Digital Dialogues of Displacement: Exploring the Role of Whatsapp in Addressing Family Reunification Challenges and Transnational Parenthood Among Pakistani Migrants in Italy

Syed Imran Haider[a], Iqbal Hussain[b]

Abstract

This study explores the role of WhatsApp in addressing family reunification challenges, promoting emotional well-being, and sustaining transnational parenthood among Pakistani migrants in Italy. Given the complexities of family reunification policies and the emotional toll of long-distance relationships, this research aims to understand how digital communication technologies especially WhatsApp, help migrants navigate these issues and maintain familial bonds across borders. The study employs a sequential mixed-methods approach, combining an online survey conducted through Google Forms with content analysis of WhatsApp group real conversations. The results reveal that WhatsApp serves as a critical tool for transnational families, facilitating real-time communication, emotional support, and the preservation of parental roles despite geographical separation. It also advances the understanding of how digital media not only sustains family ties but also functions as a form of digital kinning, fostering reciprocal care and emotional resilience among transnational migrants. Content analysis identified major areas of difficulty in family reunification including documentation, lengthy procedures and meeting economic requirements and the social networking has been seen as platform to seek support from each other. Such groups need to be guided and encouraged by the relevant stakeholders so the peer-to-peer support mechanisms could be strengthened.

Keywords: fathering, transnational fatherhood, migration, family studies, digital caregiving, diaspora networks.

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1   Introduction

In an era of unprecedented global migration, the significance of polymedia technologies within transnational migrant communities has grown since the onset of the new millennium, driven by the evolution and widespread adoption of smartphones, internet technologies and social media platforms (Leurs & Smets, 2018). Today, digital communication technologies have become essential in maintaining transnational relationships and situations associated with displacement (Kılıç & Bodur, 2024). The digital media, mainly WhatsApp, a widely used instant messaging platform, plays a pivotal role in facilitating communication, particularly for migrant communities separated by geographical boundaries (Udenze & Ugoala, 2019).

Family reunification remains one of the most pressing concerns for transnational migrants, as restrictive immigration policies, bureaucratic hurdles, and economic constraints often delay or prevent the legal reunification of spouses and children (Ambrosini, 2015). Family reunification policies differ across countries, often influenced by immigration laws, economic conditions, and social integration policies. In some countries, like Canada and Germany, relatively flexible regulations facilitate the reunification of families, whereas stricter policies in countries like the United States and Denmark impose financial and legal barriers, including income thresholds and language requirements (Boehm, 2017; Kofman, 2018). In Italy, family reunification is a complex and time-consuming process than is commonly believed. Nearly 30% of reunifications in Italy are partial wherein all kids are not reunited. Many other reunifications, specifically for some national groups, are accomplished with informal procedures, especially when husbands join their wives, likely due to the strict legal requirements for income, housing size, and tenure in the country (Ambrosini, 2015). The discriminatory aspects of Italy's family reunification policies, highlight how legal and bureaucratic barriers create inequalities for migrant families. The migrants' experiences reveal contradictions within policies that claim to support integration but often reinforce exclusion (Della Puppa, 2025).

In recent years, Italian sociological literature has increasingly explored the dynamics of migrant families by analyzing the processes of family reunification (Ambrosini et al., 2010; Bonizzoni, 2009; Della Puppa, 2025; Rossi & Scabini, 2008; Tognetti Bordogna, 2011a). These studies examine the transformations in generational and gender roles that occur before and after migration and reunification (Tognetti Bordogna, 2005).

Research on family reunification has also focused on its various experiential forms, including cases where the primary migrant is a man or a woman, and the reunification of different family members such as spouses,

children, or parents. Scholars have highlighted the challenges and repercussions that reunification entails for migrant families (Ambrosini, 2014; Bonizzoni, 2009; Della Puppa, 2025). Moreover, the reunification process has been conceptualized as a broader migratory strategy involving entire households (Tognetti Bordogna, 2011a). It is also recognized as a crucial stage in the social construction of masculinity among male migrants. Della Puppa (2014) specifically examines Bangladeshi migrant men, illustrating how they use family reunification to reassert their identity as responsible adults and family providers in their host country.

Emotional well-being is another crucial aspect of the migrant experience, with many facing significant mental health challenges due to loneliness, stress, and social exclusion. Prolonged separation from the family leaves negative psychological and emotional impacts both on the migrants and their left behind family members (Silver, 2014). Transnational families feel more fragmented not only due to geographical separation but also because of the gradual decline in shared meaningful experiences between migrants in the host country and their left behind family members in the source country (Adebayo, 2020; Fuller-Iglesias, 2015; Larrinaga-Bidegain et al., 2024).

In navigating these complex transnational realities, scholars like Bryceson and Vuorela (2002) have identified two fundamental strategies employed by families: frontiering and relativizing. Frontiering denotes the active and deliberate set of ways in which transnational families attempt to maintain and reinforce family relationships despite the physical separation imposed by migration. This includes practices aimed at preserving emotional closeness, shared norms, and a sense of collective identity across borders. Conversely, relativizing refers to the adaptive processes through which individuals create, develop, or even consciously diminish relationships with other members of their family of origin, adjusting to the practicalities and emotional demands of distance. Bryceson and Vuorela (2002) further conceptualize the family in migration as an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1991), drawing parallels with national or ethnic identities that are sustained through shared narratives, symbols, and communication, rather than constant face-to-face interaction. However, this conceptualization, while insightful, has also been critically questioned and enriched by other scholars (Ambrosini, 2019; Della Puppa, 2014; Tognetti Bordogna, 2011b), who highlight the dynamic, often contested, and sometimes fragmented nature of these "imagined" bonds in lived experience, emphasizing that digital connections, while powerful, do not erase the challenges of physical absence or the complexities of power dynamics within families. This ongoing theoretical debate underscores the need for empirical research that delves into the specific mechanisms and lived experiences of maintaining family cohesion in the digital age. Parenting in such

families relies heavily on long-distance communication, which serves as a vital bridge for maintaining relationships across borders. Research on migrant transnationalism highlights how migrants strive to maintain a social and emotional presence despite physical separation. This virtual presence becomes particularly crucial and often challenging within parent-child relationships (Carling et al., 2012). However, internet and digital platforms (like Facebook & WhatsApp) provide a mean of emotional support by allowing migrants to share their experiences, seek guidance, and express their feelings within their family and community networks. The ability to receive immediate reassurance from loved ones can help mitigate the sense of isolation and provide a much-needed coping mechanism. WhatsApp and Facebook have become the latest communication revolution that facilitate transnational family interactions by enabling the free flow of news and updates. This technological connectivity allows family members to maintain a sense of belonging and emotional attachment across borders (Plaza & Plaza, 2019).

WhatsApp serves as a digital bridge, enabling real-time communication and maintaining a sense of intimacy despite geographical distance. Through features like voice and video calls, instant messaging, and multimedia sharing, WhatsApp facilitates ongoing interactions that help migrants remain actively involved in their family's lives (Ortiz Cobo et al., 2024). Access to the internet and the ability to use digital platforms are increasingly crucial for migrant communities to stay connected with loved ones, seek support, and navigate social and legal challenges (Baldassar et al., 2024). Keeping the importance of digital platforms for migrant communities in front, this study aims to explore the role of WhatsApp in addressing the challenges of family reunification, emotional well-being, and transnational parenthood among Pakistani migrants in Italy. By examining the lived experiences of these migrants, the study will provide insights into how digital communication reconfigures familial relationships, addresses reunification challenges, fosters emotional resilience, and exercises transnational parenthood. Furthermore, it will also assess the effectiveness and limitations of WhatsApp as a tool for sustaining family connections in the context of migration.

1.1 *Pakistani migrants in Italy*

Pakistani migrant community is one of the most recently settled groups of migrants in Italy. However, it shows clear signs of an ongoing stabilization process, marked by increasing long-term residency, family reunifications, and greater social and economic integration within Italian society (Abenante, 2017). The Pakistani community in Italy has experienced an exponential growth in the

past decade. As of January 1, 2023, there were 138,884 legally residing Pakistanis, making it the ninth-largest non-EU community in the country (Ministry of Labor, 2023). Majority of Pakistani migrants arriving in Italy come from Punjab, particularly from the central districts. The most common regions of origin include Gujrat (24%), Mandi Bahauddin (12.7%), Gujranwala (8.7%), Jhelum (7%), Sialkot (6%), Rawalpindi (4.7%), Sargodha (4.7%), and Lahore (3.6%). Additionally, a smaller proportion of migrants come from Peshawar in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (3%) and Karachi in Sindh (3%) (Mukhtar, 2020). In the year 2022, a total of 20,094 Pakistani citizens arrived in Italy, marking a 36.1% increase from the previous year. The primary reason for entry was/is asylum-seeking or the pursuit of protective status, accounting for approximately 42% of Pakistani arrivals, an increase of 38.4% compared to the previous year. Notably, the Pakistani migrant community ranks second among the non-EU migrant groups in terms of the prevalence of this immigration motive (Ministry of Labor, 2023). The immigration process is primarily facilitated through social networks and digital communications. Workplace connections also play a significant role, accounting for 23% of migration links, followed by social media and messaging apps including WhatsApp and Facebook (IOM, 2020).

1.2 Transnational parenting

Transnational parenting encompasses the strategies employed by migrant parents to sustain their parenting roles despite spatial separation. Studies have shown that the physical separation resulting from parental migration can be challenging that negatively affects the well-being of parents and their left behind children (Haagsman & Mazzucato, 2021). However, migrant parents construct their migration as sacrifice for the wellbeing of their family. They often feel proud of contributing to a better future for their children and families (Hershberg, 2018; Poeze, 2019). Parenting in the context of migration demands clear arrangements and continuous negotiations to maintain family stability and ensure effective functioning, especially in terms of roles, responsibilities, and expectations (Peng & Wong, 2016). Migration may result in the redistribution of gender roles in transnational families. For instance, women who migrate become the new main provider while those who left behind are expected to intensify their caring roles with some additional responsibilities which are normally expected from men (Larrinaga-Bidegain et al., 2024; León, 2011). However, the stereotypical attributions of gender roles tend to be dominant even in transnational parenting that view fathers as providers and mothers as care-takers (Aldana, 2017; Hernández Cordero, 2016). Gender differences are apparent in transnational parenting evident from the fact that transnational

mothers prioritize keeping the family united and often consider the possibility of returning, while transnational fathers focus more on finding ways for their spouses and children to join them abroad, to access better job opportunities and enhance the family's financial stability (Apatinga et al., 2022).

1.3 ICTs (WhatsApp) & digital dialogues

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) allow transnational parents to easily and affordably communicate with their children and families in their home country (Larrinaga-Bidegain et al., 2024). Easy-to-use applications such as WhatsApp enhance synchronous and asynchronous communication through exchange of images, text and voice messages, calls, and video chats that allows migrant parents to preserve a sense of connections and to strengthen family bonds (Chalá-Mejía & Suquillo, 2024). Through digital communication, intimacy and long-distance care is ensured despite physical separation that serves as a form of co-prescience for transnational parents with their left behind children (Larrinaga-Bidegain et al., 2024; Leifsen & Tymczuk, 2012). Communicative technologies (Facebook, WhatsApp and other messaging applications) have become channels to demonstrate authentic parent-child relationship across borders (Ou et al., 2023). These "digital dialogues" help to bridge the physical gap, allowing parents to be involved in their children's daily lives, albeit virtually. For example, transnational parents can help their children with homework, advise them on eating habits or share with them their knowledge and experiences that counter the psychosocial threat of losing their role as caring parents (Larrinaga-Bidegain et al., 2024). However, scholars argue that while technology facilitates communication, it cannot fully replace in-person interactions and may sometimes exacerbate emotional strain due to time zone differences and connectivity issues (Baldassar et al., 2016). Despite these limitations, digital platforms remain a vital tool for transnational families to sustain relationships and manage caregiving responsibilities across borders. WhatsApp groups, in particular, promote digital kinning, which refers to the process of creating and maintaining familial-like relationships and caring environment through digital communication (Baldassar & Wilding, 2020). The term "kinning" highlights how new technologies and digital apps (WhatsApp chat groups) foster reciprocal social relationships through care and support among members of support networks (Merla et al., 2021).

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2   Methodology

This study employs a sequential mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative content analysis of WhatsApp group conversations, to comprehensively explore the role of digital communication in addressing family reunification challenges, emotional well-being, and transnational parenthood among Pakistani migrants in Italy. The methodological framework prioritizes ethical integrity, data reliability, and rigorous analytical procedures, which are central to the research journey (Okorie et al., 2024).

2.1. Access to fieldwork and researcher positionality

Access to the fieldwork was facilitated through an existing WhatsApp group, "Family Reunion & Cohesion," established in August 2022, which comprises over 400 Pakistani migrants in Italy actively discussing and seeking guidance on family reunification. As a Pakistani migrant researcher myself, currently based in Italy as an MSCA Fellow, my shared nationality and lived experience provided a crucial foundation for establishing trust and rapport within this community. This insider positionality allowed for a deeper understanding of the nuanced challenges faced by the participants and potentially enhanced their willingness to engage with the research. However, I am acutely aware of the need for reflexivity regarding potential biases arising from this position, particularly in interpreting responses and ensuring that participant voices were not inadvertently shaped by my own perspectives. Efforts were made to maintain neutrality during data collection and analysis, and interpretations were triangulated where possible.

2.2. Data collection and ethical considerations

Data collection was conducted entirely online, reflecting the digital nature of the study's focus and the transnational context of the participants.

2.2.1.   Quantitative data

Quantitative data was collected through an online survey administered via Google Forms. The survey targeted Pakistani migrants in Italy who were members of the aforementioned WhatsApp group. Purposive sampling was

employed to ensure the participation of individuals actively engaged in discussions related to family reunification and transnational family life. The survey was shared directly within the WhatsApp group, inviting members to participate voluntarily. A total of 71 members/respondents completed the survey, serving as the sample size for this quantitative component.

The survey was designed to gather essential demographic information, details about their migration experiences, the composition of their transnational families, and their perceptions regarding the frequency, nature, and perceived effectiveness of WhatsApp in facilitating family cohesion, addressing reunification challenges, and mediating emotional well-being and transnational parenthood. All survey questions were formulated in English, considering the diverse linguistic backgrounds of the target population and English being a common language of communication in academic and formal contexts for many migrants. To protect privacy and ensure anonymity, personal identifiers such as names and phone numbers were not collected, and sensitive information was anonymized during data processing.

2.2.2. Qualitative data

Qualitative data for content analysis was retrieved from the WhatsApp group conversations that took place between January 2024 and January 2025. This period was selected to capture recent and relevant interactions within the group concerning family reunification challenges, emotional support, and discussions pertinent to transnational parenthood. The conversations were primarily conducted in a mix of Urdu and English, reflecting the linguistic practices of the Pakistani diaspora. Relevant conversations were meticulously transcribed and translated into English for analysis, with careful attention to preserving the original meaning and context.

Informed consent was a paramount ethical consideration for both data streams. For the survey, consent was obtained through a clear introductory statement on the Google Form, explaining the study's purpose, data usage, confidentiality measures, and the voluntary nature of participation, with participants clicking to confirm their consent before proceeding. For the WhatsApp group content analysis, explicit informed consent was obtained from the group administrator and all active participants whose messages were to be analyzed. This involved a detailed explanation of the research, emphasizing voluntary participation, the confidentiality of their contributions, and their right to withdraw their consent or request the exclusion of their messages at any time (Xu et al., 2020). Measures were taken to anonymize all participants in the chat history during data processing and reporting, ensuring that no identifiable

information was disclosed. Understanding and applying anonymity and confidentiality in research is key for credible research (Kang & Hwang, 2023).

2.3. Data Analysis

2.3.1.   Descriptive statistics

Quantitative data was analyzed through SPSS for calculating frequencies and percentages for the key concepts. In order to make the analysis more representative for knowing the experience of the respondents regarding the family reunification process (including embassy process, family authorization, appointment, documents legalization etc) and the role of WhatsApp in seeking guidance from friends, the results were presented through line graphs.

2.3.2.   Coding and thematic analysis

A thematic analysis approach (Clarke & Braun, 2017) was applied to identify patterns and recurring themes in the conversations. The initial coding process involved open coding, where messages were labeled based on their primary content. Subsequently, axial coding was used to group related codes into broader categories, such as documents legalization challenges, accommodation challenges, bureaucratic hurdles and emotional stress. These themes were then refined through iterative analysis to ensure accuracy and representativeness of the findings.

3   Results and discussion

3.1. Respondents' demographics

Participants' demographics, including age, education, occupation/employment, length of stay, and experiences with the family reunification process, reveal significant insights. The results (in table 1) showcased that majority of the respondents (76.1%) belonged to the age group 26-35 years followed by age group 36-45 years, which makes 15.5% of the respondents. The results are consistent with the Ministry of Labor (2023) report that reflects 43.1% migration trends in Pakistanis under the age of 30 and 47% migration rate among Pakistanis aging 30 to 50 years. The results further revealed that 47.9 respondents were from Punjab province of Pakistan. The

results are aligned with that of Mukhtar (2020), who pointed out that majority of Pakistani migrants arriving in Italy come from Punjab, particularly from the central districts with a small percentage from Peshawar in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Karachi in Sindh province of Pakistan.

Table 1. Respondents' Demographic.

Age	Frequency	Percent
18-25 years	6	8.5
26-35 years	54	76.1
36-45 years	11	15.5
Total	71	100.0
City/Province		
Islamabad/Federal Area	20	28.2
Peshawar/KP	7	9.9
Lahore/Punjab	34	47.9
Karachi/Sindh	8	11.3
Quetta/Baluchistan	2	2.8
Total	71	100.0
Education		
14 years education graduate	2	2.8
16 years education Graduate	15	21.1
Post-graduation	54	76.1
Total	71	100.0
Occupation/Employment		
Student	36	50.7
Researcher/Postdoc	24	33.8
Full time employed	5	7.0
Part time employed	6	8.5
Total	71	100.0
Duration of stay		
Less than 1 year	12	16.9
1 to 3 years	44	62.0
4 to 6 years	7	9.9
More than 6 years	8	11.3
Total	71	c
Family Reunification		
In process	49	69.0
Reunited within last 1 year	3	4.2
Reunited 1-3 years ago	3	4.2
Reunited 3-5 years ago	1	1.4
Not planning for reunification	15	21.1
Total	71	100.0

The influx of Pakistani migrants to Italy was observed mainly for educational purpose. Majority of the respondents came to Italy for post-graduation either as students to pursue their degrees or carry out their research

work. For majority of respondents (62.0%), duration of stay in Italy was 1-3 years but had not completed their family reunification process. For this reason, they were planning for family unification which was under process. A small proportion of the respondents was already succeeded in family reunification i.e. 4.2% succeeded in family reunification in the last 1 year. Similarly, 4.2% reunited 3-5 years ago while 1.4% reunited 3-5 years ago. It was also surfaced out that all migrants who came to Italy either for education or for work permit, were not planning for family reunification.

3.2. Family reunification process in Italy

In Italy, family reunification is a complex and time-consuming process due to the strict legal requirements and bureaucratic hurdles (Ambrosini, 2015). In order to assess the respondents' experience of the family reunification process, responses were measured against five questions 1). Rate your experience with the embassy process for family reunification 2). Rate you experience with getting family authorization in Italy 3). Rate your experience with legalization process 4). Rate your experience with online appointment system, and 5). Rate your experience with the visa processing times. For this purpose, a 10 point (1 to 10) rating scale was formulated for scoring respondents experience of different steps of family reunification process including embassy process, family authorization process, legalization process, appointment system and visa processing. In the rate scale (from 1 to 10), 1 meant "very unsatisfactory" level whereas 10 meant "very satisfactory" for respondents in the reunification process. It was observed (see figure 1) that family reunification process remained "very unsatisfactory" experience for the respondents who were planning for family cohesion or family reunification in Italy. The delay tactics in the reunification process is probably due to the policies of the successive Italian governments, which are intended to restrict irregular migration and control the flows of legal migrants to Italy (Lum, 2012). High level of unsatisfactory experience was reported in visa processing followed by appointment system, embassy process, family authorization and legalization process in descending order, which are pre-requisites for family reunification in Italy. The figure below presents the rating of experience by the Pakistani migrants in Italy who have been in the process of family reunification or have successfully reunited with their families in Italy.

Figure 1. Challenges in family reunification: migrants' experience with the process.
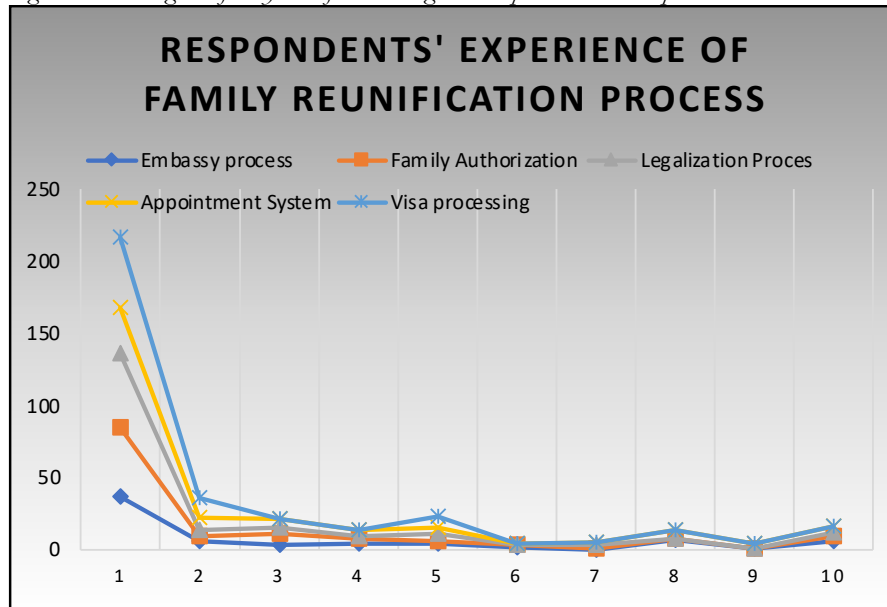
3.3. Emotional challenges due to family separation

Migration is experienced not only by the migrants themselves but also by their left behind family members leaving negative psychological and emotional impacts on either side (Silver, 2014). Extended separations take a heavy toll on family relationships, leading to emotional distress for migrants and their left behind children. Table 2 indicates the emotional challenges faced by Pakistani migrants in Italy due to separation from their families. They felt emotional distress and challenges including loneliness, anxiety and stress related to children upbringing. Resultantly, their work performance was reported to have significantly impacted. For some respondents (7.0%), the emotional stress was so high that they used to take professional counseling to relieve the negative implications. However, for 36.6% respondents, there was no emotional and psychological impact of family separation on their work performance. Nevertheless, migrants often live in a state of uncertainty, experiencing significant fear and anxiety, which contribute to malaise and emotional stress (Castañeda & Buck, 2011).

Table 2. Dealing with emotional burden of family separation and its impact on work performance.

| Emotional distress	Frequency	Percent
Very often	55	77.5
Often	8	11.3
Sometimes	26	36.6
Total	71	100.0
Primary emotional challenges	Frequency	Percent
Loneliness	44	62.0
Anxiety	2	2.8
Stress related to children upbringing	25	35.2
Total	71	100.0
Effect of family separation on work performance	Frequency	Percent
Significantly impacts	31	43.7
Moderately Impacts	8	11.3
Slightly impacts	6	8.5
Not impact	26	36.6
Total	71	100.0
Coping Mechanism	Frequency	Percent
Talking to friends/family	45	63.4
Engaging in community activities	12	16.9
Professional counseling	5	7.0
No specific coping mechanism	9	12.7
Total	71	100.0

To address/relieve the emotional challenges, "talking to friends/family" was noted as commonly practiced coping mechanism by the migrants considered for the study. In this regard, communicative technologies like Facebook and WhatsApp have become channels to effectively communicate with friends and family members across borders (Ou et al., 2023).

3.4. Role of WhatsApp as support network

WhatsApp serves as a support network application for migrant communities that enhance synchronous and asynchronous communication through exchange of images and audio/video chats that help to stay connected with loved ones, seek support, and navigate social and legal challenges (Chalá-Mejía & Suquillo, 2024) in family reunification. To assess the role of WhatsApp group chat in seeking guidance in family reunification and related issues, five questions were asked; 1) How effective is the WhatsApp group in providing the needed support? 2). Rate how timely the response to queries is received? 3). How safe do you feel while sharing your personal information? 4). How respectful is the behavior of group members? 5). How confidently you can share your opinions in the group? To record, responses of the respondents, a 10

points (1 to 10) rating scale for each question was formulated. For question 1 (1 meant "very ineffective" & 10 meant "very effective"), for question 2 (1 meant "very late" & 10 meant "very prompt"), for question 3 (1 meant "very unsafe" & 10 meant "very safe"), for question 4 (1 meant "Not respectful" & 10 meant "Highly respectful") and for question 5 (1 meant "distrustful" & 10 meant "trustful"). Respondents were asked to rate the question according to their opinion/experience of the role of WhatsApp in seeking guidance for family reunification. Analysis of the responses (**figure 2**) indicates as ascending order of frequencies from left to right showcasing high level of effectiveness, promptness etc. WhatsApp chat among the group member regarding different steps in family reunification was reported to be very effective. Similarly, responses to other questions also indicate positive role of WhatsApp in seeking assistance to address legal and bureaucratic challenges to family reunification process. However, it cannot fully replace in-person interactions and may sometimes exacerbate emotional strain especially when queries are not addressed timely (Baldassar et al., 2016).

Figure 2. Perceived effectiveness and trust in WhatsApp support group.
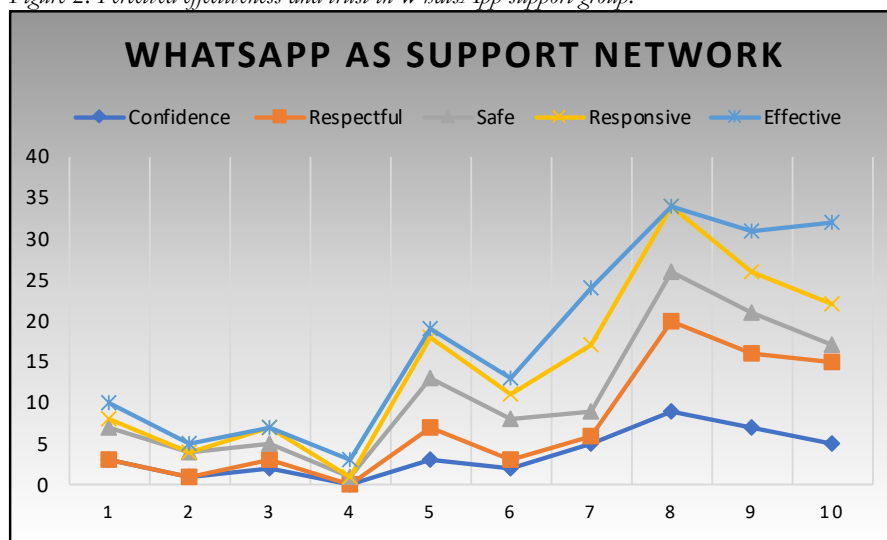
3.5. Family reunification challenges

Content analysis of the WhatsApp group chat revealed several key themes related to diverse challenges to Pakistani migrants in Italy during the process of family reunification. These include substantial legal, administrative and practical

challenges (Verhellen & Güdük, 2025), which were frequently discussed for seeking assistance from the group members for possible solution.

3.5.1.   *Document legalization challenges*

One of the most frequently discussed challenges was the process of document legalization. Participants highlighted the complexity and time-consuming nature of obtaining and authenticating required documents, like marriage certificates, birth certificates, proof of relationship etc. The major issue pointed out, was of appointment for documents legalization. Documents are to be legalized from Italian Embassy, which needs appointment from concerned authorities (Zampagni, 2016). To get early appointment for legalization, some participants even looked for availing service of the agents/brokers …… *"Group member….. is (documents) legalization appointment open, may agents fix it today or not"*, *"……May be yes ….. Agents have links there, & they charge clients for walk in Legalization appointment"*. However, majority of the group members expressed their reservations in availing the service of agents for being fraud. For instance, a participant expressed *"…..rather, I sense that his frustration is due to the fact that we are being ripped off by agents….. "*. The dissatisfaction was frequently shown on getting appointment for legalization of documents or *nulla osta* (No objection) for being a longer and time-consuming process. But information regarding availability of appointments was timely shared in the group but was found random and a bit ambiguous due to lack of authentic information regarding documents legalization process.

3.5.2.   *Accommodation challenges*

Securing adequate housing that meets the legal requirements for family reunification emerged as a significant challenge. Italian law mandates that migrants must provide proof of suitable accommodation, which often requires a formal rental contract with owner, source of income and sufficient space for family members. Members of the group, planning for family reunification frequently asked questions related to house suitability and other such requirements, which were timely responded with a vote of thanks back from the assistance-seekers among the group members. For instance, questions like these *"…. How to calculate house suitability and other requirements for getting accommodation….?", "…. how do they (authorities) calculate minimum living space allowance for one or two persons?""…. what should be the constructed space?",* were answered by different members in the group in these words. *"……. space required*

per person is 14 sq.m, therefore, for a family comprising of 4 members, the space required must be 56 sq.m"," It usually counts the walls & it varies from house to house! Not fixed but remember that per person area must not be violated". Analysis of the group chat revealed that house suitability was highlighted as a must for applying *nulla osta* for family reunification. Studies have highlighted that one of the basic issues faced by international migrants especially students in Italy is finding suitable accommodation due to various factors, including high cost of housing in major cities and limited availability of student dormitories in the country (Samei, 2024). However, home-sharing is commonly practiced in Italy to resolve the issue of accommodation for migrants. It involves private individuals offering accommodation to migrants for varying durations, ranging from a few weeks to several years (Sperandio, 2024), For international students including Pakistani students housing remains the primary concern on arrivals as they do not possess enough local market knowledge and connection (Samei, 2024). Social networking through WhatsApp group chat provides enough assistance to the group members to tackle the accommodation issue for family cohesion and family reunification in Italy.

3.5.3. *Bureaucratic hurdles*

The WhatsApp chat revealed widespread frustration with the bureaucratic inefficiencies and lack of transparency in the Italian immigration system. Participants reported long waiting times for appointments, unclear application procedures, and frequent requests for additional documentation. While expressing their frustration, some group members regarded attitude of the Italian Embassy as a corrupt and inefficient one due to the unnecessary delay in granting appointments to the applicants or responding to the migrants queries related to various issues. The chat showcased that appointments remained open in succession but gone in minutes as reported by majority of the group members. Agents were also reported to fix early appointment on payments but were found corrupt and fraudulent. *"….. Agents are charging 3 to 5 lakhs for appointment but have become more corrupt than BLS & Gerry".* The bureaucratic hurdles to immigrants in Italy are resulting from the policies of the successive Italian governments intended to restrict irregular migration, promote the integration of migrants, and control the flows of legal migrants (Lum, 2012). Bureaucratic hurdles were frequently discussed in the group for seeking assistance in overcoming the such hurdles. However, with few exceptions, such hurdles could not be tackled with success through group chat. Rather frustration was observed among members in this regard. The findings from the WhatsApp group chat underscore the multifaceted structural challenges faced

by Pakistani migrants in Italy during the family reunification process. These
challenges are not unique to Pakistani migrants but reflect broader systemic
issues within European immigration policies and practices.

3.5.4. *Emotional stress*

The emotional toll of prolonged separation from family members was a
prominent theme in the chat. Participants expressed feelings of loneliness,
anxiety, and helplessness as they navigated the challenges of family
reunification. Migrants usually live in a state of uncertainty, experiencing
significant fear and anxiety, which contribute to malaise and emotional stress.
This situation is exacerbated by their separation from the support networks
provided by their families and communities of origin (Castañeda & Buck, 2011).
However, the emotions that transnational parents feel for their left behind
children reflect personal, social and cultural context. In some cultures it may be
normalized while in others it may not (Dito et al., 2017). Analysis of the chat
revealed that emotional stress was compounded by the uncertainty of the
reunification process and the fear of rejection. Frustration was also noted
among the group members when their application/request or emails were not
replied by the authorities. The unnecessary delay in the appointment process
further advanced frustration among the applicants among the group members.
The WhatsApp group served as a forum to relieve stress and frustration among
the group members. The unfolding process of family reunification or delay in
the process of reunification is a barrier to the mental health and wellbeing of
the migrants in the host country (Choummanivong et al., 2014).

4   Conclusion

This study offers critical insights into the multifaceted role of WhatsApp
in mediating the complex realities of family reunification and transnational
parenthood among Pakistani migrants in Italy. Our findings underscore how
digital platforms, while not a panacea for structural barriers, significantly
contribute to digital social capital by fostering online peer support and
information exchange. The content analysis revealed that while WhatsApp
effectively served as an informational hub for navigating bureaucratic hurdles
(document legalization, accommodation, administrative inefficiencies), its most
profound impact lay in its function as an emotional outlet, mitigating the
pervasive emotional stress of prolonged separation. This highlights how digital
communication facilitates mediated intimacy and enables a form of digital

emotional labor, where migrants actively perform and receive emotional support to sustain familial bonds across vast distances. The persistence of challenges, despite collective digital efforts, points to the enduring power of structural inequalities within migration governance. Digital tools, while enhancing individual and collective agency in information seeking and emotional coping, cannot fully overcome deeply entrenched bureaucratic inefficiencies or the vulnerabilities created by exploitative practices. This suggests that the promise of digital connectivity in transnational family life is inherently constrained by the "immobility" of institutional processes.

Theoretically, this study contributes to a nuanced understanding of digital co-presence by demonstrating its practical application in collective problem-solving and emotional regulation within a specific migrant community. It also enriches theories of transnational parenthood by foregrounding the active strategies employed by migrant fathers (and implicitly, mothers) in leveraging digital platforms for caregiving and emotional sustenance. Looking forward, several promising avenues for future research emerge. More in depth and specifically longitudinal studies are crucial to understand the evolving psychosocial and developmental trajectories of members within these digitally connected transnational families. Further research could also comparatively examine the interplay between formal support services and informal digital networks in family reunification processes. Finally, it is also recommended to explore how policy reforms, coupled with targeted digital literacy and advocacy training, could enhance migrants' ability to navigate reunification processes more effectively

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