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What is a File on a Phone? Personal Information Management Practices Amongst WhatsApp Users

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The file, as a means of sharing structured information across time and place, has spanned centuries of ICTs. Despite much CSCW research on file management practices in organizational desktop computing settings, little research has examined how files are managed and shared using mobile devices. Our research asks, how do mobile phones and mobile applications impact the personal information management (PIM) practices involving files for young adults? In this interview and task observation study, we examined the file management practices of mobile phone users (N=25), both Android and iOS owners who use the superapp WhatsApp. Superapps like WeChat and WhatsApp are increasingly characterized as technology of life for the majority world, particularly among mobile-first users. We find that many grammars of action related to managing digital files in personal computing and email contexts persist, but participants' sharing practices are influenced by media ideologies of friends, family, colleagues; and that their file management practices are shaped by the affordances of WhatsApp, as well as mobile operating systems and device hardware constraints. These results will be useful to researchers examining collective PIM practices; mobile communication practices between users and businesses via messaging apps; and theories of personal information practices related to the sharing and storage of digital files among mobile-first cohorts who increasingly share and access information via platforms and mobile applications.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in ubiquitous and mobile computing**; *Smartphones*; *Mobile computing*; • **Information systems** → *Personalization*.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: Superapps, Personal Information Management, File Management, Mobile Apps

1 INTRODUCTION

Mobile phones, apps, and cloud platform services are now primary information and communication technologies (ICTs) that people use to create, share, and find information. While the ethical and legal impacts of personal data management in cloud platforms are often researched regarding data tracking [27, 34, 88], there has been little Personal Information Management (PIM) research that focuses on how people share, manage, and search for files on their mobile phones. In this study, we address the following research questions: What is a file on a phone? How do people understand, manage, and use files on phones? Do perceptions of file management change with so-called "unlimited cloud storage" and constant network connection? Answers to these questions are

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