



Experiences of intergenerational communication styles among older adults in Tamil Nadu

Dr. N Boobalakrishnan, A Azhagudurai

Department of Media and Communication, Central University of Tamil Nadu, Thiruvarur, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

India is a country having the world's largest youth population presently, at the same time it is further adding sizable older adults yearly. As per the census data 2011, India has 8.6% of (then 110 million) population aged 60 and above. The present study collected data from 450 older adults from the state of Tamil Nadu using Multistage stratified sampling technique. The proposition of the respondents was 41% male and 59% female, and the average age of the participants was 66 years. Older adults are strong enough to understand the intergenerational communications of both accommodation and non-accommodation with the younger generations. The perception of Intergenerational communication does not change with respect to male or female older adults and their living locations like rural or urban areas of Tamil Nadu.

Keywords: Intergenerational Communication, Communication Styles, Older Adults, Aging, Youth

Introduction

India is a country having the world's largest youth population presently, at the same time it is further adding sizable older adults yearly. As per the census data 2011, India has 8.6% of (then 110 million) population aged 60 and above. The Government of India took this concern and is implementing a number of schemes for welfare of older adults in the country. India always preserves its culture and values as per the government's idea of 'Vikas Bhi, Virasat Bhi'. We need to move forward without avoiding our traditions. Historically the Indian family system is a joint family structure, hence the nuclear family trends also moving towards the joint family structure. Older people are always assets of the society with more potential of experience that can guide the younger generations, with reference to the 17th and 18th Lok Sabha members' average age is 59 and 56 respectively. India particularly Tamil Nadu has the cultural tradition of a joint family system that attracts foreigners too, to get married to Tamil Nadu guys. In villages comparatively older adults are the most respected personalities in the society.

Younger generations can get more insights and tips from older adults by communicating with them. Older adults are a bouquet of experiences, can guide the younger generations from their own experiences for life lessons and situation handling etc. Communication is a never ending process, communication keeps progress, communication plays a role of making bonds between generations. Intergenerational communication in India plays an important role in transmitting cultural values from older generations to the younger generations. It yields good results even today, thus India stands unique through its traditional values that builds the society as a network. In a study exploring intergenerational relationships in India, chadha (2012) revealed that older individuals dynamically contribute to preserve the cultural values by sharing them with their younger generations.

Through storytelling and real-life examples, these older adults impart valuable knowledge and lessons about sharing, mutual respect, and harmony, fostering a sense of connectedness and continuity within families. Older adults (grandparents) play a fundamental role as a pillar in the

Indian family structure, deeply rooted in cultural traditions and social values. In the traditional joint family system, elders are regarded as the cornerstone of the household, offering wisdom, guidance, and emotional support to younger generations. Their life experiences and knowledge make them the wisdom tree of the family and provide advice in key family decisions, from financial matters to personal conflicts.

Apart from being mentors, they actively contribute to nurturing and raising children by imparting cultural values to the next generations, often taking on caregiving responsibilities while parents focus on work. This intergenerational bond fosters a sense of duty and respect toward elders, reinforcing strong family connections. Additionally, older adults ensure continuity of tradition across generations. However, as modernization and urbanization reshapes lifestyles and family structures in India. Nowadays family structures are gradually evolving and revolving in India. The shift from joint families to nuclear families lifestyle has led to a decline in intergenerational communication among elder family members and relatives and cohabitation, posing challenges in older citizens' care. Many older adults now face isolation, financial insecurity, and health-related struggles due to these changes.

Despite these shifts, respecting and caring for elders remains an important value in Indian culture. Efforts are being made to integrate older adults into modern family dynamics, including assisted living communities, social support programs, and government initiatives aimed at elderly welfare. The Indian government is implementing Ayushman Bharat a free Health insurance coverage of up to 5 lakhs per year per family, additionally older adults aged 70 and above can get free treatment under Ayushman Bharat Vay Vandana Yojana.

Major Objective: To identify the experiences of older adults' Intergenerational communication styles/patterns.

Specific Objectives:

1. To determine the frequency of perceived intergenerational communication styles among older adults in Tamil Nadu.

2. To examine the relationship between the socio-demographic profile of older adults and their perceived Intergenerational communication styles.

Review of Literature

The intergenerational bonds and family structures prevailing traditionally are undergoing a demographic shift due to India's ageing population (Nahata, 2021) ^[1]. Older adults frequently face hardships to maintain social connections, engaging in social gathering and maintaining interpersonal relationships. Intergenerational communication is gradually recognised as a vital strategy to overcome these challenges, providing significant support and valuable addition for older adults (Yorkston *et al.*, 2010) ^[12]. To enhance positive intergenerational communications, the development and implementation of programmes targeting both young and older adults is mandatory (Wagner & Luger, 2020) ^[13].

Dollinger and Stephanie's (2001) ^[14] study suggested important differences in knowledge of aging and attitudes towards older people between students who completed traditional academic courses in psychology of aging and those who did not. Those initiatives can contribute notably to overcome the challenges posed by the aging population. Research suggests that intergenerational programmes can emphasize positive attitudes and stereotypes between young and older people (Meshel & McGlynn, 2004) ^[5]. Furthermore, the intergenerational communication quality, rather than the frequency, is important in creating positive attitudes among younger generations towards older generations (Schwartz & Simmons, 2001 ^[6]; Bousfield & Hutchison, 2010) ^[7]. Hutchison *et al.* (2010) ^[8] suggested the predictive nature of frequent intergenerational communication on young people's future engagement with older people.

Endorsing this result, Zhang *et al.* (2018) ^[9] research strengthens the notion that the frequency of intergenerational communication is an essential predictor of younger generations' attitudes towards older generations. Intergenerational communication is a varied phenomenon influenced by various elements. Research highlights the positive impact of children's interaction on older adults' well-being (Dsouza *et al.* 2023) ^[10] and the examination of the built environment's role in fostering communication among older adults (Lu, 2023)

The necessity of physical co-presence and shared family time for efficient intergenerational connection is emphasized by Yunita *et al.* (2022) ^[12]. Media has become a major influencing factor of intergenerational communications, specifically among middle-aged parents (Gong *et al.*, 2021) ^[13]

Cultural variations mainly shape intergenerational relationships, with Asian and Western cultures reflecting clear cut predictions and behaviors (Gallois *et al.*, 2020 ^[14]; Yang, 2020) ^[15]

In addition, the specific circumstances over intergenerational communication happens, as pointed out by Gasiorek (2016) ^[16], impart valuable cognizances into the dynamics of these interactions. Gasiorek (2016) ^[16] noticed three fundamental activity types: explicit messages about age and aging, role models of aging, and intergenerational communications among the broader category 'environmental chatter'.

Strom and Strom (2014) ^[17] identified a negative relationship between technology utilization and

intergenerational communication, recommending intergenerational dialogue as a key strategy to mitigate age-segregated communication and foster successful aging. Law *et al.* (2019) ^[18] conducted a review mapping to study academic research between 1996 and 2017 disclosed that nearly half of the included studies concentrated on strong relationships, while one-third concentrated on health and well-being. These findings show that relationships, health and well-being were the most common topics during the two-decade period under investigation. Younger generations frequently demonstrate a tendency towards respectful behaviour towards older people, including the adaptation of their communication styles to facilitate meaningful interactions. Bernhold (2021) ^[21] in his comparative study of Western and East Asian younger adults' perceptions of communications with older people revealed a shared cultural obligation to non-family elders, followed by family elders.

Furthermore, younger East Asian adults from Philippines, South Korea and Japan perceived intergenerational communication to be more difficult than the western youths. Accommodative strategies can possibly reduce the difference between parents and children, thereby facilitating self-expression and stronger familial connections among children (Morgan *et al.*, 2019). In a cross-cultural comparison of young people's beliefs about intergenerational communication, Williams *et al.* (1997) studied Eastern (Korea, Japan, People's Republic of China) and western (United States of America, Australia, New Zealand and Canada) cultures. Their findings revealed that young people from Eastern cultures revealed less positive perspectives of their communication with older people in several ways compared to their western counterparts.

Colander *et al.* (2014) in their study revealed that religious-specific accommodative communication positively influences relational well-being, whereas nonaccommodative communication decreases parental satisfaction. The provision of advice acts as a moderating factor between religious diversities and relational satisfaction. Accommodative strategies may be specifically useful for older adults who are facing depressive symptoms. Perceptions of accommodation have been found to positively predict family identity among these individuals (Bernhold, 2022).

Research Question: How do older adults experience Intergenerational Communication?

Methodology

The data was collected from the 450 older adults from the state of Tamil nadu using Multistage stratified sampling technique. The state was divided into five zones; North, South, Central, East, West, and accordingly the samples were collected from the identified zones. The proposition of the respondents was 41% male and 59% female, and the average age of the participants was 66 years. A survey questionnaire was administered to collect data on the perception of intergenerational communication (accommodation and non-accommodation), which was measured using twelve items on a five-point Likert scale. Additionally, the demographic variables gender and location were included for data collection. To answer the research question and fulfill the objectives, frequency analysis and a t-test were performed, and the results were presented with interpretation.

Analysis

Perceived Intergenerational Communication Levels (Accommodation and Non-accommodation) Vs Gender and Location of the Older Adults

Table 1: Descriptives: Perceived Intergenerational Communication Levels (Accommodation and Non-accommodation) Vs Gender and Location of the Older Adults

Intergenerational Communication	Male		Female		Rural		Urban	
	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High
Accommodation	49 (11%)	139 (31%)	77 (17%)	185 (41%)	67 (15%)	208 (46%)	59 (13%)	116 (26%)
Non-accommodation	98 (21%)	90 (20%)	129 (29%)	133 (30%)	137 (30%)	138 (31%)	90 (20%)	85 (19%)

Table 1 shows that most older adults, both men and women, feel others adjust their communication to them. More women reported both very low and very high levels of this adjustment compared to men. Overall, 72% of older adults perceived high communication adjustment, while 28% perceived low adjustment. Specifically, more women (41%) than men (31%) reported high adjustment, and more women (17%) than men (11%) reported low adjustment. Further, the table shows that similar numbers of older men and women perceived others not adjusting their communication. However, slightly more women reported both high (29%) and low (29%) levels of this lack of adjustment compared to men (20% high, 21% low). Overall, about half of the older adults perceived high non-accommodation (50%), and half perceived low non-accommodation (51%). More women reported both high (30%) and low (30%) non-accommodation than men (20% high, 22% low).

With reference to the location, the table indicates that most older adults in both rural and urban areas feel others adjust their communication to them. However, more rural older adults reported both very low and very high levels of this adjustment compared to urban older adults. Overall, 72% of older adults perceived high communication adjustment, while 28% perceived low adjustment. Specifically, more rural older adults (46%) than urban (26%) reported high adjustment, and more rural older adults (15%) than urban (13%) reported low adjustment. Further, the table shows that similar numbers of older adults in urban and rural areas perceive others not adjusting their communication. However, more rural older adults reported both high (31%) and low (30%) levels of this lack of adjustment compared to urban older adults (19% high, 20% low). Additionally, 61% of older adults who reported high non-accommodation were from rural areas.

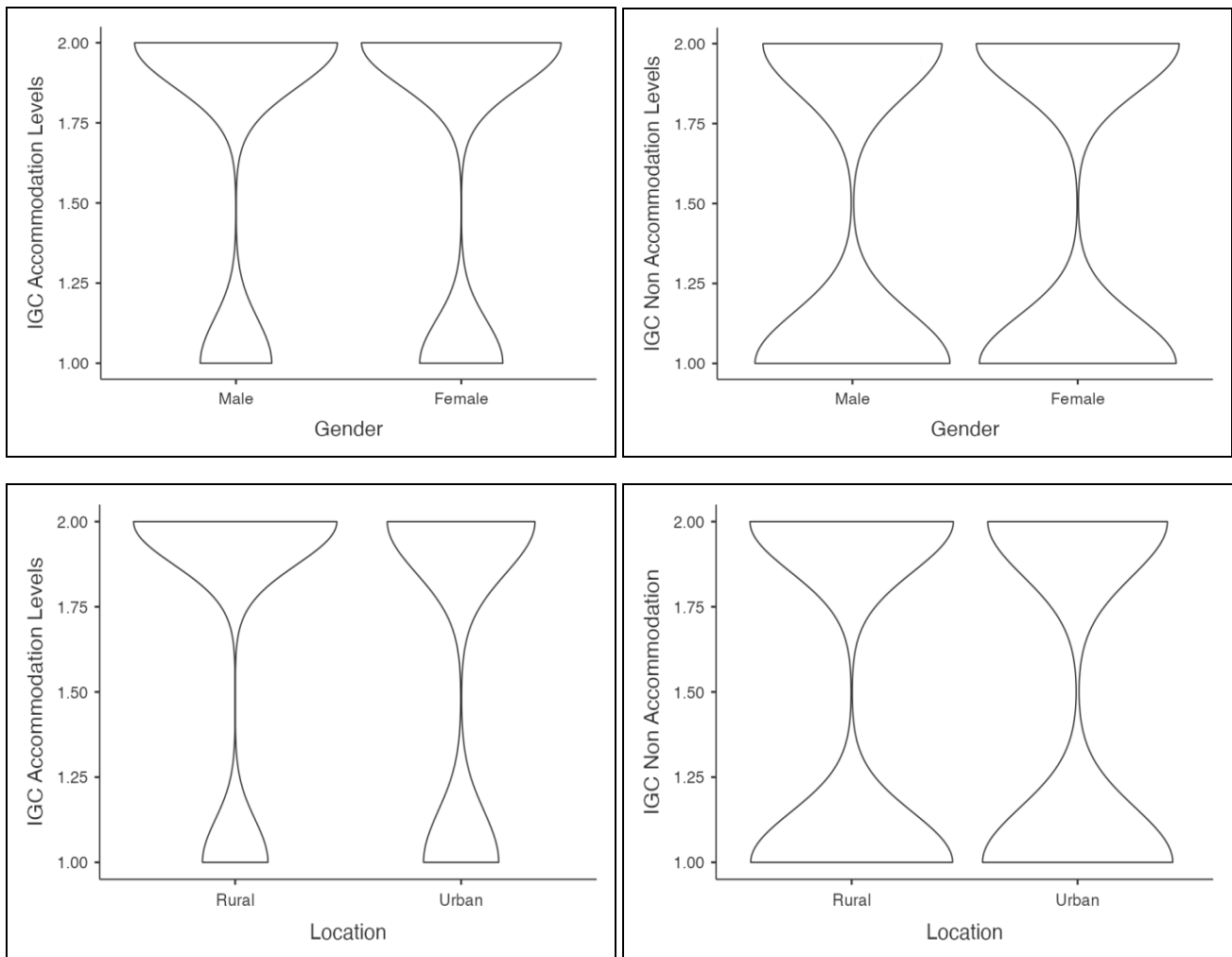


Fig 1: Perceived Intergenerational Communication Levels (Accommodation and Non-accommodation) Vs Gender and Location of the Older Adults

Difference in Gender and Location Vs Intergenerational Communication (Accommodation & Non-Accommodation)

The following hypotheses were tested in order to examine the relationship between the gender (male, female) of the older adults and Intergenerational Communication (Accommodation & Non-accommodation) variables.

H1: There is a significant difference between male and female older adults towards perceived accommodative intergenerational communication.

H2: There is a significant difference between male and female older adults towards perceived non-accommodative intergenerational communication.

H3: There is a significant difference between rural and urban older adults towards perceived accommodative intergenerational communication.

H4: There is a significant difference between rural and urban older adults towards perceived non-accommodative intergenerational communication.

Table 2: T test: Perceived Intergenerational Communication Levels (Accommodation and Non-accommodation) Vs Gender and Location of the Older Adults

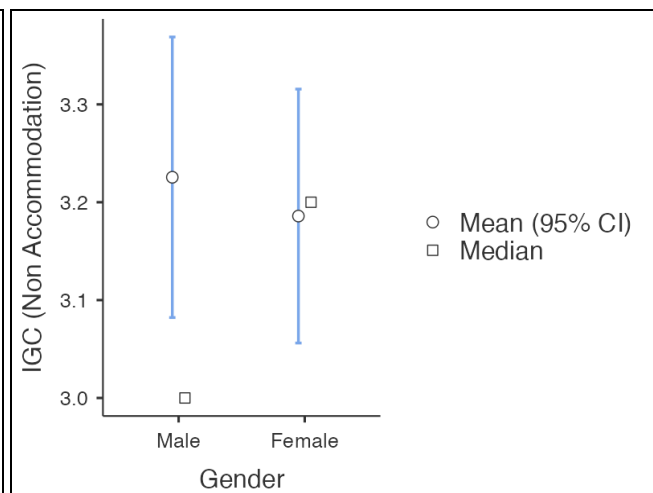
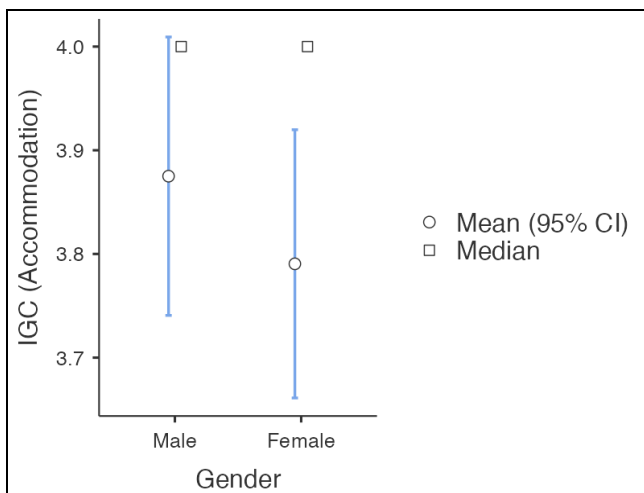
Intergenerational Communication	Gender			Location		
	t	df	p	t	df	p
Accommodation	0.870	448	0.385	0.495	448	0.621
Non-accommodation	0.398	448	0.691	-0.628	448	0.530

Table 3: Descriptives: Perceived Intergenerational Communication Levels (Accommodation and Non-accommodation) Vs Gender and Location of the Older Adults

Intergenerational Communication	Group	N	Mean	Median	SD
Accommodation	Male	188	3.88	4.00	0.93
	Female	262	3.79	4.00	1.07
	Rural	275	3.84	4.00	0.982
	Urban	175	3.80	4.00	1.071
Non-Accommodation	Male	188	3.23	3.00	1.00
	Female	262	3.19	3.20	1.07
	Rural	275	3.18	3.20	1.093
	Urban	175	3.24	3.00	0.960

Table 2 shows the results of a test comparing how men and women perceive intergenerational communication. The test found no significant difference between men and women in how much they feel others accommodate their communication ($t(448) = 0.870, p = 0.385$). The average score for men was 3.88 (out of a higher possible score), and for women, it was 3.79. Similarly, the test found no significant difference between men and women in how much they perceive others not accommodating their communication ($t(448) = 0.398, p = 0.691$). The average score for men was 3.23, and for women, it was 3.19. Further, table 2 also shows a test comparing how older adults in rural and urban areas perceive intergenerational

communication. The test found no significant difference between rural and urban respondents in how much they feel others accommodate their communication ($t(448) = 0.495, p = 0.621$). The average score for rural respondents was 3.84, and for urban respondents, it was 3.80. Similarly, the test found no significant difference between rural and urban respondents in how much they perceive others *not* accommodating their communication ($t(448) = -0.628, p = 0.530$). The average score for rural respondents was 3.18, and for urban respondents, it was 3.24. Hence, based on the above findings, it can be concluded that not all hypotheses were supported.



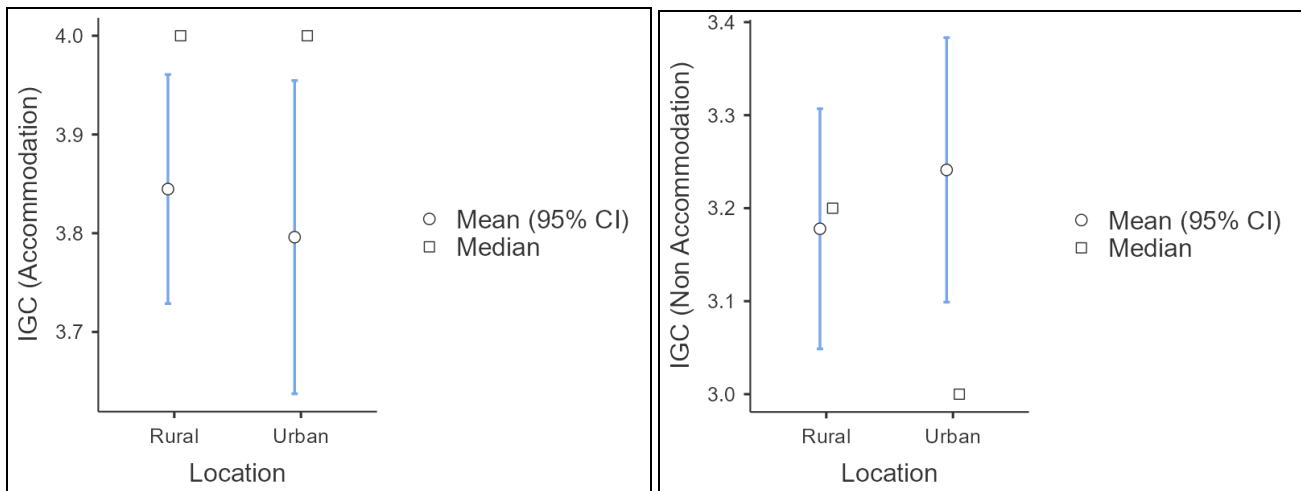


Fig 2: Perceived Intergenerational Communication Levels (Accommodation and Non-accommodation) Vs Gender and Location of the Older Adults

Discussion

Interpersonal communication accommodation levels reflect that most older adults (72%) have a strong understanding of communication with younger generations. Female older adults revealed fairly more extreme experiences in very good and very bad compared to their male counterparts.

In general both male and female older adults foster highly towards positive communication. Older adults are close to equal levels divided between facing good and poor communication (nearly 50/50) of perceived non-accommodative intergenerational communication. Again, female older adults show little more extreme experiences, both in very good and very poor compared to male older adults. Both gender (male & female) older adults reported almost equal levels of high and low non-accommodative communication.

Accommodative intergenerational communication is common in both rural and urban areas. Communication between older and younger generation people is more diverse in rural areas, with both better and worse experiences, than the urban areas. Older adults in India that is male or female, living in urban or rural areas, these above factors do not significantly affect how they perceive intergenerational communication accommodation and non-accommodation. Older adults communicate with younger people more accommodatively both in rural as well as urban areas. Despite this, female older adults foster to have more polarized experiences than male older adults do in accommodative and non-accommodative intergenerational communication.

Older adults in Taiwan foster more accommodative communication with younger generations focusing on topics relevant to youth while their communications with peers are highly focused about aging and family matters (Lin & Zhang, 2008). Younger people are more accommodative when communicating with older adults, but this differs across cultures (McCann *et al.*, 2003) [24]

Studies on gender differences in social connections among older adults reveals complex trends. The data shows that more male and female older adults foster to have higher and lower positive social connections respectively. But this study found that male older adults report more perceived tangible support, while female older adults have more strong social connections, which are related with their increased sense of tangible support (Nakash *et al.*, 2021) [23]

When considering the aspects of communication environment related to aging, like resisting anti-aging images on media, self-stereotyping, age-based social exclusion, resilience to ageism and planning for the future, female older adults foster to report more extreme experiences compared to male older adults.

Conclusion

Intergenerational communication is vital in a country like India because socio-cultural values and family structures generally transfer messages, life values, social ethics to next generations naturally. Older adult population keeps increasing in India, it is time to wake up and create a favourable atmosphere in family and society for the well-being of the senior citizens. The perception of Intergenerational communication does not change with respect to male or female older adults and their living locations like rural or urban areas of the country. Intergenerational communication tends to impart values to the younger generations. Moral support is essential interpersonal communication for older adults to lead their life peacefully and happily. Family structures need to rebuild jointness both in urban as well as in rural areas to make an inclusive society. This study reflects older adults are strong enough to understand the intergenerational communications of both accommodation and non-accommodation with the younger generations both in urban and rural areas.

References

1. Nahata P. In Charts: How India Is Ageing. NDTV Profit, 2021. <https://www.ndtvprofit.com/business/in-charts-how-india-is-ageing>
2. Yorkston KM, Bourgeois MS, Baylor CR. Communication and aging. *Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation Clinics*,2010;21(2):309–319.
3. Wagner LS, Luger TM. Generation to generation: effects of intergenerational interactions on attitudes. *Educational Gerontology*,2020;47(1):1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03601277.2020.1847392>
4. Dollinger LAH, Stephanie. participation in a course on aging: knowledge, attitudes, and anxiety about aging in oneself and others. *Educational Gerontology*,2001;27(8):657–667. <https://doi.org/10.1080/036012701317117893>

5. Meshel DS, McGlynn RP. intergenerational contact, attitudes, and stereotypes of adolescents and older people. *Educational Gerontology*,2004;30(6):457–479. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03601270490445078>
6. Schwartz K, Simmons JP, L. contact quality and attitudes toward the elderly. *Educational Gerontology*,2001;27(2):127–137. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03601270151075525>
7. Bousfield C, Hutchison P. Contact, Anxiety, and Young People's Attitudes and Behavioral Intentions Towards the Elderly. *Educational Gerontology*,2010;36(6):451–466. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03601270903324362>
8. Hutchison P, Fox E, Laas AM, Matharu J, Urzi S. Anxiety, Outcome Expectancies, and Young People's Willingness to Engage in Contact with the Elderly. *Educational Gerontology*,2010;36(10–11):1008–1021. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03601271003723586>
9. Zhang YB, Paik S, Xing C, Harwood J. Young adults' contact experiences and attitudes toward aging: age salience and intergroup anxiety in South Korea*. *Asian Journal of Communication*,2018;28(5):468–489. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01292986.2018.1453848>
10. Dsouza JM, Chakraborty A, Kamath N. Intergenerational communication and elderly well-being. *Clinical Epidemiology and Global Health*,2023;20:101251.
11. Lu YX. A Study on the Impact of Perceived Built Environment on Elderly Communication Activities in Old Communities. *Open Access Library Journal*,2023;10:1–15. doi:10.4236/oalib.1110312
12. Yunita SD, Doriza S, Oktaviani M. Keeping A Harmonious Relationship With Elderly Family Members Who Are Not Living Together Through Communication,2022.
13. Gong W, Guo Q, Jiang CL. Conversation Breeds Compliance: The Role of Intergenerational Communication in Promoting Preventive Behaviors against COVID-19 among Middle-Aged Parents in China. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*,2021;18(19):10198. doi:10.3390/ijerph181910198
14. Gallois C, Giles H, Ota H, Pierson HD, Ng SH, Lim TS, *et al.* Intergenerational communication across the Pacific Rim: The impact of filial piety. In *Latest contributions to cross-cultural psychology*,2020:192–211.
15. Yang J. Korean University Students' Perception on Intergenerational Communication: Focusing on cultural factors. *The Journal of the Korea Contents Association*,2020;20(9):86–98.
16. Gasiorek J, Fowler C. Profiling Younger Adults' Communication About Aging. *Communication Studies*,2016;67:163–182.
17. Strom RD, Strom PS. Assessment of Intergenerational Communication and Relationships. *Educational Gerontology*,2014;41(1):41–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03601277.2014.912454>
18. Law J, Young TJ, Almeida J, Ginja S. Intergenerational communication – an interdisciplinary mapping review of research between 1996 and 2017. *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships*,2019;17(3):287–310. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15350770.2018.1535349>
19. Bernhold QS. The Role of Media in Predicting Older Adults' Own Age-Related Communication and Successful Aging. *Mass Communication and Society*,2021;24:1–30.
20. Krejcie RV, Morgan DW. Determining sample size for research activities. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*,1970;30(3):607–610.
21. Bernhold QS. Older adults' recalled memorable messages about aging and their role in the communicative ecology model of successful aging. *Communication Quarterly*,2022;70(2):132–160.
22. Lin MC, Zhang YB. Taiwanese older adults' perceptions of aging and communication with peers and young adults. *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*,2008;18(2):135-156. <https://doi.org/10.1075/JAPC.18.2.02LIN>
23. Nakash O, Arnon S, Hayat T, Abu Kaf S. Strength of social ties and perceived tangible support: distinct characteristics and gender differences of older adults' social circles. *Journal of Women & Aging*,2022;34(6):719–730. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08952841.2021.1951075>
24. McCann RM, Keaton SA. A cross cultural investigation of age stereotypes and communication perceptions of older and younger workers in the USA and Thailand. *Educational Gerontology*,2013;39(5):326–341.