

WHATSAPP, GENDER, AND HUMAN CAPITAL: DIGITAL COMMUNICATION AS AN ARENA OF EMPOWERMENT IN INDONESIAN FAMILIES

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Abstract: This research investigates how digital communication within Indonesian families particularly through WhatsApp group chats shapes and reflects gender dynamics while contributing to the development of human capital. Using an interpretative qualitative approach, the research engaged 15 participants, including fathers, mothers, sons, and daughters aged 15 to 30, from various household structures. The findings reveal that symbolic male dominance, such as by fathers or brothers, persists in digital spaces. Meanwhile, female voices, especially those of daughters, are often muted or confined to domestic-related topics. Through the lens of Muted Group Theory and Standpoint Theory, the analysis shows that patriarchal norms are reproduced in digital interactions, yet these interactions also offer opportunities for transformation. In families practicing inclusive communication patterns, young women exhibit increased self-confidence, agency, and participation in decision-making. Family WhatsApp groups function not only as logistical tools but also as symbolic arenas where power is negotiated and emotional labor is performed. This research argues that gender-sensitive digital communication can serve as a grassroots empowerment strategy, strengthening social resilience and contributing to the development of adaptive and participatory human capital within the Indonesian cultural context.

Keywords: WhatsApp, gender, human capital, digital communication, Indonesian families

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, digital technology has transformed how families communicate, presenting both positive impacts and challenges. Social media, instant messaging, and video calls have enabled family members to stay connected despite physical distance and have enriched intergenerational interactions (Barrie et al., 2019; Syukur et al., 2024; Taipale, 2019). However, uncontrolled use can lead to technoferece digital disruptions that hinder the quality of relationships, displace face-to-face communication, and increase family conflicts (Almeida et al., 2024; Tammissalo & Rotkirch, 2022).

Research challenges arise from the scarcity of qualitative studies and insufficient exploration of how digital communication influences family relationships and gender roles in non-Western contexts, particularly among children and adolescents (Lafton et al., 2023; Tammissalo & Rotkirch, 2022). This gap necessitates further investigation into family-oriented digital platforms and digital social capital as both tools for empowerment and potential sources of relational distraction (Abrantes et al., 2017; Dubrov, 2020).

Digital platforms facilitate communication among family members living across different locations and time zones by providing features such as text, voice, image, and video messaging. These tools enable asynchronous and multidirectional communication across generations (Taipale & Farinosi, 2018). During the COVID-19 pandemic, WhatsApp played a significant role in fostering psychological resilience by serving as a channel for emotional support and information exchange among family members (Esteve-Del-Valle et al., 2022). In transnational families, WhatsApp groups are also used to coordinate elder care, although they sometimes reinforce unequal gender roles (Tawodzera, 2025).

However, WhatsApp use also raises privacy concerns, as the constant sense of being watched within family groups may suppress conflict and unconsciously regulate behavior (Moyano Dávila et al., 2023). Furthermore, the platform shapes new norms of family communication, such as expectations around message replies, expressions of respect, and digital etiquette across generations and cultures (Adzmi et al., 2021; Weng et al., 2024). Therefore, WhatsApp is not merely a practical communication tool but also a social space that influences the dynamics of modern family life.

Digital media simultaneously offers opportunities and poses challenges to gender roles within Indonesia's patriarchal family structures. Women continue to face barriers to online participation due to limited digital literacy, an issue deeply rooted in unequal access to education and entrenched patriarchal norms (Suwana, 2017). Nevertheless, social media

platforms have emerged as spaces for self-expression, enabling women to defy gender stereotypes and engage in sociopolitical activism (Winarnita et al., 2022).

On the other hand, social media usage can also disrupt household harmony, contributing to rising divorce rates and interpersonal conflict, though it may also foster greater transparency and communication between partners (Nurjanah et al., 2024; Nugroho et al., 2025). Within religious communities such as Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), women's access to digital platforms is frequently restricted by prevailing cultural and moral codes (Hefner, 2022). At the same time, Muslim mothers play a significant role in monitoring and guiding their children's online behaviors (Lim, 2016). This research explores gender-sensitive digital communication within Indonesian families as a strategic approach to developing human capital, emphasizing empowerment, self-confidence, and collaborative agency. While digital interactions replicate patriarchal hierarchies offline, they also present opportunities for transformation.

Theoretically, the study draws on Muted Group Theory and Standpoint Theory, integrating sociocultural frameworks to understand how digital communication can reinforce or challenge gender inequalities. Although prior studies emphasize institutional reforms, the significance of everyday interactions in digital family communication remains underexplored in Indonesia. This study proposes a grassroots, family-centered approach to communication, positioning the family as a primary site for social transformation.

The study addresses two central questions: First, how do Indonesian family members subjectively experience gender-aware digital communication? Second, how does this form of communication foster empowerment and contribute to human capital formation?

2 METHODS

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling and snowball referrals to ensure a diversity of perspectives relevant to the study's aims. The sample comprised 15 members of Indonesian families, including fathers, mothers, and both male and female children aged 15 to 30 years, capturing a range of generational voices and household structures. Detailed participant characteristics are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

| Participant Code | Age | Gender | Role in Family | Education Level | Location |
|------------------|-----|--------|----------------|-----------------|----------|
| P1 | 48 | Male | Father | Bachelor's | Urban |
| P2 | 45 | Female | Mother | Bachelor's | Urban |
| P3 | 19 | Female | Daughter | High School | Urban |
| P4 | 22 | Male | Son | Bachelor's | Urban |
| P5 | 50 | Male | Father | High School | Rural |
| P6 | 47 | Female | Mother | High School | Rural |
| P7 | 21 | Female | Daughter | Bachelor's | Rural |
| P8 | 24 | Male | Son | Bachelor's | Rural |
| P9 | 52 | Male | Father | Master's | Urban |
| P10 | 49 | Female | Mother | Master's | Urban |
| P11 | 17 | Female | Daughter | High School | Urban |
| P12 | 29 | Male | Son | Master's | Urban |
| P13 | 46 | Male | Father | Bachelor's | Rural |
| P14 | 44 | Female | Mother | Bachelor's | Rural |
| P15 | 18 | Female | Daughter | High School | Rural |

Inclusion criteria focused on participants actively engaged in digital family communication, particularly through family WhatsApp groups, and those who had experience in family decision-making processes. Selection also considered gender dynamics within these digital interactions, such as who typically initiates conversations and whose messages elicit responses. This approach enabled the collection of authentic narratives from individuals who are deeply embedded in digital exchanges that either reflect or challenge prevailing gender norms. Snowball sampling was particularly useful in reaching families that might otherwise be overlooked through conventional recruitment strategies.

Data were gathered via semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 45 minutes, conducted either in-person or through digital platforms such as Zoom or Google Meet, depending on the participants' availability and location. The semi-structured format provided a balance between guided questioning and open-ended exploration, allowing participants to express their experiences in rich and nuanced ways.

Interview questions were designed to probe communication dynamics within family WhatsApp groups. Sample questions included: "Who is the most active participant in conversations?", "Whose voice is acknowledged or ignored?", and "Who usually initiates or concludes important discussions?" These prompts aimed to uncover symbolic power relations, silences, and emotional expressions embedded in everyday digital dialogues.

All interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to ensure cultural and linguistic relevance. The recordings were transcribed and translated for thematic analysis. With participants' consent, all interviews were recorded, and researchers took note of non-verbal cues and contextual details. The approach was intentionally flexible, allowing emergent themes to surface organically throughout the data collection process.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was employed to explore participants' lived experiences in depth. The initial phase involved multiple readings of the transcripts to develop a holistic understanding. Key statements were annotated, and preliminary themes were identified, particularly those reflecting gendered patterns of communication.

These emerging themes were then clustered into broader categories, capturing shared meanings across participants' narratives. A thematic framework was constructed to highlight the essence of their experiences, focusing on issues such as whose voices are validated, tensions between affection and authority, and subtle forms of empowerment both expressed and suppressed within digital family interactions.

Interpretations were conducted manually to maintain sensitivity to linguistic and cultural context. The analysis was iterative and reflective, constantly moving between individual cases and overarching themes. To ensure validity, the study employed source triangulation (e.g., comparing parent and child accounts), member checking (participant feedback on interpretations), and maintained a comprehensive audit trail documenting all analytic decisions. All analytical interpretations were informed by a gender-conscious lens, drawing upon Standpoint Theory, Muted Group Theory, and the broader cultural context of Indonesian family life.

3 RESULTS

Participant narratives reveal a clear asymmetry in the distribution of voice within family digital communication, particularly in WhatsApp group chats. Older male figures, such as fathers or elder brothers, tend to dominate conversations and steer the direction of discussions. Phrases like "Dad is usually the one who decides" surfaced repeatedly during interviews, indicating that symbolic dominance remains prevalent even in digital family spaces.

In contrast, the voices of women, especially younger daughters, are often sidelined. Their input is typically acknowledged only when addressing domestic matters such as cooking or hobbies, but is disregarded when offering strategic perspectives, for example, on financial decisions. A 19-year-old female participant shared, *"When I gave advice about family savings, no one replied. But when I sent a cake recipe, everyone responded enthusiastically."*

These findings align with the premises of Muted Group Theory, which argues that dominant groups construct and control public communication channels, compelling subordinate groups, such as women, to either conform or remain silent. In this case, while digital media theoretically expands avenues for expression, entrenched gender norms within patriarchal family structures continue to suppress women's voices, especially in conversations deemed "serious."

From the perspective of Standpoint Theory, women's experiences in family WhatsApp groups highlight their distinct and often overlooked social positioning. This theoretical lens underscores that marginalized groups possess unique epistemic sensibilities due to their lived experiences at the periphery. When a daughter's strategic input is ignored, it is not simply a matter of miscommunication but a reflection of internalized power relations within digital familial discourse.

Nonetheless, this inequality is not universal. Participants from families with higher levels of education or those residing in urban areas reported greater opportunities for mothers and daughters to participate meaningfully in conversations. In such contexts, women's voices were more likely to be acknowledged, particularly when discussing emotional, relational, or digitally literate subjects. These findings support the view that factors such as educational attainment and socioeconomic status significantly shape digital communication dynamics within families (Syukur et al., 2024; Suratnoaji & Alamiyah, 2025).

Although digital technology holds the potential to empower, everyday practices suggest that digital spaces still function as arenas for the reproduction of inequality. WhatsApp, in this context, is not merely a communication tool but a symbolic arena where power, identity, and values within the family are continuously negotiated. Participants described various strategies to cope with these gendered tensions, including explicitly setting group communication rules, negotiating family guidelines about acceptable online behaviors, and openly discussing misunderstandings or conflicts offline to avoid digital misunderstandings. As one participant shared, *"In our family, we agreed not to discuss sensitive topics through WhatsApp, but rather discuss them face-to-face to avoid conflicts."*

Participants described the family WhatsApp group as a dual-functioning space: simultaneously a logistical management tool and a medium for emotional exchange. On the one hand, it facilitates the coordination of family schedules, the delivery of instructions, and the negotiation of decisions. On the other hand, it serves as a platform for expressing affection and nurturing emotional closeness.

Interestingly, participants observed a gendered reception of messages. Disciplinary or corrective messages sent by male figures such as fathers or older brothers were often perceived as "firm" and "reasonable." In contrast, similar messages delivered by mothers or daughters were frequently labeled as "nagging" or "overly emotional."

This reflects how power and emotional labor are distributed and interpreted along gender lines in digital family communication. Muted Group Theory sheds light on this phenomenon: women often lack equal symbolic access to assert authority, causing their expressions to be filtered through stereotypes that diminish their legitimacy. While male messages are interpreted as rational, female messages are more likely to be dismissed as emotional or intrusive, highlighting the gendered asymmetry in message interpretation.

From the lens of Standpoint Theory, women's emotional contributions in family WhatsApp groups should not be seen as a weakness, but rather as a form of epistemic strength, rooted in their social roles as emotional anchors of the family. One participant shared, *"When mom sends the morning prayer message, everyone replies. It feels warm."* Such expressions not only strengthen familial bonds but also reflect women's agency in cultivating a supportive digital environment.

Expressions of affection such as prayers, congratulatory notes, and emotional support were predominantly initiated by mothers or older daughters. Although men often retain dominance in decision-making processes, women play an irreplaceable role in sustaining digital intimacy. This underscores that digital platforms are not merely spaces of authority but also intricate relational arenas interwoven with affective dynamics.

In this context, WhatsApp functions as both a symbolic space of power and a domain for emotional labor. This aligns with findings that suggest WhatsApp operates not only as a communication tool but also as a sociocultural space that reinforces or contests gender norms and familial power structures (Esteve-Del-Valle et al., 2022; Moyano Dávila et al., 2023; Tawodzera, 2025).

The interpretation of messages within family WhatsApp groups cannot be disentangled from gender-based power relations. Women continue to shoulder the burden of digital emotional labor, often without symbolic recognition. Hence, it is essential to frame digital family communication not merely as message exchange, but as a social arena that (re)produces structures, roles, and values embedded in patriarchal cultural contexts.

Participants revealed that digital communication within the family, particularly through WhatsApp groups, serves not only as a space for daily interaction but also as a transformative tool that fosters agency and empowerment, especially for young women. When families provide equitable opportunities for participation in digital conversations, female members tend to feel more confident, valued, and included in decision-making processes.

One 21-year-old female participant shared, *"I started to believe that my opinion matters not just at home but also outside,"* after being consistently encouraged to express her views in household logistics discussions. This encouragement laid the groundwork for her later involvement in a digital campaign on gender awareness in her community. These findings suggest that inclusive communication in digital family settings can transcend domestic boundaries and stimulate public engagement.

This phenomenon can be analyzed through the lens of Standpoint Theory, which emphasizes that individuals from marginalized groups, in this case, young women, possess unique lived experiences that enable them to develop a critical awareness of unequal social structures. When families create space for women to voice their thoughts and contribute to family discourse, the process not only elevates their position but also enriches the quality of dialogue through more diverse and reflective perspectives.

Conversely, Muted Group Theory explains how young women in families have often been symbolically silenced by patriarchal norms of communication. However, their active involvement in more democratic digital spaces serves as a form of "unmuting": a dismantling of symbolic silence through recognized and valued participation.

Several participants noted behavioral changes in themselves or other family members. Daughters who were once passive became more assertive, while fathers or brothers began to listen and respond more supportively. For instance, one participant explained how her family explicitly discussed these changes: *"We talked openly about how we should respect each other's opinions in the WhatsApp group. My father started to ask more questions and acknowledged my contributions, which made our group warmer."* This indicates that families actively employed strategies to overcome communication challenges, facilitating mutual respect and empathy.

Gender-sensitive digital communication, therefore, functions not merely as an empowerment tool for marginalized groups but also as a reflective mechanism for dominant groups to redefine power relations within the family. In this context, WhatsApp becomes more than just a chat platform; it evolves into a social arena where trust, empathy, and mutual appreciation help cultivate human capital.

4 DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study reveal that gender-sensitive digital communication within Indonesian families serves both as a mirror and a catalyst for social transformation. Digital platforms such as WhatsApp have become integral to the management of daily family life; however, their usage often reproduces existing gender hierarchies present in the offline world. On the other hand, these platforms also offer unique opportunities to renegotiate power dynamics, particularly when communication practices are inclusive and attentive to voice equity.

In line with Standpoint Theory, the data suggest that individuals' positions within the family hierarchy significantly shape how they engage in digital communication and how their messages are received. Female participants, especially daughters, shared experiences of having their voices silenced or acknowledged only when aligned with traditional gender expectations. These findings reinforce the theoretical view that marginalized groups navigate communication through the lens of social power, wherein recognition is granted primarily when they conform to dominant norms. Additionally, participants' narratives support the Muted Group Theory, which highlights how language and discourse in family chats often reinforce male authority, requiring women to carefully craft their expressions in order to be heard.

Nonetheless, the study provides compelling evidence that digital communication can become a space for empowerment when designed to foster participatory dialogue. Families that adopt more egalitarian communication patterns tend to cultivate self-confidence, agency, and social initiative among younger members, especially girls. These results resonate with previous research indicating that inclusive family communication fosters critical thinking and collaborative skills, thereby enriching human capital development (Syukur et al., 2024; Weng et al., 2024). Moreover, this aligns with Standpoint Theory's assertion that marginalized voices, once heard and valued, can significantly enhance overall discourse quality.

This empowerment process becomes evident in families that utilize digital communication for shared decision-making, open emotional exchange, and intergenerational dialogue. Such practices are not only democratic in form but also transformative in function, encouraging each family member to see themselves as a valuable contributor. Fathers and sons who actively listen to and acknowledge women's voices reported increased family cohesion and mutual respect, indicating that gender-sensitive communication also enhances emotional development and social understanding among male members.

It is essential to interpret these findings within the cultural context of Indonesian family life. Unlike many Western societies that are predominantly individualistic and nuclear in structure, Indonesian families are generally grounded in values of collectivism and hierarchy. Norms such as *sopan santun* (politeness) and *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) subtly yet powerfully shape digital communication practices. This culturally nuanced perspective aligns with existing studies suggesting that silence and indirect expressions in communication can signify respect rather than marginalization, necessitating careful interpretation within non-Western contexts (Barizi et al., 2024; Hefner, 2022).

From a practical standpoint, this research yields several implications. Educators and school counselors are encouraged to guide families toward inclusive communication strategies, fostering developmental resilience in children (Lafton et al., 2023). Policymakers should prioritize gender-equitable digital literacy programs to enhance family communication habits critically and reflectively (Nurjanah et al., 2024). Additionally, technology developers could implement features such as balanced contribution indicators and rotation of conversational roles, thus actively promoting inclusivity and equity within digital family interactions (Dubrov, 2020)(Esteve-Del-Valle et al., 2022).

5 CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study underscore the critical importance of gender-sensitive digital communication within the family context as a foundational pillar for cultivating empowered and resilient human capital. Equitable and participatory digital interactions function not merely as channels for information exchange, but also as transformative spaces that foster empowerment—particularly among young women. When all family members are granted equal opportunity to express their voices through digital platforms such as WhatsApp groups, it cultivates self-confidence, nurtures broader social aspirations, and promotes active engagement in decision-making processes. This dynamic, in turn, facilitates the emergence of change agents from within the family who can contribute meaningfully to broader social spheres.

Conversely, digital communication patterns that perpetuate patriarchal hierarchies, such as the dominance of male voices or the silencing of female perspectives, tend to hinder empowerment efforts and exacerbate relational inequalities within the family unit. As such, inclusivity in digital communication is not only an ethical imperative but also a strategic approach to strengthening individual capacities as part of a broader human capital development agenda.

Furthermore, communication practices that acknowledge and validate all voices within the family have been shown to foster adaptive and resilient character development emotionally, socially, and cognitively. Participants demonstrated specific coping strategies to address communication tensions, such as explicitly agreed-upon family rules and regular offline discussions to resolve misunderstandings, illustrating proactive approaches to managing digital communication issues. Thus, equitable and participatory digital communication becomes a strategic component in reinforcing social resilience and enhancing the quality of human capital at the family level, ultimately contributing to broader national development goals.

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