


Face-to-face and mediated intergenerational family communication in European countries

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Abstract

This paper analyzes data from the European Social Survey (ESS), collected during the COVID-19 pandemic across 31 countries, to examine intergenerational family communication among individuals aged 45–54 with both their children and parents. We address two research questions: What similarities and differences emerge across European countries in terms of physical and emotional proximity and forms of intergenerational communication? Which mediated communication channels are most and least used with parents and children, and are there any gender differences?

The ESS's large-scale, nationally representative design enables nuanced gender-based and cross-country comparisons of face-to-face, telephone, audiovisual, and other digital interactions. Results show that, despite widespread digital device access, in-person and phone contacts remained preferred, while audiovisual modes were far less frequent. Gender differences in communication with children are minimal but more marked with parents. Country profiles largely converge, with the notable exception of clearly oppositional Mediterranean versus Scandinavian patterns. Despite the lockdowns imposed by the pandemic, patterns of family communication perceptions remain relatively stable. These results point to a relatively slow pace of change in family communication patterns and highlight the need for more contextual research at both national and cross-country levels.

Keywords: intergenerational family relations; media affordances; cross-country comparisons; ICT and family communication.

Introduction

As communication technologies evolve, they reshape family dynamics and relationships. The various ways in which family members engage with technology—enhancing connectedness or creating disruption—reflect broader shifts in how families navigate and maintain bonds across generations. This paper aims to contribute to uncovering these interactions, while providing insight into the gendered dimensions of communication practices within families and whether and how digital technologies might reinforce or challenge traditional gender roles.

In 2021, the European Social Survey (ESS) introduced a new module on communication, digital perception, and digital use in the context of family and professional relationships, focusing on face-to-face and mediated communication (Abendroth *et al.* 2024). This survey was applied to nationally representative samples aged 15+ in 31 countries, with a total of 59,685 respondents. The results provide a unique opportunity for family and media researchers to investigate old and new communication trends in intergenerational communication

across different European countries. The diversity in cultural values and digital adoption also provides a rich background for a reflection on the distinctive affordances of communication choices in intergenerational family communication, contributing to a nuanced understanding of family dynamics in contemporary Europe. This paper explores secondary analyses of the data with the aim of characterizing the patterns of communication of individuals aged 45 to 54 in their roles as parents and as daughters/sons, including the possible impacts of the COVID-19 lockdown.

Many of the surveyed individuals aged 45–54 may have shared significant historical events during their “formative years” (Mannheim 1928) of adolescence and youth. Born between the late 1960s and the late 1970s, many certainly have experienced disruptive historical events and their subsequent impacts during their adolescence and youth: the fall of the Berlin Wall and the breakup of the Soviet bloc in Northern and Central Europe or the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia and the ensuing wars were particularly disruptive.

Cultural sociologists argue that the media may, on a smaller scale, constitute historical events, that is, the very appearance of a technological medium or a specific configuration of the media system “can, within certain limits, cast a generation, for example by establishing itself an important shared memory” (Colombo 2011: 28). Having had access to personal digital devices and increasingly transnational, private, and specialized media channels, as well as having watched the first live-broadcasted Gulf War on television or been thrilled by the music on the global MTV channel, may have contributed to the cultural identification of many of these individuals. This view aligns with that of Edmunds and Turner (2002), cultural sociologists who highlight the concept of generation as an age cohort that acquires social significance through its formation as a cultural identity. Because of these formative conditions, this population may be considered functionally equivalent within their respective systems (Wirth and Kolb 2004).

To enhance the understanding of intergenerational family relationships across European countries, we consider their reported digital contexts and practices, the physical and affective proximity with their children (aged 12 and older) and parents, and the communication formats and devices used. Specifically, we aim to characterize the current interactions of this intermediate generation in the context of a pandemic, examining intergenerational and gendered communication practices, and discussing the distinctive affordances in intergenerational family communication.

Our research questions are:

RQ1: What similarities and differences emerge across European countries in terms of family proximity and intergenerational forms of communication?

RQ2: Which forms of mediated communication are most and least used with parents and children? Are there gender differences?

Materials and methods

This section starts by presenting the theoretical concepts employed, followed by a discussion of the methodological choices made.

Theoretical frameworks

The concept of *affordance* (Baym 2015; Fox and McEwan 2017) is central in this study, since it highlights the characteristics and possibilities of a particular tool or situation, including aspects such as interactivity,

temporal structure, social cues, storage, replicability, reach, and mobility. These dimensions are significant because they provide, according to Madianou and Miller,

a wide range of facets of human communication, including the degree to which we see media as more or less authentic in comparison to face-to-face interaction, the sense of community, identity, gender, veracity and the self, and how such factors work in various forms of highly personal or impersonal contexts for communication and the creation and maintenance of relationships (Madianou and Miller 2012: 173).

Drawing on the concept of "remediation" (Bolter and Grusin 2000) and exploring long-distance family relationships, Madaniou and Miller's work focused on "the social, emotional, and moral consequences of choosing between different media" (Madianou and Miller 2012: 173). As the authors point out, this choice implies three preconditions: access and availability; affordability; and media literacy. When cost and access become less significant and (particularly functional) media literacies develop, "people start to see the reasons why any particular person has chosen any particular medium as a social act" (Madianou and Miller 2012: 183).

Hence, the analysis of media affordances requires examination of both the inherent properties of media and the personal reasons or motivations that influence users to select between mediated and face-to-face communication. The value of a medium's affordances, such as synchrony, visibility, and mobility, depends on how well they match what users expect to achieve through their use. In family contexts, family members may choose phone calls because they fulfill emotional security needs and provide instant closeness particularly for older family members.

Research on ICT and family relationships is still emerging (van Hook *et al.* 2018; Barbosa Neves and Casimiro 2018), but it has already identified that accessibility, affordability, and acceptability of technology as a daily communication tool can foster relationships beyond the traditional parent-child roles (Hertlein 2018; Odasso and Geoffrion 2024).

Conducting qualitative research in Sweden and the USA, Eklund and Sadowski (2021) explored how adults and younger family members increasingly manage their own family relationships, reflecting on how communication practices are evolving due to individualization. The fact that many families now live apart or spend a considerable amount of time away from each other has led to a shift from household-to-household interactions to person-to-person connections within the framework of networked individualism (Quan-Haase *et al.* 2018). Taipale's (2019) research describes "digital families" as extended families utilizing ICT to stay connected despite limited in-person interactions; this new definition of family encompasses multiple generations and varied family compositions, including geographically dispersed and mixed families.

These communication practices and situations imply distinctive affordances. Research into intergenerational communication across three family generations revealed two competing discourses: connectedness and disruption. The connectedness discourse emphasizes the need for/importance of closeness, with face-to-face interactions being preferred for several reasons: a sense of social presence since it is possible to see and feel one another; greater openness and intimacy; the chance of managing misunderstandings and negotiating conflicts. By contrast, the disruptive discourse, associated with mediated communication, reflects concerns about overcommunication and the avoidance of discussing family conflicts through platforms like WhatsApp (Hatzir and Segev 2023). Additionally, digital technologies may intensify connectedness,

especially concerning intimacy, belonging, and care, but also introduce power struggles and conflicts within intergenerational relationships (Azevedo and Ponte 2020; Erstad *et al* 2024).

Current processes of digitalization have accelerated and reinforced these social trends (Eklund and Sadowski 2021), thus contributing to a growing phenomenon of “digital relationality” (Thompson and Cupples 2008; Alkobi and Khvorostianov 2024; Qian and Hu 2024) and transformed family communication. Although adolescents, who increasingly use technology to maintain relationships, introduce innovations and technologies into the family, affecting how parents and children interact (Rudi *et al.* 2015; Doty and Dworkin 2014), the acceleration driven by younger generations does not uniformly extend across generations.

In fact, recent empirical research has highlighted disparities in digital communication preferences among older generations. For instance, a study on face-to-face and mediated communication in grandparent-grandchild relationships in Germany found that face-to-face and non-digital established media were associated with higher perceived communication quality compared to digital media. Innovative digital media received less favorable quality evaluations (Doring *et al.* 2023).

Family communication practices are also interwoven with other social contexts. A longitudinal study of three-generation families in California found that mothers (aged 60–72) who were least likely to use communication technologies with their adult children were older, non-white, less educated, and lived closer to their children (Peng *et al.* 2018). Remarkably, these patterns persisted even after the introduction of smartphones and tablets.

Other perspectives highlight that the rapid and diverse pluralization of family forms has made the conventional notion of kinship-based, lineage-oriented generation obsolete (Taipale 2019), even considering that the processes of generational identity-making supported by the digital media are likely to link one generation to another instead of cutting them dramatically (Aroldi 2011). Updating this rationale to the current era of platforms (e.g., Instagram, WhatsApp, Zoom), Aroldi and Colombo (2020: 576) argue that “the era of platforms undoubtedly constitutes the ecosystem in which the next generations all over the world are forming.”

The dynamics of family communication may have also undergone significant shifts intricately tied to gender roles and how they may affect familial bonds, responsibilities, and generational interactions. The Family Communication Patterns Theory (Koerner and Fitzpatrick 2002) is particularly insightful when examining differences in communication patterns between mothers and fathers. Research by Rudi *et al.* (2015) shows that adolescents tend to communicate more frequently with their mothers than with their fathers. Face-to-face conversations remain the predominant method of communication, but phone calls and text messaging are also significant, with phone interactions occurring three to five times a week and texting one to two times a week. This pattern underscores a gendered dimension of communication, where mothers are more frequently engaged in regular, direct interactions with their children.

The advent of social networking sites (SNSs) and other digital technologies has introduced new dimensions to family communication. For mothers, the frequent use of SNSs for parenting has been positively associated with both bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital involves close-knit relationships that offer emotional support, while bridging social capital connects diverse groups and provides access to broader information networks (Lin 2001; Harpham *et al* 2002). This reflects a trend where mothers use digital tools to reinforce familial connections and manage social interactions. Fathers, however, tend to rely on different communication technologies. They are more inclined to use email for interactions with non-resident family

members, friends, and children, while text messages and SNSs are also part of their communication repertoire (Taipale 2019). The author also highlights how the “sharing as caring” ethic, particularly visible in WhatsApp communication, often aligns with gendered expectations. Mothers frequently play a central role in creating and maintaining family WhatsApp groups, a manifestation of the “re-familization” trend, reflecting a move towards reinforcing familial bonds through digital means, although it also highlights persistent inequities (Taipale 2019).

The replication of traditional gender roles through new technologies has profound implications for gender inequality within families. Women often bear the brunt of caregiving and emotional support responsibilities, which can affect their economic opportunities and career aspirations (Budig and England 2001; Correll *et al* 2007). Treas and Gubernskaya (2018) note that technology, while facilitating increased intergenerational contact, often sees women—particularly mothers and daughters—assuming primary roles in maintaining these connections. This pattern suggests that while technology can provide opportunities for increased familial contact, it also reinforces existing gender norms and potentially perpetuates gender disparities.

Cross-country and individual comparisons

In line with the guidelines for cross-country comparative analyses (Hasebrink, 2016), we distinguish two levels of analysis:

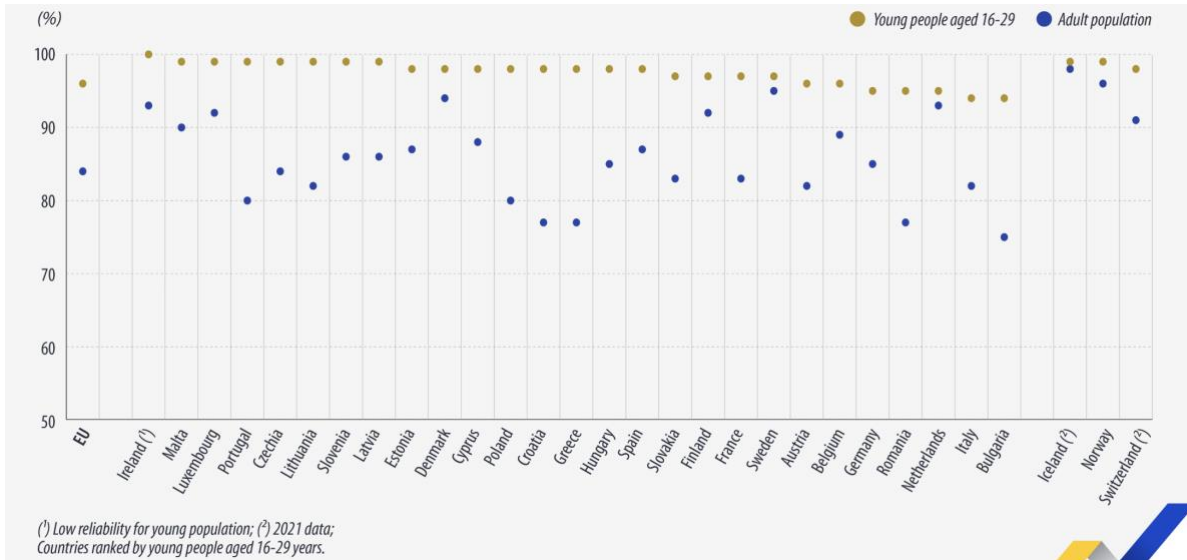
- *The country level*, with indicators that have been assessed for the whole country. Here, we consider two indicators: the cultural proximity with other countries and the daily digital access.
- *The individual level*, that is, populations that are functionally equivalent within their systems. Looking at the 45–54 age group, we consider the gender and family positions (mother/daughter; father/son) of these individuals.

The country level - Since the early 1980s, the World Cultural Map conceived by Inglehart and Winner has explored how scores of world societies are located on two major dimensions of cross-cultural variation: *traditional values versus secular-rational values*; and *survival values versus self-expression values*. As explained in the World Values Survey¹, the first dimension measures the relevance of a religious doctrine in societies, with secular values indicating a largely reduced role of organized religion. The second indicates how autonomous from kinship obligations individuals in a society are in their life planning, with self-expression values emphasizing high individual autonomy. For the current contextualization, we employed the most recent version of the World Cultural Map, based on the joint survey round of the World Values Survey and European Values Study 2017–2022 (Figure 1).

¹ See <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSContent.jsp?CMSID=findings>

is narrowest in two pioneer countries: the Netherlands, where *not all* young people access the internet daily, and Iceland, where all young people and adults are daily users.

Figure 2: People who used the internet daily (2022)



Source: Eurostat, 2023.

As far as our age group (45-54) is concerned, having online access at home is current without remarkable differences in relation to the European mean, except for Portugal (Table 1). It is also worth noting that, compared with the Eurostat data, they use the internet less frequently daily: the highest rates come from Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands, the lowest from Slovakia and Hungary. Regarding mobile access to the internet, Norway, Iceland and the Netherlands are remarkably above the average, whereas North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovakia, Hungary, and France are remarkably below. Apart from France, those positions of lower technological access are in line with the greater weight of values linked to survival, in the cultural map of Figure 1. Excepting for France, this lower technological access aligns with the greater weight of values linked to survival (Figure 1).

Table 1: Digital access among the 45–54-year-old (%)

Access to the internet and daily use	European mean	Remarkably above	Remarkably below
Have online access at home	87	No significant differences	PT (75)
Daily use of the internet	70	>85: IC, FI, NL, NO, SW,	<50: HU, SK
Have online mobile access	57	>75: IC, NL, NO,	<40: FR, HU, MK, RS, SK

Source: ESS 2022

This contextual background frames our aim of identifying similarities and differences within the 45-54 age group across the countries that participated in the ESS (RQ1).

The individual level - As mentioned above, among the respondents aged 45-54, we aim to analyze their gendered family position (mother/father; daughter/son), the reported emotional proximity with their children aged 1+ and with their parents, and the communication processes they use in these intergenerational relations, that is both face-to-face and mediated forms of communication.

Methodology

Using secondary data from the ESS, we isolated the 45–54 age group and, within this cohort, we selected responses from male and female respondents. Out of a total of 59,693 participants, the selected age group (45–54) comprises 10,231 individuals, that is, 17% of the ESS sample. Most of them (54%) are female (5,553).

SPSS statistical software was used to analyze our data in accordance with both descriptive and multiple correspondence analysis (MCA/HOMALS). The descriptive analysis presents the European means along with the rates of countries that are significantly above or below those means. Considering the main descriptive statistics noted in the initial descriptive analysis, and to answer our first research question, we opted for multiple correspondence analysis (MCA/HOMALS) to evaluate whether profiles based on emotional closeness and types of communication between respondents with their parents and children were different depending on the country analyzed.

Because a “mega” table with multiple correspondences between the categories of all the variables selected here would be impossible to read, a choice was made to read that multidimensional space by way of its graphical representation, to analyze the interdependence of all the categories of the variables chosen for this purpose and to simultaneously project them onto a Cartesian space.

This idea entailed analyzing:

- i) categories that are close to each other and may assume different configurations.
- ii) categories that are opposite to each other and may provide an understanding of different relationships between the groups/profiles identified.
- iii) categories that are closer to the origin and correspond to possible intermediate profiles.

We then chose to broaden the spectrum of variables to be included in this in order to obtain a more reliable analysis that would result from the interdependence of a larger number of variables and their response categories.

The representational variables used were those best suited to the subject matter of the study, notably: how emotionally close to child aged 12 or over; how emotionally close to parent; how often the internet is used; mediated communication with child; mediated communication with parent; non-mediated communication with child; non-mediated communication with parent; travel time to child; travel time to parent; and country (passive variable).

Based on the Cronbach alpha values for two dimensions and their corresponding inertia values, it was possible to distinguish a first dimension (xx – intergenerational communication, mediated or non-mediated) and a second dimension (yy – emotional closeness).

Results

Intergenerational proximity and communication practices across countries

Table 2 presents the European means and the rates of countries remarkably above or below those means, thus providing a comparison by line and column in relation to digital access, intergenerational relations in terms of physical and emotional proximity, and non-mediated and mediated forms of communication.

Table 2: Physical and emotional proximity and communication practices across countries (%)

Physical proximity	European mean	Remarkably above	Remarkably below
Children (12+) live in the same household	70	> 85 : IL, IE, IT	< 55 : EE, FI, LT, NO
Children (12+) live at +60-minute travel	8	> 15 : EE, FI, LIT, NO, SW	Zero : UK
Parents live in the same household	8	> 15 : BU, EE, HR, LV, PT, RS, SK	Zero : CH, FI, NL
Parents live at +60-minute travel	18	> 30 : CH, FI, FR, NO, SW	Zero : UK
Emotional proximity			
Extremely close with children (12+)	55	> 70 : IL, ME, MK, PT, SP	< 40 : CH, EE, LV, NO, PO, SL
Extremely close with parents	32	> 47 : CY, IL, IE, ME, SP	< 18 : CH, EE, IC, NO, PO
Frequent communication			
Face to face with children	55	> 70 : IL, ME, MK, PT, SP	< 40 : CH, EE, LV, NO, PO, SL
Face to face with parents	32	> 47 : CY, IL, IE, ME, SP	< 18 : CH, EE, IC, NO, PO
Mediated with children	49	> 65 : IL, NM, RS, SP	< 35 : CH, CZ
<i>Has increased after COVID2019</i>	11	> 16 : NM, LIT, IL, UK, FI, CY	< 7 : RS, HR, BU, PT
Mediated with parents	16	> 25 : IL, ME, RS, SP	< 10 : BU, EE, GR, HU, SL
<i>Has increased after COVID2019</i>	14	> 19 : IL, ME, RS, SP, CY, IC, NL	< 9 : SW, PT, NM; SL

Source: ESS 2022

Our analysis of the *physical proximity with children (12+) and/or parents* considered two extreme positions, namely, whether they lived in the same household or more than one hour away.

In half of the countries, about 70% of the individuals live with their children aged 12+ in the same household, and the dyad is notably high in Ireland, Italy, and Israel. Nordic countries are remarkably below the European mean and Finland presents the lowest rate (43%). Children living far from the household is residual but the rates almost double in five Nordic countries. Interestingly, in the UK neither children nor parents live less than one hour away.

For this intermediate generation, sharing the household with parents is notably high in the Balkans (Bulgaria, Croatia, Serbia), North and Central Europe (Estonia, Latvia, Hungary, Slovakia), and in Portugal. By contrast, cohabitation is almost residual and even absent in the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Finland—in the latter two, the travel distance to parents' houses is above one hour. Physical distance in relation to the younger and older generation thus makes a gap within European countries.

Among the four options for *emotional proximity* (extremely close; very close; quite close; not close), we considered the extremely close one, since it was reported by more than half of the individuals in relation to their children (55%), and by around one third in relation to their parents (32%). Remarkably high closeness with both children and parents was reported in Montenegro, Spain, and Israel; high closeness with children was also reported in North Macedonia and Portugal, and with parents in Cyprus and Ireland. This emotional proximity was less reported in Northern and Central Europe: individuals from Estonia, Norway, Poland, and

Switzerland preferred to define their proximity with children and parents as *quite close*. The same answer was also more frequent in Latvia and Slovenia, for children, and in Iceland, for parents.

Regarding *frequent forms of communication*, more than half of the respondents reported frequent face-to-face communication with children, against just one in three regarding parents. Spain, Montenegro, and Israel are notably above the European mean on frequent direct communication with children and parents, while Switzerland, Nordic, and Scandinavian countries are again remarkably below.

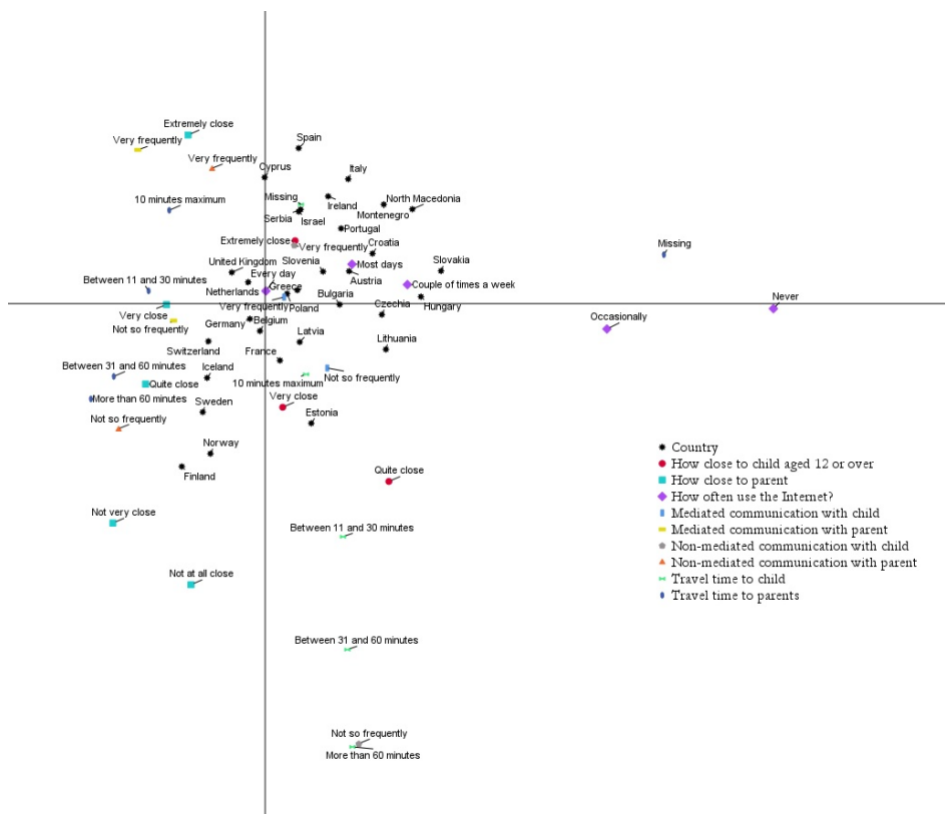
Finland presents the lowest rates on face-to-face communication regarding children (53%) and parents (24%), in line with the low rate of physical proximity.

In most countries, *frequent mediated communication* with children is close to the European mean, while the gap is higher in relation to parents. As Table 2 shows, countries from distinctive cultures (Israel, Serbia, and Spain) present the highest rates of frequent mediated communication with younger and older family generations.

Less frequent mediated communication with children is reported in Switzerland and Czechia, while with parents is reported by a panoply of countries from the South to the North Central Europe. Following the COVID-19 lockdown, mediated communication with children and parents has slightly increased, particularly in relation to parents, and only in Portugal was this increase below the average in relation to children and parents. From the analysis of the interdependence between the variables pointed out above, five response profiles emerged (with the first two being quite prominent due to their opposing nature).

Due to the vast amount of information at stake, Figure 3 (below) highlights the position of the countries in this multidimensional space to better illustrate what was previously mentioned.

Figure 3: Interdependencies between the variables



Source: the authors

Profile 1 (Mostly quartile 1, +x; +y): composed of response categories that suggest greater emotional closeness and higher rates of total intergenerational communication (mediated + non-mediated), as well as greater proximity in terms of physical distance between generations (respondents with their children and parents). A space in the Cartesian graph also shared by a very specific set of countries, such as Spain, Ireland, Cyprus, Italy, Israel, Serbia, Portugal, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and to a lesser degree Croatia, Slovenia, Austria, and Slovakia

Profile 2 (Mostly quartile 3, -x; -y), oppositional to the first profile: composed of response categories that suggest lower degrees of emotional closeness and smaller rates of overall intergenerational communication (mediated + non-mediated) as well as less physical proximity between these generations. A space in the Cartesian graph shared by the following countries: Switzerland, Iceland, Sweden, Norway, and Finland (here in ascending order).

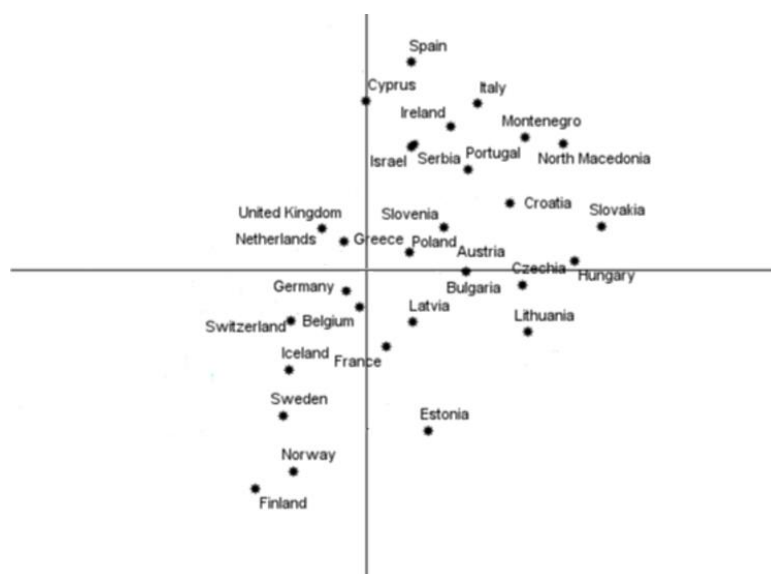
Profile 3 (Quartile 4): like Profile 2 in terms of lower degrees of intergenerational emotional closeness between the respondents and their parents and children, but with a not-so-obvious relationship with the response categories that point to lower levels of intergenerational communication. A space shared by countries such as France, Latvia, and Estonia.

Profile 4: composed of intermediate response categories from both dimensions in a space shared by countries such as Poland, Greece, Germany, Belgium, United Kingdom, and the Netherlands.

Profile 5: composed of response categories that also suggest lower degrees of emotional closeness but some traces of intergenerational communication. A space shared by countries such as Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, and Lithuania.

Since Figure 3 can be difficult to visualize considering the vast amount of information involved, Figure 4 highlights the position of the countries in this multidimensional space to better situate what was previously discussed.

Figure 4: Intergenerational communication and emotional closeness



Source: the authors

It is quite visible the oppositional position between Catholic and Orthodox cultures, on the one hand, and the more individualized Protestant cultures, on the other. Our results largely exposed the contrast between Scandinavian countries (particularly Sweden, Norway and Finland) and the opposing patterns observed in the Mediterranean and Balkan regions. It is also worth noting the contrasting positions of two democratic liberal political cultures (UK and the NL) and three former Soviet countries (Latvia, Lithuania and particularly Estonia), considering that in the later the adult generation experienced a radical political change during their formative years.

Options for mediated communication across countries

Let us now move to the options for mediated communication across countries. The ESS survey asked about three types of options: *phone calls*; *written texts on screen (SMS, e-mail)*; *audiovisual messages*. As Table 3 shows, phone calls were clearly the preferred method for communicating with both children and parents, followed by digital written messages, while audiovisual messages were far less used.

Table 3: Frequent mediated communication with children and parents, by countries (%)

	With children			With parents		
	European mean	Remarkably above	Remarkably below	European mean	Remarkably above	Remarkably below
Phone calls	64	>80: CY, GR, IL, ME, RS	<50: BE, CH, DE, NL, SW	58	>70: BU, CY, GR, IL, HU, MK, ME	<45: CH, DE, FR, IRL
Written digital communication	46	>60: CY, IL, NL, NO, SP	<30: BU, GR, HU, MK	34	>45: FR, NL, SP	<20: BU, GR, MK, PT
Screens	17	>30: IL, ME, RS	<10: CZ, FI	14	>25: IL, ME	<10: CZ, FI, GR, SL

Source: ESS 2022

It is worth noting that means for *frequent phone calls* with children aged 12+ and parents (64% and 58%, respectively) are higher than the corresponding rates for frequent in-person communication (55% and 32%, respectively—see Table 2). This mediated synchronous communication is far above the average in Israel, Cyprus, and in Eastern and Balkan countries. By contrast, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden, all digitally advanced countries, present the lowest rates of phone calls to communicate with children.

Less than half of the individuals use *text messages* to communicate with children and/or parents, and cross-country results are similar. This practice is more prevalent in Spain and the Netherlands, among both children and parents, and less common in Bulgaria, Greece, and North Macedonia. Hungary has the lowest use of text messages to communicate with children, while Portugal has the lowest use of text messages to communicate with parents.

Finally, frequent audiovisual communication through *screens* is by far the least reported option, both for children and parents, since it was mentioned by less than a quarter of the participants. Interestingly, Montenegro presents high rates both in relation to children and parents, while two digitally advanced

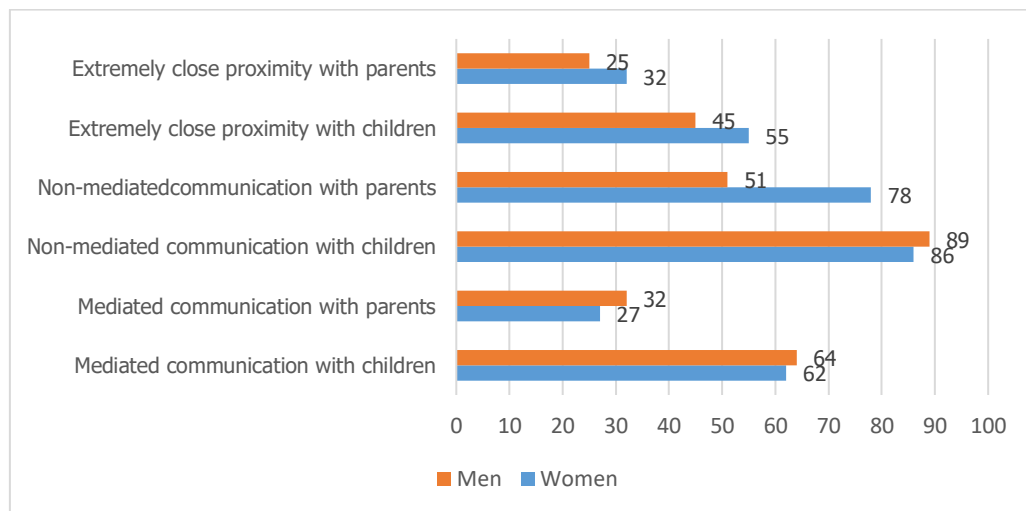
countries (Finland and Czechia) are far below the average. In Israel, Montenegro and Serbia, using screens for audiovisual communication is nearly twice the EU average.

Gendered intergenerational proximity and communication among individuals

To explore gendered family positions, we considered indicators on emotional proximity, face-to-face and mediated communication reported by these mature adults in relation to their position as daughters and sons and as mothers or fathers.

As Figure 5 points out, affective closeness is higher among women, both for their position as mothers and daughters. More than half report an extreme emotional proximity in relation to their children, and one in three in relation to their parents. In both cases, men's rates as fathers and sons are slightly below.

Figure 5: Emotional proximity and communicational forms, by gender (%)



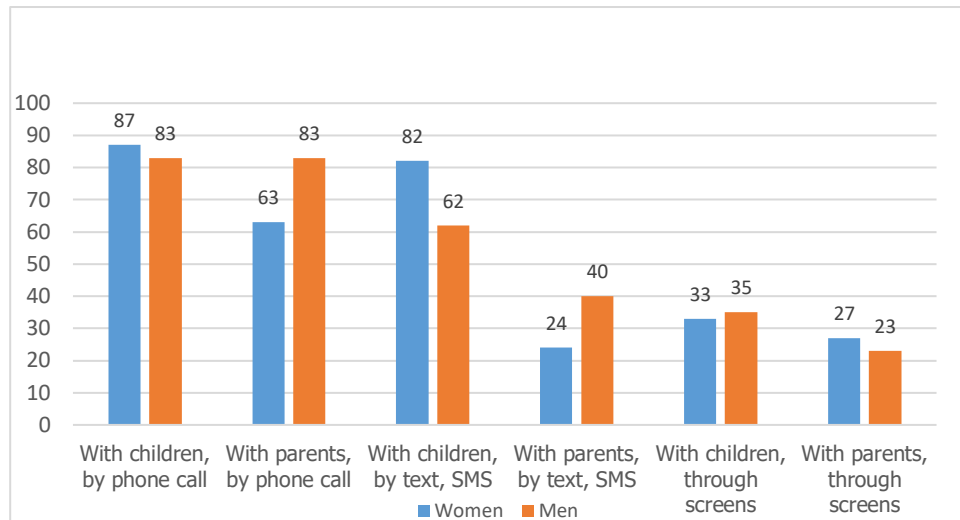
Source: ESS 2022

In line with the cross-country results, individual communication with children over 12 years old is higher than communication with parents. Almost nine in ten mothers and fathers frequently communicate face-to-face with their children, with almost no gender difference, thus illustrating their physical proximity as parents. Meanwhile, frequent face-to-face communication with their own parents presents a gender gap between daughters (78%) versus sons (51%), representing the highest gender difference observed.

Regarding frequent mediated communication, these adults communicate with their children two times or more as often as they do with their parents.

Finally, Figure 6 points to the devices used for mediated communication. In line with the cross-country results, communication through audiovisual screens is the least frequent option for communicating with both younger and older family members, while phone calls are the most used option.

Figure 6: Mediated communication forms, by gender (%)



Source: ESS 2022

Meanwhile, gender differences are evident in the way people make choices: men use phone calls and text messages more frequently to communicate with their parents, whereas women contact their children more often via text messages. Interestingly, when it comes to texting parents, the rate for men nearly doubles that of women (40% and 24%, respectively).

Discussion

Our analysis of the ESS data collection aimed to highlight similarities and differences across European countries in the communication practices of the intermediate generation aged 45–54 with their children and parents, as well as their gendered positions as parents and as daughters/sons, thus addressing our two research questions.

The profiles identified through multiple correspondence analysis go beyond mere statistical classification. They express socio-communicational configurations consistent with the cultural frameworks and with the theories of mediation previously discussed.

Previous ESS surveys on family features have already revealed a contrast between the Scandinavian countries, which pioneered family life transformations that later became normative in other societies (Thorborn 2004) and countries characterized by “modern traditionalism” (Torres *et al.* 2008: 54; Bilsky *et al.* 2010). However, our analysis reveals a more nuanced position: several countries from different cultures (e.g., Greece, Germany) are close to balancing frequent digital use with family proximity, while others are relatively distant (e.g. Estonia, Slovakia); although Portuguese adults aged 45-54 were below the average in terms of having online access at home, the lowest rates of daily internet use and online mobile access occur in Slovakia and Hungary - two countries that were under Soviet influence during the formative years of our adult cohort and whose GDP remain below the EU average (EUrostat, 2023).

These differences are important when considering the intergenerational family relations in context. In Scandinavian countries, the levels of autonomy among children, parents, and grandparents may be linked not only to cultural factors, but also to housing policies that facilitate access to housing for all. By contrast, in Southern countries, a culture of protectionism toward children is combined with challenges in the job

market for young people, postponing their physical autonomy from their parents' households, while in the Balkan countries the traditional duty to care for parents combined with a lack of social support structures may contribute to the higher level of cohabitation between the elderly and their adult children in the same household. After 1989, these cultural differences suggest that the radical move from economically controlled and authoritative political regimes to open markets and liberal political systems did not influence adults from Baltic and Eastern countries in the same way.

Furthermore, we should also avoid reductionist views and consider cultural issues related to styles of language and emotional expression. As highlighted in comparative studies by Kitayama *et al.* (2000), while a higher expression of disengaged emotions reflects a cultural emphasis on secularization, individuality, autonomy, and uniqueness, the expression of engaged emotions emphasizes vulnerabilities, interdependence, and closeness with others, often framed by religious and other cultural dimensions. The Poland case is particularly challenging: while the country presents one of the highest rates of Catholicism in Europe (Pew Research Center 2018), adults born between 1967 and 1977 – having experienced the radical political and economic change in their formative years – are remarkably below the average regarding reporting extremely close physical and emotional proximity and face-to-face communication with their parents and children.

The generational and national reliance on telephone contact can be understood through the theory of communicative affordances (Hutchby 2001; Madianou and Miller, 2012), according to which technologies offer structured possibilities for action. In the case of the telephone, it affords immediacy, low technological barrier, and emotional connection, which may explain its prominence in intergenerational ties, making it a preferred medium for maintaining family bonds—especially in contexts of lower digital literacy or intergenerational asymmetry. Conversely, forms of written digital communication, such as text messages and emails, are used less frequently overall. Despite their advantages for interpersonal relationships, including self-censorship (Eklund and Sadowski 2021), these forms of digital relationality may also favour disruption and misunderstanding due to the absence of social cues. Interestingly, the most remarkable use of this option to communicate both with children and parents occurs in Spain and the Netherlands, countries with distinctive cultural contexts. Finally, audiovisual family communication through platforms, an emerging trend that has increasingly been the object of research involving families with young children, still seems far from a frequent choice for communication with children aged 12+ and parents among this adult generation. Therefore, in relation to RQ1, despite the high level of online access at home and the increasingly deep mediatization (Couldry and Hepp 2017), phone calls and face-to-face communication continue to be reported as the most frequent forms of interaction. Both forms of synchronous communication include affordances such as verbal and non-verbal cues, high interactivity and intimacy, accessibility, and seems to be associated with higher perceived communication quality in person-to-person connections (Wellman *et al.* 2006; Quan-Haase *et al.* 2018; Doring *et al.* 2022).

RQ2 asked the position within the family of our adult respondents and the reported relationships with younger and older members. Bengtson and Roberts (1991) have conceptualized intergenerational family solidarity as a multifaceted construct, including affection, association, consensus, resource sharing, familism norms, and opportunity structure for interaction. Digital technologies can impact these elements by deepening family relationships, while also addressing challenges related to social and emotional isolation, particularly regarding the elderly family members (Azevedo and Ponte 2020; Freeman *et al.* 2020). In fact,

ESS data shows that frequent technologically mediated communication with children is almost three times higher than with parents.

The team responsible for this new ESS model points out that the imbalance may be associated with less frequent use of digital media by older individuals and greater daily support and monitoring of children due to their age (Abendroth *et al.* 2024). However, since children aged 12+ exclude younger children and include young adults, one may ask what monitoring and controlling children's lives means. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight the considerably lower use of video calls in communication with children - compared to the greater use of written messages - potentially as a measure/strategy to mitigate the invasion of their privacy facilitated by video calls.

From a gender point of view, the results show a recurring pattern: women maintain more intense emotional ties and are more responsible for sustaining family communication circuits, particularly within mother-daughter relationships, which are often regarded as the "backbone of family communication" (Miller-Day 2004). Although the modes of communication with children do not differ substantially, that is not the case with communication with parents where face-to-face interaction - and the closeness that this form of interaction provides - is considerably more prevalent among women.

These findings reinforce existing gender norms and disparities in caregiving and emotional labor (Budig and England 2001; Correll *et al.* 2007).

This "digital kinship work" (Eklund 2023), associated with the maintenance of relationships, tends to be made invisible in quantitative analyses, but has profound impacts on the unequal distribution of emotional and logistical responsibilities within families. Even in technologically developed contexts, women continue to play the role of "emotional managers" (Miller-Day 2004), including through family groups on platforms such as WhatsApp. This burden of emotional and communicational management attributed to women can be read in the light of feminist communication theory, which identifies a symbolic division of relational labor (Fraser and Nicholson 1988). Thus, the use of family groups in apps such as WhatsApp often ends up reinforcing a logic of invisible care associated with the female role in families.

Interestingly, the option for texting - whose affordances include asynchronous and faster communication and greater control over interactions (Koerner and Fitzpatrick 2002; Moyano Davila *et al.* 2023) - is more common among women as mothers, and among men as sons.

Aroldi's (2011) assertion that digital media link generations rather than create a stark divide is partially supported by our findings, particularly in relation to younger generations. However, even though the rise of digital platforms has enabled new forms of interaction, these are often layered onto traditional communication practices instead of replacing them entirely, as could have been expected (Aroldi and Colombo 2020). The practices reported by the individuals in an intermediate generation suggest that their use of platforms to communicate with their children and parents is not as present and imminent as technological development might suggest.

Final notes

At the time of data collection, immediately following the COVID-19 pandemic, for this intermediate generation, the use of audiovisual platforms to communicate with family members falls short of social expectations that tend to universalize such platforms, especially among younger members. This lower usage may reflect specific contexts in which these platforms are perceived as less practical or desirable for regular

family communication. Certainly, human desires and capacities are shaped by the affordances particular to the socio-material living context, but “the adoption uses and adaptations are part of a desire of how to live; it comes from us, our choices and abilities” (Silva 2018: 285).

It should not be forgotten that this is a “picture of a moment”, 2022, that is likely to change in future ESS surveys addressing the same questions – and not only because technological devices and affordances continue to evolve. Future mature adult generations are those that have been experiencing the digital context throughout their lives. For them, formative years already include personal screens and control on self-presentation.

This critical and comparative reading of intergenerational communication practices in Europe highlights to what extend digitalization, instead of being a merely technological factor, reinforces or reconfigures pre-existing generational, cultural and gender inequalities.

Three structural patterns emerge from European Social Survey data regarding intergenerational communication which need deeper analysis: First, traditional communication methods (face-to-face and synchronous communication) continue to persist for family bonding, suggesting that device availability does not explain technological adoption because affective cultural and relational factors play a significant role. Second, technology does not prove to be a factor of emancipation, but rather a vehicle that may reproduce gender inequalities. Third, the asymmetry in the frequency and intensity of communication with parents (vs. children) points to a potential risk of isolation of the older generation, even in contexts with technological infrastructure. Such asymmetry can be aggravated by factors such as low digital literacy, cultural norms of distancing, or the absence of active ageing policies that incorporate a digital dimension.

This paper presents some limitations. Firstly, working with secondary data from ESS limited our ability to explore other questions on family communication (e.g. who takes the initiative and for what purpose). Secondly, we considered only two contextual indicators (the cultural position and the daily digital use) due to the large number of countries involved. Nevertheless, by combining other quantitative and qualitative approaches and continuing to follow this ESS module longitudinally, the results may stimulate further research into how contemporary families are using the communicative contexts available to them. They contribute to deepen Media and Communication Studies as well as Family Studies by showing how family communication combines material and affective dimensions, which challenges the traditional oppositions between mediation and proximity, presence and distance, and autonomy and care. They are thus crucial not only for understanding contemporary European families, but also for designing digital inclusion policies that are sensitive to the sociocultural and intergenerational context.

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