



Intergenerational Communication in Traditional and Virtual Bulgarian Families

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Abstract. Mobility and migration processes through transnational borders outline the new dimensions of the modern world. The countless possibilities to work and study abroad are among the main reasons for the younger generations in Bulgaria to leave their country and their family, relatives and friends. The newly formed virtual family form composed of a married or unmarried couple, a family with children (narrowly) and their ancestors (broadly) where single, several or all members of the family unit do not live in the same household faces immense challenges.

Despite the contemporary seamless and timely communication possibilities, the paper seeks to answer two research questions: Does the intergenerational divide deepen in the virtual family over time? How the communication is changing in the virtual family compared with the traditional one? Thus the aim of the study is to measure the generational divide in the communications between virtual and traditional families. A comparative analysis of in-depth face-to-face and Skype interviews with respondents from virtual and traditional families has been conducted. The results and conclusions indicate that the different daily routine and lifestyle of the family members could alienate them. Intergenerational divide between younger and older members is detected both in virtual and traditional family. This reduces the effectiveness of the interactive communication between the family members, especially with regard to older people when they live apart.

Keywords: Virtual family · Traditional family · Intergenerational divide · Ageing

1 Introduction

The process of digitization is among the main milestones tracing the dimensions of humankind's transformations in the 21st century. Today these transformations are catalyzed by the intense development of the communication technologies. As positive as their impact might be on progress in all areas of life, it is no less true that they pose challenges for the social stratification of society in terms of age [1].

Institutional attention for the ageing population began to appear in the last decade of the 20th century. The UN *Principles for Older Persons* (Resolution 46/91) are grouped under five themes: independence, participation, care, self-fulfillment and dignity. The

Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA) and the *Political Declaration*, adopted by the Second World Assembly on Ageing in April 2002 [2], are still among the global guiding documents that have a priority focus on the areas of the rights of older adults and their well-being in a supportive environment.

Demographic imbalances, such as population decrease and ageing strongly impact the workforce developments. Thus they create problems for the macro-fiscal stability and sustainability of all social systems - the labor market, the retirement methods and pension plans, the healthcare arrangements, the social assistance and long-term care order, the education classification, etc. The rise of the proportion of retired and older people over the next few decades is considered to be one of the greatest challenges to the economic and social system of the EU [3].

Mobility and migration processes through transnational borders draw the new dimensions of the modern world. The countless possibilities to work and study abroad are among the main reasons for the younger generations in Bulgaria to leave their country and their family, relatives and friends seeking for a better life.

The development of Human-computer interaction (HCI) and free movement across the national borders facilitate some virtual relationships to develop into long-distance relationships [4]. In this sense, at macro level, the Oxford Dictionary uses the definition “virtual community” described as a “community of people sharing common interests, ideas and feelings on the Internet”. Therefore, at micro level (family), the term “virtual family” may be used.

According to Tomov [5] the newly formed virtual family form composed of a married or unmarried couple, a family with children (narrowly) and their ancestors (broadly) where single, several or all members of the family unit do not live in the same household faces immense challenges.

HCI eases to maintain family relations and therefore creates mediatized or virtual ways of communication and living. The emergence of the Internet has changed the balance between communication and spatial distance, promising to put into action what Marshall McLuhan [6] predicted, and Manuel Castells [7] called the “space of streams” where communication is a function regardless of the place. Along with the spatial distance, the time concept should be considered as well. This correlates with the frequency, the duration of communication and in many cases reflects the quality of relationship between members of the family. Personal motivation and feelings of absence, loneliness, self-isolation are among the major factors motivating the personal contact with the closest people. The intergenerational divide between younger and older participants in the new HCI environment has important implications on contemporary communication processes as well. “Intergenerational contact has the potential to reduce the prevalence of ageism and significantly improve the mental and physical health of younger and older persons” [8]. Although the communication is not a universal substitute of the physical contact or “remedy”, it could “mild” the negative feelings, but in some cases may intensify them. This corresponds with Fortunati’s [9] statement that the ideal form of communication is the personal interaction, despite the prospects of future scenarios related to the new technological developments that might change the way of interaction between relatives especially with regard to older people.

2 Methodology

The aim of the research is to measure some of the parameters of the generational divide in the communication between virtual and traditional families. When studying the topic in detail we came out to two research questions, which are not sufficiently addressed in the literature: Does the intergenerational divide deepen in the virtual family over time? How the communication is changing in the virtual family compared with the traditional one? In order to answer these questions, in-depth interviews were conducted to explore the nature of liaison between family members who maintain personal communication and those not living together, herein defined as “virtual families”. Questionnaires included also problematic discourses related to the older adults – their accessibility to urban environment; their working capacity and opportunities to stay active beyond retirement; the way they communicate with younger relatives; and the intergenerational divide.

Sampling included a total of 40 (N = 40) respondents. The first group of interviewees represents families (parents, their children or grandchildren) who stick to interpersonal communication (N = 20), while the second (N = 20) portrays families who maintain remote communication (virtual families) via mobile phone, social networks and communication applications. Methodology follows the theory of Duncombe and Marsden [10], according to which a distinguishing feature of distant communication is the presence of many emotional aspects, which are often unclear and confused. In case of further analysis these aspects require a qualitative research.

The questionnaire consists of 15 basic questions and 5 supplementary ones such as place of birth of the interviewees, their gender, age and place of residence. Basic questions are structured as follows: four open, eleven closed (one of which is dichotomous – offering two possible answers) and two semi-open ones. In addition, respondents were asked clarifying questions. This approach broadens the spectrum of knowledge, eliminates some weaknesses of the structured interview method; predisposes the more introverted respondents to share further about communication with relatives and about challenges facing the older adults in Bulgaria.

Interviews were conducted in person, in a convenient place and at a time appropriate for the respondents. Given the long distance, the financial constraints of the study and the deadlines set, part of the interviews took place via Skype. The online connection was conducted with microphones and cameras switched on, which helped to increase intimacy, sense of closeness and trust between the interviewers and interviewees.

Given the intimate nature of the questions, the survey guaranteed the anonymity of the respondents, observing the ethical standards and the Code of Ethics of the Bulgarian Sociological Association [11]. This further helped to achieve greater openness, honesty and desire with which the interviewees shared their feelings and emotions. The mutation in the voice intonation, the spontaneously bursting in tears and the uncontrolled gestures betrayed their hidden anguish from the rare physical encounters with relatives and loved ones. In addition to the emotionally releasing effect, in the course of the interview respondents often reflected on topics and problems related to their communication with the older adults which they had never discussed before in their everyday life.

The selection of interviewees was random, including friends, acquaintances and colleagues. They were also the initial mediators in the recruitment of the next interviewees. Use of the mediated sampling method has aided their recruitment, providing greater

diversity and confidentiality than the standard snowball sampling. Due to the combinability of the selection, some of the weaknesses of the indirect and snowball sampling, mainly related to the representativeness, were avoided.

It also encompasses, without attempting to distinguish between the generations, the two main groups forming the family, namely, parents with their children and grandparents with their grandchildren. In the study the groups are distributed relatively evenly.

In addition, the methodology includes age differentiation covering groups between the age of 19 and 35 years, on the one hand, and older adults over 60 years of age. Starting age of 19 was applied for two main reasons:

- (1) At the age of eighteen or nineteen, the secondary education level shall be completed. In their desire to pursue higher educational degree, some prospective students leave the household they shared with their parents and siblings, to continue their education in another city, and often choose the prospect of studying abroad.
- (2) After completing their secondary education, these young people have reached the legal age, have accumulated life experience and are able to discuss freely topics related to their family, communication and feelings from a distance. At this age individuals have reached the age of majority, have accumulated life experience and are able to freely discuss topics related to their family, communication and feelings from a distance.

In the survey also participated older adults over the age of 60, living in Bulgaria. Age is linked to the ageing process, which can be crucial for any individual as it involves major changes. These changes are work-related (retirement), as well as family, societal, physiological and health related changes, which require adjustments to perceptions and structuring of life. In addition to that, the purpose of the age differentiation was to determine whether the older adults possess the necessary computer literacy and access to the new technologies. And also - to determine whether there is an intergenerational divide in communication between family members who maintain an interpersonal relationship and those who are separated (live in different cities or countries).

In addition, the study follows the concept of the so-called virtual family, which represents an alternative family form consisting of married or unmarried couple, a family with children (in the narrow sense) and their grandparents (in the broader sense) where one, several or all members of the family unit do not live in the same household [5]. It is characteristic of them that they share daily challenges, exchange ideas and feelings remotely through the new ICTs.

The questions raised in the survey also highlight future scenarios related to new technological developments that will change the mode of communication and interaction between relatives, especially with regard to the aged ones.

3 Results

All members of the surveyed families living together prefer to interact in person. When they are separated in everyday life or for longer periods of time, most of them communicate over the phone, as well as via social networks (in particular, Facebook and Messenger) and other applications such as Viber and Skype. The key to choosing a medium

of communication, according to Miller & Madianou, is to consider each medium as a structure of opportunity [12]. This has also been historically confirmed when consumers wishing to communicate remotely had access to one or two media, such as the letter and recorded voice on audio tape sent by mail.

This study, focused on the communication among the members of the Bulgarian family not living together, confirms this thesis. Here is what two of the interviewees shared:

When microphone and camera are switched on in Viber I can fully sense my child's moods and feelings. This way I feel able to support him and to empathize to his emotions.

On the phone, through Viber app, I communicate when I want to quickly hear from my mom or dad living abroad. Usually I use Facebook when the message I want to leave is not so urgent and does not require an immediate response. I use e-mail only for business communication – almost never when communicating with my relatives.

Duration of Communication. The majority of the interviewed families living together (93%) talk to each other for more than 30 min a day, with topics being discussed ranging from health (64%) to leisure (64%), then work/study (57%), finance (21%) and games and sports (14%). The total sum of the percentages exceeds 100 as respondents indicated more than one conversation topic.

Among the family members not living together the percentage ratio is almost the same with only the topic about financial situation that is viewed in a different way. In families who live together, this is very often an issue leading to subsequent conflicts and disagreements, while in families not living together this topic is more about worrying about the financial situation of the other family members. Additionally, current political or social events in the county or in the city where family members located are also discussed.

An interesting fact is that there are still per cent of the interviewed families who live together, but have answered that they were talking to their relatives between 5 and 15 min a day. Mostly they explain:

We have nothing to say to each other.

This is an example of a typical generation divide where young family members feel that they have no common topics to discuss with older adults and, accordingly, do not want to communicate with them, claiming that they have nothing to learn from them or share with them.

One of the interviewees stated:

My parents are stubborn and I avoid communicating with them very often because they do not understand me. They have old fashioned understanding of life, they always are the right party to the dispute, and they do not enter their children's shoes.

Another respondent declared:

When we have nothing to share with my mother or my father we resort to discussing the weather forecast – how cold it is outside, that I have to wear my jacket when I go out, and that I have to be careful not to forget my umbrella because it is raining outside and I will be soaked to the bone.

Weather information is sometimes, as interviewees admitted, a “lifeline”, especially when topics are exhausted and there is no other curiosity to share.

Compared to family members living together, the conversation duration among family members not living together is much shorter. Exactly 44% of them say that they talk about 30 min a day. For 39% of the interviewed family members not living together that duration is even shorter – up to 5 min a day. Between 5 and 15 min is the conversation for 17% of people who do not live together (Fig. 1).

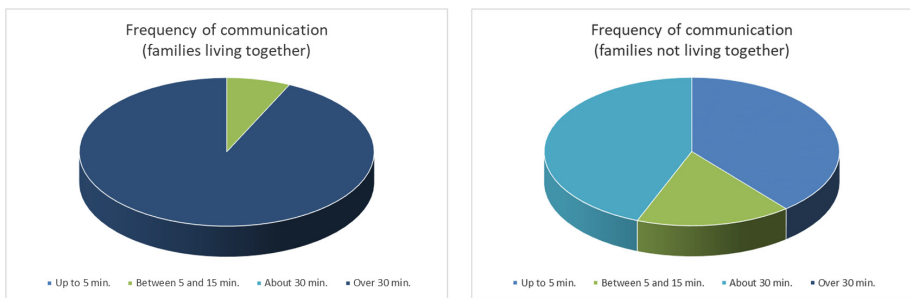


Fig. 1. Frequency of communication

Emotionality. In the present study emotionality is considered as maintaining the stability of the relationship between relatives and intimate partners. On the one hand, it is at the root of the motivation to start communication, and on the other, the persistence in communication and experiencing emotionality promotes empathy and interest (in the absence of perseverance and empathy, the closest family members may feel lonely and abandoned). According to Stoyanova, positive-oriented emotions confirm the confidence that people are loved. Communication with a loved one brings joy and is an immanent characteristic of emotional acceptance [13].

An interesting fact is that 29% of the interviewed family members living together said that they always openly express their emotional state when talking to their relatives. 7% claimed that rarely express their emotions openly and the remaining 64% stated that in most cases they show openly and naturally what they feel. This indicates that although they live together, communicate on a daily basis and share a common home and emotions, the majority of the members of one family are in fact rarely fully honest and natural when communicating with each other. However, none of them answered that they never express their feelings honestly, while among families not living together 17% said that they never express their emotions honestly. Only 11% were categorical that they always show what they care about, but the same percentage (11%) answered that they rarely show their emotional state openly. Similarly to the families living together

more than half of those who do not live together express their emotional state most often during a conversation (61%) (Fig. 2).

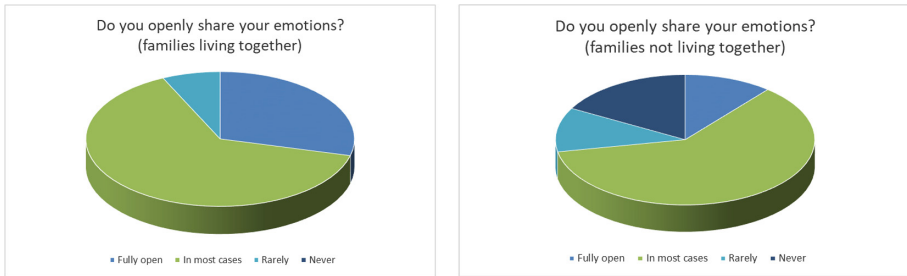


Fig. 2. Emotionality of communication

This situation to a large extent suggests the question to what extent and how family members value communication as meaningful, sincere and comprehensive. The paradox is that people living together confess that they have more secrets and taboo topics with their loved ones than those who do not share a roof over their heads. The question arises whether the idea of daily communication overlaps with the idea of a short and synthesized conversation that lasts a maximum of 30 min by phone or via Viber. Perhaps the ideas of communication and understanding diverge here. Or due to the fact that they live together under one roof, family members actually have to hide more things from each other than when communicating virtually with their loved ones who are far from them. It is better to further investigate this issue in another study.

Generational Divide. More than half of the family members living together believe that between the representatives of the youngest and the oldest in the family the so-called generational divide does not exist (57%). The opposite is the opinion of 36% who believe that the generational divide is more likely to exist. Fewer, only 7%, said that they sometimes feel this generational divide. Another 7%, however, are adamant that it exists. According to the younger representatives who responded in this way, and who still coexist with their parents, there is a perception that the behavior of adults is old-fashioned and conservative and therefore does not correspond with their view of life and the world.

A respondent shared:

My father has a rigid mindset and far-left political beliefs that do not correspond with my democratic understandings. My mother, for her part, grew up in a time where she did not have the opportunity to get a good education and did not travel much around the world. Although I am grateful that she raised me and gave me the opportunity to get a college degree, her ideas about life are limited and at odds with mine, which predetermines the generational divide between us. This characterizes the communication with my parents, when there is any such, and the answers to their questions are reduced to short answers like “Yes” and “No”.

A 25-year-old’s impressions of communicating with her mother were:

My mother is often annoying and asks me questions for my personal life that I do not consider appropriate. But I attribute them to her worry whether everything is okay with me, especially when we haven't heard from each other in a while.

The dependence-independence between the mother and her children, the attempt to enter the personal space and the encounter of resistance in the opposite side to make it happen also cause the conversations not to proceed smoothly, despite the preliminary desire of both parties. Generally, in families not living together, the generational divide could also be due to the different socio-economic environment and dynamics of life, the multidimensional perception and interpretation of reality, as well as the sense of apathy.

In comparison, the percentage of representatives of families not living together, who consider that there is no generational divide between the youngest and the oldest family member is higher (61%). This may be due to the fact that they do not actually live with their relatives and do not have to face daily the differences in communication and perception of the world. And it may also be due to the existing nostalgia and the idealization of the loved ones who are far from the particular person. Nevertheless, 28% of the interviewed families not living together consider that there is a generational divide and 11% stated that they could not say so (Fig. 3).

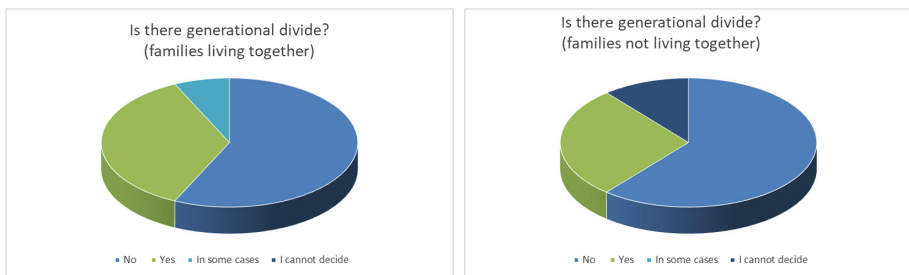


Fig. 3. Generational divide

Almost all respondents from both types of families (93%) believe that the generational divide can be overcome through more communication, greater tolerance for one another more time spent together, more conversations and games with younger members of the family. Only 7% claim that this generational divide will always exist and there is nothing to be done about it.

One of the respondents, a man 65 years old, stated:

Generational divide could be only overcome by constant conversations, conversations and conversations again. Whether there is a problem, a hesitation, a situation to solve, the most important is to keep a lively dialogue with children. Otherwise, the generational divide will deepen enormously.

Work, Integration and Health of the Older Adults. Half of all respondents from both types of families (50%) were of the opinion that older adults should continue to work after retirement. As a motive for this understanding, they pointed out the fact that

in this way people will be more motivated, engaged and will feel better. Another 36% considered that it is a decision that depends on the individual himself, on the situation he/she is in, and on whether he/she feels comfortable, etc. Only 14% stated firmly that the older adults should not work after retirement. It is interesting to note that these answers were given by young family members, and the motive they pointed out was that after retirement, people are less able to work and get tired easily (Fig. 4).

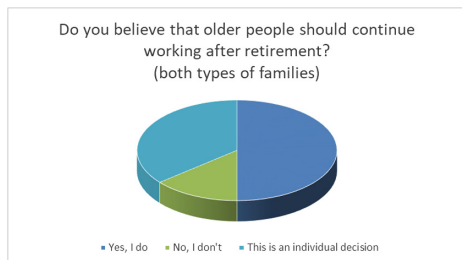


Fig. 4. Work after retirement

7% of the respondents who gave this answer are those who openly acknowledge the generational divide in communication between them and their older relatives, with average daily communication between them in the range of 5–15 min.

One of the interviewees, a woman of 70, shared:

After retirement, it is good to give yourself a well-deserved rest, to pay more attention to your grandchildren, to help your children, as well as to receive a fair pension for the work done over the years.

As the average pension in Bulgaria is not high (less than EUR 200) [14], this is also among the reasons that some older people are economically forced to continue working.

A 76 years old man pointed out that working for him is also a way to break away from the banality of everyday life. He also stated:

My pension and that of my wife are not enough, so I continue to work, albeit a low-skilled job as a janitor in a parking lot.

Asked whether older adults are socially integrated, a total of 79% of all families in the sample answered “to a small extent”, 7% were fully categorical that the older generation is not integrated in the modern society. Other 7% stated that all depends on the individuals. And only 7% considered that the older adults in the country are largely socially integrated.

51% of all respondents from both types of families believe that information and communication technologies have a positive effect on the health of the older adults, because, thanks to the media and information on the internet, people are more informed and aware of different health services, technologies and innovations that would help them as long as they have the necessary resources for that. 14% strongly agree that information and communication technologies do not in any way help elderly with regard to their

health. Another 14% consider that communication technologies help raise awareness of the health status of the older adults, but only of those living in big cities. 7% of the respondents are of the opinion that the elderly are failing to take advantage of information and communication technologies and are not fully informed on important for them issues. Another 7% state that technologies had impact on them, however not positive, but by offering various advertising products and services that aim not to cure them but for a commercial purpose. The survey also reflects the opinion of 7% seniors who rely on health TV shows or specialized newspapers (such as the *Third Age*) for appropriate information (Fig. 5).

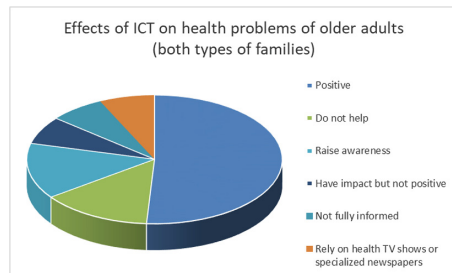


Fig. 5. Effects on health problems

One of the 65 years old respondents stated:

I read in Third Age what is recommended for tone, for a healthy heart or for what to take to keep my blood pressure normal.

In connection with the development of the new technologies, the survey also contains a non-standard question regarding the presence of a robot prototype of someone's relative, with whom one could share daily experiences and everyday needs. When asked whether this robot could substitute the person whose prototype it is, 57% of the family members living together responded that this could happen, but to a small extent. 36% claimed categorically that no talk about substitution could take place and only 7% stated that they could not judge.

Compared to family members living together, only 33% of the family members not living together stated that such a robot-prototype could substitute to a small extent their loved one in their everyday life. 55% were adamant that a robot would not substitute a loved one, 7% stated that they could not judge and another 5% were of the opinion that such a robot to a great extent could substitute the physical contact with a loved one (Fig. 6).

It is interesting to note that the percentage of people not living together who would not substitute their close relative with a robot-prototype is higher than among the family members living together. The sense of nostalgia and the idealization of relatives who are far from the other family members can also intervene here.

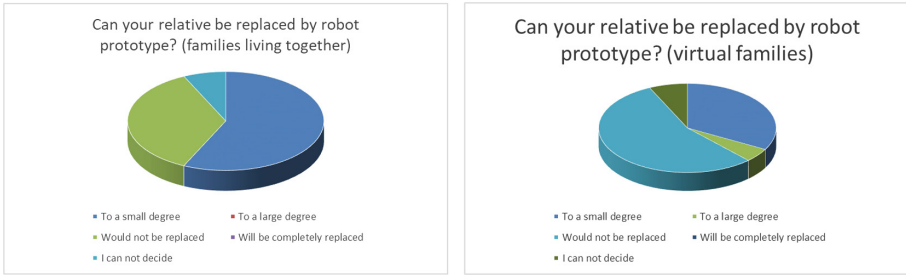


Fig. 6. Robot-prototype as a substitute

The overall result from the both types of families shows a rather important conclusion, namely that modern representatives of families do not completely reject the idea of a robot-prototype to substitute their loved ones.

Conclusions, Limitations and Implications for Future Research. The results in answering the research question: Does the intergenerational divide deepen in the virtual family over time? indicate that the different daily routine and lifestyle of the family members could alienate them. The distance and time of separation further intensifies this feeling. Everyday experiences, emotions, problems and worries often exclude the involvement of the virtual family. Although virtual relationships and virtual family are extremely complex phenomena, availability of relatively frequent and qualified communication often turns out to be vital for the survival of the family structure and for preservation of the relationship.

Due to some study time constraints the results in the current paper could not fully measure whether the intergenerational divide deepen in the virtual family over time. This problematic issue should be studied further over a longer period in future research.

Despite these limitations, the answers of the respondents support more completely the second research question: How the communication is changing in the virtual family compared with the traditional one? One of the conclusions is that with the development of new modern technologies family members, whether living or not together, are less able to find themselves in a situation where they cannot communicate with each other. Communication tools are constantly increasing their capacity in every aspect. Communication becomes a matter of specific attitude and desire, of choice of means and of a recipient.

Besides, among the family members not living together is observed the fact that there are almost no taboo topics and people share almost any emotions, regardless of distance and whether they communicate more via social networks or over the phone. Even more, sometimes in families living together, there is a larger generational divide and restraint of emotions than with the families not living together. Cohabitation together does not always lead to a closer relationship and more trust and commitment to the other. On the other hand, the different lifestyles of family members lead rather to their alienation. Daily experiences, emotions, dating, problems and anxieties often preclude the involvement of relatives, and sharing is not specific to them or is limited

by the reasoning mostly of young people that adults will not understand them as they have spent most of their lifespan at another time.

On the other hand, the question arises whether a short remote conversation of 30 min a day on average could completely displace daily communication with loved ones. The fact that some family members do not live together with the others allows them to do things that they rarely share when communicating with each other. This raises the question of whether these things are becoming taboo topics in their perception or they simply do not find it necessary to share them. For example, topics that children avoid discussing with their parents often affect their privacy, thus trying to prevent any interference in it and gain personal freedom. As a consequence, the question arises as to what extent virtual and real communication is subject to comparison and to what extent the expectations for both are the same.

The difference in views on life and the world between the youngest and the oldest in one family can be clarified through more communication, insight into the problems of the other and compromises on both sides. This is the opinion of most of the interviewed family members. Few of them believe that such an abyss exists and much less that it is a problem that interferes with daily communication. The idea of a robot-prototype of someone's relative to substitute the real person in everyday communication, sharing experiences and providing assistance, albeit to a small extent, is accepted by the members of both types of families. In modern society there are almost no family members who do not have and do not use communication and information technologies on a daily basis. As they get used to them, people expect more and more new technologies to hit the market, and stereotypes about communication and the means to use them, more and more to improve. Communication tools, which in the past were only found in fantasy novels, are now not only a reality but also an integral part of people's daily lives. The idea of robots entering our daily lives for a long time is not associated with negative evaluation only. The extent to which technologies are moving in this direction changes the attitudes of society making it ready to accept this idea.

At the same time, remote communication between family members is dynamically dependent on the constant internal and external changes of the environment – cultural, technological, corporative, which determines the need of further in-depth research in this relatively new scientific field.

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