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## **PARENTS' DIGITAL COPING RESOURCES WITH ONGOING POLITICAL CONFLICTS**

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Mobile technologies such as the instant messaging application WhatsApp have become significant resources for information and social support in times of crisis (Laranjo et al., 2015), as well as for crisis communication (Afifi et al., 2019, 2020; Stephens et al., 2020). In times of crisis, these applications afford the exchange of real-time information and can influence users' health awareness, response behaviors, coping behaviors, and even their ability to build resilience (Al-Dmour et al., 2020; Braun-Lewensohn, 2015; Gray, 2019; Stephens et al., 2020). In addition, recent studies (Gray, 2019; Malka et al., 2015) have highlighted the role played by the instant messaging application WhatsApp during man-made disasters by affording interpersonal and group communication (Kaufmann & Peil, 2020). Conversely, they have also been reported to constitute a potential source of misinformation and increased exposure to other users' emotional distress (Hampton et al., 2016). To date, the role WhatsApp groups play for individuals, families, and communities living in regions affected by ongoing conflicts has yet to be investigated.

This research draws upon the salutogenic (Antonovsky, 1987) and ecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1992) theories to examine parents' digital coping processes with political violence in southern Israel. To this end, the study examines the types of coping resources provided in local online parent groups (OPGs) during violence escalation and relative calm periods. Furthermore, it identifies parents' positive and negative perceptions of OPG usage. The study involves a mixed-methods approach comprising qualitative in-depth interviews with 15 couples who are parents of children under the

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age of 17 residing in communities near the Israel-Gaza border and an online ethnography of four local OPGs.

## **Results**

Study findings reveal three levels of parents' coping resources on OPGs: personal, family, and communal digital coping resources. In addition, four WhatsApp affordances immediacy, reachability, mobility, and multimediality—contributed to WhatsApp's role as a shared and ubiquitous coping resource.

### **Personal**

Our participants noted that during an escalation, they use the group to decide what would be the right way to respond to the emergency, as a mother, who lives in a Kibbutz, notes: “There is a lot of this discussion about “Are you evacuating your home? Have you started packing?” It's a discourse that makes an impact. It affects me when I see the lists that slowly there are no families left in the kibbutz, and it is not that you are pressured to go, but you say “what kind of mother am I? Am I staying with my kids under fire? What am I doing? Am I right or wrong? “

### **Family**

For some parents, especially for mothers who are left alone home as the fathers are being drafted into the war, the group serves as an alternative source of support: “During an emergency, when my husband is drafted, and I become a single mother of children, this (group) is another responsible adult with me. It's a feeling that I have not another person next to me, but another 50 people with me, who are next to me and can give me an answer at any moment I need, and I think it's worth it all. Because when you're in an emergency, and you feel alone, you're not in a good position, you're not functioning, and that's a terrible feeling”.

### **Community**

Our participants also noted how issues that the community together had to face were discussed in the WhatsApp groups, as one of the fathers noted: “In the last escalation, a child from my daughter's school was killed. The school staff offered in the WhatsApp group to schedule a Zoom meeting to address the boy's death with the students. On the one hand, WhatsApp offers you the opportunity to coordinate a meeting easily. Still, on the other hand, maybe it is something too sensitive to discuss textually and so immediately. Discussing it in the group with text messages omits some nuances, and not everyone knows how the parents perceive it. Someone wrote, “the children are scared anyway and don't need it.” I don't know what she meant, but I felt It's stressing me out that she's writing it like that. I felt difficult with the format of talking about this thing so immediately and so not face to face.”

## **Conclusion**

Our results expand and develop the original models and core concepts of the salutogenic and ecological paradigms traditionally studied solely in offline environments.

Moreover, results examine the effectiveness of digital contexts such as WhatsApp groups in helping parents cope with an ongoing collective stressor: a particularly worthy goal given that social media applications now constitute the primary online connection for most individuals. Such an understanding, in turn, may have broad impacts on health promotion efforts for mental health issues related to political violence as well as other large-scale health crises (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic).

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