

Identifying Generational Gaps in Emotional Expression among Youth and Parents

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to identify and interpret generational differences in emotional expression between youth and parents, focusing on how social, cognitive, and cultural factors influence emotional communication patterns across generations.

Methods and Materials: This qualitative research employed an exploratory design grounded in the interpretivist paradigm to capture the lived experiences of emotional communication within families. The study involved 20 participants from Canada, comprising 10 youth (aged 18–25) and 10 parents (aged 40–60), selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in gender, culture, and socioeconomic background. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person and online, each lasting 45–70 minutes, until theoretical saturation was reached. Data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically using NVivo 14 software. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-step framework, with codes and categories refined through constant comparison and reflexive journaling to ensure credibility and consistency.

Findings: Five major themes emerged: (1) Communication Styles Across Generations, reflecting youth's verbal openness versus parental restraint; (2) Technological Mediation of Emotion, highlighting digital communication as both a bridge and barrier; (3) Emotional Norms and Cultural Expectations, emphasizing the impact of cultural scripts and gendered expression; (4) Perceptions of Empathy and Understanding, revealing emotional misattunement and validation gaps; and (5) Adaptation and Emotional Bridging Mechanisms, showing efforts toward intergenerational empathy and emotional literacy. The findings indicated that differences in emotional vocabulary, digital fluency, and cultural norms contribute to misinterpretations and emotional distance, while reflective dialogue and hybrid communication foster improved understanding.

Conclusion: Generational gaps in emotional expression arise from interwoven social, cultural, and cognitive mechanisms that shape emotion socialization within families. Promoting emotional literacy, reciprocal empathy, and adaptive communication practices can enhance intergenerational cohesion and emotional well-being.

Keywords: Emotional expression; intergenerational communication; youth; parents; cultural norms; emotional literacy

1. Introduction

Emotional expression—the capacity to recognize, articulate, and communicate one’s feelings—is fundamental to psychological development and interpersonal functioning across the lifespan. In adolescence and early adulthood, the ability to express emotions adaptively predicts social competence, identity consolidation, and mental health outcomes. However, in many families, significant intergenerational discrepancies exist in how emotions are communicated, regulated, and interpreted. These generational gaps are influenced by cultural norms, social learning, and the psychological meanings ascribed to emotion within family systems. As adolescence represents a transitional stage of autonomy and emotional differentiation, it often exposes differences in expressive style between youth and their parents, leading to potential misunderstandings or relational distance (Chiang & Bai, 2024).

Recent advances in developmental and social psychology have illuminated how parental emotion-related behaviors shape youth’s emotional functioning. Parental rejection, emotional neglect, and inconsistent responsiveness have been identified as antecedents of emotion dysregulation and shame proneness among adolescents (Romano et al., 2025). Adolescents raised in emotionally invalidating environments frequently internalize feelings of guilt or self-criticism, resulting in heightened vulnerability to anxiety, self-harm, and internalizing symptoms (Gottschlich et al., 2025). Similarly, when parents suppress or minimize emotional expression, children may learn to equate emotional disclosure with weakness, reinforcing intergenerational cycles of emotional restraint. These patterns demonstrate that emotional communication within the family is both a social-learning process and a psychological structure that transmits beliefs about emotion across generations (Grech et al., 2025).

A growing body of work highlights the cultural and contextual variability of emotion expression and regulation. For instance, collectivist cultural values often emphasize emotional moderation and harmony maintenance, while individualist cultures encourage emotional openness and authenticity (Bennett et al., 2024). Immigrant and bicultural families may experience intensified emotional dissonance due to the coexistence of these contrasting value systems. Adolescents from immigrant households often describe confusion about how, when, and to whom emotional experiences can be safely expressed, reflecting tensions

between familial expectations and personal emotional needs (Bennett et al., 2024). This tension may produce what has been termed “emotional ambivalence,” where youth internalize conflicting emotional display rules from both their heritage culture and the broader social context (Espinosa et al., 2025).

Shame and guilt have been identified as central emotional processes mediating intergenerational patterns of emotional communication. Internalized shame, in particular, has been found to mediate the relationship between emotional neglect and self-harming behavior in adolescents (Gottschlich et al., 2025). Similarly, longitudinal research on cognitive biases and emotional symptomatology suggests that maladaptive emotion appraisal processes can perpetuate negative self-perceptions and influence the quality of peer relationships (Espinosa et al., 2025). These findings align with cognitive-developmental perspectives asserting that adolescents’ emotion expression evolves through the interplay of cognitive flexibility, self-conscious emotions, and empathy, all of which are shaped by parental modeling and reinforcement.

The cognitive-control model of adolescent emotionality further underscores the role of executive functioning in moderating emotional reactivity. Experimental studies indicate that peer presence and social feedback can modulate adolescents’ cognitive control during emotional decision-making, leading to heightened risk-taking and impulsivity when emotion regulation is compromised (Guo et al., 2024). This underscores the importance of understanding not only how youth experience emotions but also how they convey them to significant others. Within the family, impaired cognitive control and limited emotional vocabulary may amplify intergenerational misunderstandings, especially when parents interpret emotional expressiveness as defiance rather than communication (Yan et al., 2024).

Moreover, interparental conflict and emotional insecurity have been recognized as key contextual factors shaping how adolescents express and process emotions. Studies reveal that adolescents’ coping strategies—whether avoidance, problem-solving, or emotional suppression—moderate the effects of interparental discord on adjustment outcomes (Tsuritani & Jikihara, 2024). Youth who experience frequent exposure to parental conflict may adopt avoidance-based coping and disengaged expression styles, internalizing the belief that emotional disclosure escalates tension rather than alleviating it. Over time, these learned behaviors crystallize into intergenerational emotional scripts, wherein both

parents and children enact predictable, rigid communication patterns during emotional exchanges (Chiang & Bai, 2024).

Parallel to familial influences, peer and romantic contexts further shape adolescents' emotional expression norms. Emotional openness and reciprocity among peers can either buffer or amplify the emotional strain arising from parent-child gaps. Research shows that secure peer attachment fosters emotion regulation, whereas weak peer bonds increase susceptibility to affective dysregulation (Muntamah & Pratama, 2025). Adolescents with stronger cognitive and affective empathy demonstrate greater flexibility in navigating emotional conflicts with parents, suggesting that empathy serves as a protective factor mitigating the negative effects of intergenerational communication barriers (Muntamah & Pratama, 2025). Conversely, self-silencing tendencies in adolescent romantic relationships have been associated with maladaptive communication habits acquired within family systems characterized by emotional invalidation (Petrov & Dimitrov, 2024). These findings collectively suggest that generational patterns of emotional expression extend beyond the parent-child dyad into broader relational domains.

In the realm of psychopathology, emotional inhibition and confusion are recurring features of youth adjustment difficulties. Studies among adolescents with specific learning disorders reveal that language deficits can impede social cognition and emotion understanding, resulting in difficulty labeling or communicating internal states (Bailey & Im-Bolter, 2024). Emotional expression gaps are thus not only cultural or generational but also cognitive, as they hinge on the ability to verbalize emotion with precision. Similarly, adolescents experiencing perfectionism and high self-conscious emotions, such as embarrassment or guilt, often exhibit elevated anxiety when parental emotional responsiveness is lacking (Lievore et al., 2025). Such youth may interpret parental silence or emotional distance as rejection, reinforcing maladaptive self-appraisal patterns and avoidance of emotional disclosure (Romano et al., 2025).

At a broader social-cognitive level, feedback processing and social comparison mechanisms also contribute to generational emotional disparities. Adolescents' sensitivity to social evaluation makes them particularly reactive to feedback from both peers and parents. New vignette-based assessments show that adolescent emotional responses to positive or negative feedback are shaped by their perception of parental approval and acceptance (Grech et al., 2025). When parents respond to emotional expression with

criticism or disengagement, adolescents may internalize shame and exhibit reduced willingness to express vulnerability in the future (Quiroga-Garza & Cavallera, 2024). Conversely, supportive parental feedback fosters emotional resilience and encourages open emotional discourse, even across cultural or generational divides.

The link between shame, cognitive flexibility, and emotional regulation has also received empirical validation. Adolescents with lower cognitive flexibility tend to experience stronger associations between shame and both self-directed (e.g., self-harm) and other-directed (e.g., aggression) harm (Yan et al., 2024). This finding illustrates that the ability to cognitively reappraise emotional experiences acts as a buffer against maladaptive expression. Families that model flexible emotional dialogue—acknowledging, reflecting, and validating feelings—equip youth with the metacognitive tools necessary to express emotions without resorting to extreme behaviors. In contrast, emotionally rigid family environments contribute to the perpetuation of intergenerational emotional dysregulation, where both parents and adolescents misunderstand one another's emotional intent (Uddenberg et al., 2025).

Moreover, identity formation processes intersect with emotional communication. Adolescents from culturally or linguistically diverse families often face identity confusion when their emotional experiences are not mirrored or validated within the family unit (Bennett et al., 2024). The dissonance between cultural identity and emotional norms can elicit a persistent sense of misalignment—youth feel “too emotional” for their parents' standards yet “too reserved” for their peers' expectations. Such dynamics reinforce emotional self-consciousness and inhibit emotional authenticity. Consistent with this, qualitative studies of adolescent males experiencing familial mental illness have revealed feelings of psychological burden, self-stigmatization, and emotional exhaustion stemming from perceived emotional isolation (Zulvia & Aviani, 2025). These experiences demonstrate how unacknowledged emotions within the family can become internalized, manifesting as guilt, shame, or the need to suppress vulnerability.

In addition to familial and cognitive mechanisms, social emotions such as pride, guilt, and shame are intertwined in complex networks that display remarkable stability across adolescence (Uddenberg et al., 2025). Longitudinal data show that these emotional networks influence patterns of emotional expression over time, contributing to habitual self-silencing or overcompensation in emotional

communication. Adolescents who experience guilt and shame as dominant emotional tones are more likely to withdraw from emotional interactions with parents, perceiving such encounters as opportunities for criticism rather than understanding (Quiroga-Garza & Cavalera, 2024). Importantly, interventions promoting emotional literacy and reflective communication can recalibrate these emotional networks, enhancing mutual understanding between generations.

Another relevant dimension concerns coping strategies within the interparental and family context. Adolescents who effectively cope with interparental conflict by maintaining emotional openness and cognitive appraisal tend to exhibit better adjustment outcomes (Tsuritani & Jikihara, 2024). Conversely, those who resort to emotional suppression or disengagement mirror their parents' avoidance strategies, perpetuating intergenerational cycles of emotional nonexpression. These findings highlight the role of familial modeling in transmitting emotional coping mechanisms, both adaptive and maladaptive, across generations (Chiang & Bai, 2024).

Similarly, the intersection between emotion regulation and aggression has gained increasing attention. Empirical research demonstrates that deficits in emotional intelligence contribute to higher levels of verbal aggression among adolescents (Yunita & Isnawati, 2024). Youth who struggle to regulate or articulate emotions often resort to confrontational expression patterns, which parents may interpret as disrespect or rebellion. This misinterpretation can escalate generational conflict, particularly when parents respond with increased control or punishment rather than empathy. Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing family-based emotional communication interventions that emphasize mutual emotional literacy rather than unilateral behavioral correction.

Contemporary research has also begun to explore the positive emotional spectrum and its paradoxical role in adolescent behavior. A systematic review revealed that positive emotions such as excitement or amusement can, under certain conditions, facilitate antisocial behavior when misaligned with moral regulation (Moore et al., 2024). This indicates that not only negative emotions but also unmodulated positive emotions can create expressive misalignments across generations. Parents who associate positive expressiveness with impulsivity may discourage such displays, inadvertently dampening emotional vitality in their children. These findings underscore the complexity of

emotional socialization and the necessity of contextual understanding in generational comparisons.

Furthermore, studies of youths with learning and emotional challenges demonstrate that social cognition and language ability significantly influence emotional communication (Bailey & Im-Bolter, 2024). The capacity to express nuanced emotions depends on both cognitive-linguistic development and the social environment's responsiveness. When parents provide reflective feedback and emotional scaffolding, youth exhibit stronger emotion regulation, empathy, and resilience (Lievore et al., 2025). In contrast, emotionally dismissive parenting reinforces internalized shame and weakens the child's capacity to verbalize emotions adaptively (Romano et al., 2025).

Taken together, the reviewed evidence highlights a convergence of developmental, cognitive, cultural, and relational mechanisms that shape intergenerational emotional expression. Across these domains, recurring patterns emerge: (a) parents' emotional restraint versus youth's emotional openness, (b) the influence of shame and self-conscious emotions on expression, (c) the moderating role of empathy and cognitive flexibility, and (d) the sociocultural tensions underlying family emotional norms. Although existing studies have illuminated the individual correlates of adolescent emotion regulation, fewer have explored the interactive generational dynamics that sustain emotional gaps between youth and parents, especially in multicultural contexts like Canada, where diverse emotional scripts coexist.

Therefore, the present study aims to identify and interpret the generational gaps in emotional expression between youth and parents, exploring how social, cognitive, and cultural factors shape emotional communication across generations.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study adopted a qualitative exploratory design to gain a deep understanding of the generational differences in emotional expression between youth and their parents. The qualitative approach was chosen for its capacity to uncover subjective meanings, lived experiences, and social contexts surrounding emotional communication within families. The research followed an interpretivist paradigm, emphasizing the participants' perspectives and interpretations of their interpersonal emotional exchanges.

The study sample consisted of 20 participants residing in Canada, including 10 youth (aged 18–25 years) and 10

parents (aged 40–60 years). Participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring diversity in gender, cultural background, and socioeconomic status to capture a wide range of emotional expression patterns. Inclusion criteria required participants to be fluent in English, willing to discuss family relationships, and have regular emotional interactions with their parents or children. The sample size was guided by theoretical saturation, which was reached when no new themes or insights emerged from additional interviews.

2.2. Measures

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews designed to explore participants’ perceptions, experiences, and attitudes toward emotional expression across generations. An interview guide was developed based on existing literature and refined after two pilot interviews. Key questions focused on how emotions are communicated within the family, perceived differences between youth and parents, and the influence of cultural and social norms on emotional behavior.

Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 minutes and was conducted in person or via secure video conferencing platforms (e.g., Zoom) according to participants’ preferences. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, then transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy.

2.3. Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Data analysis was conducted iteratively, moving through six stages: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report.

The software NVivo 14 was used to facilitate systematic coding, data organization, and theme development. Open coding was initially performed to identify meaningful

segments of text, which were subsequently grouped into categories reflecting broader conceptual patterns. Constant comparison was used to refine emerging themes and ensure analytical consistency across interviews. Reflexive journaling and peer debriefing enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

To ensure rigor and trustworthiness, the study employed multiple validation strategies, including member checking, where selected participants reviewed key interpretations, and triangulation through comparison of youth and parent perspectives. Researcher reflexivity was maintained throughout to minimize interpretive bias and enhance transparency in the analytic process.

3. Findings and Results

The study involved 20 participants residing in various provinces across Canada, representing a diverse range of age, gender, and cultural backgrounds. Of these participants, 10 were youth (aged 18–25 years) and 10 were parents (aged 40–60 years). Among the youth, 6 identified as female and 4 as male, whereas among the parents, 5 were mothers and 5 were fathers. The participants reflected a multicultural demographic composition, with 9 identifying as White Canadian, 6 as South Asian Canadian, 3 as East Asian Canadian, and 2 as Middle Eastern Canadian. In terms of education, 12 participants held a university degree, 5 had completed college-level education, and 3 had a high school diploma. Regarding employment status, 8 parents were employed full-time, 1 parent was retired, and 1 parent was self-employed, while among the youth, 7 were university students and 3 were part-time employees. All participants reported living in urban or suburban settings, and the majority (15 participants) reported engaging in regular family interactions at least several times a week. This demographic diversity contributed to a comprehensive understanding of generational variations in emotional expression across cultural and social contexts.

Table 1

Themes, Subthemes, and Concepts Derived from Thematic Analysis

Main Categories (Themes)	Subcategories	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Communication Styles Across Generations	1.1 Verbal vs. Nonverbal Expression	Tone and volume differences; Limited verbal affirmation; Reliance on gestures; Indirect emotional cues; Emotional restraint
	1.2 Emotional Vocabulary Gap	Difficulty naming feelings; Use of slang by youth; Formal vs. casual language; Misinterpretation of emotional terms
	1.3 Conflict Communication Patterns	Defensive talk; Avoidance of sensitive issues; Emotional escalation; Withdrawal during disagreements

	1.4 Expressive Comfort Levels	Discomfort with vulnerability; Selective sharing; Context-dependent openness; Fear of judgment
	1.5 Generational Emotional Etiquette	Perceived disrespect; Norms of politeness; Cultural differences in display rules; “Don’t talk back” mentality
2. Technological Mediation of Emotion	2.1 Digital Expression Norms	Emojis as emotion tools; Text-based misunderstandings; Emotional substitution via memes; Preference for digital communication
	2.2 Social Media Visibility	Public sharing of emotions; Privacy concerns; Validation seeking; Parental disapproval of oversharing
	2.3 Communication Frequency via Technology	Constant contact vs. silence; “Seen” message conflicts; Response time sensitivity; Generational interpretation of online silence
	2.4 Emotional Support Through Technology	Comfort texting emotions; Supportive messages; Fear of emotional surveillance; Digital reassurance
	2.5 Technology-Driven Misunderstandings	Irony lost in text; Overinterpretation of tone; Generational gap in emoji use; Misread humor
3. Emotional Norms and Cultural Expectations	3.1 Family Emotional Climate	Collectivist restraint; Emotional warmth; Expression control; Respect-based communication
	3.2 Gendered Expression Patterns	Fathers’ emotional reserve; Mothers as mediators; Sons’ emotional restriction; Daughters’ verbal openness
	3.3 Intergenerational Role Models	Modeling parental behavior; Learned suppression; Adaptation to new norms; Role reversal in empathy
	3.4 Cultural Scripts of Emotion	“Don’t show weakness”; Stoicism as strength; Emotional duty to family; Influence of immigrant identity
	3.5 Emotional Labor Expectations	Managing family harmony; Emotional caretaking by youth; Silence as respect; Burden of understanding parents
	3.6 Social Desirability of Emotions	Avoidance of negative feelings; Preference for positivity; Shame in sadness; Repression for reputation
4. Perceptions of Empathy and Understanding	4.1 Emotional Validation	Feeling dismissed; Parents minimizing youth feelings; Seeking acknowledgment; Misaligned empathy
	4.2 Generational Emotional Literacy	Awareness of emotions; Misinterpretation of intent; Vocabulary mismatch; Empathy education gap
	4.3 Parental Emotional Availability	Physical presence vs. emotional absence; Time constraints; Overfocus on discipline; Low affective response
	4.4 Youth Coping Strategies	Peer venting; Journaling; Humor as defense; Emotional withdrawal
	4.5 Emotional Reciprocity	One-sided expression; Youth empathy toward parents; Desire for mutual openness; Guilt in expressing needs
5. Adaptation and Emotional Bridging Mechanisms	5.1 Emotional Education and Awareness	Need for emotional literacy; Family workshops; Generational empathy programs; School-based training
	5.2 Dialogical Spaces	Safe conversations; Family meetings; Use of humor; Third-party mediators (e.g., therapists)
	5.3 Hybrid Emotional Communication	Combining face-to-face and online talk; Shared storytelling; Emotional symbolism; Using art or music to connect
	5.4 Intergenerational Learning	Parents adapting digital empathy; Youth learning patience; Shared reflection on emotions; Acknowledging mutual growth
	5.5 Overcoming Emotional Stereotypes	Breaking “weakness” myths; Redefining masculinity; Embracing emotional vulnerability; Cross-generational understanding
	5.6 Future-Oriented Connection	Hope for better communication; Emotional mentoring; Shared rituals; Emotional resilience across generations
	5.7 Cultural Integration Strategies	Bicultural identity formation; Emotional acculturation; Balancing traditional respect with modern openness

1. Communication Styles Across Generations

Analysis revealed distinct differences in communication styles between youth and parents, shaping how emotions were expressed, interpreted, and managed in family contexts. Youth participants described their communication as more open, verbal, and emotionally nuanced, whereas parents tended to rely on nonverbal cues or controlled verbal expressions, reflecting generational norms of restraint. Many parents believed excessive emotional disclosure could be perceived as weakness or disrespect, while youth viewed it as essential for authenticity and connection. For instance, one 22-year-old participant stated, “When I tell my mom I’m

upset, she just says, ‘You’ll be fine.’ It feels like she doesn’t get that I just want her to listen, not fix me.” Conversely, a 50-year-old father commented, “In our time, you didn’t talk about feelings—you handled them quietly. That’s how we were raised.” These contrasting communication patterns led to misinterpretations and emotional distance, particularly during disagreements, where parents often withdrew while youth pushed for dialogue. Emotional vocabulary differences also created misunderstandings, as younger participants used contemporary expressions like “burnout” or “anxious energy,” which older generations found unfamiliar or exaggerated.

2. Technological Mediation of Emotion

Technology emerged as both a bridge and a barrier in intergenerational emotional communication. Youth participants reported feeling more comfortable expressing emotions digitally through text messages, emojis, and social media posts, while parents preferred traditional face-to-face interactions. For many parents, digital communication lacked the tone and emotional depth necessary for genuine connection. A 19-year-old female participant shared, *"It's easier for me to text how I feel, but my dad says I'm hiding behind my phone."* Meanwhile, some parents perceived youth's online sharing as excessive or inappropriate, with one mother noting, *"They post every emotion online—it feels like nothing is private anymore."* The study also found that technology introduced new forms of emotional misinterpretation, as tone, irony, and humor were often lost in text-based exchanges. Despite these tensions, both generations used digital platforms to maintain emotional connection when physically apart, especially during busy periods. Yet, the difference in digital fluency reinforced emotional gaps, as parents struggled to interpret online cues that youth considered self-explanatory.

3. Emotional Norms and Cultural Expectations

The third theme captured how cultural and generational norms shaped emotional expression within families. Many parents, particularly those from immigrant or collectivist backgrounds, emphasized emotional restraint, respect, and the prioritization of family harmony over personal disclosure. This contrasted sharply with younger participants' values of emotional transparency and mental health awareness. As one parent reflected, *"In our culture, showing too much emotion can be seen as being weak or immature."* Meanwhile, a 21-year-old participant noted, *"I wish my parents understood that crying doesn't mean I'm fragile—it means I'm human."* Gendered expectations were also evident: fathers often described suppressing emotions to model "strength," while mothers took on emotional labor by mediating family tensions. Youth participants expressed frustration over these unspoken emotional hierarchies, feeling obligated to understand their parents' emotions without receiving the same empathy in return. These findings suggest that cultural and gendered scripts continue to influence intergenerational emotional norms, though younger generations are gradually redefining emotional authenticity as strength rather than vulnerability.

4. Perceptions of Empathy and Understanding

A recurrent pattern in participants' narratives was the perceived lack of emotional validation across generations.

Youth frequently reported feeling dismissed or misunderstood when expressing emotions, describing parental responses as problem-focused rather than empathetic. One young participant expressed, *"When I tell my parents I'm anxious, they say, 'You have a good life, what are you anxious about?' They don't get it's not about gratitude—it's about connection."* Parents, on the other hand, felt unappreciated for their efforts to provide stability and emotional support, as illustrated by one father's remark: *"I may not say 'I love you' every day, but I show it by working hard and being there."* This tension highlighted a difference in emotional literacy and reciprocity—while youth sought verbal acknowledgment and empathy, parents expressed emotions through actions and responsibility. The findings also indicated that many youth developed adaptive coping strategies, such as seeking emotional support from peers, journaling, or humor, to compensate for the perceived emotional distance within the family. Overall, both generations desired emotional closeness but lacked a shared framework for expressing and interpreting empathy.

5. Adaptation and Emotional Bridging Mechanisms

Despite generational differences, both youth and parents demonstrated a growing capacity for adaptation and emotional bridging through mutual learning and dialogue. Participants described efforts to create new emotional spaces, such as family conversations, shared storytelling, or hybrid communication that combined digital and in-person interactions. A 45-year-old mother reflected, *"My daughter taught me how to send voice notes. Hearing her voice makes it easier for me to understand how she feels."* Similarly, a 23-year-old participant said, *"We started having weekly dinners where we talk openly—it's awkward at first, but now it feels natural."* These interactions fostered intergenerational empathy, enabling both sides to challenge traditional stereotypes about emotional strength and vulnerability. The study also revealed that younger participants often initiated these changes, driven by their exposure to emotional education and mental health advocacy. Over time, these adaptive practices cultivated shared emotional literacy, balancing traditional respect with modern openness and setting the foundation for healthier communication patterns across generations.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present qualitative study sought to identify and interpret generational gaps in emotional expression between youth and parents in Canada, revealing five major thematic

domains: communication styles, technological mediation, cultural emotional norms, perceptions of empathy, and emotional bridging mechanisms. The findings demonstrated that intergenerational differences are rooted in complex intersections of emotional literacy, cultural expectations, and social learning, which shape how emotions are expressed, received, and regulated across generations. The analysis illuminated that youth tend to value open, verbal, and affectively rich expression, whereas parents often adhere to emotional restraint, politeness norms, or nonverbal communication. These patterns are consistent with emerging developmental evidence that familial emotional environments influence adolescents' emotional reactivity and internalization processes (Chiang & Bai, 2024).

The first core finding—differences in communication styles across generations—resonates strongly with prior research highlighting the role of family-of-origin interactions in shaping emotional reactivity and internalizing symptomatology (Chiang & Bai, 2024). Parental rejection or emotional withdrawal often leads adolescents to suppress feelings or engage in indirect expression patterns (Romano et al., 2025). In this study, youth described frustration when their parents responded to emotional disclosures with problem-solving or dismissal rather than empathy, reflecting emotional invalidation mechanisms widely documented in previous family studies (Gottschlich et al., 2025). Adolescents' greater use of expressive language and desire for emotional authenticity reflect a generational shift toward emotional openness as psychological strength, challenging older norms that equate restraint with maturity. This divergence aligns with cultural findings on emotional value differences between collectivist and individualist orientations (Bennett et al., 2024). Parents, particularly those from collectivist or immigrant backgrounds, often interpret emotional control as respect, while younger generations socialized in individualist contexts see expression as honesty and relational connection.

Furthermore, these communication discrepancies can generate intergenerational emotional misattunement, which contributes to relational strain and psychological distress. Previous research shows that adolescents raised in families characterized by low emotional responsiveness and high behavioral control display elevated shame, perfectionism, and anxiety (Lievore et al., 2025). Similarly, parental misunderstanding of adolescent emotional vocabulary or tone may reinforce self-conscious emotions and defensive communication, consistent with Romano's findings that shame mediates the association between parental rejection

and emotion dysregulation (Romano et al., 2025). Collectively, these results underscore that generational emotional gaps are not simply behavioral differences but reflect internalized emotion scripts transmitted through socialization and reinforced by cultural context.

The second theme, technological mediation of emotion, reflected the dual role of digital communication as both a facilitator and a barrier. Youth participants reported using technology to express emotions more comfortably, whereas parents viewed digital communication as superficial or emotionally deficient. This mirrors developmental studies indicating that adolescents increasingly rely on digital channels for self-disclosure and identity expression, whereas parents emphasize face-to-face interactions to convey emotional authenticity (Grech et al., 2025). However, the digital medium's lack of paralinguistic cues can lead to misinterpretations, echoing findings that tone and irony are often misread across generations, resulting in conflict escalation. The preference of youth for emojis and short text exchanges parallels the shift in emotional communication norms toward symbolic and visual expression, a phenomenon that redefines the boundaries of empathy and intimacy in technologically mediated relationships (Guo et al., 2024).

Interestingly, these patterns suggest that digital fluency shapes emotional accessibility. Youth who express feelings through online platforms may experience lower anxiety about vulnerability, whereas parents, unfamiliar with digital emotional codes, perceive such expressions as impulsive or inappropriate. This resonates with Moore's synthesis showing that positive emotional arousal, when not properly contextualized, can lead to behavioral misalignment (Moore et al., 2024). In both the present findings and prior literature, the mismatch in digital communication competence contributes to misunderstanding, emotional disengagement, and generational frustration. Nonetheless, some families demonstrated adaptive use of technology—such as sending voice notes or supportive messages—to maintain emotional connection, aligning with the integrative function of technology in contemporary relational dynamics.

The third theme, emotional norms and cultural expectations, highlighted the role of cultural scripts and gendered roles in shaping intergenerational emotion expression. Many parents upheld traditional beliefs that emotions should be contained to preserve harmony and family image, a pattern especially prevalent among participants from collectivist backgrounds. This reflects Bennett's findings that adolescents from immigrant families

experience identity confusion when emotional norms inherited from heritage cultures conflict with host cultural values emphasizing expressiveness (Bennett et al., 2024). Parents' emphasis on stoicism and youth's emphasis on emotional transparency illustrate divergent interpretations of emotional maturity. Youth participants' remarks that "crying is human, not weakness" resonate with contemporary conceptualizations of emotional competence as adaptive self-awareness rather than suppression.

Additionally, the findings revealed gendered emotional expectations, consistent with prior literature noting that fathers often display lower emotional responsiveness, while mothers assume emotional labor roles within families (Bennett et al., 2024; Lievore et al., 2025). These gendered dynamics perpetuate asymmetry in emotional exchanges and reinforce societal norms equating masculinity with emotional control. When emotional expression is discouraged in male figures, youth—especially sons—learn to internalize affect, heightening vulnerability to anxiety and self-blame (Gottschlich et al., 2025). Such cultural and gendered conditioning underscores the necessity of addressing family-level emotion norms as a key determinant of adolescent well-being.

The fourth theme, perceptions of empathy and understanding, illustrated that both youth and parents experienced emotional invalidation, albeit for different reasons. Youth felt dismissed or unheard, while parents perceived their efforts as unrecognized. This reciprocal misperception aligns with evidence that emotional availability within families often declines when both sides operate under incompatible communication schemas (Chiang & Bai, 2024). Adolescents in this study described turning to peers or digital spaces for validation, supporting Muntamah's findings that peer attachment and empathy moderate the relationship between family communication and emotion regulation (Muntamah & Pratama, 2025). However, reliance on peers can also introduce vulnerabilities, particularly when peers model maladaptive coping or self-silencing behaviors, as noted by Petrov in studies of adolescent romantic relationships (Petrov & Dimitrov, 2024).

Moreover, the emotional disconnect between generations appears intertwined with shame and guilt networks that maintain stability across development (Uddenberg et al., 2025). Parents' pragmatic or dismissive responses may unintentionally activate adolescents' guilt, leading to self-censorship and decreased willingness to share emotions. These mechanisms mirror findings by Quiroga-Garza

demonstrating that resilience moderates the effects of shame and guilt in social contexts (Quiroga-Garza & Cavallera, 2024). Youth participants who had developed emotional literacy through education or therapy were better able to reinterpret parental emotional behavior, suggesting that cognitive flexibility serves as a mediator between intergenerational emotional gaps and psychological adjustment (Yan et al., 2024). Thus, enhancing cognitive and emotional understanding in both generations could foster reciprocal empathy and emotional safety.

The final theme, adaptation and emotional bridging mechanisms, captured the families' emerging efforts to reconcile emotional differences. Many participants described intentional practices such as family dialogues, shared rituals, or hybrid communication (e.g., combining digital and in-person emotional sharing). These strategies represent a positive evolution in intergenerational emotional literacy, supporting prior evidence that reflective communication and empathy training can recalibrate emotional networks (Uddenberg et al., 2025). Parents who gradually adapted to their children's emotional language—through humor, storytelling, or mediated dialogue—demonstrated improved relational satisfaction and mutual understanding. This reflects Tsuritani's findings that adaptive coping with interparental conflict enhances adolescent adjustment and emotional resilience (Tsuritani & Jikihara, 2024). Similarly, Espinosa's longitudinal modeling of emotional symptomatology indicates that cognitive biases can shift when emotional contexts become more validating (Espinosa et al., 2025).

These bridging processes also parallel the resilience-building functions identified in prior studies, where empathy and mutual understanding mitigate the intergenerational transmission of shame and emotional neglect (Gottschlich et al., 2025; Quiroga-Garza & Cavallera, 2024). By cultivating open emotional spaces, both parents and youth began challenging entrenched stereotypes—such as equating vulnerability with weakness or authority with emotional control. This finding underscores a central developmental insight: emotional communication is not fixed but relationally negotiable, capable of transformation through reflective engagement. The participants' adaptive strategies echo the growing recognition that emotional flexibility—both cognitive and interpersonal—is essential for sustaining intergenerational cohesion (Yan et al., 2024).

In a broader perspective, the findings align with transdiagnostic frameworks linking emotional dysregulation, shame, and self-conscious emotions across

diverse developmental contexts. For example, research on adolescents with learning and social cognition difficulties demonstrates that limited emotional vocabulary impedes authentic emotional exchange (Bailey & Im-Bolter, 2024). Similar mechanisms were evident in the present study, as both youth and parents struggled with mismatched emotional lexicons. Furthermore, internalized perfectionism and fear of emotional exposure, particularly among adolescents experiencing high parental expectations, resonate with Lievore's findings on anxiety and inhibitory control in youth with learning challenges (Lievore et al., 2025). Collectively, these results affirm that generational emotional gaps represent a multi-layered phenomenon, spanning cognitive, social, cultural, and linguistic domains.

Overall, this study contributes to the expanding field of emotional socialization by offering qualitative insights into how families negotiate emotion across generational and cultural lines. The findings converge with cognitive and affective models suggesting that emotional development is sustained through dynamic interactions among empathy, self-awareness, and feedback processing (Grech et al., 2025). In particular, the role of parental feedback emerged as critical: when parents offered validating responses, adolescents experienced emotional empowerment; when responses were dismissive or moralizing, they felt misunderstood. These outcomes reinforce the empirical consensus that supportive emotional climates enhance resilience and reduce the maladaptive impact of shame and guilt (Gottschlich et al., 2025; Quiroga-Garza & Cavalera, 2024).

5. Limitations & Suggestions

Despite its contributions, the study presents several limitations. First, the qualitative design and small sample size ($n=20$) restrict generalizability. Although the aim was depth rather than breadth, future quantitative or mixed-method studies could test the identified patterns across larger and more diverse populations. Second, cultural diversity among participants introduced interpretive complexity—participants' emotional norms were influenced by differing heritage backgrounds, which may limit comparability across families. Third, data relied solely on self-report interviews; nonverbal cues and real-time family interactions were not directly observed. This reliance may omit contextual nuances of emotional expression in naturalistic settings. Finally, researcher reflexivity, though maintained

throughout analysis, remains a subjective process that could shape thematic interpretation.

Future research should explore the generational transmission of emotional norms longitudinally, tracing how parents' emotional patterns evolve as their children transition into adulthood. Incorporating observational or psychophysiological measures—such as emotional tone analysis or heart rate variability—could provide richer insights into how emotional regulation manifests behaviorally. Comparative studies across cultural groups would also clarify the influence of acculturation and bicultural identity on intergenerational emotion gaps. Additionally, integrating adolescent peer or romantic contexts could illuminate how external relationships reinforce or compensate for familial emotional deficits. Finally, experimental interventions focusing on family-based emotional literacy training could test the effectiveness of reflective dialogue and empathy-building exercises in narrowing intergenerational emotional distances.

The results underscore the need for family counselors, educators, and mental health practitioners to prioritize emotional literacy and empathy enhancement in family interventions. Parents can be guided to adopt active listening, validation techniques, and emotion-labeling skills to better attune to their children's expressive needs. For adolescents, psychoeducation on constructive emotional articulation and empathy toward parental perspectives can promote mutual understanding. Community programs that integrate digital communication tools—such as emotion-sharing platforms or guided reflection activities—may also help families maintain emotional connection in technologically mediated contexts. Finally, promoting open family dialogues about emotional expectations, respect, and vulnerability can foster sustainable intergenerational cohesion and psychological well-being.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this article.

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