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Article

## Intergenerational Perspectives on Media and Fake News During Covid-19: Results From Online Intergenerational Focus Groups

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### Abstract

This article reflects on intergenerational perspectives on media habits and fake news during Covid-19. Active participation is closely linked to the citizens' media literacy competencies. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, inequalities in access, use, and understanding of the information conveyed by the media became more evident. Digital skills are essential to encourage co-learning and active ageing among different generations. This article relies on data collected during two online intergenerational focus groups with family pairs of different ages (grandparents and grandchildren) conducted in Portugal in the context of the European project SMaRT-EU. The focus groups addressed subjects such as news, fake news, critical perspective towards social networks and digital communication, and younger and older people's perspectives regarding these matters. The thematic analysis of the Portuguese data suggests that, by placing grandparents and grandchildren side by side, the online intergenerational focus groups promoted sharing and exchange of knowledge, valuing the intergenerational encounter and the voices of one of society's most fragile groups. Data also shows that participants have different perspectives on communication and digitally mediated interaction, mainly related to age factors and media literacy skills. As for fake news, although grandparents and grandchildren show awareness of the phenomenon, for the youngest participant it was complex to identify characteristics or the spaces where they are disseminated. The young adult participant was the most proficient and autonomous digital media user. Results further indicate that, although the online environment contributed to continuing research in times of pandemic, bringing together family members with different media literacy skills and ages poses difficulties related to the recruitment of participants.

### Keywords

fake news; information disorders; intergenerationality; media habits; online focus groups; Portugal

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted inequalities. The most vulnerable groups in society—in particular, if we consider their digital and media competencies—have found themselves more isolated and affected than others. The growth of phenomena associated with the pandemic contributed to the increase in some of these inequalities (Pérez-Escobar & Canet, 2022). Information disorders have had a strong impact contributing to the pollution of the communications environment, the

promotion of fear and distrust, and the dissemination of information that undermines democratic values. According to Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), this phenomenon comprises three notions that are distinguished by their purpose and impact, even if they can overlap. As they explain:

Dis-information. Information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country.

Mis-information. Information that is false, but not created with the intention of causing harm.

Mal-information. Information that is based on reality, used to inflict harm on a person, organization or country. (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 20)

In this complex context of information disorders, disinformation and fake news are diffuse terms that entered the common discourses of daily life. They became commonplace words and two of the most mentioned terms in any discourse on media—The pandemic has dominated the media scene and fake news has dominated digital media (Rocha et al., 2021). So, given the complexity of these phenomena, we take the complex notion of information disorders (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) as the basis for the reflection conducted within the scope of this research. The sharing of fake or harmful content is often rampant and, because this content is typically structured in a journalistic format, it gives the receiver an appearance of trustworthiness that misleads, raises doubts about fundamental issues such as medicine and technology, and even incites hate and violence. This massive virtual sharing has contributed to the spread of misinformation and raised alarm for subsequent implications for citizenship (Kharod & Simmons, 2020).

Among the most vulnerable groups that are affected by this phenomenon are older people (Guess et al., 2019; Osmundsen et al., 2021). In modern societies, there is a trend towards an ageing population which highlights the need to consider older adults' heterogeneous nature and experiences (Amaral & Daniel, 2018). With this comes a number of challenges, including defining the age groups of the "older adults." On the one hand, according to the World Health Organization (2019) older people's age groups should be defined based on their socio-cultural and economic-political characteristics. On the other hand, the European Union (Eurostat, 2019) and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022) acknowledge that older citizens are people over 65 depending on retirement standards. Some of these individuals are newcomers to digital environments and social media channels with low experience in digital media, traits that can hinder the detection of manipulated images, deceptive information, sponsored content, clickbait, and other forms of deception. As the use of social media increases, by both young and old, "fake news is also on the rise. The role played by age in the consumption of fake news on social media, however, is unclear" (Loos & Nijenhuis, 2020, p. 69). Further research about these matters is therefore relevant to the field of communication sciences and media studies.

Critical thinking is one of the key elements for detecting possible risks in media environments and promoting enlightened media use (Kellner & Share, 2005). On the same grounds, information and knowledge are fundamental to access, analyse, and create own media content.

According to the European Union, media literacy involves the capacity of accessing, critically understanding, and engaging with the different media available (European Commission, 2022), which "creates knowledgeable individuals, empowers communities, and encourages democratic participation" (Mihailidis et al., 2021, p. 1). If we consider media literacy as "the ability to identify different types of media and understand the messages they're sending" (Common Sense Media, 2020), we can find the inspiration to relate media education to effective and contextualised work with communities. Following this line of thought, intergenerational approaches can contribute to promoting media literacy, based on experience and practice, within particular settings and groups.

Aiming to promote media literacy as a form of resilience against fake news and misinformation as well as to find out if shared media experience could be used to promote resilience towards information disorders, the SMaRT-EU project conducted 16 online intergenerational focus groups (OIFGs) in Croatia (n = 1), Belgium (n = 2), Estonia (n = 10), Portugal (n = 2), and Spain (n = 1). All partners agreed in advance on the number of intergenerational focus groups (FGs) to be held, considering the total expected number of activities and participants. By creating an environment conducive to the exchange of ideas and sharing of knowledge, the OIFG gathered grandparents and grandchildren, totalling 34 participants from five countries, in an experience of critical reflection about media habits before and during the pandemic, communication in the digital age, and perceptions and impact of information disorders. In this article, we present and reflect on the results of the two OIFGs conducted in Portugal. On the one hand, the analysis aims to compare and contrast the ways grandparents and grandchildren communicate and meet via digital media, both in the pre- and the post-pandemic context. On the other, it strives to understand and explore the meanings that each generation associates with misinformation and the fake news phenomenon, reflecting on the specific Covid-19 pandemic context in which the project was carried out. For such, a thematic analysis of the FGs' content was performed, having as a starting point three main questions: (a) What are the media habits of grandparents and grandchildren? (b) What importance did the media have in times of isolation? (c) Where do they find information and what impact does false information have on their daily routines? Field notes were also used to complement and cross-reference the results of the thematic analysis.

## 2. Infodemic and Information Disorders During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Access to reliable, varied, and substantiated information is vital for all citizens. Ensuring that quality information is available creates opportunities for individuals to contribute to their communities' sustainable development and to hold their governments accountable (UNESCO,

2021). The growth of digital technologies has led to the emergence of new media and channels and to phenomena such as media convergence (Jenkins, 2006), aspects that have caused profound changes in media environments and in the ways people communicate. The dynamics and flow of information have become more intense, leading human interaction and society to a highly interconnected and complex level that challenges pre-existing ideas of time and space (Melro & Oliveira, 2012), as well as the relationship between individuals and the media (Pinto, 2000). In this scenario, and despite the increasing supply of and easier access to information, several events threaten citizenship. Information disorders (Frau-Meigs, 2019) are one of them. And while the sharing of misleading information in public spheres is not exactly a modern-day phenomenon, it is understood that the growth of digital technologies and, more specifically, the internet and social media leveraged its reach and generalised its impact (Damasceno, 2021; Hobbs & McGee, 2014). The reach, as Frau-Meigs (2019, p. 77) points out, is due to three main characteristics: their “viral presence (they can reach many people), advertising (which can be monetized and generate traffic and profit), and automation (they can be amplified by robots and algorithms).”

In the pandemic context, the sharing of misleading information and misinformation became particularly worrisome. With the Covid-19 outbreak, the various communication channels were hit by an abrupt growth in information—accurate and inaccurate—on the same topic in a short period of time. The spread of different information disorders reached disturbing proportions, leading the World Health Organization to declare that, in addition to a pandemic, the world was experiencing an “infodemic” (Guarino et al., 2021, p. 1). This overabundance of information disorders about the pandemic made it hard for citizens to find reliable guidance and make informed decisions regarding their health and well-being. In times of isolation, with few opportunities to socialise in person with family, friends, and peers, time at home increased and consequently so did the use of digital media to keep in touch and updated about world events (Kemp, 2020).

### **3. Intergenerationality as an Approach to Media Literacy and Digital Citizenship**

Intergenerationality points to the connections that result from the interaction between different generations. In the scope of this article, it particularly refers to younger and older people’s interaction. If the era of traditional media (namely audiovisual media) highlighted generational gaps, the digital era allows and enhances decisive connective patterns (Amaral & Brites, 2019). By promoting contact between groups of people of different ages and from different backgrounds (sometimes living in different geographies), intergenerational approaches promote communication, moments of sharing, and, consequently, a better understanding between

them, solidarity, and inclusion. Particularly regarding the promotion of media literacy, research has shown that intergenerational approaches can positively contribute to lifelong education (Patrício & Osório, 2015, 2016), cultural expression, and personal fulfilment. Therefore, intergenerationality can have positive results when one seeks to address issues related to everyday practices such as media uses, the impact of media in daily life, the opportunities and dangers of its use, and the importance of (digital) media for a broad citizenship experience.

Compared to other generations, older people are regarded as being unlikely to domesticate technologies (Hirsch & Silverstone, 1993) and are commonly subjected to multiple disadvantages (Livingstone et al., 2005), such as age, gender, and difficulties in using media. The domain of digital skills is, by definition, shown as an inherent characteristic of younger generations, especially those born without knowing analogue technologies. However, this is a static view of generations that ignores multidimensionality as well as the stereotypes faced by older adults (Loos, 2012). While at the dawn of the digital age generational gaps were promoted, this path was changed, for instance, with the interactivity that we are familiar with nowadays:

The digital age promotes the blurring of barriers between different age groups that interact through and with technologies. Intergenerational relationships that narrow in digital can overcome the so-called generation gaps, fostering intergenerational interaction, which allows the sharing of knowledge and forms of sociability anchored in different generational contexts. (Amaral & Brites, 2019, p. 5113)

The frontiers between generations are fluid (Bolin & Skogerbø, 2013), indicating that media literacy can be a channel to bridge the intergenerational digital divide (Meimaris, 2017) and that digital media-based intergenerational proximity is a recent—and viable—research approach (Brites et al., 2019).

### **4. Context and Methodology**

The SMARTEU—Social Media Resilience Toolkit project was conducted with the main purpose of promoting media literacy as a form of resilience against information disorders. The project ran between October 2020 and December 2021 and distinguished itself by using OIFGs (promoting younger and older generational mutual learning in each task) and a participatory approach, and by prioritising learning by doing as a way to discuss topics related to media education, digital citizenship, and information disorders with specific target groups, approaching them from their points of view. Among other activities, the team conducted online FGs with families, teachers and students, scholars, communication professionals, and youth workers to promote reflection

on the project's main themes. This article focuses on the family OIFG.

#### 4.1. Online Intergenerational Focus Groups

FGs are one of the most widespread qualitative data collection techniques, allowing data collection through the interaction of a group of people on a particular topic (Morgan, 1996, 1997). They can be very productive in media studies (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999), as interaction takes the place of data source, recognising the active role of the researcher as a discussion facilitator. By promoting a focused discussion on specific topics among participants who share some characteristics, FGs help to deepen knowledge about topics of interest to the research from the target audiences' perspective (Krueger & Casey, 2009). FGs can also produce new ideas and creative concepts and enable understanding of how participants talk about a phenomenon as well as the interpretation of previously obtained results (Stewart et al., 2007). Regarding online FGs, Stewart and Shamdasani (2017) underline that studies have been demonstrating that online-based interaction tends to be similar to in-person interaction (Hoffman et al., 2012) and that web-based approaches can replicate the social interaction that takes place in offline environments (Eastwick & Gardner, 2009; Slater et al., 2006). Online FGs also enable research teams to conduct research in challenging times. By relying on online tools, teams can overcome cost-related issues associated with research in offline contexts, difficulties to access specific locations, and even access to specific groups of participants, such as youth or people with disabilities (Abrams & Gaiser, 2017; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017; Stewart & Williams, 2005).

The SMaRT-EU team conducted 16 OIFGs involving grandparents and grandchildren. Understanding that the option to use this research technique and denomination to describe data collection with two participants might not be consensual, in the earlier reflection phase the European team discussed not only the terminology but also the option of conducting pair FGs during the research project.

As the literature points out, FGs do not require a specific number of participants. They are characterised by the interaction and collective reflection promoted among their participants (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999), this being the crucial aspect to be ensured in these activities. By conducting OIFGs, the team aimed to address the need to bring into the discussions of the field new, innovative, and creative forms of addressing and debating media literacy with older people (Rasi et al., 2021).

The basic script and guidelines were created by the Estonian team. While developing the script, the Estonian team intended not only to address the main issues underlying the project but also to promote moments of critical reflection and interactivity focused on three media and information literacy videos (named "YouTube News") produced within the project. These videos addressed—in

simple and accessible language—issues related to media literacy, content production, and news and information-related issues. Two of them explored aspects more familiar to younger individuals (e.g., influencers and content production) and the other subjects also familiar to the older ones (e.g., information and communication). For these reasons, the team agreed that the videos could be a useful tool to spark intergenerational discussions over the aforementioned topics. Since the FGs would be conducted online, besides using the videos, the research team conceived other strategies to promote interactivity and intergenerational exchange and knowledge sharing. Therefore, researchers also relied on the value of using drawings as effective techniques to explore or extract hidden meanings from discourses (Varga-Atkins & O'Brien, 2009). Participants were asked to make drawings that could represent their media habits that were afterwards used to complement the data collected and analysed. The final script consisted of three sets of questions structured around three main themes (media habits and communication routines, information disorders, and influencers/content producers), moments of individual and collective reflection (even with zoom sound disconnected, to ensure privacy), drawing activities, and video discussions. The final version was then translated into the partner's national languages.

Furthermore, the work package that included the FG was tested and implemented by the Estonian team before the other partners proceeded with it. All these aspects gave us leverage in the results that could be achieved through the OIFGs. By then the researchers were aware of the relevance of the intergenerational and family dimensions in times of Covid-19. The team intended to bring to light the challenges that families, namely those with older people—regardless of the socioeconomic and educational settings—faced to maintain communication routines during the pandemic. Considering all these aspects, the team agreed that the script and the activities planned for the OIFGs met the aim of encouraging participants to actively discuss and critically reflect upon certain subjects with each other and not only to provide answers. The researchers were confident that the OIFGs with family pairs brought an innovative dimension without jeopardising the quality of the sample and the results. The OIFGs were always conducted by two researchers, both focused on conducting and taking notes, even if in particular moments one was more focused on a specific part of the task. The sessions lasted between 80 and 90 minutes and were conducted on Zoom.

#### 4.2. Recruitment and Privacy Matters

This analysis focuses on the results of the two intergenerational, family FGs conducted in Portugal with grandparents and grandchildren. Participants were recruited from the researcher's network, aiming to ensure a diverse representation. The final group of participants included two

older women aged 63 and 73 (a group with lower digital skills), a younger child aged seven (digitally skilled but with content-based deficits), and a young adult aged 22 (with deep digital understanding and knowledge of the context, being a journalism student and a digital influencer).

In the particular Portuguese case, several contacts were made until two groups of families were available to participate in the OIFG. The people contacted indicated several reasons for declining the invitation to participate. The topics of media literacy, information disorders, and digital media use make people uncomfortable and doubtful of their ability to discuss and reflect on related subjects. Besides, the invitation to engage in research projects causes anxiety, making people afraid of being judged for their participation. Yet another aspect emerged during recruitment concerning activities that rely on the use of digital tools. Older participants, in particular, demonstrated fear towards using these tools—Some of the people that were invited to the FG reported they had never used the internet before and did not know how to use it properly to engage in these meetings and provide a valid contribution to the research.

Previously to the OIFG, all participants received a research consent form where the purpose of the sessions and how they would be run were explained. Participants were also informed about the data that would be used in the subsequent analysis. In this phase, grandparents and grandchildren were informed that anonymity would be guaranteed through the use of fictitious names in all publications and presentations that addressed the results of the FG. Internally, and in order to ensure this anonymity and avoid possible lapses, after the transcription of the FG, the participants' names were replaced by fictitious alternatives.

#### 4.3. Thematic Analysis of the Focus Groups

We relied on thematic analysis to reflect on the FG and explore the data collected, as this approach allows us to go beyond counting words or extracting clippings, making it possible to identify the meanings and themes that can indicate patterns. In the context of this research, it was considered relevant to centre the analysis on identifying, analysing, and reporting the major themes/dimensions that emerged (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012; Clarke & Braun, 2017) within the data from the OIFG. To conduct the thematic analysis, we followed the six-step approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation, code formulation, generation of themes, themes review, defining and naming themes, and report formation.

After the analysis and identification of the pressing themes that emerged from the discussions with the participants, the field notes were used in a complementary manner to enrich the analysis. The team considered the field notes to be particularly useful to clarify aspects related to the participants' expressions or visual aspects

identified in the recordings that had not been expressed in the transcribed discourses.

As previously mentioned, the drawings were used and analysed to complement the participants' discourse, namely their descriptions of media and habits and routines of media use and consumption.

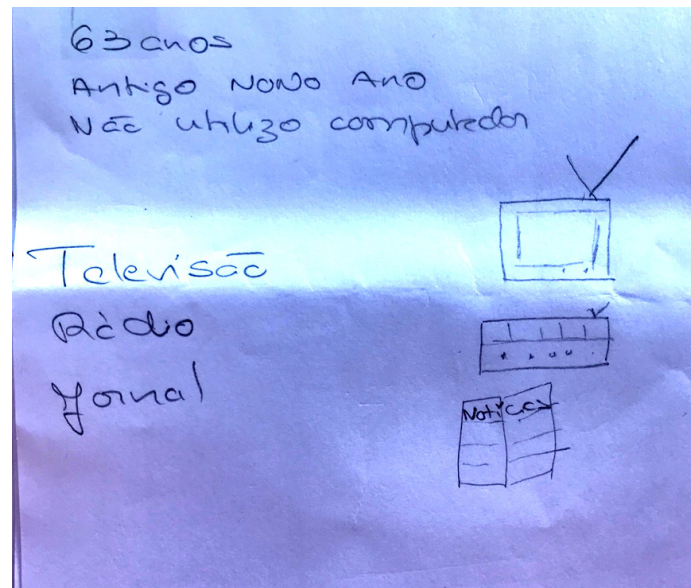
## 5. Findings

From the data analysed, and considering the literature review that underpins this research, the thematic analysis allowed four major themes to be identified. The themes are presented in detail in this section.

### 5.1. Media Habits and Intergenerational Learning Experiences

Regarding the theme of media habits, both grandmothers (Antónia, 63, and Sofia, 73) and granddaughter (Ana, 7) had no profiles on social media, and evidenced a low level of digital use and interest, especially when compared to the grandson (Rui, 22), a journalism student and a digital influencer. When we look closer at the first FG, which brought together a young child and a grandmother (Antónia and Ana), we notice that, although the child had contact and experience with digital media and was already independently performing tasks using digital tools, some issues challenged her understanding. Namely, the questions related to the matters of information disorders (including the "fake news" expression, as it is used in common sense) proved to be more complex. The grandmother Antónia, on the other hand, despite not using social media and only using Google for occasional searches showed interest in discussing the proposed topics and appreciated the opportunity to share her opinions. The grandmother's speech was, therefore, predominant in this session. As to the preferred medium, television plays an important role in this family's routines, being also a companion during the day, especially for Antónia—as Figure 1 depicts—although she said that she is occasionally confronted with aspects on television channels that she labelled as fake news. According to her, this is due to the race for ratings and the urgency to get the information out before everyone else. From her point of view, however, these aspects lead to inconsistencies, inaccuracies, and viewer confusion.

The second FG brought together a different (digital) family context. With a grandson (Rui) that is a journalism student and also an influencer and a grandmother that is still learning how to deal with technology (Sofia), we could note that the grandson's skills influenced the family context and views on technology. As was the case with the first OIFG participants, this grandmother indicated that she did not have social media profiles, like on Facebook and Instagram, and only used messaging applications such as WhatsApp and Skype to contact family. On the other hand, the grandson claimed to use most of the existing social media on a daily basis. In the



**Figure 1.** Antónia’s (63) drawings point to traditional media consumption (television, radio, and print newspapers) and include a statement saying she does not use computers. Note: The text in the drawing reads “63 years old; Former ninth grade; I don’t use the computer. Television; Radio; Newspaper.”

case of this set of participants, however, we can say that both already had previous experience using digital media and networks as a way to keep in touch with family and friends. Although physical contact and proximity were also mentioned as preferential and essential to their family and friendship relationships, both recognised that, whereas before the pandemic digital media allowed them to keep in touch with people who were distant, during the pandemic these media became crucial to keep in touch with their immediate family as well.

Something that became quite evident during this session was that not only the grandmother had already attended technology-related training to improve her digital skills, but also the grandson had been gradually passing on his knowledge about these technologies to her. According to Sofia, the grandson was extremely important for her journey as an independent user of technologies, mentioning that the contact and sharing between different generations help to foster bonds and to integrate, especially the older ones, into the new digital worlds.

Briefly pointing to the data collected at the European level in relation to news habits, overall, we can conclude that intergenerational communication appeared as an effective way to promote everyday news consumption, a diversified understanding of news, and news validation. In addition, it was visible that interaction between generations can positively contribute to preventing the risk of misinterpretations of information. All of this increases resilience towards harmful consequences of information disorders.

### 5.2. Media Routines in Times of Confinement

Concerning media habits in times of isolation, the granddaughter and grandmother from the first FG clearly

stated that the pandemic changed the family dynamics. Whereas before the pandemic, in-person conviviality was preferred and smartphones were only used occasionally to text, make calls, or video calls, the pandemic reversed the situation. The smartphone became a central and fundamental part of their relationships and allowed them to keep in touch, especially in times of isolation. Digital media devices facilitated proximity and social interaction. Antónia recognised, for example, that video chatting allowed her to follow the growth of her grandchildren, and that in the case of the older ones the use of the cell phone to make video calls with family members was something important to bring them closer to each other and to make them aware of what was happening in the world.

Antónia, who still has a very close relationship with her parents stressed that digital media were crucial for them, both older people with locomotion and communication handicaps, to be able to contact their family, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, alleviating the impact of isolation and feelings of loneliness. The granddaughter mentioned that during the quarantine periods her parents often made video calls so that she could keep in touch with some friends.

Although by the time of the OIFG a number of restrictions had been lifted and contact between families was allowed once again, the smartphone had not ceased to be part of their family routines. The use of this tool was, however, reduced to sending messages and making video calls through WhatsApp. In the case of the child, Ana, she also had access to TikTok through her parents’ cell phones, facilitating her social and mediated interaction. Antónia, even if—as pointed out above—she had no social media profile, recognised the importance of social media to mitigate isolation, as was the case in periods of

confinement during the pandemic. In line with this idea, the granddaughter mentioned that, although she really enjoyed playing with her friends, social media allowed her to keep up with people in a more consistent manner, nurturing ties and knowing what people were doing and where they were.

### 5.3. *The Role of Social Media and Digital Devices*

In spite of the evidence of the important role of digital devices in connecting families, going outside this close group, and thinking about social media to maintain the connection between people and even create new friends, Antónia shared a very strong opinion on the subject. She stressed that “friendship” and “social media” are two aspects that for her are not intrinsically linked. She mentioned that:

To be someone’s friend I have to be with the person, to know the person...being friends at a distance is not friendship for me. Maybe I’m a bit old-fashioned...about these things, but for me friendship is to live with the person, to know the person, to be with the person, because even being with the person day after day and knowing them minimally, many times you never really create friendship. I think that at a distance you can make it easier, and I believe that many people do. They’ll be acquaintances at most...friends, I don’t think so, I think it’s very strong. (1st FG, Antónia, 63)

It is easy to note that the other grandmother, Sofia, takes a similar line of thought. Despite not being a user of social media, she also recognised the importance they have in the new ways of communicating and in the new dynamics of meeting people. In line with her grandson, she states that social media are no substitute for meeting people in person, stressing that:

Digital networks make contact much easier, but I think that physical contact, talking, looking at a friend who is present, without a doubt the human being is a being of affection. And, as he [the human being] is a being of affection, he doesn’t lose, even with the digital medium, this feeling....Because even when we touch an animal, moving our hand over the animal’s fur, we relax. We feel that there is a contact there, that there is a caress, that there is affection. (2nd FG, Sofia, 73)

She also adds that:

This is very important and we must not forget that. Despite the great evolution of all the new technologies, all of this, we must not forget this part that the human being needs and will continue to need throughout humanity [human contact, touch, and presence]. (2nd FG, Sofia, 73)

For those that already lived in digital environments, the pandemic only raised their importance. As previously referred, the three female participants were low users of digital environments before the pandemic. On the contrary, Rui—highly skilled—says that the pandemic context only contributed to increasing his use of social networks and exploring new ones, namely TikTok. Concerning what he likes the most about social media, he points out interactivity and the fact that they allow people to overcome the barriers of time and space as the main reasons for people’s amazement with social media. However, he recognises that they are no substitute for the presence and physical contact with others.

In regard to social media presence, Rui also refers to the issue of fabricated online personas. He believes that these are frequently forged as a mask for social media networks, rarely corresponding to reality, being many times the result of illusion and the fascination with the digital world. About this, he states that:

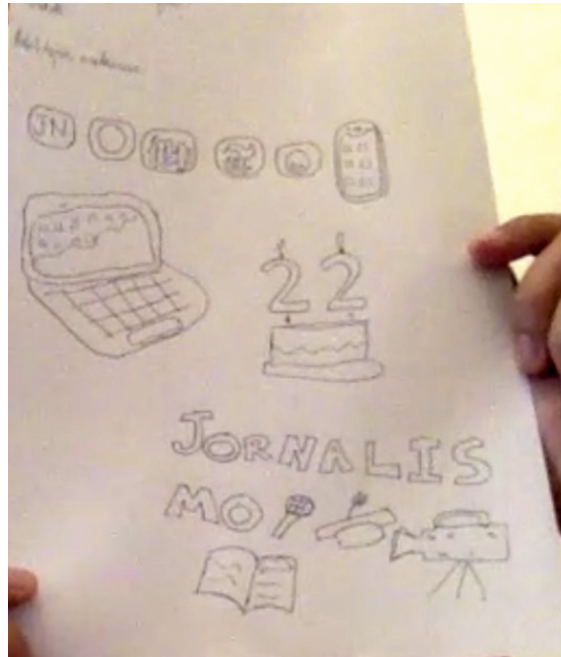
When they [people] are fascinated by the online [medium], fascinated by the digital [world] and create a persona only in the digital [world], they lose contact with the natural, with the organic and, in the end, we are made of flesh and blood, we are not made of zeros and ones. (2nd FG, Rui, 22)

News consumption, fake news, and its meaning, as previously highlighted, proved to be complex issues for the granddaughter, Ana. However, it was interesting to notice that, despite not being able to verbalise what she understood by “fake news,” the granddaughter was able to associate examples that she was confronted with in the media, namely empty supermarket shelves and the unbridled rush to the malls that this piece of news triggered. Antónia, in turn, mentioned that during the most critical phases of the pandemic she encountered false news and misinformation in various media, especially on television, and felt confused—never deceived. However, and despite suggesting that it is important to question, she thinks that sometimes people become too confused and have too many doubts. Especially those who consume more information, like her husband.

### 5.4. *Covid-19 Changed How People Communicate*

Rui and Sofia, considering the pandemic context, believe technologies have changed the way people communicate. From their point of view, people came to value the potential of the digital medium more as well as the immediacy that media contact allows, and there is no way back from this evolution. In addition, Sofia shares that this proximity and greater use of the media has also been important for people to have more access to diversified information and different means of communication. She mentions, for instance, the possibility of consulting health specialists located abroad and joining group consultations with people from other countries. She adds





**Figure 2.** Rui’s (22) drawings on his (digital) media preferences. Note: The text in the drawing reads “journalism.”

that, in her opinion, it is possible to combine both worlds and the links created. As far as information consumption and research are concerned, both the grandmother and grandson refer to consuming information essentially from media that they consider being “of reference.”

They do it, however, through different channels. Sofia refers to finding information in newspapers and on television, while her grandson uses the computer and the smartphone—as Figure 2 shows—especially the applications of the media he favours. Rui also mentions occasionally clicking on the news he finds on social media, namely Facebook. When asked what “news” means to them, both say it is the information that reaches them through any medium.

## 6. Final Notes and Future Perspectives

The research conducted within the scope of the SMART-EU project allowed for a reflection on a set of aspects in light of the present social context deeply affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Firstly, and from a methodological perspective, it allowed us to understand that by placing grandparents and grandchildren side by side in a joint reflection on their media habits and practices, on the impacts of information disorders, and the pandemic itself on these habits, it was possible to promote an environment of reflexivity on their practices, of sharing and intergenerational exchange of knowledge and experiences. Particularly, and in line with the literature (Amaral & Brites, 2019; Patrício & Osório, 2015, 2016), the intergenerational approach contributed to bridging the generational gaps and encouraging practices anchored in media literacy, while serving as a strategy to span the intergenerational digital divide as

well. Although the OIFGs’ results show that grandparents and grandchildren were already in the habit of using mobile media to communicate—namely through messaging applications such as WhatsApp—it became apparent that these practices intensified during quarantine periods and did not disappear with the easing of physical contact restrictions. The reports, especially from the older participants, show that they found in these media a way to keep in touch more regularly, to follow the growth and life events of their loved ones more closely. This is one of the most positive aspects they point out and value the most in the use of mobile media. The younger participants also mention it, further stating that, in addition to family, digital media was also important to maintain and nurture friendship relationships with peers—not, however, something new to their routines. In contrast, grandmothers believe friendship is lived and built in the physical world, through direct contact between individuals.

From an age perspective, the data collected in the FGs shows that the complexity of some topics hinders the active involvement of the younger participants and even affects their motivation during the sessions. The young child who participated in the first OIFG mentioned that she had access to social media through her parents (particularly TikTok), and also that television and even print media were part of the family routine of news consumption. However, the concept of “news” and “fake news” was something she was not familiar with, which may be related to the fact that her media consumption focuses on entertainment and that she is not an independent media consumer and user (her practices are usually supervised by an adult). As for the remaining participants, the two grandmothers and the grandson report having felt a more marked presence of fake

news from the media where they consume information—either digital (e.g., social media) or traditional (e.g., television). These aspects have bound them to develop (and improve) information research and analysis skills. In the case of the grandson, being an undergraduate journalism student, these skills were partially acquired within his academic training. In the case of the grandmothers, their discourses suggest that these skills were gradually developed in a self-taught way, and very much motivated by curiosity and questioning provoked by the information war.

As for the online participatory approach, the OIFGs show that the use of digital platforms allowed the research team to reach grandparents and grandchildren in times of social restrictions. It was also evident throughout the OIFGs that, by switching to an online model it was possible to promote rich context-based dialogue and moments of co-cooperation and co-learning. During the sessions, participants were in direct contact with the tools and were actually working in the environment that was the focus of the discussions, something that proved to contribute to a proper mindset and to ensure that people with digital competencies and others with low literacy levels had the opportunity to explore new tools, environments, and subjects, through learning-by-doing and contextualised exchange of experiences. As an example, Antonia (63) learned during the sessions with her granddaughter (Ana, 7) how to use Zoom and how to activate and deactivate the sound of the application; Sofia (73) reflected during the OIFG with her grandson (Rui, 22) on her own relationship with digital media and on everything she had learned about them with Rui's support.

Even though the shift to the digital environment was crucial for the project to continue, it is important to underline the challenges that arose from this change in the environment. Regarding the OIFGs, the aspect that became more evident was the difficulty in recruiting participants willing to meet through digital media to participate in discussions related to media literacy and digital tools and environments. Other challenges also arose. By moving from the offline to the online environment, the team had to deal with a series of technical challenges and issues such as poor internet connection, lack of devices, and demanding technical conditions. These constraints were persistent and made the sessions last longer than expected, with several interruptions throughout them.

## 7. Perspectives Drawn From the Fieldwork

Conducting OIFGs in several countries allows for comparative studies, without ignoring the specificities of each context. This is a line of research to be explored and which will allow an understanding of similarities and differences. Our study shows that intrafamilial exchanges across generations have the potential to promote dialogical lifelong learning opportunities related to media and digital platforms. Future research can incorporate

FGs with people of various generations and with different intrafamilial relations, in order to understand the complexity of dynamics in the use of media and digital platforms.

Another aspect that can be a valid contribution of OIFG is that their results can contribute to improving other methods used in research projects, namely those conducted in different educational settings. In the case of the SMaRT-EU project, the results of the OIFG and the feedback obtained from families were taken into consideration both to improve the contents of the presentations used in the intergenerational workshops and to design a set of online materials aimed at older people that were made available in the last phase of the project.

In future research, it will also be essential to conduct intergenerational FGs with people from different social classes, racial-ethnic belonging, and genders, and to allow a much-needed intersectional approach. Understanding how situations of oppression or privilege impact the dynamics related to the use of media and digital platforms is crucial to developing digital and media literacy strategies better adjusted to distinct social realities.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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