy.

Building on a broader study[1] concerning the role of Information and Communication Technology (ICTs) in the relationship between the family and the school systems, the present work explores the role of PWGs as sites of peer interaction for contemporary parents. Specifically, we report our exploratory findings from quantitative and qualitative data collected with an online survey administered to a sample of 302 Italian parents. This study is among the firsts to theoretically and empirically tackle this phenomenon, opening new avenues of research to look at for future inquiry.

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[1] The study has been carried out by the Research Centre on Childhood and Families of the University of Bologna (CREIF, https://centri.unibo.it/creif/it).

2. Literature review

2.1 Parent involvement in education: a longstanding yet evolving paradigm for the digital age

The idea that the family and the school systems should cooperate to enhance students' academic experience has long roots in the pedagogical literature. Studies highlighting the important role of the home variable on students' achievement date back to over fifty years ago (Coleman et al., 1966). Over time, scholars have stressed the positive implications of a collaboration between teachers and parents as social actors who can learn from each other to nurture the broader education system the child is part of (Gordon, 1977). Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1979) further remarks how the home has at least as much influence as the school on a child's learning and education. The importance for teachers and parents to be on the same page and "allied" (Contini, 2012; Gigli, 2012), then, led to the establishment of formal and informal contacts between parties, such as institutional encounters and child-transmitted notes and memos, in order for parents to supervise their children's learning activities at home while being in touch with educators (Becker and Epstein, 1982).

In this context, the concept of *parent involvement* has gained popularity, functioning as an umbrella term describing the different strategies parents use to cooperate with schools and participate in their children's education (Edwards and Kutaka, 2015). Scholars have often categorized parent involvement into two main areas: *home-based* and *school-based* (e.g. Hill and Craft, 2003). The former illustrates instances where parents assist their children with homework, actively talk to them about their academic lives, and engage in school-related activities. The latter, in turn, describes the act of parents talking with teachers during parent-teacher conferences, being present in various institutional encounters, and/or volunteer for the school.

A cogent corpus of literature has documented benefits associated with parent involvement over the years, like promoting children's academic success, social adjustment, and students' well-being (Epstein and Sanders, 2002; Epstein, 2010; Jeynes, 2011). It is no surprise, then, that such a systemic cooperation has become an "institutional standard," as something that schools and families tend to aim at (Lareau, 1989).

This is also the case in the Italian education system, where parents are expected to play an active role in their children's education as it unfolds within educational services (Bove, 2007; Formenti, 2014; Mantovani, 2001). Italian families, in fact, are legally encouraged to be part of a collaborative framework with schools (Granata et al., 2016), to foster their participation in the broader pedagogical community they and their children are part of.

In the digital age, technology can help further fostering parents' participation in their students' school life. This has been the case in Italy in the past few years, with the increase introduction of ICTs as a form of communication and accountability between the family and the school system (Pieri, 2010). As an example of that is the introduction of the "online register" (Decree-Law No. 95/2012), a digital educational database committing teachers to report their students' educational data online to allow parents the mobile monitoring of their children's school records (Delfino, 2015). Other opportunities for the school and the family to be in touch using technology are websites, emails, and instant-messaging (Pieri, 2010).

It is worth noting, though, that most of the literature on parent involvement, both offline and online, has relied on individualistic frameworks where teachers communicate with parents, without considering how parents themselves *proactively* gather with peers to exchange school information and find support. As Sheldon (2002) makes the case for, research on the topic "has tended to characterize parents as relatively isolated individuals who interact with their child and their child's teacher" (p.301). In turn, not only do parents interact with their peers, but studies have found that those who maintain ties with other parents are more likely to have access to school information and know more about school policies (Lareau and Shumar, 1996; Useem, 1992). As members of social groups and networks, parents may be influenced by interacting with their peers who can provide information, support and reinforce behavioral and moral expectations about their *need* to be involved (Sheldon, 2002). This is in line with the idea that one of the main motivators for parent involvement is *parental role construction*, or a socially constructed belief system creating a corpus of expectations on what parents are supposed to do as explicitly and implicitly requested not only by the school but also by pertinent social groups, like peers (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

Consistent with studies concerning offline parent participation in school-related activities (Sheldon, 2002), research on parent involvement in the digital age has focused on instances of *institutional interactions* where the school opens new mediated communication avenues with families using websites, email, or instant messaging apps like WhatsApp for parent-teacher communication (Amini, 2018; Bordalba and Bochaca, 2019; Wasserman and Zwebner, 2017). Very little, in turn, is known about parents *themselves* using technology to engage in their children's education through *peer interactions*. Because parents' use of social media to informally interact with other parents and find information and support is a common trend nowadays (Lupton et al., 2016), we argue in this paper that including the study of online social networks in the broader realm of parent involvement in the digital age may represent an important avenue of inquiry.

2.2 It takes an "e-village:" parents' social media as arenas for parent involvement

Parents are active users of digital technology and social media in the global North, with mothers being more likely to seek and receive support through online communication (Duggan et al., 2015). In the era of intensive parenting and mothering (Faircloth, 2014; Hays, 1998) online communities like parenting forums have been found to provide parents with the opportunity to share worries, doubts, and questions concerning daily problems and doubts, and receive feedback (Brady and Guerin, 2010). Parents who have difficulties to access offline support can also find help in other social media like Facebook (Bartholomew et al., 2012; Gibson and Hanson, 2013). A wide variety of topics are discussed when interacting via parenting forums and Facebook Parenting Groups, like pregnancy (Cappellini and Yen, 2016), birth (Das, 2017), health choices (Hookway et al., 2017), and upbringing (Cino and Demozzi, 2017). Overall, parenting online platforms have been described as female-dominated" (Dworkin, et. al., 2013), but some preliminary evidence suggests that some fathers as well use Facebook with respect to their parenting, to learn how to perform their role, archive fatherhood, and access social support

(Ammari and Schoenebeck, 2016). Taken together, these studies support the claim that digital technologies and social media are part of family life, as well as a parenting tool.

While the abovementioned literature has mostly focused on platforms like parenting forums and Facebook, very little is known about the use of PWGs by parents to communicate with peers and how this use relates to parent involvement.

In her notion of "transcendent parenting," Lim (2018) considers WhatsApp as well in the broader realm of parental social media, suggesting that by using instant messaging apps parents can transcend traditional time and space boundaries requiring them to be in certain places at a certain time to be engaged in their children's academic life. As the author claims,

Social media platforms such as Whatsapp and Facebook present yet another parenting obligation in the form of parent chat groups for their children's classes to discuss school-related matters. These can range from daily minutiae such as the forms children must submit and the sharing of homework tips, to weightier issues such as discussing the quality of teachers and the school's academic programs (Lim, 2018, p.34).

Being involved in one's child academic life through technology, then, can be seen as an extension of a parent's responsibility. The use and operational definitions of parent involvement in fact vary, indicating not only parents' communication with teachers or parent-child interactions about homework, but also parents' communication and relationships with other parents (Greenwood and Hickman, 1991; Sheldon, 2002). According to Price-Mitchell (2009), the more parents gather together and interconnect "because they value children's success in school and life, the greater potential for productive outcomes" (p.18).

However, few empirical data are available to better frame and understand this phenomenon as occurring using social media like WhatsApp. An exception is a study from Addi-Raccah and Yemini (2018), who researched how Israeli parents use PWGs to foster parental interaction and engagement. The authors found that PWGs offer democratic and accessible opportunities for parents to be involved in their children's academic life, beyond time and physical constraints. These groups were found to be used to ask questions about homework, report anecdotes of specific events occurred to children, and to even question teachers' behavior or homework load. In this sense, scholars have argued that social media like WhatsApp may redefine traditional dynamics between the family and the school, allowing parents to gather together and possibly be more intensively involved in their children's education (Gigli, 2016; 2017).

Well before ICTs were part of the educational milieu, parent over-involvement was deemed debatable, as children may not develop an adequate sense of responsibility and autonomy (Epstein and Becker, 1982). This phenomenon can be accentuated by new technology, as the boundaries between the school and the family can blur (Kurtz, 2015). This is particularly the case with applications like WhatsApp, whose affordances make users available everywhere and at any time, possibly influencing the breadth and depth of parent involvement (Wasserman and Zwebner, 2017).

2.3 *The specificity of WhatsApp opening new avenues of interpersonal online communication*

WhatsApp is a free cross-platform instant messaging application for smartphones launched in 2009, allowing users to send text messages, images, documents, and other media, as well as to call and video-call contacts, both in one-to-one and one-to-many conversational formats (Anderson, 2016). With 1.5 billion active users in over 180 countries, and the average user checking the app more than 23 times per day (99 Firms, 2019), it is deemed to be one of the most popular messaging platforms worldwide (Jayanthi & Sheshasaayee, 2015), and the most used instant messaging app in Italy (VincosBlog, 2017). Understanding the technological and communicative peculiarities of WhatsApp is pivotal to better investigate our topic of inquiry. The "affordances" framework is relevant here. In the field of human-computer interaction (HCI), the concept of affordances was adapted by Norman's definition describing them as the "fundamental properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used" (1988, p. 9). With respect to mobile devices, Bucher and Helmond (2018) report on their communicative affordance of availability, indicating how mobile phones alter both the degrees and the ways of being available, thus the associated forms of social interaction and interpersonal communication.

WhatsApp is unique as it differs from other social media platforms, like Facebook, because users' profiles are bound to their cellphone numbers. Thus, only people who, for whatever reason, had exchanged their mobile number can get in touch through the app, with no possibilities to find users on a broader database like it is the case with other social media (Anderson, 2016). The app also differs from traditional forms of mobile communication like SMS for several reasons: it is free and only needs an Internet connection, allows synchronous communication, provides users with read notifications, does not have character limits, and allows to create groups to engage in one-to-many communication (Anderson, 2016). In terms of users' perceptions, compared to traditional SMS it is seen as more conversational, less formal, quicker, increasing a sense of community and connection, and creating a stronger social expectation of response to messages due to its visual delivery feedback, which supports the idea of constant availability (Church & De Oliveira, 2013). Users reported to feel more aware of their response patterns when using the app, suggesting new forms of accountability and moral implicative may be at stake (O'Hara, et al., 2014). The average response time to WhatsApp messages is indeed very short, with research finding that approximately 31% of all messages delivered in the platform are answered within one minute (Rosenfeld, et al., 2016). A representative large-scale study conducted with Argentinians investigated how WhatsApp is domesticated in users' life in their everyday interactions with family, friends, and work (Matassi et al., 2019). Findings show that the app is seen as a taken-for-granted and normalized element of day-to-day communication for most users, with middle-adults using it in response to a constellation of work and caring responsibilities. With respect to WhatsApp groups, these are linked to particular mutual relationships among friends, colleagues, family members, and collectives (O'Hara, et al., 2014). Variables like level of group importance and the group's subject affect the degree of members' participation (Gazit & Aharony, 2018). Far from being separate from one's life, the affordances of WhatsApp groups allow to create "idiosyncratic communication places" with their own membership rules, per-

ceived purposes, emotional connotations, and behavioral and cultural expectations for its users (Nouwens, et al., 2017).

Taken together, these studies suggest the widespread usage of WhatsApp and its incorporation into daily patterns of communication for many users, as well as some peculiar characteristics like the possibility of engaging in synchronous group-based communication and a state of "constant" availability, which may allow for new dynamics to develop between wide groups of users as well as generate feelings of anxiety and annoyance when using this app (Matassi et al., 2019).

As such, we seek to understand whether and how these new communication places intersect with peer-based parent involvement by investigating the usage of PWGs with a sample of Italian parents.

3. The present study

The present paper builds on the dearth of research about the use and role of PWGs in Italy with respect to parent involvement. This study is part of a broader exploratory study on Parenting and ICTs which was conducted in Italy during 2018. The present paper specifically focuses on the usage of Parenting WhatsApp Groups among a sample of Italian parents.

Given the paucity of literature on the topic, this contribution seeks to answer the following exploratory research questions to provide a base for further inquiry in the area:

RQ$_1$: What socio-demographic variables relate to PWGs membership?

RQ$_2$: What is the role of PWGs for our sample of parents and what are their attitudes and opinions about them?

3.1 Method and sampling

A semi-structured exploratory survey was administered to a convenience sample of Italian parents, posting the link on several Facebook Parenting groups –following authorization of the admins. The study was carried guaranteeing confidentiality and anonymity of data, following the ethical standards in line with the Italian Data Protection Act as adapted to the GDPR 2016/679 with the Legislative Decree No. 101 of 10 August 2018.

Information was collected concerning parents' PWGs membership and usage, reasons for using these platforms or not, opinions about these spaces, and whether participants ever abandoned or wanted to abandon these groups, employing closed-ended questions and a series of Likert-type scales. Reasons and motivation for using or abandoning these groups were then further explored through two qualitative open-ended questions.

Three hundred and two respondents correctly and thoroughly completed the survey. Data from the demographic section of the survey shows that the majority of respondents were from North Italy (67.6%), followed by Center Italy (23.7%) and a small portion from the South (8,7%). All respondents (100%) self-identified as parents and Italian. Mothers were oversampled, constituting 85% of the whole sample. With respect to parents' age, 38.7% were between 30-40 years of age, 48.7% between 41-50, 12.3% between 51-60 and 0.3% over 60. Parents were also highly educated, with 70.5% holding a university degree, 27.5% a high school diploma, and 2% having a lower level of education. The majority of

respondents (89%) reported to be employed and to live with partner/spouse (86%). These demographics are probably due to the convenience sampling strategy which employed postings on Facebook Parenting Groups. Indeed, this sample is in line with previous studies showing that white, educated, and employed mothers are the category most frequently accessing and using parenting online resources (Madge and O'Connor, 2006).

The average number of children per family unit was 2 (SD= .74, range 1-5). For the purpose of this paper, children's age and school level was calculated referring to the first child. Overall, 15.6% of first children were aged 0-3, 20.5% 4-6, 18.2% 7-9, 13.6% 10-12, and 32% were older. With respect to the level of education of the first child, 3.3% of the children were not in the education system yet when the survey was completed, 10.3% were in daycare, 17.2% were in pre-school, 30.5% in elementary school, 14.9% in middle school, 19.2% in high school, and the remaining 4.6% of first children were either in post-secondary education (i.e. university) or no longer in the education system.

3.2 Data analysis

- Quantitative data

Quantitative data were analyzed using the SPSS software (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). Descriptive statistics were calculated to investigate parent's usage of and opinions about PWGs. A binary logistic regression was run to find possible predictors of PWGs membership between socio-demographic variables, setting an alpha level of .05. Variables included in the model were parents' gender, age, family structure, education, and employment status, as well as number of children and the school level of the first child. Of the 302 respondents, 271 cases were included in the logistic regression analysis. Cases where the first child, at the time of the survey, was either not yet or no longer in the education system or was attending university were manually excluded (N= 24). SPSS listwise deletion of missing cases led to a removal of 7 additional cases.

Parents' gender was included as a variable of interest in the model because the literature supports that women are more likely to be involved in their children's education both offline and online (Blau and Hameiri, 2017; Hango, 2007). Women are also more likely to use CMC to better orient their parenting (Lupton et al., 2016), use WhatsApp for longer periods of time than men and tend to send and receive more messages when using the app (Montag et al., 2015; Rosenfeld, et al., 2018).

While parent involvement itself concerns parents of different age (Fehrmann et al., 1987), younger parents are more likely to use social networking sites and social media for parenting compared to older parents (Dworkin et al., 2012; Madden et al., 2012). Thus, parents' age was included in the model through a three-value categorical variable recoded with respect to the age range of our sample (considering parents aged 30-40, 41-50, and older).

Family structure as well has been found to influence parent involvement, with children living in two-parent families being more likely to be supported and monitored with respect to schooling (Astone and McLanahan, 1991). As such, we controlled for differences in PWG's membership by inserting in the model a binary variable considering whether children lived in a household with two parents (either married or co-habitants) or with only one parent.

Parents' education level was included, as studies found that parents with higher levels of education (i.e. holding at least a college degree) are more likely to be involved in their children's education (Lareau, 1987; Lee and Bowen, 2006). Informed by the literature and consistent with our sample's education level, the education variable was recoded as "holding a university degree" and "not holding a university degree."

Children's school level was another variable of interest, as studies indicate that parent involvement tends to decrease drastically in upper grades as children reach high school (Epstein, 1983; Hornby and Lafaele, 2011).

Parents' occupational status (employed/not employed) and number of children (one/more than one) were included as additional controlling variables to explore whether they could affect PWG's membership. Parent involvement is often time-consuming, but technology may allow parents to more actively take part in their children's education by crossing traditional time barriers that could affect the level of involvement of employed parents (Addi-Raccah and Yemini, 2018). Parents with more than a child, on the other hand, may have more chances to be part of at least a PWG than parents of only children.

- Qualitative data

Parents were asked through a closed question whether they had ever abandoned at least one PWGs they were members of (*Yes*; *No, I never felt the need to do it*; *No, but I wanted to*). Parents who stated to have abandoned or wanted to abandon a PWG were then invited to report their reasons for leaving or staying in the group through two open-ended questions.

Open-ended responses to the questions were analyzed following an inductive coding approach. The research team first employed *initial coding* to break down "qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examining them, and comparing them for similarities and difference" (Saldaña, 2009: 81). *Pattern coding* followed as a second cycle method (Miles and Huberman, 1994), to organize the corpus of initial codes into a smaller number of categories and "attribute meaning to that organization" (Saldaña, 2009: 150). This led to the development of an initial codebook that was tested by two external coders (MacQueen et al., 1998). Coders were first trained using a sub-sample of the answers. Training continued until acceptable levels of agreement were reached, adjusting and updating the codebook as needed. We then calculated Cohen's Kappa statistics to a 15% of the sample (Cohen, 1960), with coefficients ranging from .76 (for question one on reasons for leaving the group) to .91 (for question two on reasons for staying), indicating substantial to almost perfect agreement (Viera and Garrett, 2005). Once differences were resolved, the data was equally divided into two sets with each coder coding one. The unit of analysis was the single answer.

4. Results

- Quantitative findings

The striking majority of the sample -80%- reported to be member of at least one PWG, with an average of 2.57 groups per respondent (SD= 1.81, range 1-11). A binary logistic regression was performed to explore the effects of parents' gender, parents' age, family structure, parents' level of education, employment status, number of children, and children's school level on the likelihood that participants were members of PWGs (Tab.1).

	B	S.E.	Wald χ^2(*df*)	*p*	O.R.
Parent's gender					
Woman	1.460	.436	11.216 (1)	.001	4.307
Man (Ref. Cat.)	0				1
Parent's age			6.314 (2)	.043	
30-40	.380	.676	.315 (1)	.575	1.462
41-50	1.203	.559	4.626 (1)	.031	3.330
Older (Ref. Cat.)	0				1
Family structure					
Living with partner	.965	.478	4.083 (1)	.043	2.625
Other (Ref. Cat.)	0				1
Parent's education					
University Degree	.256	.418	.376 (1)	.540	1.292
Lower (Ref. Cat.)	0				1
Employment status					
Unemployed	1.887	1.156	2.663 (1)	.103	6.597
Employed (Ref. Cat.)	0				1
Number of children					
More than a child	1.168	.406	8.290 (1)	.004	3.217
Only child (Ref. Cat.)	0				1
1st child's school level			13.107 (4)	.011	
Daycare	.896	.735	1.483 (1)	.223	2.449
Preschool	.896	.654	1.877 (1)	.171	2.450
Elementary school	1.711	.585	8.549 (1)	.003	5.534
Middle school	2.270	.791	8.240 (1)	.004	9.678
High school (Ref. Cat.)	0				1

Nagelkerke R^2= .303

Table 1. Logistic regression exploring possible predictors of PWG's membership.

The logistic regression model was statistically significant χ^2 (11, *N*=271) =55,165, *p* <.001, explained 30% of the variation in the outcome (Nagelkerke R^2= .303), and correctly classified 87% of cases. The analysis found significant overall effects of parents' gender *Wald's* χ^2 (1, N=271) = 11.216, *p* = .001, parents' age *Wald's* χ^2 (2, *N* = 271) = 6.314, *p* = .043, family structure *Wald's* χ^2 (1, N=271) = 4.083, *p* = .043, number of children *Wald's* χ^2 (1, *N* = 271) = 8.290, *p* = .004, and the child's school level *Wald's* χ^2 (4, *N* = 271) = 13.107, *p* < .011. Specifically, the odds ratios suggest that mothers were 4.3 times more likely than fathers to be members of PWGs. Parents aged 41-50 were 3.3 times more likely to be members than older parents, while no significant differences emerged when comparing parents aged 30-40 with parents over 50. Parents living with spouse/partner were 2.62 times more likely than those who didn't. Parents of more than one child were 3.21 times more likely than parents of an only child to be members. With respect to the child's school level, parents' participation to PWGs tended to increase over time, reaching a peak in middle school and decreasing in high school. Specifically, parents with the first child attending middle school were 9.67 times more likely to be member of a PWG than those whose first child was attending high school, followed by parents whose first child attends elementary school, who were 5.53 times more likely to be members of at least one group. No statistically significant differences were found with parents of

children in preschool and daycare. Parents' level of education and occupational status had no statistically significant effects.

With respect to respondents' usage of and opinions on PWGs, 45% reported to actively take part in the conversations, while 30% lurk, and 25% declared to rarely participate. While most participants agreed that being a member of a PWG allowed them to get useful information (84%), negative attitudes were strikingly commons. In fact, the majority of respondents did not find PWGs to be appropriate places to socialize (79%), nor to get social support when venting (65%), or to know different perspectives (61%), In turn, most parents agreed that these chat rooms can be places of exaggeration (63%), where people participate reluctantly (60%) and waste their time (55%).

Of current members, 39% never felt the need to abandon these groups. With respect to the whole sample, 28% declared having abandoned at least one group, (with only 4% of these being non-members of any PWGs at all at the time of the survey). In turn, 33% of current members wanted to leave at least a group but did not. The next section reports on qualitative findings providing insights on the rationale behind the decision to leave or stay in PWGs.

- Qualitative findings
a) Reasons for leaving

A total of 81 responses to the question asking participants why they had left a PWG were coded. Five codes were developed: improper use of the group (41%); futile communication (23%); personal detachment (18%); dissolution of original purpose (14%); other (4%). The code "other" was used with borderline answers where none of the other codes was pertinent.

Improper use of the group. The majority of parents reported to have left the group because they thought it was used improperly by other members in terms of communication dynamics and lack of "netiquette" and good manners. Examples of such an improper use ranged from receiving too many messages not in line with the nature of the group, to getting texts at whatever time of the day. Many messages would report anecdotal and alarmist information causing confusion among members. A parent recounted of a mother who openly accused one of her daughter's classmates, aged 5, because he bit her arms, posting a photo of the child showing the wound and directly criticizing the child's parents. Others reported instances where teachers were attacked and criticized because of their classroom behavior, grades assigned or homework load. Many parents described other members as "enraged," "over critical," and "negative," contributing to the decision to leave the group.

Futile communication. Another reason for leaving was the perceived futile nature of many communication, leading to chitchat between members that was deemed pointless and unproductive.

Personal detachment. Several parents reported to have abandoned PWGs because of a feeling of personal detachment toward the other members and their ideas, defined as "annoying." Leaving the groups was a pragmatic way for parents to distance themselves from their peers and these interactional loci.

Dissolution of original purpose. Some respondents decided to leave the group because it was no longer useful as it used to be when they joined it. The most common occur-

rences were those of parents having children graduating and moving to a different scho-ol. While no negativity was associated with one's membership, this was just no longer responding to contingent needs, thus was practically useless.

Taken together, these findings can be grouped into two main thematic patterns explaining why parents would decide to leave PWGs. On the one hand are behaviors per-ceived as inappropriate, violating social and moral expectations (e.g. badmouthing other parents, children, and teachers), as well as leading to improper communication patterns in terms of quantity and quality of messages (e.g. too many messages at whatever time, not useful, nor in line with the purpose of the group). On the other is a perceived incon-gruence between the group and one's personal needs and beliefs, whether it be because parents would feel detached from and unconcerned with the group and its members, or because the chat room was no longer practically useful.

b) Reasons for staying

A total of 76 answers to the question asking why parents would still decide not to leave the group in spite of wanting to do so were coded. Six codes were developed: use-fulness (40%); social conformity (21%); fear of missing out (20%); exclusive information (9%); social role (5%); other (5%). The code "other" was used with borderline answers where none of the other codes was pertinent.

Usefulness. Most parents decided not to leave the groups because, after all, they were deemed useful, allowing them to get handy information concerning what is going on with the school, catch up on homework and tests, or organize school events.

Social conformity. Quite a few parents reported not to have abandoned these groups because they thought this kind of behavior was "not very kind" and not in compliance with social expectations and would have compromised their ability to fit into the group of parents offline. One parent stated, "I wanted to leave, but then realized this would have caused a rift with other parents and misunderstandings with the whole group," or, as another put it "I don't' want to look antisocial."

Fear of missing out. Several respondents reported on the need to continue being member of these groups because they feared they could miss out on social dynamics that would end up with excluding them and their children from the broader social circle these groups were part of. For example, a parent recounted of an occasion where she felt like abandoning the group, but then figured that she would have missed out on information about playdates or working groups, which consequently would have marginalized her son.

Exclusive information. This code grouped those instances where parents stressed that PWGs are so part of family-school communication to the point where they can be "the only place where you can find school information today." As an example of that, a mother stated that "quite often today educators, and actually the whole school in general, are not very efficient or just don't have time to communicate with families", so talking with other parents on these chats "allows you to get important information and direc-tions on your child's school life that you may not get otherwise."

Social role. A few parents reported that they could not quit PWGs because of the social role played within those groups, as they were on the board of parent-teacher orga-nizations (PTO), or served as room parents, facilitating communication between parents, teachers, and the school and organizing school events.

Altogether, reasons for not leaving PWGs can be grouped into three main thematic patterns. First, from a utilitarian point of view, these groups are deemed practically useful to get in touch with many parents at once, get information about school, homework, playdates or events. Second, parents fear to be left out from communication in terms of *a*) social dynamics and interpersonal relationships; *b*) school dynamics, risking losing exclusive information hard to get via official channels. Finally, as members of a group, some parents thought that abandoning a PWG would be perceived as a violation of implicit social norms and lack of common courtesy, risking to leave a bad impression on other parents and cause misunderstandings, sometimes even with respect to the social role played within the group (e.g. room parents).

5. Discussion

The literature on parent involvement, both offline and online, has tended to put the emphasis on institutional encounters and communication between the family and the school systems (Sheldon, 2002; Wasserman and Zwebner). However, studying ordinary peer interactions between parents is particularly pivotal today, as parental communities have developed into online arenas (Lupton et al., 2016). Parenting WhatsApp Groups represent an understudied extension of this phenomenon. This arises questions for educationalists with respect to their usage by parents to participate in their children's schooling by informally "encountering" peers in such interactional loci.

Previous research found that PWGs provide parents with new ways to be involved in the academic life of the offspring, allowing them to get information from peers and overcome time and physical boundaries, while at the same time fostering a collective democratic approach to parent involvement (Addi-Raccah and Yemini, 2018). Our study followed this line of inquiry to get a broader picture of this phenomenon with a sample of Italian parents. Our findings both confirm and expand previous literature on PWGs, online parenting, and parent involvement.

The majority of participants reported to be members of at least one PWG. Unsurprisingly, gender was the most significant predictor of membership, with mothers being significantly more likely than fathers to be members. The gendered dimension of membership is in line not only with the demographics of WhatsApp users (Montag et al., 2015), but also with previous studies on offline/online parent involvement and online communities (Blau and Hameiri, 2017; Hango, 2007; Lupton et al., 2016). Effects of parents' age and marital status were significant, yet marginal, while number of children and children's school level significantly predicted membership of at least one PWG.

Membership tended to increase from daycare to elementary school, reaching a peak in middle school and decreasing again in high school. While previous literature has documented the decline in parent involvement as a child reach high school (Epstein, 1983; Hornby and Lafaele, 2011), these results may either speak for a different usage of PWGs in different school levels, or –at the same time- be due to the convenience nature of the sample, as we will discuss later.

Both our quantitative and qualitative findings suggest that PWGs serve first a utilitarian purpose, for which they are highly valued: getting school information. While information-seeking through online communication can be intended as one of the indicators

of parent involvement in the digital age, a peculiarity of our findings is that, apart from that, members hold negative attitudes toward these chat rooms, questioning members' genuine desire to be part of them. This is significant, as the literature on other parenting platforms like parenting forums found that mothers think they are good places not only for information-seeking, but also for social and emotional support, fostering the opportunity to connect with members also outside of the forums and become friends (Dworkin et al., 2013).

Some parents abandoned these groups, whether it be because they were no longer useful (e.g. when the child graduated), or because parents felt a sense of detachment. But most of all, what led many parents to leave was a perceived improper use of these spaces with respect to their communication patterns, in terms of quantity and quality of messages. The affordance of WhatsApp of "constant availability" (Church and De Oliveira, 2013) plays a pivotal role here, with our findings aligning with previous studies where users reported frustration with this feature of being "always on" (Matassi et al., 2019).

In line with the theorizations on the *social life of things* (Appadurai, 1988), not only do people create and shape objects, but also attach personal and interpersonal meanings to them. PWGs, as idiosyncratic interactional loci, are embedded in a corpus of social norms and expectations that, consistent with Nouwens et al. (2017), have their own explicit/implicit rules, perceived purposes, emotional implications and expected behaviors.

In spite of some recognized pitfalls, other parents on the other hand wanted to leave but were held back from an array of responsibilities. It may be the case that being members of these groups can be perceived as a way to enact good parenting (Faircloth, 2014), implicitly allowing to perform the role of an involved parent in one's child's education. If PWGs provide parents with useful information, tolerating some discrepancies in terms of behavioral and moral expectations may be worth their while if they can be updated on what happens at school in return. This is all the more so if considered in light of many parents' busy schedules and the quick and easy access to information that WhatsApp allows. Not leaving because of social conformity, or to avoid to "disappoint the group," speaks for a concern with broader social mechanisms, showing that even within virtual groups parents may want to "save their face" (Goffman, 2017). Such an effort in interpersonal interactions is called "facework," or "the interactive process of establishing and maintaining face via communication" (Samp, 2015, p.2). Another reason not to leave was a *fear of missing out* (see Przybylski et al., 2013) on social dynamics that would potentially exclude parents and children from the broader social circle these groups were part of. This suggests that, while the informational nature of these groups is probably their most important feature, other relational and social forces are at work.

Finally, one last finding deserving further attention, although not very common, is the concept of "exclusive information," leading some parents to think that PWGs are "the only place where you can find school information today." Further research will be necessary to understand to what extent this can be the case, and whether possible communication issues between families and schools may actually make some information hard to get, leading some parents to rely on these groups as the sole opportunity to be updated on school matters.

From an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), PWGs can lead to positive improvements in terms of systemic transitions and interactions, in line with Epstein's

(2001) model of overlapping spheres of influence of family, school, and community, highlighting the shared responsibilities of each party to socialize and educate children. Technology, in this sense, can ease this process allowing parents a more democratic and accessible participation and engagement to their children's schooling. On the other hand, while the introduction of ICTs in school-family communication can rise enthusiasm, scholars have also considered whether such a climate may encourage circumstances where, along with the desire to micromanage children's lives, parents may more intensively be involved with their academic tasks and achievements (Gigli, 2012; 2017). Studies, in fact, support that parent involvement can have its cons, with teachers reporting concerns that children may not develop an adequate sense of responsibility when parents are "too much involved" (Epstein and Becker, 1982). The issue of over-involvement can be particularly accentuated by new technology, as the boundaries between the school and the family can blur up when communication is available everywhere and at any time (Kurtz, 2015).

As the debate in the Italian pedagogical literature has stressed (Gigli, 2016: 138), putting too much emphasis on parent involvement may:

- increase the gap between families of different socio-economic status, ethnicity, or dealing with a different plethora of life stressors, which may have different means to rely on when it comes to engage with their children's education;
- foster parental *hyperpresence*, which in turn could border on invasive behaviors, leaving little room for children to develop their independence, and for teachers to autonomously do their job without the fear of being "constantly accountable;"
- promote parental *hypo-presence*, or a state of physical and psychological absence where parents are too overwhelmed with so many tasks coming with neoliberal definitions of parenting, with parent involvement requirements risking to become one additional unrecognized labor, especially for women.

6. Conclusions, limitations, and future directions

The main purpose of this study was to explore and give some insights on PWG's usage among a sample of Italian parents, drawing on data from a semi-structured online survey. Our findings both confirmed and expanded previous research in the area, with the contribution of implementing the skeleton literature on Parenting WhatsApp Groups as interactional loci allowing for new dynamics of peer interactions and parent involvement to develop in the digital age.

However, several limitations need to be addressed. The first one is the convenience nature of our sample, due to the recruitment strategies through parenting online platforms. As these platforms are mostly "female-dominated" (Lupton et al., 2016), it is no surprise that women were oversampled. At the same time, the gendered dimension of parent involvement has been extensively supported over time, both offline and online (Blau and Hameiri, 2017; Hango, 2007). Another limitation was the absence of foreign parents, which again may be due to difference in the demographics of parenting websites compared to the broader population (Madge and O'Connor, 2006).

While our using Facebook as an online recruitment approach is methodologically common and strategic to engage parents in research studies as it allows to reach a sample of interest in a quick and cost-effective fashion (Dworkin et al., 2016), future research

can build on our preliminary findings and better put them into context with a large-scale representative sample.

As parents' beliefs and self-efficacy are two important variables of parent involvement (Sheldon, 2002), further quantitative studies can explore how they relate to the use of PWGs, controlling for other intervening variables like gender, children's age, or parents' digital literacy.

While our qualitative findings provided us with more insights on the nuanced usage of PWGs, semi-structured interviews and focus groups would allow to get a better understanding of this phenomenon, building on the interactivity between interviewers and participants, and possibly including also non-native parents. Findings, though, would still need to be interpreted carefully, given the social desirability of self-report methods and that when it comes to schooling parents have an interest in being perceived as "good" and "involved" parents (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005), possibly leading to a social-desirability bias effect (Fisher and Katz, 2000). As such, future research could employ methodological triangulation (Denzin, 2012; Duffy, 1987), for example by building on a netnography approach (Kozinets, 2010), to investigate naturally occurring data, their interactional nature and development, the array of topics discussed by parents and the way they are discussed, and possibly compare samples from different grades.

In terms of practical implications, we contend our findings can inform practitioners (e.g. educators and school principals) to consider technology and social media not only in their top-down format (i.e. with the school providing parents with institutionally oriented digital tools), but also as they are spontaneously used by parents. This would allow to better understand to what extent benefits of this platforms can be maximized while also getting some perspectives on their effective role in the broader realm of family-school-community interactions.

Last but not least, our data were collected before the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the unprecedented challenges this situation gave rise to with respect to every sphere of social life, including education, we advance further research could build on our findings to try and see whether and how parents' usage of and satisfaction with PWGs changed as a result of this global pandemic.

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