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Navigating Connection and Trust: A Phenomenological Study on the Lived Experiences of Social Media Users in Intergenerational Communication

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Abstract

This research highlights how social media users in the Philippines experience relationships across different channels over time and how generation affects those experiences. It uses a descriptive phenomenological approach to collect data. The sample comprised fifteen participants from three generations, aged 19–60, who participated in a virtual focus group conducted in Taglish. To analyze the data, the study used Moustakas's modified van Manen method. The research uncovered six main themes: (1) the emergence of social media as a modern relational infrastructure organized in generational platform repertoire; (2) collapsing physical distance via the ritualized mediated co-presence among mobile and migrant families; (3) connection that is existing yet drained of warmth; (4) trust demonstrated as the congruence between online and offline, toleration, and embodied verification; (5) the paradox of availability, where being responsive is interpreted as caring but yields the feeling of obligation; and (6) mutual generational learning, where middle-aged adults appear as intuitive interpreters. The authors characterize the essence of this phenomenon as "held in tension mediated proximity," meaning that social media bridges physical distances, while trust must be constantly negotiated. The research sheds light on polymedia and intergenerational solidarity by showing that, in Filipino relational culture, trust is evaluated not by the platforms used but by cultural expectations of presence and reciprocity.

Keywords: social media, intergenerational communication, trust, availability, mediated co-presence, phenomenology, Philippines

1. Introduction

Social media has become a common way to socialize and manage relationships. Researchers have shifted their focus from remote communication to how families and friends use platforms, chat groups, and video calls to maintain relationships (Alkobi & Khvorostianov, 2024; Demirsu, 2022). The pandemic has made digital communication the only way to stay in touch and keep relationships alive while

physically isolated (Nguyen et al., 2020, 2022). Mediated interactions can be as intimate as face-to-face communication, as the hyperpersonal model has explained for over 20 years (Walther & Whitty, 2021). Young people believe online communication with friends has advantages because it is available and controllable, but it is less personal than meeting face-to-face (Scott et al., 2022).

Connectivity has its downsides. Users also experience availability stress, meaning they feel obliged to be available for others online (Stevic, 2024). Studies indicate that being constantly ready to communicate online affects one's mood (Johannes et al., 2021). Research shows that how quickly a person responds to a message depends on social norms and the situation (Dogruel & Schnauber-Stockmann, 2021). Nowadays, nearly everyone engages in phubbing when with others. This phenomenon may harm interpersonal relationships (Arenz & Schnauber-Stockmann, 2024). Parents' smartphone use can make them feel distant from their children even when they are close (Denecker et al., 2023).

Tensions increase due to the generational gap. Anxiety about technology can hinder older people's inclusion in the digital world (Kim et al., 2023). Older adults often use social media with care to maintain relationships and psychosocial usefulness (Yachin & Nimrod, 2021). Younger family members often become "warm experts" and teachers of their elders (Martínez & Olsson, 2022) through a phenomenon called digital back-feeding (She et al., 2025). Generations see meaning in online signals differently. What a young adult sees as an appropriate reaction, an older family member may see as a distraction, and vice versa. The concept of "digital natives" obscures this process (Evans & Robertson, 2020).

The situation in the Philippines is especially illustrative in light of the processes outlined here. For a long time, Filipino families have been shaped by the migrant workforce, and social media plays a central role in transnational family relationships, bringing them closer and allowing them to fulfill their roles as parents from afar (Acedera & Yeoh, 2022; Cabalquinto, 2020). In Filipino psychology, *kapwa,* which means togetherness that unifies 'self' and 'others', is the core concept of social relations (Cervantes, 2025); *kwentuhan*, or 'conversation', is one activity through which *kapwa* is sometimes created (Paclibar, 2026). This idea, along with *pakikiramdam* (which suggests sensitivity to others' unexpressed feelings), shapes Filipino users' understanding of how to evaluate response, silence, and presence in cyberspace. Everyday communication often blends Taglish, English, and Filipino, each with its own ways of building relationships.

Although numerous surveys and experiments examine social network use, few reports have published users' experiences of trust and bonding on social media across generations within the same culture. Quantitative studies can capture usage patterns; however, few accounts explain the user experience: what it is like to be "*seen-zoned*," to celebrate Christmas with family via a computer screen, or to be taught by a granddaughter to use a messaging program. Work on mediated relationships of intimacy among Filipinos focuses mostly on global relationships of parents and children (Acedera & Yeoh, 2022; Cabalquinto, 2020). However, little research explains how young, middle-aged, and elderly social network users express and experience trust and accessibility in their interactions with friends and family members.

This study addresses that gap through a phenomenological inquiry with fifteen Filipino social media users aged 19 to 60. It is guided by three research questions:

1) **RQ1.** How do social media users across generations describe their everyday experience of social media as a means of communication and connection, particularly when physical distance is present?
2) **RQ2.** How do participants experience and make sense of trust and availability in online peer and family relationships?
3) **RQ3.** How does generational position shape the lived experience of building and maintaining relationships in online spaces?

This research makes three contributions. First, it provides a thick description of mediated connection and trust in a Filipino, code-switching, and intergenerational sample that international documentation does not adequately cover. Second, it identifies the availability paradox, where the same level of responsiveness can be felt as care and burden, and shows that different generations perceive this paradox differently. Third, it suggests that online trust is perceived more as culturally based judgment formation than as a characteristic of the

platforms. The rest of the article reviews the literature, theoretical framework, methodology, findings, and implications.

2. Review of Related Literature and Theoretical Lens

2.1 From Connectivity to Polymedia

Messaging apps have made group text messaging an everyday part of life for family and friends. As noted in a study of three-generation family WhatsApp group participants, group members can act as "*kinkeepers*", are frequently described as "*flickerers*", and opt to take part passively as trusted experts and consequently establish common rules regarding communications (Alkobi & Khvorostianov, 2024). Belonging to the group is already a sign of being part of the family. Reactions in such chats depend mostly on the participants' surroundings (Dogruel & Schnauber-Stockmann, 2021).

This research uses a polymedia perspective. With access and affordability less of a concern, individuals have a range of channels to choose from, making their choice of medium a message in itself. Choosing a video call over text messages, family group chats, or public posts already indicates something about the bond between interlocutors. Recent studies on family chats and intergenerational video-calling show how such decisions shape the dynamics of family relations (Alkobi & Khvorostianov, 2024; Demirsu, 2022). This perspective shifts attention from individual platforms to the repertoires individuals create and interpret.

2.2 Mediated Co-Presence in Mobile and Transnational Families

Studies on transnational families have pointed out the role of communication technologies in providing care and creating co-presence in the absence of direct contact. Baldassar and Wilding (2020) claim that "digital kinning," or communicating with geographically distant relatives, allows family members to care for and support one another through communication technologies while providing older migrants with social connectedness and helping them preserve their cultural and social identity. The authors explain that smartphones' video-calling functionality empowers individuals to express their thoughts visually and share their locations during discussions. In their study in the Philippines, Acedera and Yeoh (2022) indicate that social media transforms the notion of presence and absence among young people whose parents were employed abroad. According to Cabalquinto (2020), Filipinos use mobile photography to share their family life.

The COVID-19 crisis brought out the usual ways migrant families operate. The need for social distancing pushed people to rely on all forms of digital communication, which varied in efficiency because of the existing digital divide. Older parents who could communicate with their children remotely described their overall well-being more positively during the pandemic. As a result, the idea of mediated presence spread to individuals of all ages instead of being confined to migrant families.

2.3 Intergenerational Social Media Use

The rise of different social media platforms and older adults' use of them has been gradual; however, this trend is far from straightforward. A scoping review identifies fear of technology as a key barrier to older adults' digital engagement (Kim et al., 2023). Research involving focus groups with 184 grandmothers in various countries confirms ambivalence and caution when using Facebook, and suggests that external sources often initiate or motivate Facebook use. Whether or not they use Facebook, it helps people connect to their past and their ties. Nimrod (2020) states that older generations use technology selectively, only when it compensates for losses they have experienced in life, such as low mobility and family fragmentation.

Family education is usually bottom-up. Digital back-feeding, in which the younger generation educates the older, can be proxy back-feeding or learning back-feeding. Proxy back-feeding occurs when the young act on behalf of their older relatives, while learning back-feeding occurs when older relatives learn on their own (She et al., 2025). According to interviews with older adults, learning from children or grandchildren is beneficial, but it isn't easy. A warm expert may solve problems without teaching and thus not change at all, or may become a warm teacher who adjusts his/her approach to the individual's needs (Martínez & Olsson, 2022). The distinction between digital natives and digital immigrants has received much criticism because many argue that birth year cannot explain digital skills (Evans & Robertson, 2020). Intergenerational solidarity also offers a different perspective. Family cohesion includes emotional intimacy, communication, geographical proximity, agreement, and conflict, and researchers have

applied these dimensions to digital communication such as texting, calls, and social media interactions (Hwang et al., 2024). Social media plausibly reshapes several of these dimensions at once: it increases contact while leaving emotional closeness and consensus open to negotiation.

2.4 Trust in Digital Spaces

Trust often refers to a willingness to incur risk based on expectations about another's behavior and intentions. Some suggest it is built on assessing another person's trustworthiness, including notions of honesty and goodwill (Schilke et al., 2021). Trust may be vested in individuals, groups, and organizations, and each may behave independently in this regard (Schilke et al., 2021). In online situations, this means individuals may trust one online service but not the people they do business with, or vice versa.

The mediated environment complicates trustworthiness judgments. The hyperpersonal model clarifies how selective self-presentation and idealized perceptions may accelerate intimacy online (Walther & Whitty, 2021). Warranting theory posits that individuals relate online data about their communication partners to the person's actual life. Information outside an individual's control, particularly information from third parties, is more valuable for warranting and forming impressions about offline characteristics (Lane et al., 2023). Even if online self-presentation is considered fake, users tend to report high subjective authenticity in their social media use (Kreling et al., 2022). Participants recall that communication with close friends is more manageable and accessible. However, they also claim that online communication is less intimate than traditional interaction (Scott et al., 2022). Generational changes in trust online do not follow the same pattern for everyone. Older adults tend to share fake information more frequently, and this tendency may be linked to cognitive, social, and digital literacy issues (Brashier & Schacter, 2020). This suggests a gap between declared caution and actual behavior.

2.5 Availability, Responsiveness, and the Costs of Connection

A significant area of contemporary research focuses on availability, defined as the expectation of being reachable and able to respond promptly. When responding through instant messengers, socially determined rules govern interactions, and situational factors matter more than individuals' wishes in predicting responsiveness (Dogruel & Schnauber-Stockmann, 2021). A two-wave longitudinal study found that availability pressure increases private communication on social media among late adolescents and young adults, suggesting perceived peer expectations to be available (Stevic, 2024). Nevertheless, this research has not indicated the negative impact this pressure has on individuals' quality of life. Online vigilance, defined as constant readiness to communicate online, has been examined in everyday life using smartphone logging and experience sampling (Johannes et al., 2021). Vanden Abeele (2021) thinks that digital wellbeing is a process of balancing the pros and cons of being online. Nassen et al. (2023) identified voluntary digital isolation as one way to restore balance.

Connectivity is also changing how co-located interactions happen. A meta-analysis of 79 studies concluded that phubbing is widespread, harms relationships and friendships, and is most strongly predicted by problematic mobile phone use (Arenz & Schnauber-Stockmann, 2024). In family contexts, higher parental smartphone use means more perceived *technoference*, or feeling as if technology interferes with time spent together (Denecker et al., 2023).

2.6 Theoretical Lens and Research Gap

This research draws on three viewpoints, using them as sensitizing rather than predictive frameworks. During the investigation, these three points of view, used for the initial analysis, are brought back when interpreting according to phenomenological tenets (Frechette et al., 2020; Galinha-de-Sá & Velez, 2022). The concept of polymedia suggests that selecting a platform is a social process that has its own meanings (Alkobi & Khvorostianov, 2024; Demirsu, 2022). The notion of intergenerational solidarity, along with its application to digital communication (Hwang et al., 2024), highlights how communication modalities can enhance or, conversely, weaken family cohesion. The approach of *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* (Filipino psychology) provides culturally relevant concepts, which comprise *kapwa* (the underlying notion of self and others as one entity; Cervantes, 2025), *kwentuhan* (the notion that indicates the importance of conversation as the means of establishing and reinforcing *kapwa* relationships; Paclibar, 2026), and *pakikiramdam* (being sensitive to others).

Earlier literature clarifies that social media makes connection possible; that availability norms have costs; and that different generations differ in social media use. However, the literature does not clarify how these elements connect in the lives of people across generations within one relationship culture, or how trust manifests under conditions of unavailability, both expected and disliked. This study fills this gap.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The research used a descriptive (transcendental) phenomenological design to present the core essence of an experience as described by those who experienced it (Frechette et al., 2020; Galinha-de-Sá & Velez, 2022). The phenomenological approach was appropriate because the research questions address what study subjects experience in terms of mediated connection, trust, and availability, and how these experiences come about rather than the frequency or intensity of the experience. The data were collected through a phenomenological focus group. Although results are traditionally derived from individual interviews, Love et al. (2020) suggest that focus groups can achieve phenomenological goals, since the researcher pays special attention to individual narratives while examining how participants interact in the group. This approach suited the research's intergenerational theme: listening to peers from different generations helped respondents express their understanding of their own generation. The reports follow the criteria established for quality qualitative research (Johnson et al., 2020) and the COREQ checklist.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

Participants were chosen using a purposive, criterion sampling technique and had to satisfy the following inclusion criteria for the selection process: (a) Filipino individual aged between 18 and 60 years; (b) habitual user of at least one social media or messaging platform; (c) uses social media for communicating with family, peers, or work colleagues; (d) willingness to share experiences in English or Filipino or both. For cross-generational comparison, the researchers recruited three groups of five participants each: younger adults (19-23 years), middle-aged adults (28-41 years), and older adults (48-60 years). The final sample includes 15 participants (Table 1): students, teachers, a guidance counselor, the school principal, local government and barangay officials, a small business owner, an administrative officer, a cooperative manager, and a retired teacher. This study used pseudonyms as required. The analysis retained culturally acceptable kinship terms because they indicate each participant's generation.

Table 1. Participant profile (N = 15)

Code	Pseudonym	Age	Generational band	Occupation	Primary platforms
P1	Marco	21	Young adult	College student / freelancer	Facebook, TikTok, Instagram
P2	Bea	19	Young adult	BS Education student	TikTok, Instagram, Messenger
P3	Christian	23	Young adult	IT support specialist	Facebook, Discord, X (Twitter)
P4	Angelica	20	Young adult	Communication Arts student	Instagram, TikTok, Facebook
P5	Joshua	22	Young adult	Education graduate	Facebook, Messenger, YouTube
P6	Karen	28	Middle-aged adult	Junior high school teacher	Facebook, Messenger, LinkedIn
P7	Mark	32	Middle-aged adult	Senior high school teacher	Facebook, Messenger, YouTube
P8	Diane	35	Middle-aged adult	Guidance counsellor	Facebook, Instagram, Viber
P9	Carlo	39	Middle-aged adult	Local government	Facebook, Messenger,

				employee	TikTok
P10	Rica	41	Middle-aged adult	Elementary school principal	Facebook, Viber, Messenger
P11	Tito Ramon	48	Older working adult	Small business owner	Facebook, Messenger
P12	Auntie Susan	52	Older working adult	Administrative officer	Facebook, Viber
P13	Kuya Nestor	55	Older working adult	Barangay official	Facebook, Messenger
P14	Nanay Elena	58	Older working adult	Retired teacher / homemaker	Facebook, YouTube
P15	Tatay Roberto	60	Older working adult	Cooperative manager	Facebook, Messenger

The sufficiency of the sample was evaluated based on the amount of information in the sample relevant to the narrow study purpose rather than a fixed saturation number. Researchers widely dispute whether saturation can be a universally accepted parameter in reflexive qualitative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). At the same time, empirical studies show that most themes in qualitative data emerge early, and saturation can be assessed by the rate at which new themes emerge (Guest et al., 2020; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Because only one group was conducted, the message regarding saturation is conveyed with caution, as it is presented as a limitation.

3.3 Data Collection

On August 14, 2026, the researcher conducted an online focus group. The researcher prepared an informal guide based on the research objectives and adjusted it to fit the phenomenological study's goals. The guide included one question about participants' everyday lives; two questions about their experience of remote connectedness and changes from traditionally used means of communication; two questions about trust and availability; and one question about intergenerational differences. All questions were open-ended and asked participants to give the specifics ("Can you recall one situation…").

The focus group took place in Taglish—the English–Filipino mixed register typical in the Philippines to facilitate conversation without the necessity to translate experiences. The session was audio- and videotaped with participants' consent. The recording was transcribed using Otter.ai technology, and a bilingual researcher thoroughly checked the resulting transcript against the recording.

3.4 Data Analysis

The analysis proceeded using Moustakas's seven-step version of the van Kaam method, as reported by Galinha-de-Sá and Velez (2022). The analysis was carried out on the original transcript. The authors kept the transcription in its original language and deferred translation to the reporting stage. The authors clearly outlined the translation procedure in line with previous studies on cross-language qualitative data analysis (Yunus et al., 2022). The process adopted involved:

1) **Epoché (bracketing).** During the analysis, the author generated reflexive memos capturing her presuppositions about social media and its role in facilitating connection. Throughout the process, she was mindful not to let her convictions shape her outlook while reading what the subjects had to say (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023).
2) **Horizontalization.** The author included every participant quotation that pertains to the phenomenon, giving each equal weight. This process produced 53 identified quotations from 22 relevant participant quotations.
3) **Reduction to invariant constituents.** The author analyzed each quotation against two criteria: whether it presented a moment of consciousness important to understanding the phenomenon, and whether it could be generalized and labeled. We kept distinct quotations if they added something new to the

analysis, even if they overlapped.

4) **Clustering and thematizing.** The author grouped the invariant properties into 15 subthemes and six overarching themes.
5) **Validation.** We compared all themes with the summarized transcript of what the subjects said to ensure each theme was clearly stated and aligned with their accounts.
6) **Textural and structural descriptions.** For each theme, the author produced textural and structural descriptions of the experience.
7) **Composite description.** The researcher synthesized the textural and structural descriptions into a composite statement of the essence of the phenomenon.

Because the data came from a collective, the investigation focused on both personal experiences and moments of interaction. Instances include direct agreement ("*Masuport ako kayo, Sir Mark*"), qualification ("*pero tama si Christian*"), and address across generations ("*That's true, Iho*"). These were analyzed as indicators of shared or disputed meanings, in accordance with Love et al. (2020). The number of people who contributed to each theme is presented to show distribution across generations rather than to establish significance.

3.5 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was pursued through the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Johnson et al., 2020).

- **Credibility** was supported by verifying the transcript against the recording, using verbatim quotations in the original language with translations, and searching for disconfirming statements during validation.
- **Transferability** was supported by thick description of the participants, setting, and cultural context.
- **Dependability** was supported by an audit trail comprising recordings, raw and verified transcripts, the analysis matrix, and dated analytic memos.
- **Confirmability** was supported by reflexive memoing and the reporting of researcher positionality.

3.6 Researcher Reflexivity

The researcher's academic status may have prompted participants to give socially desirable or more articulate responses in sessions she moderated. Many participants are teachers or students. The writer claims that during the session, one of the moderator's questions alluded to the research's working hypothesis: that social media contributes to connection. The writer acknowledges that this might have influenced participants' responses, as stated in the reflexive account of how the researcher influenced the data (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). To do so, the study used two analytical phases. The first phase was horizontalization, which involved paying particular attention to statements about both the costs of establishing relationships and the tensions that emerged as a result. The second phase involved verification, where each theme was examined to see whether opposing accounts were available. Themes 3 and 5, which appear to question the hypothesis, were abundant in subjects' accounts, meaning none of the responses unconditionally confirmed it.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The researcher obtained informed consent from study subjects, both in writing and orally, after explaining the study's aim, their right to withdraw at any time without fear of consequences, and how the information would be used. All information collected during the study was anonymized, meanings hidden in quotes, and audio recordings preserved on tape recorders and made accessible with passwords, so only the researcher had access, in compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012.

4. Findings

A total of fifty-three major statements were compiled under six themes with fifteen sub-themes (See Table 2). The first and second themes address RQ1, the fourth and fifth themes address RQ2, and the third and sixth themes address RQ3; all themes are interconnected. Each quotation is presented in the original Taglish, followed by an English translation. The participant's code, age, and generation (Y = young adults, M = middle-aged adults, and O = older adults) are indicated next to the quoted text.

Table 2. Themes, subthemes, and distribution across generational bands

Theme	Subthemes	Contributing participants	Statements (n)
1. Social media as everyday relational infrastructure	1a Bookending the day; 1b Layered platform repertoires	P1–P5 (Y); P6 (M); P11 (O)	15
2. Collapsing distance through mediated co-presence	2a From letters to real time; 2b Seeing as caring; 2c Ritual co-presence	P8–P10 (M); P12–P14 (O)	12
3. Connected yet wanting: the thinning of warmth	3a Warmth that does not transmit; 3b Absent presence at home	P10 (M); P14, P15 (O)	3
4. Trust as congruence, forbearance, and embodied verification	4a Online–offline congruence; 4b Forbearance in the "seen zone"; 4c Embodied verification and caution	P4 (Y); P7 (M); P15 (O); endorsed by P3 (Y)	7
5. The availability paradox	5a Responsiveness as care; 5b Responsiveness as obligation	P3, P4, P5 (Y)	6
6. Reciprocal generational learning and the middle-generation bridge	6a Bottom-up teaching and the wish to keep pace; 6b Divergent grammars of intimacy; 6c The middle generation as broker	P1 (Y); P6, P8 (M); P12, P14 (O)	10

4.1 Theme 1: Social Media as Everyday Relational Infrastructure

Participants across all three bands described social media not as an activity but as the medium through which their day unfolds. They experienced it as infrastructure: always present, rarely noticed, and felt most when they relied on it.

1a. Bookending the day. For some respondents, social networking marks the beginning and end of the day. P5 remarked, "Social media is literally the first and last thing I open every single day" (P5, 22, Y). P1 shared this waking activity: *"pagka-gising pa lang sa umaga, open agad ng Facebook and Messenger para icheck yung mga group chats sa school and sa freelance work"* [as soon as I wake up in the morning, I immediately open Facebook and Messenger to check the group chats for school and freelance work] (P1, 21, Y). In the earliest group, the same ritual takes place, but the focus shifts from peers to family. *"Pagkagising ko, Facebook muna para makita ang balita at kung anong ginagawa ng mga kamag-anak ko sa abroad"* [When I wake up, I check Facebook first to see the news and what my relatives abroad are doing] (P11, 48, O). For P6, the morning order had professional significance: *"icheck ko muna ang DepEd Messenger group chats namin before opening my personal feed"* [I first check our DepEd Messenger group chats before opening my personal feed] (P6, 28, M).

1b. Layered platform repertoires. Participants did not refer to "social media" as a single space. They referred to it as a layered system in which each medium performs a particular role. Younger participants referred to TikTok and Instagram for entertainment purposes and keeping track of their friends (*"doon ko nakikita kung ano ang nangyayari sa mga kaibigan ko in real-time"* [that is where I see my friends in real-time]; P4, 20, Y), while they used Discord for peer groups (P3). Messenger was reserved for important issues: *"para sa mga importanteng usapan, Messenger pa rin kasi doon naman tayo nagpapadala ng requirements from school"* [for important discussions, we still use Messenger since we send requirements from school via it] (P4, 20, Y). P2 said Messenger is the place for *"lahat ng announcements and chika"* [all the announcements and gossip] with relatives and classmates. P1 referred to Facebook and Messenger as his "lifeline" to friends.

The repertoire was also influenced by the audience's age. P3 picked Facebook for *"updating older relatives kung nasaan ako"* [updating older relatives on my whereabouts] (P3, 23, Y), suggesting that platform choice is partly about reaching the other generation's leading platform. Older respondents limited their choices to Facebook, Messenger, and Viber, which they used for business: *"Messenger din para sa negosyo ko para madaling macontact ng mga customers"* [I

also use Messenger for my business so that customers can contact me without difficulties] (P11, 48, O).

4.2 Theme 2: Collapsing Distance Through Mediated Co-Presence

The most emotionally charged accounts concerned physical separation, arising from overseas work, internal migration, and field assignments. These accounts came predominantly from middle-aged and older participants.

2a. From letters to real time. Respondents compared the current situation with the past, when communication was less frequent and slower. "In the past, it was hand-written letters or telegrams" (P13, 55, O). "Back then, communication involved a call from a landline or a letter that might take weeks; nowadays, it happens in real time" (P8, 35, M). P12 said that kin communication before the impact of social networks followed a festive calendar: "You had to wait until the fiesta to get news from people coming from there" (P12, 52, O). P9 recounted how in the past field research meant living in isolation: "When you are in the field you cannot reach anybody; now it is easy to get in touch with friends anytime" (P9, 39, M).

2b. Seeing as caring. The connection was made through sight. Seeing one's relatives, rather than just hearing about them, becomes a way of showing care and reassurance. P8 recalled how sibling relationships took shape amid distance: *"talagang Messenger video call ang bumuhay sa amin"* [it was really Messenger video calls that kept us alive] (P8, 35, M). The verb *bumuhay* means "to give life" and, here, indicates that mediated contact gave life to the family. Similarly, P13 described an act of parental surveillance: *"isang pindot mo lang sa Messenger, nakikita mo na kung kumakain na ba ang mga anak mo"* [with one tap on Messenger, you can see whether your children have eaten] (P13, 55, O). Asking whether someone has eaten *(kumain ka na ba)* in Filipino culture suggests a cultural pattern of care that can now be visualized. P9 summarizes the experience: *"parang wala lang ang layo"* [it's as if the distance is nothing] (P9, 39, M).

2c. Ritual co-presence. For the oldest participants, mediated contact was woven into family rituals. P14 contrasted past and present Christmases: "Noon, naiiyak ako sa lungkot kapag Pasko dahil wala sila. Ngayon, kahit papaano, parang magkakasama pa rin kami sa hapag-kainan kahit sa screen lang" [Before, I would cry from sadness at Christmas because they were not here. Now, somehow, it's as if we are still together at the dinner table, even if only on a screen] (P14, 58, O). Her qualifiers, *kahit papaano* (somehow, at least) and *kahit sa screen lang* (even if only on a screen), show that this co-presence is deeply valued yet understood as partial. This partiality leads into Theme 3.

4.3 Theme 3: Connected Yet Wanting: The Thinning of Warmth

Alongside gratitude for mediated contact, participants described something that does not travel through the screen.

3a. Warmth that does not transmit. P10, a principal who had managed a school community through the pandemic, affirmed that "social media allowed us to maintain strong connections despite physical isolation", but added: "*even if we are connected online, minsan nawawala yung personal warmth na meron sa face-to-face interaction*" [even if we are connected online, sometimes the personal warmth of face-to-face interaction is lost] (P10, 41, M). Participants experienced connection and warmth as separable.

3b. Absent presence at home. Older participants described the reverse problem: people who are physically near but attentionally elsewhere. P14 recounted: "*naninibago kami minsan kapag ang mga apo namin ay puro na lang cellphone ang hawak habang magkakatabi naman kami sa sala*" [we sometimes feel estranged when our grandchildren are always holding their phones even while we are sitting together in the living room] (P14, 58, O). P15 observed that young people are "*masyado silang nakatutok sa cellphone*" [too focused on their phones] (P15, 60, O). The paradox was clearly felt: social media brings the distant child to the dinner table while taking the co-present grandchild away from the living room.

4.4 Theme 4: Trust as Congruence, Forbearance, and Embodied Verification

Asked what trust "looks like or feels like" online, participants described three distinct but related experiences.

4a. Online–offline congruence. For P7, trust online rested on consistency between the online self and the offline person: "*trust online is anchored on transparency and authenticity. Kasi sa social media, madaling magpanggap*" [because on social media, it is easy to pretend] (P7, 32, M). Trust

means "*yung taong kinakausap mo online ay totoo rin sa personal*" [the person you talk to online is also genuine in person], and it is demonstrated "through consistent communication". P3 explicitly endorsed this view ("Agree ako kay Sir Mark").

4b. Forbearance in the "seen zone". P4 defined trust through what one refrains from doing: "*ang trust online ay yung hindi kayo nagdududahan porket hindi kaagad nakapag-reply ang isa't isa*" [trust online is when you don't doubt each other just because one of you didn't reply right away] (P4, 20, Y). On this account, trust is the capacity to extend good faith across a visible silence. It is a form of *pakikiramdam* that reads a delayed reply charitably rather than as a slight.

4c. Embodied verification and caution. The older participants have used mediated interaction in family traditions. P14 told the story of the two Christmases: *"Noon, naiiyak ako sa lungkot kapag Pasko dahil wala sila. Ngayon, kahit papaano, parang magkakasama pa rin kami sa hapag-kainan, kahit sa screen lang."* [Before, I used to cry at Christmas time because they weren't here with me. Now, somehow, it seems that we are still seated at our dining table, but only virtually] (P14, 58, O). The qualifiers used in her utterance, *kahit papaano and kahit sa screen lang*, demonstrated that people value the experience but understand it as only partially real.

4.5 Theme 5: The Availability Paradox

The question on availability produced the clearest ambivalence, voiced entirely by young adults. The same responsiveness that expresses care was experienced as a source of pressure.

5a. Responsiveness as care. P5 articulated a generational norm: "*Sa generation namin, ang availability ay sign ng loyalty o care. Kapag mabilis kang mag-reply sa kaibigan mo kapag may problema siya, ibig sabihin kasama ka sa support system niya*" [In our generation, availability is a sign of loyalty or care. If you reply quickly to your friend when they have a problem, it means you're part of their support system] (P5, 22, Y). P3 agreed: "*Maganda kasi mabilis ang tulungan pag available ang tropa*" [It's good because help comes quickly when your friends are available] (P3, 23, Y).

5b. Responsiveness as obligation. In the same turns, both participants described the cost. "*minsan toxic din na parang inaasahan ka na mag-reply agad 24/7. Parang nawawala na yung personal space mo*" [Sometimes it's also toxic, like you're expected to reply immediately 24/7. It's like your personal space disappears] (P3, 23, Y). "*nakakapagod din kapag umabot na sa punto na parang obliged kang maging online all the time*" [it's also exhausting when it reaches the point where you feel obliged to be online all the time] (P5, 22, Y). P4 identified the read receipt as the mechanism that turns delay into offense: "*Yung pressure na 'seen zone' ka pero hindi ka nag-reply agad, minsan nagcacause pa ng misunderstanding sa mga friends*" [The pressure when you've seen a message but didn't reply right away sometimes even causes misunderstandings among friends] (P4, 20, Y).

The two faces of availability were not experienced as belonging to different people or relationships. They held both faces simultaneously, often in one sentence joined by *pero* (but).

4.6 Theme 6: Reciprocal Generational Learning and the Middle-Generation Bridge

6a. Bottom-up teaching and the wish to keep pace. Older participants recounted their shift from fear to happiness, influenced by younger family members. "Long ago, I was afraid of gadgets. But when my grandchildren taught me how to use Messenger, I was thrilled." (P12, 52, O). According to P8, "the parents of my parents had a hard time adapting." After that, cold communication transitioned to daily calls with grandchildren. P14 spoke about the motivation for learning the technology: "We also learn because we want to keep up with you." (P14, 58, O). In this case, the goal was to keep up with the interlocutors.

6b. Divergent grammars of intimacy. Participants of different ages noted differences in how they recognized closeness. P1 revealed: "It's totally normal for us to be friends even without meeting each other in person. Some people feel even more comfortable being open online than in a face-to-face conversation" (P1, 21, Y). He remarks that older people, by contrast, tend to value "the sincerity of the voice and the personal story". P14 responded directly: "That's correct, son. Old people are used to physical hands and eye contact while talking" (P14, 58, O). This interaction demonstrates that each generation learns about one another's intimate languages although they still prefer using the one typical for their own generation.

6c. The middle generation as broker. The participant in the millennial generation identified herself in the middle of two perspectives: "*Bilang*

nasa gitna (millennial), nakikita ko pareho ang perspective. Nakikita ko ang importansya ng bilis at convenience ng social media para sa connection, pero naiintindihan ko rin ang takot ng mga matatanda na baka mawala ang tunay na human touch sa mga relasyon." [Being in the middle (millennial), I see both perspectives. I see the importance of social media's speed and convenience for connection, but I also understand the elders' fear that the real human touch in relationships might be lost] (P6, 28, M). Both Generation X and Millennial participants shared experiences helping their older relatives connect online, as was the case with the Generation X participant (P8).

4.7 The Essence of the Phenomenon

By synthesizing descriptions at both the textural and structural levels, we can summarize participants' experience through the concept of "mediated nearness with tension." Texturally, they experience social media as both a usual practice of relating in their everyday lives and a way to be perceived by people far away. This gives them relief, assurance, and a sense of tradition in being together. However, they also perceive social media as reducing warmth in the experience, shifting attention away from those physically close, and requiring them to be always "on" and reachable. Structurally, participants' experiences are shaped by how physical distance values mediated connections and how the visibility of responses makes silence a form of communication in itself. Attitudes toward online communication also depend on participants' generation: younger people find intimacy and trust in responsiveness and online self-disclosure; older people attribute these qualities to a person's presence and speech, while middle-aged participants blend attributes from both groups.

Across generations, trust is not experienced as a property of platforms. Instead, people judge it as a property of the person: whether they are consistent across online and offline worlds, whether they can extend good faith across a delayed reply, and whether they are known in the flesh.

5. Discussion

This study examined connection, trust, and availability among Filipino social media users across generations. The first result is that social media has proven to be a good channel for connecting people. Second, connection does not automatically lead to trust. Finally, the last finding suggests that availability is differently defined by different people and generations. The following sections discuss each finding.

5.1 Generationally Layered Repertoires as Relational Choices

Theme 1 backs up the polymedia view of social networks. Users did not see the "social network" as a single medium but as a kind of collection of channels, each of which carries its own meaning: TikTok and Instagram act as a way of keeping up with peers, Discord is used for friends' groups, and Messenger is for important communications and with families. A noteworthy finding is that users' channel choices differ by the recipient's age and their relationship. One participant, a young IT worker, uses Facebook only to keep older relatives updated. The study also found that Messenger was the only channel shared by all participants, serving as a basis for intergenerational communication. This aligns with data from Alkobi and Khvorostianov (2024) on WhatsApp groups that include three generations, where using a single channel allows older members to stay included.

The explanation of social media as an infrastructure that "frames" the day aligns with research on constant engagement with digital communication (Johannes et al., 2021) and the normalization of digital presence during the pandemic (Nguyen et al., 2022). The ways respondents describe school-related, DepEd, and business chats suggest that their coordination through messaging has also permeated professional life. For teachers in particular, a key indicator of the blurring line between being available for work and being personally available is the trend of checking institutional chats in the morning before going through a personal feed.

5.2 Mediated Co-Presence and Its Partiality

The encounters described in Theme 2 align with studies on technology use in transnational families and among migrants (Baldassar & Wilding, 2020; Demirsu, 2022). Participants experienced the compression of time and distance described in this field of study, as well as a sharp contrast with the era of letters, telegrams, landlines, and fiesta time management. In addition, the subtheme seeing as caring adds a particular cultural flavor to the analysis, as checking by sight whether one's children have eaten reflects the Filipino understanding of caring and turns it into a visual rather than merely verbal action. This aligns with

Demirsu's (2022) finding that video calling helps families expand their contact with family members through visual performance and spatial sharing, and with Cabalquinto's (2020) finding that Filipino families "show" their family lives through mobile imagery.

The qualifiers used in P14's account, *kahit papaano* (somehow) and kahit sa screen lang (even if only on a screen), suggest that mediated co-presence is appreciated because it is recognized as imperfect. This echoes Demirsu's (2022) comment on the difficulties of being separated while also being virtually present, and Acedera and Yeoh's (2022) observation that social media clarifies but does not eliminate the distinction between presence and absence in Filipino transnational families' reality. It warns us about the pitfalls of taking co-presence for granted. Theme 3 indicates that this incompleteness operates at home. The same technology that brings a muted child to the dining table also takes their grandchild away from the sofa, aligning with meta-analysis findings on the adverse effects of phubbing on relationships (Arenz & Schnauber-Stockmann, 20224). The result complements findings from authors who claim that families feel smartphone use interferes with their collective experiences (Denecker et al., 2023). It aligns with young adults' views that online interactions are less personal than those that take place in reality (Scott et al., 2022).

Through the lens of intergenerational solidarity (Hwang et al., 2024), social media appears to promote connection and provide assistance and reassurance across distance. Hwang et al. (2024) show that older parents whose relationships with adult children can be classified as "digitally connected" experience greater well-being. The accounts in this collection show how this connection works in real life while also illustrating its limits. Emotional closeness remains intact even at a distance but may become less manifest in co-located situations. This finding raises the important theoretical question of whether mediated communication redistributes solidarity across dimensions rather than merely increasing or decreasing it.

5.3 Trust Relocated from Platforms to Persons

According to the 4th Theme, participants understood trust in relation to people rather than platforms or information systems. The three subthemes correspond indirectly to the commonly theorized foundations of trustworthiness (Schilke et al., 2021). The commonality of online and offline self (4a) is linked to honesty being perceived as saying what one is, validated through ongoing communication. The 4th subtheme, acting with patience within the "visible zone" (4b), relates to the definition of kindness, meaning presuming good intentions behind being quiet. The 4th point of the theme, making sure of the truth (4c), addresses the question of warrants in relation to warrant theory, noting that online information influences offline impressions to the extent that it can be viewed as a reliable warrant (Lane et al., 2023). For respondent P15, the only truly reliable warrant remains an actual meeting.

The contrast between generations depicted in Themes 4 and 6b is explained using Walther and Whitty's (2021) hyperpersonal model. Young respondents feel very relaxed when communicating online, which aligns with the model's description. Young adulthood includes self-presentation control, which seems to be an important component of online communication with peers (Scott et al., 2022). Older participants' view that communication should have a "personal hand and a look in the eye" suggests they value face-to-face communication, especially since the hyperpersonal model makes it easy to deceive others online ("madaling magpanggap"). Nevertheless, research indicates that many users see their online communications as being real (Kreling et al., 2022). This suggests that older participants' opinions may reflect generational norms as much as actual dishonest behavior. At the same time, one should not assume that older participants' caution guarantees safe online behavior, since older individuals share fake news more often than younger ones (Brashier & Schacter, 2020). It means that what people say and what they do may differ significantly.

The finding that participants located trust in persons adds a lived-experience dimension to accounts of trust as directed at different targets, from particular others to institutions and systems (Schilke et al., 2021). Participants largely did not mention platform-level or system-level trust. This suggests that, in everyday relational use, users foreground interpersonal trust and treat platform trust as background.

5.4 The Availability Paradox and Forbearance as Its Resolution

Theme 5 supports previous studies showing that

young people think peer pressure is manageable and that the expectation of constant availability drives personal communication on social media (Stevic, 2024). Participants described the "seen zone" to explain how culturally determined norms of responsiveness (Dogruel & Schnauber-Stockmann, 2021) can be understood and misinterpreted after someone sees a message. Their feelings of exhaustion and the disappearance of private space add another layer to the existing research. However, Stevic (2024) reported no impact of expected availability on people's overall enjoyment of life.

The research provides two key insights. First, the paradox does not take form between different people or relationships. Both sides of the paradox usually occur within one individual. This supports Vanden Abeele's (2021) view of digital well-being as a shifting concept. In addition, insights drawn directly from participants' feedback suggest that a solution is possible. One participant defined trust as cases where there is no doubt in the interlocutor's response, which is the relational answer to the problem of the seen icon field. Where there is availability, there is cooperation, and everything can be tolerated; where there is no such availability, the situation becomes suspicious, as it can be understood within the concept of relationship where availability works.

Younger adults articulated the paradox of availability, whereas older participants saw the problem as youth being "too busy on their phones." This imbalance may indicate that peer-responsiveness norms are more prevalent among younger adults than among their older counterparts. In either case, this suggests that, across generations, interventions such as voluntary disconnection (Nassen et al., 2023) will be perceived differently: as a self-care measure by younger people and possibly as a positive return to attention by older ones.

5.5 Reciprocal Learning and the Middle Generation as Broker

Theme 6 supports findings on digital back-feeding and warm expertise developed in families (Martínez & Olsson, 2022; She et al., 2025). It also demonstrates how technology anxiety, which happens to be one of the significant impediments to digital inclusion of seniors (Kim et al., 2023), may be surmounted by means of social support, e.g., in the case of P12 overcoming fear with joy after being taught by her grandchildren. In the words of She et al. (2025), this is learning back-feeding rather than proxy use: the elder gains the skill instead of the youth acting on her behalf. P14 states that elders learn "as we want to keep in touch with you," which proves Nimrod's (2020) concept of selective optimization with compensation: the elderly start employing technology in the areas where that serves to compensate for lost opportunities, in the case at hand, for daily communication with children who live far away from them. The findings also support the view that limited social media use in old age can still help maintain social relations and relevance (Yachin & Nimrod, 2021).

The literature predominantly lacks any information on the middle generation's role as a negotiator (6c), while showing a clear distinction between younger and older users. As shown in previous research on transnational families, mothers who are on the move act as mediators and organize video calls between grandparents and their grandchildren (Demirsu, 2022). The middle-aged people in the present research play a similar role in their country. They are familiar with both intimacy languages, help their parents communicate with their grandchildren remotely, and voice seniors' fears to the younger generation. These results challenge the binary classification of generations (Evans & Robertson, 2020), highlighting the middle generation's role as an effective partner in efforts to improve digital literacy in families or local populations.

6. Implications, Limitations, and Future Research

6.1 Theoretical Implications

The study outlines three theoretical implications. It enhances polymedia theory with the concept of the repertoire negotiated in relation to the interlocutor's generation. In the family context, the common repertoire is confined to the channels family members can use. It also updates the theory of intergenerational solidarity in a media context. Social media redistributes solidarity across dimensions: it strengthens associational and functional solidarity while making affectual solidarity questionable. According to the article, interpersonal trust makes the failures of availability acceptable in everyday relationships.

Family discussions around "availability agreements" (for example, phone-free meals or a mutual understanding that a late response is not

a no-show) can reduce both the dwindling warmth older family members feel and the obligation younger family members feel. Middle-aged family members are well positioned to mediate such agreements. For teachers and civil servants, work group communications extend availability beyond working hours. School leaders and the Ministry of Education should set clear rules for response times and for messaging in work-related group chats. Global programs should be relational, not only technological, and based on what older people want to do (e.g., see and meet family members). Young people's counselors may be able to help with "seen-zone" worries by teaching young people how to practice patience as a trust-building experience, emphasizing how being responsive is not the same as being loyal. They could also reduce the process of converting delay into offense through available read receipts.

6.2 Limitations

These findings have several limitations. One focus group provided the data, so saturation is limited and individual depth is low, with most participants making only one or two comments. Individual interviews could have produced fuller descriptions. Also, turns were unevenly distributed within the generational strata, with middle-aged and older participants mostly responding to the question about distance and more young adults available. As a result, some apparent generational differences (e.g., the availability paradox discussed only by young adults) may reflect turn allocation rather than generational differences. Finally, at least one prompt the moderator used referred to the project's working hypothesis.

The last reflective question in the interview guide was not used, so overall reflective summaries are not available. The sample consisted mostly of people working in education and public services. Furthermore, all participants were on social media and could join the online meeting. The sampling method does not capture the experiences of non-users and older people who are less connected. Although the data were analyzed in their original language, translation may lose some meaning.

Future research may explore individual phenomenological interviews, which provide insights into different generational groups over time, and homogeneous-generation focus groups to test whether the patterns identified in this text apply across all three generations' responses to the questions. Moreover, dyadic or family-type research designs could be applied in the form of triads – parent/grandparent/grandchild – to directly observe the brokering role of the middle-generational parent. The availability paradox could be analyzed in the contexts of group chats for teaching professionals and different government agents.

Another possible direction for future research is to merge qualitative findings with quantitative data from digital traces or diary keeping to compare formally noted norms of trust with older adults' actual behavior, including features of their information-sharing practices. Last but not least, future research might include young seniors, such as seniors who live in rural areas, have higher levels of poverty, or live in other countries.

7. Conclusion

Participants from the Philippines describe social media as ordinary, a common venue for everyday communication and a useful way to bridge distances between people. Particularly for older participants, social media makes it possible to recreate a feeling of togetherness during times, moments that would otherwise be rather painful because of the distance involved.

Trust, as defined by the respondents, was an assessment of individuals. It relied on coherence between digital and real existence, willingness to interpret a delayed message positively, and, for the eldest participants, in-person confirmation. Generations differ in where they locate intimacy and trust, yet they understand how they operate. They learn from each other, with the youngest teaching others and the middle generation interpreting.

The essence of experience, mediated closeness under tension, allows us to understand that the operation of social media is not so much about ties being formed but about how people understand the meaning of presence, silence, and attention across the generations.

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