



# Technology: A Bridge or a Wall? The Inter(intra)generational Use of ICTs Among Italian Grandmothers

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**Abstract.** Our research aims to investigate the role played by media and ICTs in building intergenerational and intragenerational relations for the grandparents. The project aims to understand how grandmothers use Facebook and digital devices (computers, laptops, tablets, smartphones) within the family and the friend networks, the role of communication technologies for entertainment and the resistance and difficulties in using ICT for elderly. Data for research analysis was collected through four focus groups conducted with 28 Italian grandmothers living in Milan, Italy.

Our focus groups show an intricate scenario: although the trigger to start to use new digital technology comes from family and people belonging to different generations, the daily use of the ICTs reveals a complex relationship with children and grandchildren regarding technological issues, which is often characterized by incompatible netiquette, different competences and lack of learning assistance.

As more elderly are going online and widening their online interactions, further research should be pursued to understand how older people use digital technologies to communicate with peers and to point out the differences between elderly digital use for intra and intergenerational communication.

**Keywords:** Elderly · ICTs · Generations · Grandmothers · Family

## 1 Introduction

The aging of population is a global trend and a big challenge for societies, as the major transformations it produces implicate almost every sector of society. It is a global phenomenon as, even if in different stages and speeds, it implicates virtually every country in the world. While more advanced in countries that developed earlier it became also an undergoing process in many countries where the development has occurred later [1]. The fertility decline, together with the improved longevity, are the key factors explaining this process. By 2030, according to the UN forecasts [1], the proportion of elderly people will be more than 25% of the population in Europe and Northern America.

Followed by Oceania with 20% of the population, 17% in Asia, Latin America and Caribbean, and 6% in Africa.

Concomitant to the population aging, the mediatization by technology also continues to proliferate producing important transformations in every aspect of society including how we live and how we relate to others.

In this context, it becomes critical to understand how latter life is being experienced in this mediatized society. As the elderly experienced these transformations later in life, they may felt changes in a greater extent, which increase the relevance to understand how the elderly manage to adapt their everyday life to the social transformations resulting from the process of proliferation of digital devices and mediatization. The role of family and intergenerational communication within family seems to have a great impact on the appropriation of ICT between the elderly, especially grandmothers. It is thus important to further analyze the ICT practices within this group.

Taking into account these assumptions, a qualitative study was conducted with the aim to understand:

- What are the social contexts of ICT’s use in the daily life of the grandmothers?
- What are the role of ICT on grandmother’s intergenerational and intragenerational relationships dynamics?

## **2 Context, Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology**

### **2.1 ICT and the Elderly**

The interest on how the elderly relate with digital technologies has grown in the past few years with a significant increase of the studies devoted to the issue. The digital divide is the reasoning behind most of these studies, following the observation of the data on Internet use, where age is recurrently a key configuration of the digital divide within many societies [2]. The digital divide literature argues that being excluded from the society mediated by technology affects not only the economic inclusion as all the other aspects of life, as education, community issues, cultural and entertainment, personal interactions and political participation [3]. At the beginning the concept was focused only on the access variable, making a distinction from those who have and those who have not access to technology. The concept then developed to an understanding that the digital exclusion would not end with full access [4, 5], not only because there are different levels of access [6] but mainly because the access to digital technologies by itself, do not promote the inclusion of the people who does not have the “technical skills, status markers, and content structures that are fast becoming key institutional features of the Internet age” [5, p. 144]. Thus, the debate on digital divide was refocused from the access to the different uses and skills to benefit from the access to digital technology [4].

Senior citizens are currently, however, a most growing group of people going online [2, 7]. Loos [9] points out for the danger of using age as an ultimate explanatory variable of digital exclusion and argues that more than a problem of age, it is a problem of lack of experience with digital technology. Colombo [10] argues that factors such as the social network of the individuals, their professional status and their former jobs should

be taken in consideration more than the causal impact of age. In fact, some studies shown that there are not empirical evidences that the young people do not have problems with technology [11–13]. And some studies about population of the Netherlands show that content skills tend to increase in older users [11, 12]. As the studies on the seniors and ICT are strongly conditioned by the socio-cultural and socio-economic variables and contexts, they are country relative [14]. Italy, for example, if compared to more digitalized countries, seems to have a delay on Internet adoption of around ten years [15].

Another frequent premise on studies about seniors and technology is that the Internet, and particularly Social Network Services (SNS), would benefit the quality of life of the elderly. Factors as the decrease of social relations and the mobility loss are viewed as common processes in latter age that contribute to a greater exposition to isolation and loneliness [16]. In this context, SNS are seen as tools capable of strengthen the social networks of the elderly, making them less vulnerable to situations of isolation and loneliness [16, 17]. General socio-economic benefits and facilitated access to services such as researching services, bank and shopping [18], access to cultural and recreational activities and the enhancing of inter-generational solidarities [19] and access to information such as health information [20] are also pointed out as potential benefits for seniors being online. Other studies drown attention for the fact that the use of the Internet by senior citizens are not just about benefits, it involves also some risks [15] that should be taken into consideration.

Although the elderly are a fast growing group of Internet users, in many countries senior digital exclusion are still one of the most expressive feature of digital exclusion. The reasons pointed out by the elderly for not use the Internet are predominantly the lack of motivation and interest [19, 21–23] and the idea that elderly “often do not consider the internet a technology that is appropriate or relevant for people of their age group” [24].

Levy and Benaji [25, p. 62] have pointed out that negative stereotypes about older people impact on their “cognition, behavior and health without their awareness”. After a lifelong exposure to ageist stereotypes, they can be directed inward, on the form of “implicit age self-stereotypes” or the beliefs of older individuals about the senior population [25–27].

In a study about how senior Internet users position themselves against to different others Kania-Lundholm and Torres [28] shown how senior citizens that are active users see it as a privilege and constructed as exceptional and that “they refer to their age as one of the aspects that informs their usage [28, p. 28].

Also, intergenerational relations seem to have a great impact on the use of the Internet by senior citizens. This issue enters the debate both as a start and an ending point as maintaining contact with children and grandchildren seems to have both a positive outcome from the elderly being online and as a motivation for the senior citizens start to use the Internet.

## 2.2 Grannies Online

Senior citizens and woman are both two of the demographic groups reported as less likely to be online on the digital divide literature. Lack of perceptions of benefits for

going online is one of the central issues on the reasons presented by the elderly for not use Internet. However, the possibility to connect with family members, especially the younger ones is a strong benefit perceived by the elderly to go online [29]. Intergenerational relations, maintaining contact with children and grandchildren seem to be a reason for elderly to start to go online and result in strengthen intergenerational relations [22]. “Forced adoption” [30] or “pressure to adopt” [31] are some of the expressions used to describe the process by which senior citizens adopt a technology persuaded by family members, either children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews or others. Although it is an external pressure, it is not necessarily felt as negative by the elderly [32].

Since the beginning of the studies of technology on the domestic space [32] that family, and specially children have been identified as elements that foster adults’ adoption. Sawchuk and Crow [31] mentioned a desire to belong and the desire to understand and connect with grandchildren as a special motivation for grandmothers to changing perspectives towards what they don’t understand and as a reason to keep up with practices they did not feel comfortable with. Being highly involved in the everyday life of their family and particularly the children and grandchildren is presented as a main point of the relevance of the use of social media for grandmothers [36]. Specially in a context which they may not related much to the contents they find online, as “when marginalized groups do log on, there is often scare content that applies to their lives and their communities.” [33, p. 20].

This intergenerational communication mediated by technology gives visible shape to the different set of values and behaviors between generations towards communication. Sawchuk and Crow [34] identify how elderly understand distraction and interruption as rudeness or impoliteness in the case of the use of the cell phone. Ivan and Hebblethwaite [33] also highlight how grandmothers use the shared presence on Facebook with their grandchildren to act as a role model, rising issues of decency and privacy.

In addition to the ability to connect with family, other perceived benefits by the elderly identified by Quinn et al. [29] are the ability to surpass some age related limitations, such as mobility, being able to contact with distant friends and the cognitive benefits of learning something new.

Senior users reportedly integrate ICT in a weighted way, making choices around different options accordingly to their needs and lifestyles [30, 34].

In terms of use of Facebook seniors seem to have a relatively passive use [17, 33], the platform is seen as a place to get updates, keep in contact and monitor the situation but in a passive way. For Erickson [17] the lack of trust reported by the elderly on Facebook is not focused on the persons they can contact with but on the nature of the technology and their limited comprehension of it.

For distant grandmothers, although Facebook is not a preferred platform to communicate with the family, it has a key complementary role. It is used as a complementary platform for everyday reminiscing [35] offering an opportunity to keeping update about the everyday life of the families and functioning as a trigger for conversations via other platforms [33]. For instance, personal photos posted at Facebook can generate “photo-talk” [36], talk around them in conversation on via other channel.

Telephone and video-chatting, however, seems to be the favorite platforms for distant grandmothers to talk with their relatives because of the deeper feel of connections

and personal relationship they provide [33]. Forghani et al. [36] argue that the adoption of video-mediated technologies at home is motivated by the desire for closeness.

But this sense of closeness brought by the technology raises questions about the risk of replacement of face-to-face connection and interaction. For Erickson [17] the awareness raised by Facebook does not replace face-to-face interaction, it often results in emotional support through other channels.

It terms of the risks perceive by the elderly about ICT they seem to relate with the type of use. The more experienced elderly users perceive more risks, but also more opportunities [37]. Among the perceived risks by the elderly are the fear of making technical mistakes, exposure to offensive content, data theft, or wasted time on the Internet [37].

### 2.3 Objectives and Methodology

The main research objective was to understand the role played by the ICTs in the daily life of the grandmothers. A crucial importance was given to the role played by the intergenerational and intragenerational relations in shaping media use and learning style of the elderly. Specifically, the research wanted to investigate:

- the possible relationships in place between the grandmothers, children and nephew, with the aim of understanding the dynamics of intergenerational exchange, and how grandmothers experience the use of Internet as a tool to facilitate family communication with family members.
- the possible relationships in place between the grandmothers and their friends with the aim of understanding the dynamics of intragenerational exchange, and how grandmothers experience the use of Internet as a tool of communication and entertainment and leisure activities with friends.

Data for our research analysis was collected through four focus groups, with approximately two hours, conducted with 28 Italian grandmothers living in Milan, Italy, in February and March 2017. Participations were recruited first by a snowball approach through acquaintances and then in collaboration with a local association of elderly. The average age of the focus-group participants was 72 (minimum 65, maximum 81). The grandmother's selection criteria was being 65 years old or older and user of digital technology. The questions asked to participants focused on their subjective experience and were organized around five main topics: how they communicate with their family, how they communicate with their friends and acquaintances, the role of digital technologies in their leisure activities, the difficulties faced when using them and what would they change about these technologies.

## 3 Learning Processes and Family Role

Every interviewed grandmother has got and uses at least one device for digital communication (computer, laptop, tablet, smartphone). From the interviews clearly emerges that often the digitalization process and ICT usage is not a recent event in grandmothers'

life: according to many of the interviewed grandmothers learning how to use digital technologies happened some years ago, this by using the computer at work.

The majority of our grandmothers are teachers or employees in retirement; they lived in time the digitalisation processes during the second half of the 90s.

Children's education and the need to give children tools for school and homework were an additional incentive to the approach to the information technology and the digital world. The computer has often entered grandmothers' houses when their children attended university or school. For some grandmothers it was an opportunity to get closer to the information technology and the digital world.

In some cases grandmothers taught basics of computer usage to their little children:

*In fact, my daughter learned to use the PC with me, I approached her to the PC. Now things are different, maybe for so many functions I lose and I have to ask her (65, FG2)*

Grandmothers who own a computer for many years (for work reasons or because they bought it when children attended school) still use it nowadays to do research or to send emails, but they know they use it less than before, since the smartphone, tablet and mobile arrival. In the last few years, grandmothers perceived that the real change has been the arrival of the Internet and the smartphone but especially the computer usage in relationships and entertainment terms, not just related to work and to help children with their homework.

As regarding the theme of the family role in stimulating the technologies, the possibility/necessity to keep in touch with their younger relatives (children and grandchildren) is still the initial incentive to adopt technologies.

Familiar relationships support and stimulate the initial usage of the ICT, but in some cases it is not a serene relationship: grandmothers perceive a sort of family pressure concerning the update and learning of new digital services: a "commitment to be up with the times" but especially to be connected with the familiar web:

*I've always refused to use the iPhone, then my children and husband have almost forced me, and since then when I use the smartphone I also use WhatsApp, it's quite comfortable I do not really like telecommunications. But I use it, even because otherwise I would feel cut off even from my family (FG1, 71)*

If the first digitalisation processes (computer and feature phone during the 90s/2000) were bounded to the work sphere and to children education, during the "second digital wave" (the Internet and smartphone) the role of the family is fundamental, both in supporting/pressing the adoption (provide technologies to keep in touch with family) and, in some cases, in supporting a "reaction" of the elderly people, who want to show relatives to still be able to learn and to be at the same level of the other (younger) members of the family.

According to some grandmothers, in particular the oldest ones, the adoption of digital technologies is told as a "personal" challenge towards the family and the society in general (and also a personal challenge in feeling still active):

*I always wanted to keep up with the times and at some point I decided to buy the smartphone. My son asked me to do what with smartphone but I had decided to buy it. Also because in everyday life I saw everybody using the new technology and I did not want to be outdone. Apart from the fundamental importance of being always reachable... (79, FG1)*

For some grandmothers, in particular, learning to use the computer and other digital devices (especially through organised courses for elderly) is an occasion to show their independency, modernity and activity. The beginning of these courses offers an opportunity for grandmothers to feel active and independent (also towards husbands and children).

Many interviewed grandmothers tell how often the basics to use “new” digital technologies came from children, but rarely, from grandchildren, in the case of older grandmothers with adult grandchildren. In particular, children saw in the digitalisation of the elderly an “inclusion” opportunity in children/grandchildren world:

*My daughter taught me to use all these things because I used to reject them... if it was not for her, she is very technical. It was a way to get me closer. (71, FG1).*

After this learning phase, it seems there is not an attention of the younger generation in answering grandmothers’ additional doubts and questions. It seems that the introduction in the “new” digital world mainly happens in delimited and unexpected moments (perhaps towards the present of a smartphone or the new service casual download), but it is not combined with a daily following assistance. Numerous grandmothers expressed a certain difficulty in receiving help from children and grandchildren:

*In fact, children when they have time to teach are so fast they do not understand that we may need to take note, to answer calmly... they now have this use speed in themselves and they don’t think that for us is different... (76, FG2)*

In particular, grandmothers consider their grandchildren to be rushed and not able to explain with attention the complex steps of the ICT usage. Indeed, grandmothers request certain patience in teaching, the respect of their learning times, and comprehension of the different literacy level. These are often requests, that fall on deaf ears: several interviewed grandmothers perceive, often with lots of frustration, they do not have always available children or grandchildren to count on for doubt related to the use of the computer and smartphone:

*I don’t ask to my children because they don’t explain me anything, I prefer to go to the shop or to a friend who knows more than me. (73, FG4).*

It is interesting to notice that elderly people consider younger generation less able to understand elderly people “times” in learning new digital technologies. To this “generational” problem we can also include another problem related to familiar dynamics: children and grandchildren are often perceived as impatient in teaching.

Facing a detached and unpleasant familiar environment, learning can also happen (as an alternative or as an integration) by means of information technology courses organised by public or private authorities, which are able to offer basic information technology knowledge that can be integrated, if possible, with children and grandchildren pieces of (often sporadic) advice.

These courses in particular are appreciated for the ability teachers (often elderly teachers if not adult) have to teach with calm how to use the computer and the smartphone. Rather than the informal and not organised (and often rushed) learning of children and grandchildren, several interviewed grandmothers seem to prefer a “classical” and

formal learning process, based on the “teacher-learner” relation, on the classroom dimension, homework, final exam and based on the certificate.

#### 4 Being on the Internet

With “being on the Internet” we mean grandmothers’ reflection elements concerning the role of the Internet in their daily life and the digital services use (or not use). It is interesting to notice that interviewed grandmothers’ reflections regarding the role of the Internet are linked to the comparison with “younger generations”.

It seems to constantly emerge in grandmothers a worry concerning young people use of the Internet, but also a certain pride of a more “adult” and balanced approach to technologies, which is more thoughtful and reflective than the use children and grandchildren do.

Interviewed grandmothers give importance to the use of the digital technologies they consider to be “correct” and “appropriate”, and they are very reflective about it. In particular, they say they consider with attention both when to use technologies and, with a wider choice of means of communication, which means and services to use for a certain aim (playful, formal, intimate).

Concerning the “when to use the ICTs” issue, interviewed grandmothers consider exaggerated the use young people do of new technologies. A use which is often judged inappropriate because in contexts in which the ICTs should not be used, for example in public spaces:

Several grandmothers affirm, with certain strength, to face “correctly” (in a wisely and moderate way) the use of technologies rather than the younger generations that often use them in an antisocial and deregulated way, in some cases at the edge of pathology and dependence. Grandmothers demonstrate to have a particular attention in using the technologies in an appropriate way, at the same time the interviewed intensely criticise the use younger generations (both children and grandchildren) do of technologies. Grandmothers consider very important to have limits in the use of technologies, even though they perceive that the Internet, smartphone and computer have features that support an extended use. The worry for an excessive use of the Internet is both a criticism towards grandchildren and children, but also a personal risk in a reflective way. Grandmothers think that being elderly, experienced and responsible, the risk is limited for them, on the other hand the worry for younger people is higher.

They strongly criticise the unaware and superficial way the younger generations use of ICTs, affirming to be more “prepared” to face with maturity so powerful tools. Being elderly people and having more experience in general concerning “things in life” helps to use the ICTs in a more balanced way:

*Their generation and more the next one are kind of superficial... I see my grandchildren who, although they still cannot read, are able to use, decide, look... I also think that it's a matter of generation. Young people are more skillful in using but somewhat more unprepared (71, FG2)*

Grandmothers express a strong criticism, sometimes, concerning the use their children and grandchildren do of the ICTs. In particular there is a certain worry regarding

intimate pictures children and grandchildren often publish, with the aim to show private life and feelings:

*I think my children have no problem [to post personal photos]. They were born in another time; we are more suspicious. (81, FG2)*

Elderly people perceive to be less “competent” than younger generations, but they feel to use technologies with more common sense and measure. On one side grandchildren’s ability to use technologies is considered positive and admirable (“*they are so young but already so active*”), on the other side a worry emerges and they distance themselves from an excessive use of technologies. Young people’s knowledge is perceived as a source of opportunities, especially material and practical ones, but at the same time it is also perceived the risk to loose the cultural substance that other “analogic” content have (the reading of a book for example) and the human dimension of communication and relationships:

*From the practical point of view, young people can take advantage by the use of these technologies. They certainly have a boost in practical terms but not in terms of human relationships. (71, FG1)*

Between the strong critical element regarding children and grandchildren use of the ICTs, there is a perception that the digital is coming along with the replacement of offline and “real” relationships with “virtual” ones. In particular, face-to-face relationship or “traditional” means of communication such as the telephone are considered, by our grandmothers, to be the more suitable means of communication to express important things and feelings: Whatsapp messages or emails are considered too superficial to be used for complex issues, leading to misunderstandings. Verbal communication is still considered more suitable (even though in some cases it is mediated by a telephone), rather than written communication:

*I belong to a generation in which it is more important a phone call or a meeting when you have something to say or share, rather than sending a video or photo (71, FG2).*

According the interviewed grandmothers, the excessive use of the smartphone makes the verbal communication and the experiences in “real” contexts more difficult. In grandmother’s perception, young people use of social network risks to make more difficult intimate relationships with their own coetaneous:

*In fact, the problem for young people is exactly this... being linked, for example, to games, friends on FB, Instagram... and to be detached from reality. They have maybe 3,000 friends on FB and two friends nearby (76, FG2)*

The criticism towards “young” and grandchildren is also extended to their children, daughter-in-law and son-in-law, who are considered to be at risk in the process of replacement of “real” friendships with “virtual” ones, the replacement of lived/remembered experiences with the ones memorised on the smartphone, the replacement of “here and now” and the use of the smartphone:

*And for young people, I also mean people of 40, 45, 50 years... [...] they have lost a lot of sense of reality in my opinion. Because everyone looks at it, everyone is taking pictures, but a cell phone more in memory cannot contain... with the result that in the end you lose the real memory of your remembering. (71, FG2).*

There is the anxiety of always being connected, between difficulties already mentioned in the use of technology and between the negativities considered in the digital world. The anxiety seems to be, already once, imputed to the younger generations, to children and grandchildren.

*I call my daughter “mother anxiety” because of these technologies and because they always have to communicate everything (76, FG3)*

*nowadays going out without our smartphone is a catastrophe (72, FG3)*

This anxiety sometimes makes grandmothers pride of their partial disconnection, and their necessity to have moments in which the smartphone is turned off:

*Some time in the evening I switch off my cell phone because I do not want to be dependent to, and everyone knows that if anything is needed, they can be found on the fixed telephone (71, FG2).*

## 5 The ICTs and Familiar Relationships Among People Belonging to Different Generation

In the previous paragraph we underlined how grandmothers widely criticise the ICTs and their “wrong”, excessive, unaware use. Nevertheless, interviewed grandmothers consider the digital tools to maintain intimate and distant relationships with family members fundamental. This concerns grandmothers, whose children and grandchildren live far away and who find in digital channels tools able to “stimulate” proximity and feel, even though virtually, the pleasure of a “physical” and intimate relationship with distant relatives (children and grandchildren). In particular, grandmothers find in digital tools a possibility, from distance, to observe grandchildren growth, sending pictures:

*I’m seeing my nephew growing up, I actually see her two or three times a year when I go there, but I feel really close. For me it’s an emotion every time, every Sunday, she does not talk yet but starts playing... it’s just a joy (66, FG1)*

Elderly people with grandchildren and children, who live far from them, consider digital communication services necessary and fundamental and allowing to build intimate (mediated) relationships with their dear ones, even though they consider them personal face-to-face relationship “substitute”:

*However, if these instruments were not there, it would have been even more difficult. Because even when it comes to small messages or small videos, they are always very important to us (76, FG2).*

Therefore, if digital communication tools are considered to be central for the maintenance and care of distant relationships with children and grandchildren, the ICTs role is more problematic in building intimate relationships among people belonging to daily contests (children and grandchildren), especially if seen regularly. In building/maintenance intimate relationships, face-to-face relationships and the necessity to see and talk to each other is also considered central in a transversal way. Despite this certainty, clearly emerges that for the majority of our grandmothers digital communication tools (WhatsApp in particular) are still useful to build a connection, not necessarily intimate, but

work and instrumental, and are fundamental to maintain sentimental relationships with children (in a more residual way) with grandchildren.

Physical contact, see and talk to each other, “touch” children and grandchildren is still the main way to demonstrate affection, to feel the pleasure of given and received love, but digital channels and services (Whatsapp especially) have the ability to build a thick web of daily messages, a light, playfully and jokingly communication with the aim to keep in touch with relatives through “little things daily exchange”:

*It's a daily exchange of small things, the other night my daughter made the tortellini with my mother-in-law, she sent me the picture, to see... we get involved... (71, FG1)*

On one hand there is a wide scepticism regarding digital tools ability to “create” a relationship with relatives, on the other hand communication technologies are considered excellent tools to consolidate an already existing intimate relationship, “reinforcing” bonds:

*I think there must be a basic predisposition, a very good relationship that is so humanly strengthened. (72, FG1)*

According to our interviewed grandmothers, digital channels have not created a drop in meeting moments and they have not substituted face-to-face relationships, but they have created new (little, daily, interstitial) relationship moments between a meeting and the other. This concerns channels that create a spread, arranged intimacy in the often frenetic life interstices of children and grandchildren.

Indeed, interviewed grandmothers consider asynchronous digital communication channels (Whatsapp in particular, but also emails) useful because less invasive than the telephonic contact: indeed grandmothers have a certain worry to disturb their children, who are considered to be always too busy (or distracted and unpleasant).

Whatsapp use is central from this point of view, as a technology included in children crack times and it is considered to be a less invasive technology, which does not disturb and allows children (and grandchildren) to be free to answer when they want:

*WhatsApp because the children do not often respond, the only solution is to send them a nice message they might answer to, they say they will call later (71, FG2).*

On one hand Whatsapp is considered a suitable tool for familiar relationships “interstitial” management, on the other hand the criticism against Facebook is wider, especially because it is not considered able to express in the best way oneself feelings. Indeed, Facebook is considered a too “public” place of “exhibition”, rather than the more private Whatsapp. In particular, concerning grandchildren’s pictures, grandmothers agree that Facebook can put at risk minor’s privacy and be dangerous. Whatsapp is for this reason preferred because there is no danger that people who do not belonging to relative and friends web can see published pictures.

Grandmothers perceive they do not have control on the list of addressee and the audience of published images. Worries on Facebook are fomented by children and by social and medial speeches regarding this service but also by the negative behaviour children have against the medium that brings to limit and control grandchildren use of it. Facebook does not seem to be a “safe” environment to share personal material and feelings, because it is considered to be a public environment unlike Whatsapp, which is

the communication medium “for the family” and in general dedicated to the private sphere, and which allows to share in a protected way grandchildren’s pictures, through closed “family” groups:

*Photos of children or some family situations I’m not used to sharing them with so many people, I’d just like to share them with them, with the family group that’s been created on WhatsApp (76, FG2)*

Despite strongly criticising Facebook, a significant number of interviewed grandmothers has got a Facebook account and uses it. A wide part of grandmother’s Facebook web is composed of relatives, children and grandchildren. Grandmothers strongly refuse to publish “intimate” and “familiar” contents, but they demonstrate to often use Facebook in a lurking way, to be updated on children and grandchildren lives, without interacting with them.

*I see their photos there. My grandchildren, my daughter, publish a lot... I use it basically to see, I enjoy seeing what they do. For example, my grandson who was in the mountains and published the world cup skiing race that I liked... (81, FG2).*

It is interesting to notice that for some grandmothers, Facebook is a necessary window opened on the world of their own children, on their private and professional life, on their activities and their lives updates. From this point of view, Facebook is used as a tool to follow from “closer” children lives, who are often considered to be too busy to daily orally update parents on their lives (private or professional):

*My son is involved in musical activities and so I use FB to get know about what he is doing. It’s not that he does not want to tell me things but maybe he sometimes ignores me... (72, FG1)*

As a matter of principle, grandmothers strongly criticise when children or grandchildren publish intimate contents on Facebook, but in substance they consider those contents useful to “understand better” their own children and grandchildren. Being on Facebook is a way to comprehend grandchildren’s character, to understand if they have worries, if they are happy or sad, it is a way to understand their feelings, through their status vision and their pictures on Facebook:

*Sometimes it’s a bit like reading the secret diary as we did once. Now you look at Facebook (70, FG2)*

According to some grandmothers, feeling the necessity to be “updated” through Facebook on movements, news of their grandchildren (who are considered to be way “further” than children) is a sign of incommunicability between grandparents and grandchildren or it is a sign of an asymmetrical relationship. Facebook use is for some grandmothers an attempt to keep in contact with grandchildren and to enter (glance?) their world, apart from real confronting and updating occasions, considered to be too little.

The advent of digital technologies brought positive aspects in our interviewed grandmothers’ perception, both related to the possibility to keep in touch with their familiar web. However, negative elements emerge constantly connected to the use of the Internet and the difficulty and challenges brought by the use of these tools in familiar relationships. In some situations and contests, the presence of digital tools is a digital barrier to

interpersonal relationships and an obstacle to the dialogue and interpersonal relationships with children and grandchildren, this facing a different netiquette, a different way to “being on the web” among grandmothers, children and grandchildren:

*For example my daughter in the evening almost cannot talk because she is always at the phone, speaks, looks, reads... and she does not listen to me (70, FG2)*

In every situation and familiar and intimate contest, the invasive presence of smartphones is considered by our grandmothers an often insurmountable barrier, which is added to the difficulty to dialogue especially with their grandchildren, because they perceive to have little to share and say with them:

*I have two grandsons and when I visit them at their houses, they are always using their smartphones and they don't participate to the conversation... We don't know anymore our grandsons (67, FG3)*

Regarding relationship with grandchildren, grandmothers often perceive to be secondary compared to the thick twist of conversation that guys have with their coetaneous or their parents. There is the impression that grandchildren call often, they send lots of text messages, they write, read and they engage with the smartphone but that they dedicate just a little percentage of the amount of time spent online to digital relationships with grandparents:

*The grandchildren then use cell phones with their grandparents just to ask for something. When there is a need, then it is a continuous message (FG2)*

## **6 ICTs and Relationships Among Friends Belonging to the Same Generation**

In the previous paragraph we described how interviewed grandmothers use digital services to build/maintain intimate relationships with their relatives alive, in particular with children. Our interviewed elderly ladies claimed not to be just grandmothers, but alive and active people regardless of their familiar relationship and their “grandmother” identity. Our elderly ladies wanted to underline that they have a thick and significant web of friends, and they have interests and hobbies. The ICTs are tools considered to be fundamental to manage their own web of friends, with the aim to keep in touch with their acquaintances. The ICTs are not just a useful tool to manage intimate and familiar sphere, but are always more useful tools to take elderly ladies’ minds off, to spend time having fun, to support their free time, often spent with friends.

Comes out with perseverance from our interviewed ladies, that our grandmothers use intensively digital tools (Whatsapp firstly) to keep in touch with their web of friends. Often it is not a particularly extended web, but made up of a few, trusted people, with whom they shared decades of friendship and they find in digital tools a (new) efficient (and funny) channel of communication.

Some grandmothers underline how the intensity of communication with friends is superior than the one with relatives, both in terms of frequency and often in terms of value (fun, engagement) given by communication.

Interviewed grandmothers underline how communication technologies do not substitute “face-to-face” relationships and meetings in person, but they are integrated and they add a joking level relationship with friends, to continue between a meeting and the other. In particular, grandmothers underline how Whatsapp did not substitute personal relationships but it solidified them, multiplying occasions and ways to be in touch with friends, between an appointment and the other.

*But even with friends, it is not that personal relationships stop, we maybe send a video to laugh... then everything remains as it is, if we have a relationship we still prefer to see each other (71, FG1).*

Not only: digital communication services allow to organise in a simpler way meetings and events. This favoured, in some grandmothers’ perception, meeting moments with friends.

The most popular and used service with friends is Whatsapp, in particular through group organisation divided for “activities”, to demonstrate the extreme activism of our interviewed elderly ladies. According to our grandmothers, Whatsapp has also the function to keep stable the bond with geographically “far” friendships that are kept “alive” during periods in which they do not see each other regularly. In particular, Whatsapp is necessary to keep in touch with friends they see during summer, during Christmas occasion and who live in their native cities or in resort places.

Among the positive Whatsapp elements there is the ability to offer space for a light humour, sometimes stupid, because it is able to fill grandmothers’ daily life with happiness. Participants appreciate the playful element of this medium of communication between friends of the same generation, this can bring carefreeness and lightness but not only:

*They add something. They mostly add humour, we do so much more laughs... and a bit of affectivity (71, FG1)*

The most important register in communication among people of the same generation is represented by the sense of humour, rather than feelings. If the use of Facebook for intimate and familiar relationship is generally criticised by our grandmothers (because of its public dimension and because of following dangers), several interviewed women underline the playful and recreational use of Facebook, in particular in relationships with friends:

*Even in the case of FB, everything depends by the way it is used. I like it, once a day I use it, just to do best wishes, to communicate with some friends, to post some photos if I go somewhere, to share with friends... it is also a way to communicate.. (66, FG1)*

Regarding the role of Facebook to extend the personal social web, grandmothers show a strong scepticism about digital technologies and their ability to recover old lost friendships. Grandmothers show fatalism concerning the end of past relationships and they think Facebook just reactivates, in an artificial way, friendships and relationships ended many years before and that are still considered valid for some reasons.

Most of the time the recover of old friendships happens just at an online “conversation” level (Facebook chat in particular) or just accounts lurking of people they used to

know. Therefore, there is a general diffidence to transform the “contact” recover in real new meetings:

*I've found almost all my former students, they've written... and I like to see that one is married, the other has a son... their lives. It is not that we write, sometimes we see a picture... we wonder what they were doing. That's fine for me. (68, FG1)*

Technologies are considered useful to reinforce still current but weak friendships. This is the case of colleagues, with whom there is still a current relation (in some cases grandmothers are in retirement since not many years) but that became weaker in the last few years, due to several familiar responsibilities (in particular grandchildren care):

*I also have the group chat of ex-colleagues, but we also have lunch once a month. [...] But this beautiful practice was born to meet us every month for about 3 years and WhatsApp was also able to resume contacts with someone who was lost and re-found thanks to the group (71, FG1)*

According to some grandmothers Facebook has a positive role in recovering memories and relationships of past friendships. According to some other, not only is Facebook useless, but it risks to make worse, more complex, too thick and extended their social web, in a moment of life in which it is more important to pause on little and important personal relationships.

*I find FB a waste of time. ...between messages, comments and so on... you should spend all day. For me it really became just stressing. Parents of the pupils, then friends, acquaintances... I find it exaggerated. I finally decided to give up (71, FG1)*

Nevertheless, grandmothers agree that a limit in the quantity of communication with friends is necessary: often the number of received messages is considered to be excessive, contents are recurring (“goodnight”, “good morning”) and elderly people live with inconvenience the impossibility to read every message or to answer to everyone. In these occasions, Whatsapp risks to pass from being a positive relational tool, to be a source of anxiety and strong criticism. If the number of received messages is considered excessive, it can be a symptom that who sends them is investing too much time in digital relationships, to the detriment of face-to-face ones:

*They put a bit of sadness on me. In addition to being harassing, because of the thousands of useless messages, they make me sad because I think those who act like this, maybe he/she only too alone... (66, FG1)*

## 7 Conclusions

Our study lead to new insights on the role of ICT on the everyday life of the grandmothers, especially regarding how intergenerational and intragenerational relations shape their process of uptake, learning and use of “new” media.

- *What are the social contexts of ICT's use in the daily life of the grandmothers?*

Interviewed grandmothers often characterised to be long-time digital users, with a past experience with computer, even though minimal and work related, from the late 90's. In line with the results of previous researches [30, 31], despite these past experiences, “new” digital technologies, as computers connected to the Internet and

smartphones with data connection, seem to have entered our interviewed grandmothers' lives thanks to family pressure. This shift from a work related and child homework assistance computer use to a more entertainment, communication and relational centred use seems to characterize a second phase of their digitalization. Children – and also husbands in a residual way - have in some cases pushed grandmothers to use digital tools for safety reason and to control grandmothers' activities, for example, by qualifying grandmothers to send pictures while looking after grandchildren. The learning of these new technologies is immediately perceived as convenient, or even as a real social duty, for communicate efficiently within their family setting.

Grandmothers', however, often see technology as a “prayer” escaping from the complete comprehension and complete control. Technology is sometimes considered dangerous, excessive and intrusive, able to “throw away” and ruin beautiful moments, as when the smartphone is intrusive and spoils face-to-face relationships, and to waste younger generations' time.

Elderly grandmothers are in general confident of their abilities to avoid those dangers, and they proudly affirm that their adult age, their experience with “complicated things in life”, their wisdom and moderation, can keep them distant from risks and excesses of the digital communication.

*- What are the role of ICT on grandmother's intergenerational and intragenerational relationships dynamics?*

Several previous researches have underlined how processes of media literacy and appropriation are influenced by (positive) forms of intergenerational exchanges, especially in family contexts [15]. Our interviews show a more intricate scenario: although the trigger to start to use new digital technology comes from family and people belonging to different generations, the daily use of the ICTs reveals a complex relationship with children and grandchildren regarding technological issues, which often characterized by incompatible netiquette, different competences and lack of learning assistance. For this reason, elderly people seems to favour formal and structured ICT courses directed to them rather than the informal and not organized assistance provided by the younger relatives. This seems also to reinforce the development of some ICT uses linked the leisure dimension and to the relationship with friends.

Digital channels (Whatsapp in particular) become therefore not (only) *media* for communicate within the family boundaries but emancipatory tools, that allow to continuously nurture, reinforce and warm up long-standing friendships in a simpler and faster way and, for this reason, more compatible with the busy lives of some active grandmothers. Our interviewed grandmothers have demonstrated both an intense social activity, and the use of ICT as a backdrop where they articulate fun interactions and collective moments with friends.

Therefore, our research confirm how communication technologies can promote relationships between family members belonging to different generations and offer occasions to show (in a more or less clear way) love and intimacy. But in our research it's also clear how elderly consider digital services more and more important in offering a playful, light, leisure and entertaining environment where they can build satisfying

friendships with people belonging to the same generation and with the same way to “being on the Internet”.

## 8 Limitations and Future Works

The amount and features of our focus group participants exclude any possibility of generalization of our results. The interviewed grandmothers represent a not common profile of Italian elderly. They are middle and middle-upper class, involved in the associative context of one of the richest Italian city (Milan): our grandmothers are a wealthy and active niche of the Italian elderly population. As more elderly are going online and widening their online interactions, further research should be needed to understand how older people use digital technologies to communicate with peers and to point out the differences between elderly digital use for intra and intergenerational communication. Further researches should also explore the differences between uses in elderly with different social and cultural backgrounds.

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