

Identifying Generational Gaps in Emotional Expression among Youth and Parents

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Article Info

Article type:

Original Research

How to cite this article:

Lusignan, W., Garcia, N. H., Harris, D. W. (2025). Identifying Generational Gaps in Emotional Expression among Youth and Parents. *Journal of Psychosociological Research in Family and Culture*, 3(4), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.61838/kman.jprfc.3.4.4830>



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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to explore the generational gaps in emotional expression between youth and their parents, focusing on differences in communication styles, regulation strategies, and cultural influences within Canadian families.

Methods and Materials: A qualitative research design was employed using an interpretive phenomenological approach to capture participants' lived experiences of emotional communication across generations. The study involved 20 participants from Canada, including 10 adolescents aged 15–20 years and 10 parents aged 40–55 years. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis in NVivo 14. Theoretical saturation guided the sampling process, and themes were identified through iterative coding and constant comparison.

Findings: Five major themes emerged from the analysis: (1) emotional communication styles, highlighting contrasts between direct and indirect expression; (2) cultural and social influences, emphasizing the interplay of traditional and contemporary emotional norms; (3) emotional awareness and vocabulary, revealing differences in emotional literacy between generations; (4) family dynamics and relationship quality, identifying emotional distance and mismatched support expectations; and (5) coping and adaptation across generations, showing gradual mutual adjustment through empathy and communication.

Conclusion: Generational differences in emotional expression reflect broader cultural, psychological, and developmental shifts within families. While these gaps may cause miscommunication and emotional tension, they also provide opportunities for intergenerational learning and resilience through dialogue, empathy, and shared emotional growth.

Keywords: Emotional expression; parent–child relationships; generational differences; emotional regulation

1 Introduction

Family life provides the first and most enduring context for emotional development, yet the dynamics of emotional expression within families are continually evolving as cultural, generational, and neurobiological influences intersect. The interaction between parents and youth forms a complex emotional ecosystem in which affective communication, regulation, and responsiveness determine the quality of attachment and psychological well-being across generations (Chen et al., 2025). While emotional expression is often regarded as a stable family trait, recent research suggests that shifts in societal norms, parenting practices, and emotional literacy among younger generations are reshaping how emotions are understood and conveyed within families (Born & Vasbø, 2024; Mera et al., 2025).

Emotional expression is a core element of family communication, serving as both a regulator of interpersonal relationships and a predictor of adjustment outcomes during adolescence (Kennedy-Turner et al., 2025). Adolescence, in particular, marks a sensitive developmental stage in which individuals negotiate autonomy and intimacy with parents while forming an independent emotional identity. Parents' responses to emotional distress play a critical role in shaping adolescents' emotional development and internalizing behaviors (Jones et al., 2024). In families where parents exhibit sensitivity and openness, youth tend to show better emotion regulation, lower anxiety, and stronger interpersonal competence (Church et al., 2025). Conversely, restrictive or dismissive emotional climates are associated with higher levels of self-criticism, irritability, and behavioral dysregulation among adolescents (Suk et al., 2023a).

Generational differences in emotional expression have become more pronounced in recent years, partly due to cultural globalization and digital communication. Parents who were socialized in emotionally conservative or collectivist traditions often value restraint, while younger generations exposed to Western ideals of authenticity and emotional literacy tend to favor openness and self-disclosure (Born & Vasbø, 2024; Yeung et al., 2023). This mismatch may lead to emotional misunderstanding, where parental calmness is perceived as indifference, and youthful expressiveness is misread as disrespect or overreaction. Such discrepancies underscore how generational gaps are not simply matters of communication style, but reflections of differing emotional value systems rooted in sociocultural

and developmental histories (Saldana & Polo, 2024; Shi et al., 2024).

From a neurodevelopmental perspective, parent-child emotional synchrony is underpinned by shared neural processes that facilitate empathy and regulation. Neuroimaging studies demonstrate that similarity in amygdala activation between parents and children is associated with greater prefrontal engagement and improved emotional adaptation among youth (Chen et al., 2025). However, when emotional mirroring or regulation is disrupted—such as in families with high anxiety sensitivity or psychological control—youth may struggle to develop balanced emotion regulation patterns (Church et al., 2025; Shi et al., 2024). Such neurobiological insights reveal that generational gaps in emotion expression are not purely behavioral but may stem from distinct regulatory trajectories influenced by parental modeling and shared neural patterns.

Cultural context further shapes these dynamics by determining what forms of emotional behavior are socially acceptable or valued. In multicultural societies such as Canada, families often negotiate multiple emotional codes at once—balancing traditional values emphasizing composure and respect with contemporary norms that prize authenticity and openness (Saldana & Polo, 2024). Immigrant and bicultural families face the added challenge of managing acculturative stress, where parents and youth internalize different cultural expectations regarding emotional display and control. For instance, Latinx families have been shown to experience tension between parental emotional restraint and adolescents' adoption of Western-style emotional expression, often leading to conflict or withdrawal (Saldana & Polo, 2024). Similarly, Asian-heritage families may emphasize filial duty and self-control, whereas their children, socialized in Western educational contexts, prioritize emotional transparency and self-validation (Shi et al., 2024).

Parenting behaviors play a central role in transmitting emotional norms. The intergenerational transfer of emotion regulation strategies occurs through daily interactions in which children observe, imitate, and internalize parental emotional responses (Born & Vasbø, 2024; Mera et al., 2025). Parents who model mindfulness, empathy, and acceptance tend to foster adaptive emotion regulation and resilience in their children (Mera et al., 2025). Conversely, parents who demonstrate high anxiety sensitivity or emotional inconsistency may inadvertently heighten emotional reactivity in adolescents (Church et al., 2025). Studies of expressed emotion—a measure of critical,

overinvolved, or emotionally charged family environments—have shown that high expressed emotion is linked to increased self-harm and suicidality among youth, highlighting the potentially harmful effects of emotional dysregulation at the familial level (Kennedy-Turner et al., 2025).

The quality of the parent–child relationship has also been shown to influence the broader trajectory of youth psychosocial adjustment. Positive relationships marked by warmth and open communication predict higher levels of confidence, academic achievement, and mental health (Ke et al., 2024). In contrast, emotional suppression and control-oriented parenting may produce internalizing symptoms or psychosomatic complaints in adolescents (Jones et al., 2024; Nielsen et al., 2025). In a study of families managing chronic illness, parental emotional burden was found to exacerbate youths’ emotional distress, illustrating how emotional climates extend beyond typical developmental contexts into health-related adaptation (Passanisi et al., 2024). These findings emphasize that emotional communication within families is both a psychosocial and a physiological process, influencing coping mechanisms, motivation, and well-being across life domains.

The emotional landscape of modern families is further complicated by the presence of stressors such as economic uncertainty, digital overload, and shifting social norms. Research on parental stress during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that parents’ difficulty regulating their own emotions often led to heightened anxiety and depressive symptoms in their children (Orgilés et al., 2023). Similar findings from longitudinal studies demonstrate that even minor forms of parental maltreatment or emotional neglect can adversely affect immigrant youths’ educational outcomes and social integration (Yeung et al., 2023). Moreover, families of adolescents with mental health challenges, such as autism or mood disorders, face unique regulatory difficulties. These challenges often amplify differences in emotional expression styles, as parents oscillate between protective vigilance and emotional exhaustion (Johnson et al., 2025; Suk et al., 2023a).

Intergenerational differences are not only psychological but also embedded in broader narratives of authority and family identity. Parents’ notions of authority, often rooted in past generational models, influence how they interpret and respond to youth emotional expression (Born & Vasbø, 2024). In many families, authority is being renegotiated as youth seek emotional equality and parents attempt to balance guidance with empathy. Contemporary research on “doing

authority” demonstrates that parents across generations redefine authority through emotional discourse, moving from command-based to relationship-based forms of influence (Born & Vasbø, 2024). Such shifts highlight that generational gaps in emotional expression are not merely indicative of conflict but also represent an ongoing cultural adaptation process within families.

In addition to cultural and relational influences, personality traits and parental psychological factors contribute to the variability in emotional expression patterns. Parents with affective disorders or rigid personality structures may exhibit emotional volatility or detachment, which, in turn, shapes youth’s affective sensitivity and coping style (Rodríguez-Mondragón et al., 2024). Studies have shown that parental psychological control—manifested through guilt induction or emotional manipulation—is associated with lower emotional well-being and higher stress among emerging adults (Shi et al., 2024). Conversely, mindful and emotionally attuned parenting fosters youths’ empathy and emotional flexibility, even under stress (Mera et al., 2025). These findings converge on the idea that the parental emotional climate serves as both the mirror and mold of adolescent affective development.

The role of emotion regulation has also gained prominence in neuroscience-informed family studies. Emotional adaptation is facilitated when parents and youth exhibit neural synchrony in regions associated with empathy, such as the prefrontal cortex and amygdala (Chen et al., 2025). However, when parental distress becomes chronic, emotional misattunement can emerge, leading to youth irritability and maladaptive coping (Suk et al., 2023b). Parental distress linked to health or caregiving burdens, for example, can heighten children’s perception of emotional instability within the family (Nielsen et al., 2025; Passanisi et al., 2024). These findings emphasize that family emotion systems function dynamically, with stress and regulation patterns flowing reciprocally between generations rather than unidirectionally from parent to child.

At the same time, emerging evidence points to the capacity for resilience and adaptation in intergenerational emotional communication. Interventions such as mindful parenting and neurofeedback have shown promise in enhancing emotional awareness and regulatory capacity for both parents and youth (Mera et al., 2025; Nguyen et al., 2023). These approaches foster attunement, allowing families to rebuild emotional synchrony disrupted by stress or generational differences. Such findings align with broader developmental models emphasizing the importance of

empathy, reflective functioning, and shared emotional language as protective factors against internalizing disorders (Church et al., 2025; Kennedy-Turner et al., 2025).

Overall, the literature underscores that generational gaps in emotional expression are multifaceted—rooted in cultural, developmental, psychological, and neural dimensions. The family remains the primary context where emotional habits are learned, challenged, and transformed. Yet, as societal norms evolve and new emotional languages emerge through digital and multicultural experiences, parents and youth must continually renegotiate how emotions are communicated, understood, and validated. Understanding these processes is essential to fostering intergenerational empathy and promoting emotional well-being within families.

Therefore, the present study aims to identify and explore the generational gaps in emotional expression among youth and their parents, focusing on how differences in communication styles, regulation strategies, and cultural contexts shape the quality of emotional relationships in Canadian families.

2 Methods and Materials

2.1 Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design with an interpretive phenomenological approach to explore the generational gaps in emotional expression between youth and their parents. The qualitative design allowed for an in-depth understanding of participants' subjective experiences and interpretations of emotional expression across generations. The participants were 20 individuals residing in Canada, comprising 10 adolescents aged 15–20 years and 10 parents aged 40–55 years. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants who could provide rich and diverse perspectives on emotional communication within family settings. The inclusion criteria were: (1) willingness to participate in a semi-structured interview, (2) ability to communicate in English, and (3) belonging to a family with at least one adolescent child. Participants were recruited through community centers, online parent–youth forums, and local social media groups. The sample size was determined based on the principle of theoretical saturation—data collection continued until no new themes or insights emerged from the interviews.

2.2 Measure

2.2.1 Semi-Structured Interview

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews designed to elicit participants' experiences, perceptions, and reflections on emotional expression within their families. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions such as: “How do you usually express your emotions to your family members?”, “How do you perceive the way your parents/children express emotions?”, and “What kinds of misunderstandings or conflicts arise from emotional expression differences?” Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face or via secure video conferencing platforms, depending on participant preference and accessibility. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

2.3 Data Analysis

The collected qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. NVivo 14 software was employed to assist in organizing, coding, and managing the qualitative data systematically. The analysis process began with repeated readings of the transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' narratives. Initial codes were generated inductively from the data and later grouped into broader themes that captured patterns of meaning related to generational differences in emotional expression. The emergent themes were continually refined through iterative comparison across transcripts to ensure coherence and internal consistency. Credibility and trustworthiness were enhanced through member checking, peer debriefing, and maintaining an audit trail of analytic decisions.

3 Findings and Results

The study included 20 participants residing in various provinces of Canada, comprising 10 adolescents (aged 15–20 years) and 10 parents (aged 40–55 years). Among the youth participants, 6 were female (30%) and 4 were male (20%), while in the parent group, 7 were female (35%) and 3 were male (15%). In terms of educational background, most adolescent participants were high school or early university students ($n = 8$, 40%), while two were vocational trainees ($n = 2$, 10%). Among parents, five participants (25%) held a university degree, three (15%) had completed college diplomas, and two (10%) had secondary education.

Regarding family structure, 14 participants (70%) lived in nuclear families, and 6 (30%) reported extended family arrangements involving grandparents or relatives. The cultural composition reflected Canada's diversity: 11 participants (55%) identified as first- or second-generation immigrants (including Iranian, Indian, and Filipino backgrounds), while 9 participants (45%) identified as

Canadian-born. The participants' average duration of residence in Canada was 14.2 years, ranging from 5 to 27 years. This heterogeneous sample allowed for rich cross-generational and cross-cultural insights into emotional expression and family communication within the Canadian context.

Table 1

Themes, Subthemes, and Concepts on Generational Gaps in Emotional Expression

Category (Main Theme)	Subcategory	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Emotional Communication Styles	1.1 Direct vs. Indirect Expression	"Saying things openly," "avoiding emotional words," "using silence as communication," "hinting instead of stating," "preferring emotional privacy"
	1.2 Verbal vs. Nonverbal Cues	"Facial expressions," "tone and volume of voice," "body language," "eye contact," "digital emojis as substitutes"
	1.3 Gendered Patterns of Expression	"Fathers hiding emotions," "mothers showing warmth," "sons suppressing vulnerability," "daughters expressing empathy," "expectations for emotional control"
	1.4 Emotional Regulation Strategies	"Holding back anger," "reframing sadness," "avoiding conflict," "seeking calm before speaking," "using humor to defuse tension"
	1.5 Generational Misunderstandings	"Parents misreading silence," "youth interpreting criticism as rejection," "confusing care with control," "feeling emotionally invalidated," "using different emotional languages"
2. Cultural and Social Influences	2.1 Canadian Cultural Context	"Openness encouraged," "emphasis on individualism," "emotional literacy in schools," "multiethnic norms," "cultural acceptance of emotional talk"
	2.2 Family Cultural Background	"Traditional values," "immigrant adaptation," "emotional modesty," "honor and restraint," "cultural taboos about sadness"
	2.3 Peer and Media Influence	"Online expression," "role of social media in venting," "peer validation," "influence of influencers," "contrast between online and offline emotions"
3. Emotional Awareness and Vocabulary	3.1 Emotional Literacy Gap	"Limited emotional vocabulary," "difficulty naming feelings," "relying on generic words like 'fine' or 'okay'," "confusing emotions with thoughts"
	3.2 Intergenerational Learning	"Parents as emotional models," "learning emotional coping from elders," "youth teaching emotional openness," "role reversal in empathy," "generational mentoring"
	3.3 Emotional Suppression Patterns	"Bottling up emotions," "delayed expression," "emotional outbursts," "fear of burdening others," "self-censorship"
	3.4 Reflection and Emotional Growth	"Recognizing past patterns," "journaling feelings," "seeking therapy," "increased self-awareness," "emotional responsibility"
4. Family Dynamics and Relationship Quality	4.1 Parental Expectations and Control	"High emotional standards," "pressure to appear strong," "authoritative tone," "emotional overprotection," "strict emotional rules"
	4.2 Communication Barriers	"Generation-specific slang," "misinterpretation of tone," "interruptions during talks," "lack of emotional time," "avoidance of serious discussions"
	4.3 Conflict and Resolution Styles	"Yelling vs. silence," "withdrawal during fights," "apologies without discussion," "emotional reconciliation," "time-based cooling off"
	4.4 Emotional Closeness and Distance	"Physical affection differences," "quality time gaps," "trust in emotional sharing," "empathy misalignment," "bonding through activities"
	4.5 Emotional Support Expectations	"Youth seeking validation," "parents giving advice instead of empathy," "differences in listening styles," "expectation of emotional availability," "tendency to minimize emotions"
	4.6 Role of Extended Family	"Grandparents' emotional influence," "interference in parenting," "transgenerational emotional habits," "collective vs. individual emotion norms"
5. Coping and Adaptation Across Generations	5.1 Changing Emotional Norms	"Younger generation embracing openness," "parents slowly adapting," "conflict between modern and traditional values," "emotion as weakness vs. strength," "acceptance of therapy culture"
	5.2 Strategies for Bridging Emotional Gaps	"Active listening," "family dialogues," "shared emotional activities," "expressing gratitude," "seeking mediation or counseling"
	5.3 Emotional Resilience Building	"Learning from conflicts," "developing tolerance," "mutual empathy," "adaptive coping," "recognizing generational strengths"
	5.4 Technological Mediation of Emotion	"Text-based communication," "emojis as emotional shorthand," "video calls replacing face-to-face talks," "online family chats," "digital emotional misfires"
	5.5 Future-Oriented Emotional Goals	"Desire for mutual understanding," "normalizing emotion talk," "building intergenerational empathy," "breaking emotional taboos," "transmitting emotional openness to next generation"

Theme 1: Emotional Communication Styles

A dominant theme emerging from the data was the contrasting emotional communication styles between youth and parents. Many parents emphasized a more indirect and reserved form of expression, whereas adolescents preferred openness and immediacy in emotional exchanges. For instance, one parent stated, *"In our time, you didn't talk about how you felt—you just dealt with it"* (Parent 4), while a youth participant explained, *"I can't hide what I feel; I need to talk about it or it just stays inside"* (Youth 7). Subthemes within this category—such as direct vs. indirect expression, verbal vs. nonverbal cues, and gendered patterns of expression—illustrated the generational tension between emotional restraint and expression. Parents often relied on tone, silence, or gestures to communicate emotions, whereas youth valued verbal affirmation and visible empathy. Differences in emotional regulation strategies, such as the use of humor or avoidance, and generational misunderstandings, where parents perceived openness as disrespect and youth perceived restraint as coldness, further highlighted the communication gap. As one youth reflected, *"When my dad stays silent, I don't know if he's angry or just tired. It feels like guessing games"* (Youth 10).

Theme 2: Cultural and Social Influences

Cultural background and social context significantly shaped emotional norms within families. The Canadian cultural emphasis on individual expression and emotional literacy contrasted with the traditional and collective emotional values upheld by many immigrant parents. Participants described how social expectations in Canada encouraged emotional openness, while family heritage sometimes valued composure and modesty. *"At school they teach you to express feelings, but at home, it's seen as complaining,"* remarked one participant (Youth 2). Subthemes such as family cultural background and peer and media influence revealed that adolescents were increasingly influenced by online communities and peer validation, learning to express emotions digitally through social media. Parents, on the other hand, often viewed this as superficial or excessive. One parent commented, *"They post everything online—happiness, sadness, anger. We were taught to keep things private"* (Parent 5). These findings suggest that globalization and digital interaction have become crucial factors in redefining emotional communication norms across generations.

Theme 3: Emotional Awareness and Vocabulary

A significant generational gap appeared in emotional literacy and awareness, as youth tended to use a broader

emotional vocabulary and showed greater comfort in naming feelings, while parents often generalized emotions using terms like "fine," "okay," or "upset." The subtheme of emotional literacy gap revealed that older participants often found it difficult to distinguish between emotions, associating emotional expression with weakness or instability. *"We were never asked what we felt, so I never learned how to describe it,"* explained one parent (Parent 9). In contrast, youth participants displayed more nuanced reflection, frequently engaging in journaling or discussing emotions with peers. The subthemes intergenerational learning and emotional suppression patterns reflected how emotional coping models were transferred—or resisted—across generations. Several adolescents described reversing emotional roles, offering support or emotional vocabulary to their parents. *"Sometimes I tell my mom, 'It's okay to be sad; you don't have to hide it,'"* said Youth 6. The theme also encompassed reflection and emotional growth, where participants across age groups expressed increasing awareness of how emotional habits shaped their relationships.

Theme 4: Family Dynamics and Relationship Quality

Emotional expression was closely tied to the overall quality of family relationships and the way emotional expectations were managed within households. Subthemes such as parental expectations and control, communication barriers, and emotional closeness and distance showed that parents often valued emotional stability and composure, while youth desired validation and empathy. One parent shared, *"I try to teach my son not to overreact; life is full of problems, and you can't cry at every one"* (Parent 2). Conversely, an adolescent responded, *"When I tell my mom I'm stressed, she tells me to study harder—it feels like she doesn't listen"* (Youth 5). These differing perceptions created emotional distance, leading to misunderstandings and conflict. The conflict and resolution styles subtheme revealed that youth tended to favor open discussions and reconciliation, while parents leaned toward withdrawal or silence after arguments. Emotional support expectations also differed, as parents often offered solutions instead of empathy. A youth participant summarized, *"I don't want advice, I just want her to hear me"* (Youth 8). The role of extended family further influenced emotional habits, with some participants noting that grandparents encouraged stoicism, reinforcing patterns of emotional restraint.

Theme 5: Coping and Adaptation Across Generations

Despite the differences, participants expressed a growing willingness to adapt and bridge emotional gaps through

intentional communication. The subtheme changing emotional norms highlighted that both generations were gradually shifting toward mutual understanding—parents learning to verbalize emotions, and youth recognizing the value of emotional control. One parent reflected, “*My daughter taught me that saying ‘I’m proud of you’ matters. It wasn’t something my parents ever said to me*” (Parent 6). Strategies for bridging emotional gaps, such as family dialogues, shared activities, and seeking counseling, were common adaptive mechanisms. Younger participants described promoting emotional resilience through self-awareness and empathy, as illustrated by Youth 9: “*I’m learning to understand where my parents come from—they didn’t have the same freedom to talk about feelings.*” The technological mediation of emotion also played a role, as many families used messaging apps or online calls to sustain connection, even though digital communication sometimes led to misinterpretation. The final subtheme, future-oriented emotional goals, reflected participants’ aspirations for intergenerational empathy and emotional openness. “*I want my kids to feel it’s normal to talk about emotions. I want to change that cycle,*” said Parent 10, representing the shared hope for a more emotionally connected future.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed five major themes that collectively capture the complexity of emotional expression between youth and parents in contemporary Canadian families: emotional communication styles, cultural and social influences, emotional awareness and vocabulary, family dynamics and relationship quality, and coping and adaptation across generations. These findings emphasize how emotional expression serves as both a marker of generational identity and a reflection of evolving family communication systems. The results suggest that while younger generations tend to favor openness, verbalization, and emotional authenticity, parents often maintain values of restraint, privacy, and emotional control—patterns that align with previous research showing that generational and cultural experiences shape emotional expression norms (Born & Vasbø, 2024; Shi et al., 2024).

The theme of *emotional communication styles* highlighted fundamental differences between youth and parents in how feelings are expressed and interpreted. Youth participants often valued directness, clarity, and validation, while parents preferred indirect and reserved communication. These contrasting tendencies are consistent

with evidence showing that parental emotional restraint is rooted in intergenerational models of authority and composure (Born & Vasbø, 2024). As parents transmit emotional regulation strategies to their children, they often mirror their own upbringing—favoring emotional control over expressivity. However, this can create emotional misunderstanding in families where youth interpret restraint as emotional distance. Similar generational divides have been reported in studies of parental authority and emotional adaptation, where adolescents’ need for openness conflicts with parents’ expectations of respect and calmness (Jones et al., 2024). From a developmental standpoint, adolescence is a period characterized by heightened self-awareness and social sensitivity, which may explain the increased demand for emotional transparency among youth (Church et al., 2025). In this context, generational differences are not merely communicative discrepancies but indicators of evolving social and emotional norms within modern family systems.

Cultural and social influences played a decisive role in shaping these emotional communication gaps. The multicultural composition of the sample reflected how Canadian families often navigate multiple emotional codes simultaneously, balancing collectivist traditions with individualistic norms of expression. Parents who migrated from collectivist societies described discomfort with the emotionally expressive culture that their children embraced, consistent with studies on acculturative stress and emotional negotiation in bicultural families (Saldana & Polo, 2024). Research among Latinx and Asian-heritage families shows similar patterns, where parents’ emphasis on self-control contrasts with youths’ preference for emotional openness, resulting in relational strain and misinterpretation of intent (Shi et al., 2024). Moreover, societal trends in Western contexts—such as increased emphasis on mental health awareness and self-expression—have empowered youth to speak openly about their emotions, thereby widening the intergenerational emotional gap (Mera et al., 2025). The growing influence of social media and peer validation also reinforces adolescents’ comfort with emotional exposure, whereas parents often perceive such behaviors as impulsive or inappropriate (Rodríguez-Mondragón et al., 2024). Thus, cultural and social contexts not only shape emotional display rules but also redefine what counts as emotional maturity within families.

The analysis of *emotional awareness and vocabulary* further illustrated that parents and youth differed significantly in emotional literacy. Parents often lacked the

vocabulary to articulate nuanced emotional states, whereas youth—exposed to psychological education and online discourse—demonstrated a broader emotional lexicon. This finding is consistent with previous studies showing that parents' emotional awareness directly influences children's regulation capacities (Chen et al., 2025). Emotional mirroring and shared regulation are critical for developing emotional intelligence; however, when parents are less verbally expressive, adolescents may experience emotional invalidation (Church et al., 2025). The present study found that youth sometimes assumed emotionally supportive roles for their parents, helping them name or normalize feelings—an inversion of traditional emotional hierarchies also observed in cross-generational research on mindful parenting (Mera et al., 2025). Moreover, emotional suppression among parents was often rooted in learned behavioral patterns tied to cultural values of self-restraint and endurance, which aligns with findings that psychological control and rigid authority can hinder emotional well-being among emerging adults (Shi et al., 2024). These results indicate that emotional vocabulary gaps are not only linguistic but symbolic of differing conceptions of emotion itself—whether as a private experience to be managed or as a relational signal to be shared.

The *family dynamics and relationship quality* theme reinforced that communication barriers and mismatched expectations of emotional support often underlie generational conflict. Adolescents frequently desired empathy and understanding, whereas parents provided advice or discipline—reflecting a discrepancy between emotional and instrumental forms of support (Ke et al., 2024). This pattern echoes previous studies demonstrating that parental responses to adolescent distress strongly predict internalizing symptoms (Jones et al., 2024). When parents respond with control rather than compassion, youth may perceive emotional disconnection and reduced trust. Research on expressed emotion supports this interpretation, showing that high emotional criticism or over-involvement correlates with greater emotional distress and self-harm risk in adolescents (Kennedy-Turner et al., 2025). Furthermore, parental anxiety and emotional instability—often influenced by personal stress or cultural expectations—can amplify emotional misunderstandings (Church et al., 2025). The finding that youth in this study often avoided emotional disclosure to prevent parental worry parallels research showing that parental distress mediates the relationship between family functioning and youth emotional adjustment (Nielsen et al., 2025). Overall, these dynamics demonstrate

how intergenerational emotional tension can emerge from misaligned interpretations of care, discipline, and emotional availability.

Finally, the theme of *coping and adaptation across generations* revealed that despite notable emotional differences, both parents and youth demonstrated capacity for learning and emotional growth. Many parents reported adapting to their children's more expressive emotional style over time, while youth expressed appreciation for their parents' stability and resilience. This bidirectional adjustment process aligns with models of emotional co-regulation and intergenerational learning (Mera et al., 2025). Previous studies have highlighted that mindfulness-based parenting interventions enhance parental attunement and reduce emotional reactivity, fostering healthier emotional climates (Mera et al., 2025). Likewise, neurobiological evidence suggests that increased similarity in parent-child amygdala activation patterns supports better emotion regulation in adolescents (Chen et al., 2025). Such findings reinforce the importance of mutual emotional attunement and empathy as protective mechanisms against generational fragmentation. Moreover, the use of digital platforms for emotional connection, though sometimes prone to misinterpretation, was identified as a bridge between parents and youth. This reflects the broader trend of technological mediation in modern emotional life, where digital communication both challenges and enhances intergenerational connection (Nguyen et al., 2023).

The findings also converge with research showing that family emotional systems function as dynamic and reciprocal rather than hierarchical. For instance, studies indicate that parental distress can elevate youth irritability and vice versa, underscoring emotional interdependence (Nielsen et al., 2025; Suk et al., 2023a). In this context, generational gaps in emotional expression should not be viewed as dysfunctions but as evolving dialogues shaped by societal change, neural plasticity, and cultural hybridization. Similarly, families that cultivate reflective conversations about emotions tend to exhibit greater resilience and adaptability in managing intergenerational differences (Rodríguez-Mondragón et al., 2024). This mutual adaptation highlights the fluid nature of emotional norms—where older generations gradually adopt emotional openness and younger generations learn to value composure, producing a form of emotional co-evolution.

The results of this study also extend existing literature by providing a cross-cultural perspective on generational emotion dynamics in Canada. Previous studies on immigrant

and bicultural families suggest that youth often internalize dual emotional frameworks—maintaining cultural respect toward elders while embracing individualistic self-expression (Saldana & Polo, 2024; Yeung et al., 2023). The current findings support this, revealing that adolescents navigate a “dual emotional identity,” using context-dependent expression strategies: open and expressive among peers, but cautious and respectful with parents. Parents’ attempts to preserve traditional emotional modesty can thus be understood as protective rather than repressive, reflecting a desire to maintain moral and cultural coherence within rapidly changing social landscapes. Such patterns mirror the transgenerational continuity of emotional authority found across diverse cultural settings (Born & Vasbø, 2024).

The study also resonates with recent advances in affective neuroscience, where family emotional regulation is conceptualized as a networked process involving both behavioral and neural synchrony. Research demonstrates that when parents exhibit anxiety sensitivity or disrupted emotional control, adolescents’ brain responses during emotion regulation tasks show heightened amygdala activation and reduced prefrontal engagement (Church et al., 2025). This mechanism may explain why some youth perceive parental restraint not as strength but as emotional absence. Similarly, emotional misattunement arising from parental distress has been shown to increase symptom severity in youth with psychosomatic or behavioral challenges (Johnson et al., 2025; Nielsen et al., 2025). These insights provide biological support for the psychosocial patterns identified in this study—underscoring that intergenerational emotional gaps reflect interconnected emotional systems rather than isolated deficits in either generation.

Furthermore, the findings underscore the significance of mindful and intentional emotional practice within families. Mindful parenting frameworks, emphasizing awareness, empathy, and nonjudgmental communication, have been shown to improve family cohesion and youth emotional regulation (Mera et al., 2025). Parents in this study who adopted reflective listening and validation strategies reported fewer emotional misunderstandings and greater relational satisfaction. Similarly, families who engaged in shared emotional practices—such as discussing feelings or spending quality time—demonstrated improved emotional resilience, aligning with evidence that family emotional climate serves as a buffer against stress (Orgilés et al., 2023). The gradual shift toward shared emotional learning across generations thus represents a critical step toward bridging

emotional divides and promoting psychological well-being within contemporary families.

In summary, this study contributes to a growing body of research emphasizing that generational gaps in emotional expression are multidimensional phenomena emerging from intersecting developmental, cultural, and neurobiological processes. Parents’ emotional restraint and adolescents’ expressiveness should be viewed as complementary rather than opposing tendencies, each offering adaptive strengths. By fostering empathy, emotional literacy, and mutual regulation, families can transform emotional differences into opportunities for intergenerational growth and connection.

Despite its valuable insights, this study has several limitations. The sample size was relatively small (20 participants), which may limit the generalizability of findings to the broader population. Participants were drawn exclusively from Canadian families, where multiculturalism and Western social norms may influence emotional expression differently than in more culturally homogeneous societies. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported narratives, which may have been influenced by memory bias or social desirability. The interpretive phenomenological approach, while rich in contextual understanding, may also reflect the researchers’ subjective interpretations. Future studies should consider triangulating qualitative findings with observational or physiological measures, such as emotional tone analysis or neurobiological indicators of affect regulation.

Future research should explore longitudinal patterns of emotional communication across generations to understand how these dynamics evolve over time. Comparative studies involving families from diverse cultural backgrounds could deepen understanding of how acculturation and globalization shape emotional norms. It would also be valuable to examine how digital communication platforms influence emotional transmission and misinterpretation within families. Mixed-methods designs that integrate qualitative interviews with quantitative measures of emotional intelligence, empathy, and family functioning could further validate and expand upon the current findings.

Practitioners working with families should encourage intergenerational dialogue that emphasizes empathy, emotional literacy, and mutual validation. Family therapy interventions can incorporate mindfulness and reflective listening exercises to reduce emotional misattunement. Educational programs aimed at parents could focus on developing emotional vocabulary and awareness to better align with youth’s expressive communication styles.

Schools and community centers can also play a role by fostering family-based emotional learning workshops that bridge cultural and generational divides, promoting resilience and emotional well-being across all members of the family.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

Ethics Considerations

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

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