

## Research Article

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# Social Connection when Physically Isolated: Family Experiences in Using Video Calls

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**Abstract:** Digital (video) calls have become a significant tool during the challenging times marked by the COVID-19 pandemic. The article focuses on the perceived functionality of video calls for maintaining social contacts and overcoming loneliness in celebrating family festivities limited by physical distance policies. The qualitative study conducted at the end of 2021 in Latvia and Spain examines families' cultural socialisation via digital tools and, based on data obtained from semi-structured in-depth interviews, assesses the users' digital experiences in celebrating Christmas and the New Year from retrospective and prospective standpoints. The obtained data revealed that although digital interactions were acknowledged as an alternative means for ensuring togetherness, preserving and facilitating emotional connection, and experiencing a feeling of belonging and shared identity, they were perceived as the context of exception. The findings complement existing studies that the pandemic contributed to bridging the digital gap among generations with coordinated and negotiated conceptions of the functionality of digital tools. Video calls ensured a sense of social and emotional connectedness and inspired the appearance of virtual celebration ideas.

**Keywords:** social relationships, digital technologies, belonging, celebrating festivities, pandemic

## Introduction

During the last few decades, when modern-day remote work policies were introduced, but more significantly since the outbreak of the global pandemic, communication technologies have increasingly been changing and determining the ways social interactions occur. This process, also known as the “invasion of the public into the private” (Lai and Lim 5), has caused modifications of domestic space and the psychology of the home environment. Being traditionally characterised by tangible objects and intangible cultural values transmitted from generation to generation, the domestic landscape has gradually transformed into a permanent virtual landscape. The usage of such household centrepieces as radio, phone, television, and other gadgets has been overpowered by portable communication devices (tablets, PCs, and smartphones) with continuous internet connection providing movement opportunities and openness, on the one hand, and decreasing face-to-face contact, on the other. They also indicate that “[t]he 21st century is the era of screens” (Lai and Lim 41) and that the Digital or Smart Home is a natural phenomenon of the digital era. In addition, due to the increasing usage of digital technologies the idea of privacy has mutated as never before, and for a large part of the world population, the distinction between work and leisure has become blurred, leading to unprecedented daily work-life imbalance. Dissolved realities are increasingly becoming

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a feature of celebrations impacting festivity culture in general and family traditions in particular, while testifying to the fact that modern households are connected more virtually than physically.

Nowadays, web-based video communications in the form of video calls play a paramount role in ensuring, enhancing, and preserving connectedness, i.e. shaping collective identities, memories, and relationships among extended family members, especially those with long-distance family relationships (Abel et al.). Expected to be digitally savvy, perpetual connectivity has become an integral and natural part of the younger generation's life. However, reliance on audio-visual content and sharing family celebration photographs in group chats or social networks have also been increasing among older generations (Tariq et al.). Family is being performed through stories and rituals that contribute to creating a shared identity, while facilitating emotional connection, therefore virtual celebrations and festivities at times with limited possibilities for in-person contact imply reunion, closeness, intimacy, and care (Abel et al.). Although some aspects of the use of digital technologies may strengthen family life, others may negatively impact interactions within families.

In the context of the families' lived experiences of mediated connections, the article aims to conduct qualitative research among Latvia's and Spain's populations on maintaining social connection under conditions of emergency at the end of 2020 and the beginning of the winter season of 2021. Considering the fact that in scientific literature there is little interest in "the *felt life* of video connection – in what it means to be in contact" (Harper et al. 3) via applications that support visual communication, the study analyses families' experiences in and opinions of the use of video calls in celebrating Christmas and New Year. The goal is twofold: retrieving experiences and coping mechanisms (retrospective perspective) and clarifying expectations for the following winter holiday season (prospective perspective), as well as reconsidering the power of web-based video-mediated communication for family connectedness.

## Digital Technologies as Enablers of Social Connection

Social connectedness and communication are psychological and emotional needs that throughout an individual's lifetime facilitate feelings of belonging, a sense of security, emotional resilience, and life satisfaction. In contrast, their absence and deficiency "disrupt the inherent actualizing and organizational tendencies endowed by nature" and may lead "not only in the lack of initiative and responsibility but also in distress and psychopathology" (Ryan and Deci 76).

Connectedness is one of the basic needs that determines any human's behaviour and impacts not only the mental health of a separate individual and broader community, but also acts as a predictor of physical health outcomes such as weakening of the immune system, obesity, addictions, heart and blood vessel disorders, and many others (Deitz et al.; Pandey et al.). Thus, due to the ongoing health epidemic (or a future pandemic) in the modern world, loneliness requires special attention, prevention, and treatment.

Social life is more and more digitised (Sujon and Dier). Data from Digital Global Overview Report indicate that the leading motives for contemporary internet use are being socially connected via chat and messaging applications together with social networking (Datareportal). During the past 2 years, the COVID-19 context has increased the need for staying in touch with others during physically distant policies (Cabell et al.), not only because of social restrictions but also for seeking social and instrumental support (Lee and Gillath), as required in times of uncertainty, such as lockdowns.

Several studies have identified how people increasingly developed social and psychological support via technologies during the pandemic (Ford; Pandey et al.; Steffens et al.). In addition to phone calls, web conferencing systems emerged as a social technology leading to a new virtual togetherness that could not have taken place otherwise (Hacker et al.). Other studies identify how our experiences of close others were shaped during the pandemic and by making-sense of its context (Bowen), evidencing that social connection is a constructed process throughout the forces and constraints perceived from such situations. Thus, by using digital technologies people develop ways of maintaining and enhancing some form of social connectedness and togetherness.

Communication via technologies requires a certain level of interactivity, for which there is responsiveness, and perceived purpose of connection (Downes and McMillian); in relation to this, several studies have focused on the sense of co-presence of others in virtual environments (Bulu) as the subjective experience of being with others that an individual acquires through interaction (Zhao), i.e. when we are using digital technologies for social connection, we translate our meanings of interaction into the tools with expectations of otherness and co-presence. This perception of social connection via technologies, in the form of co-presence sense, requires not only a subjective perception but also an intersubjective perception among participants, all of whom produce interactive communications.

Similarly, Turkle examines how subjective tools are being devised and used: “people explicitly turn to them [technologies] for experiences that they hope will change their ways of thinking or will affect their social and emotional lives” (26). From here, it is possible to advance her idea of subjective towards intersubjective, via the coordination or negotiation of subjective tools where a myriad of meanings recreate the interactions for digital social connectedness. In this sense, the co-created (intersubjective) meanings and perceptions for the social interaction are key to the functionality or dysfunctionality of the feeling of connectedness among people, which is the focus of this study – further than the needs or motives for using any particular digital tool.

## The Context of the Study

Taking into consideration different layers of space (intimate, personal, social, and public), due to COVID-19 restrictions and the widely circulated rule to keep a distance of at least 2 m at all times, communication within personal space was both discouraged and forbidden, especially during national emergencies and lockdowns thereby decreasing opportunities for in-person meetings which facilitated the creation and sustaining of affiliations as well as a sense of belonging mediated by digital technologies. The severity of the illness as well as the measures taken to prevent and decrease the spread of the disease have negatively impacted people’s social habits and practices, disrupting established rituals and traditions, including family culture, for many years to come. “We are in a COVID decade: the social, economic, and cultural effects of the pandemic will cast a long shadow into the future – perhaps longer than a decade – and the sooner we begin to understand, the better placed we will be to address them” (British Academy 6). Lockdowns, semi-lockdowns, emergency situations, and social distancing rules imposed by worldwide governments in 2020 and re-introduced in some countries in 2021 provoked an unprecedented situation of copying in which online-mediated connections served as a resilient, supportive practice (Marinucci et al.).

Besides affordances, evidence on the role of digital or technology-mediated social connections during the COVID-19 pandemic is still open to debate. Popular perceptions and results reported by different users in several studies of such connections during the pandemic were framed in terms of “complement” (Waytz and Gray; Kushlev and Leita) or “substitute” connections (Murphy; Mauricci et al.). Such perceptions emerge from the unprecedented context of the global pandemic, which is itself an exception that has contributed to a massive uptake of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to replace in-presence actions and interactions with virtual surrogates. The questions this study raises are regarding the perception of online connections in the specific contexts of winter season family celebrations, where any culture-specific beliefs and traditions, national psychology, and individual communication patterns may increase or, *vice versa*, hinder family connections via technology during COVID-19 restrictions.

## The Study on the Two Countries

This article presents the results obtained in the framework of the research on intergenerational dynamics of cultural socialisation in Latvia and Spain. It examines the perceived functionality of digital tools to face and

overcome limitations of in-presence interactions under social distance restrictions during the pandemic. Taking into consideration the announcement issued by the World Health Organisation on March 11, 2020, stating that Covid-19 had reached pandemic proportions, an emergency situation in the entire territory of Latvia was declared (and subsequently prolonged several times) to stop the rapid spread of the disease, diminish overwork in health sectors, and attempt to lower the death rate, highlighting three sustained stages of social isolation: (1) from March 13 to June 9, 2020; (2) from November 9, 2020 to April 6, 2021; and (3) from October 11, 2021 to January 11, 2022 (including the lockdown from October 21 to November 15, 2021). During emergency situations, the Cabinet of Ministers of Latvia has the right to limit the rights and freedoms of national and municipal institutions, of physical persons and legal entities, and charge them with additional duties following the procedure and scope established by law (The Republic of Latvia Cabinet).

In Spain, three states of alarm were decreed, the first bringing with it the confinement of the entire population on March 14 (Real Decreto 463/2020), until June 21, with the end of the last extension bringing the country to what has been called the “new normal.” The second, on October 25 (Real Decreto 926/2020) applied restrictions in some regions, and was the last to impose a night curfew, a ban on travel between autonomous communities, and the limitation of groups to six people not living together. Regarding the Christmas holidays on December 2, 2020, restrictions on mobility and social life during the holidays were eased, allowing gatherings of up to ten people, as well as delays in the start of the curfew on public holidays, and travel between regions to visit family and relatives. However, the increase in infections forced new measures in some regions. In 2021, the country approached Christmas with a runaway infection curve and few severe restrictions. Only five communities tightened control measures to curb the spread of the sixth wave.

Although the countries selected for the analysis had similar restrictions, they have considerable historic, economic, political, geographical, social, and cultural differences. Latvia is known as a low-context communication culture (direct communication based on the word prevails), whereas Spain as a high-context communication culture (indirect communication based on word and gestures aims to ensure harmony and strengthen relationships). Both countries have made similar attempts to improve their populations’ digital skills based on the European framework for digital competence for citizens on such identified aspects as information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, digital content creation, safety, etc.

Latvia is one of the European countries that have encouraged the use of digital technologies in order to increase work productivity. Although there has been significant advancement in Internet usage in the public sector, many challenges remain in the private sector. According to OECD (2018), the country’s population are only moderate Internet users; for this reason, promoting ICT usage among individuals has been undertaken. According to the overall aim of the national digital strategy “Basic Digital Transformation Guidelines for 2021–2027,” during the coming years, the country should purposefully use the opportunities offered by the present digital technologies, produce new ones, and take advantage of the environment these technologies have created (Ministru Kabinets). Such actions would improve every individual’s and the whole society’s quality of life, thereby raising the country’s competitiveness and bolstering its economy. Within the digital transformation strategy, one particular action is concerned with the preservation and development of cultural heritage in a digital environment.

Spain’s Digital Strategy 2025 was released in July 2020 with 50 structural reforms for the country’s digitalisation from 2020 to 2025. The digital transformation has been reinforced and accelerated by the impact of COVID-19 and is shared on the European level (MINECO). Strategic actions are based on the promotion of productive models, improvement of administrations, work, and cybersecurity. The measures for enhancing connectivity in urban centres state that “the protection and preservation of historical heritage must be reconciled with the social and economic interest” (MINECO).

The study focuses on techno-mediated social connections in family celebrations during the winter-holiday season, analysing two or three-generational family cases. It presents synthesised findings related to the impact of digital tools on festive culture and family traditions under COVID-19 restrictions, i.e. the retrospective standpoint related to the winter-holiday celebrations (2020) based on the reconstruction of events and respondents’ personal experience, as well as the prospective standpoint related to the approaching winter holiday-celebrations (2021) based on the respondents’ intentions, plans, and

psycho-emotional needs. The two aspects are largely presented as similarities; the research does not preclude a selection of different countries.

## Methodology

### Procedure

The article analyses data collected from qualitative research based on the critical communicative approach, which made it possible to know and understand the experiences of families in the two interconnected periods. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain a view of families' lifestyles and traditions, narrowing the theme to the winter-holiday season of 2020 marked virtually due to COVID-19 restrictions, and their expectations of Christmas and New Year celebrations in 2021. The topics for discussion were related to the respondents' emotional state at a time when celebrating outside one household was prohibited and to their need for social connectedness, as well as their attitudes towards and experiences of using digital technologies as alternative means of reaching togetherness. Within the project, semi-structured interviews focused on three thematic blocks (family lifestyle during the pandemic, celebrating family festivities under COVID-19 restrictions, and the role of digital technologies and social media platforms for family celebrations and their impact on festive culture and family relationships) with anchor questions focusing on the retrospective and prospective aspects, including memories of psycho-emotional states during the celebrations, means for enhancing closeness, intergenerational digital literacy dynamics, and hopes and expectations for the upcoming winter celebrations. The research describes individual and group subjective experiences of using digital technologies and in particular online video calls in the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic.

### Sampling

The research was conducted with the families living in one or separate households in Latvia's south-eastern Latgale region and the capital Riga, and in three regions in Spain: Castilla and León, Cantabria, and Andalucía. To ensure the inclusion and exclusion criteria, a preliminary telephone conversation with respondents was held. Families that did not confirm the observation of regulations or the use of digital technologies (except phone calls) during holiday celebrations are not included in the research in this study. Respondents who initially confirmed that they had observed restrictions imposed by the government during the emergency situation at the end of 2020 continued participation in the research.

Eight multi-family member interviews were conducted from October to November 2021 in Latvia, two – in person and six – via Zoom and WhatsApp due to the introduction of an emergency situation and soon after it – a lockdown (Table 1). In Spain, eight multi-family interviews, four – in-person and four – by WhatsApp, were conducted from November to December 2021 (Table 2). The opinions of minors were collected through their parents without directly involving them in the interviews.

Families were recruited via other families approached in the formerly implemented projects on culture, cultural diversity, festivities, cultural literacy, and intergenerational dynamics of cultural socialisation, both in Latvia and Spain. Information saturation was the methodological principle used to end the process of gathering families, once diversity was assured (by gender, age, occupation, setting, and family structure).

The study follows international standards, the EU General Data Protection Regulation 2016/679, and national and institutional ethical conduct guidelines (Daugavpils University's Research Ethics Committee Regulations and Bioethical Committee at the University of Salamanca). To ensure anonymity, privacy, and confidentiality, families chose a surname pseudonym. Before the interviews, participants were presented with brief instructions requesting their consent and informing them that they could stop the interview at any time. All individuals included in this study provided informed verbal consent.

**Table 1:** Respondents' information (Latvia)

| Family No | Surname pseudonym | Family member/age group: (under 16, 17–25, 26–35, 36–45, 46–55, 56–65, 66 and over)       | Occupation-based socio-economic measure (based on the European socio-economic classification)                                                                           | Setting (C – capital; R – region) |
|-----------|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1         | Survilo           | Father/66 and over<br>Mother/66 and over<br>Daughter/26–35                                | Retired<br>Retired<br>Unemployed (disabled person's benefits)                                                                                                           | Urban/R                           |
| 2         | Liepa             | Grandmother/66 and over<br>Daughter/46–55                                                 | Retired<br>Lower grade professional, administrative and managerial occupations                                                                                          | Rural/R                           |
| 3         | Unique-corns      | Son/26–35<br>Father/56–65<br><br>Mother/46–55                                             | Intermediate occupations<br>Higher grade professional, administrative and managerial occupations<br>Lower grade professional, administrative and managerial occupations | Urban/R                           |
| 4         | Ozols             | Daughter/under 16<br>Fiancé/26–35<br>Fiancée/17–25                                        | Pupil<br>Intermediate occupations<br>Lower grade professional, administrative and managerial occupations                                                                | Urban/C                           |
| 5         | Zvaigznīte        | Father/36–45<br><br>Mother/36–45<br><br>Daughter/under 16<br>Son/under 16<br>Son/under 16 | Lower grade professional, administrative and managerial occupations<br>Higher grade professional, administrative and managerial occupations<br>Pupil<br>Pupil<br>Pupil  | Urban/R                           |
| 6         | Rito              | Father/46–55<br>Daughter/17–25                                                            | Lower technical occupations<br>Lower services, sales and clerical occupations                                                                                           | Rural/R                           |
| 7         | Pika              | Husband/46–55<br>Wife/44–55                                                               | Unemployed<br>Higher grade professional, administrative and managerial occupations                                                                                      | Rural/R                           |
| 8         | Ābols             | Daughter/under 16<br>Mother/36–45<br><br>Father/36–45<br><br>Son/under 16                 | Pupil<br>Higher grade professional, administrative and managerial occupations<br>Lower grade professional, administrative and managerial occupations<br>Pupil           | Urban/R                           |

## Data Analysis

The interviews were coded manually by identifying the main categories (codes) that were divided into subcategories (subcodes). They were later analysed as a meaningful text using Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis (TA) research method for qualitative research in and beyond psychology. Different forms of TA, such as inductive, deductive, semantic, latent, descriptive, and interpretive, provide a more conceptual

**Table 2:** Respondents' information (Spain)

| Family No | Surname pseudonym | Family member/age group: (under 16, 17–25, 26–35, 36–45, 46–55, 56–65, 66 and over) | Occupation-based socio-economic measure (based on the European socio-economic classification)                               | Setting (C – capital; R – region) |
|-----------|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 9         | Sánchez           | Father/46–55                                                                        | Lower grade professional, administrative and managerial occupation                                                          | Urban/R                           |
|           |                   | Mother/36–45                                                                        | Lower grade professional, administrative and managerial occupations and higher grade technician and supervisory occupations |                                   |
| 10        | López             | Son/under 16                                                                        | Pupil                                                                                                                       | Rural/R                           |
|           |                   | Mother/36–45                                                                        | Lower grade professional, administrative and managerial occupation                                                          |                                   |
|           |                   | Father/36–45                                                                        | Lower technical occupations                                                                                                 |                                   |
|           |                   | Son/under 16                                                                        | Pupil                                                                                                                       |                                   |
| 11        | Uribe             | Daughter/under 16                                                                   | Pupil                                                                                                                       | Urban/C                           |
|           |                   | Father/46–55                                                                        | Intermediate occupations                                                                                                    |                                   |
|           |                   | Mother/46–55                                                                        | Lower services, sales and clerical occupations                                                                              |                                   |
|           |                   | Daughter/17–25                                                                      | Baccalaureate                                                                                                               |                                   |
| 12        | Oroll             | Son/under 16                                                                        | Pupil                                                                                                                       | Rural/R                           |
|           |                   | Fiancé/36–45                                                                        | Unemployed                                                                                                                  |                                   |
|           |                   | Fiancée/36–45                                                                       | Higher grade professional, administrative and managerial occupation                                                         |                                   |
| 13        | Zoira             | Sister/46–55                                                                        | Intermediate occupations                                                                                                    | Rural/R                           |
|           |                   | Brother/56–65                                                                       | Disabled                                                                                                                    |                                   |
| 14        | Ruíz              | Father/46–55                                                                        | Small employers and self-employed in non-professional occupations                                                           | Rural/R                           |
|           |                   | Mother/46–54                                                                        | Lower grade professional, administrative and managerial occupations: higher grade technician and supervisory occupations    |                                   |
| 15        | García            | Daughter/17–25                                                                      | Undergraduate                                                                                                               | Urban/C                           |
|           |                   | Husband/66 and over                                                                 | Retired                                                                                                                     |                                   |
|           |                   | Wife/56–65                                                                          | Lower supervisory and lower technician occupations:                                                                         |                                   |
| 16        | Martín            | Mother/66 and over                                                                  | Retired                                                                                                                     | Urban/C                           |
|           |                   | Father/66 and over                                                                  | Retired                                                                                                                     |                                   |
|           |                   | Son/26–35                                                                           | Unemployed                                                                                                                  |                                   |

reading of the obtained data (Clarke et al. 225–226). For the data interpretation, the cluster of the first version of TA, i.e. a realist/essentialist, inductive, semantic, and descriptive approach has been used. The themes derived from the data set function as meanings rather than mere summaries, which allows presenting a detailed account of a particular aspect by filtering and comparing two time periods in both countries.

## Findings

Family culture implies repetitive and enduring activities, including rituals, that are iconic and highly valued by its members – representatives of different generations. The typology of family rituals includes

culture-related family celebrations (rites of passage, religious, and secular holidays), ritual activities observed by the family (birthdays, anniversaries), and interactivity within the family (daily customs), all of which by their specific pattern not only provide a sense of belonging and continuity but also ensure group cohesiveness and identity (Trepper et al. 96). According to Hall and Holdsworth, “[h]olidays blend both public and private: public in its visibility, but private in that they make sense in tandem with everyday practices” (290). The binary opposition “the everyday” (mundanity) versus “the holiday” (festivity) defines family practices and represents the specific rhythm of intergenerational communication; thus, they are characterised by standardisation and uniformity, on the one hand, and universalism, on the other, especially concerning values and symbols. Traditionally, holidays, including annual culture-specific religious (e.g. Christmas) and secular (e.g. New Year) celebrations, are opportunities for extended family reunions, where family members spend quality time together by following specific rituals and traditions, i.e. customary, arbitrary, and self-enforcing rules of conduct or social conventions (Tummolini 900), characterised by the regularity of the followed behaviour patterns mutually beneficial for the involved parties. Rituals, however, require participation, and the distance between a person and another individual during interaction plays an important role.

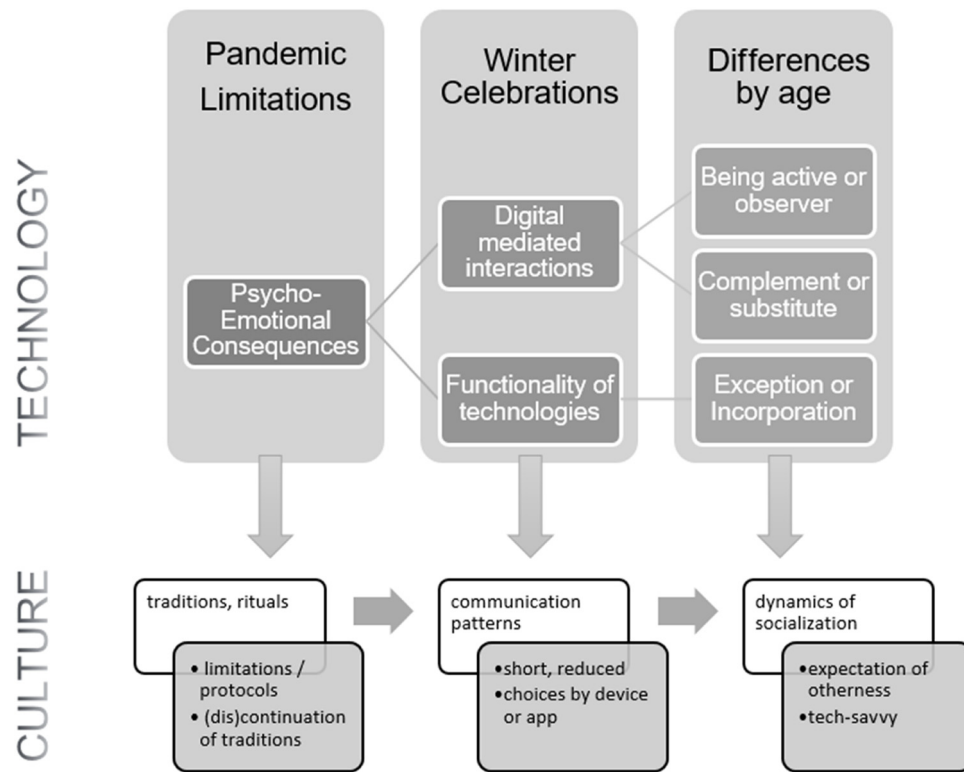
The findings from the study considered the perceptions and meanings of families in digitally mediated interactions when rituals and cultural conventions for celebrating were limited. According to Figure 1, the topics discussed were culture or technology-specific. The discourse during the interviews provides opportunities for the interviewer to combine both topics and uncover any relations. The majority of the discourses focused on pandemic limitations, connected to emotional consequences and feelings of loneliness, in connection to participant perception of the detrimental effects of protocols on cultural rituals. Another recurrent topic of discussion involved the uses, motives, and types of interactions provided by digitally mediated communications during the context (winter celebrations), sometimes in connection to the previous uses and other times on the explanations of functionalities. The third topic discussed involved the differences by age in family traditions or the kind of interactions, which resulted in different dynamics for cultural socialisation, with an agreement that for the elders, the use of video calls was both exceptional and viewed with scepticism. In the next sections, these topics and subtopics are widely explored.

## Psycho-Emotional Consequences of Restrictions and Family Disconnection

In Latvia at the end of 2020, private events and gatherings were prohibited, with the exception of events within one household, visitations were allowed within the scope of no more than two households only when a person lived alone in the household, the social contacts between persons from separate households, including extended families, were prohibited. In Spain, a maximum of six people were allowed to meet during celebrations. These limitations produced a negative effect on the everyday routine of families and on practised festive culture. Staying at home, especially during the essential annual festivities – Christmas and the New Year – which traditionally unite extended families consisting of several generations, was reported by the majority of the respondents as one of the most emotionally challenging periods of the lockdown. For some families, both in Latvia and Spain, emotions were associated with fear of socialisation: “I experienced fear in personal relationships... also .... Sadness about not being able to have physical contact” (Sánchez, mother).

In re-evaluating the circumstances and the ways 2020 winter-holiday celebrations were held, the interviewees realised that to cope with the situation, they had hidden their genuine emotions such as disappointment, sadness, regret, and loneliness behind hopes for better times. Some families reported covering sadness in an attempt to keep their own and their children’s spirits up:

The older family members were very happy, especially talking to their grandchildren. The grandparents were perhaps more nostalgic but for the grandchildren, it was fun and exciting. The adults, knowing the seriousness of the situation, tried to appear calmer and happier to the little ones than we really were. (Zaira, sister)



**Figure 1:** Topics and subtopics within the main findings.

When families compared the end of 2020 with the end of 2021, they expressed a sensation of resignation, since they had expected a better situation and felt uncertainty and exhaustion (López, mother). In addition, some families reported a deep sadness and a feeling of loneliness (or social disconnection) that they did not want to go through again:

My expectations were very good until a few weeks ago .... Last year we had dinner alone and were so sad so... we plan to meet less often and without coinciding with other family units, i.e. one day with the grandparents but without the rest of the uncles, aunts, uncles and cousins. We plan to do antigen testing beforehand. (Uribe, father)

Some families recalled following the publicly available information in 2020 that meeting outdoors vastly reduced the risk of airborne transmission and several families opted for alternative ways of celebrating festivities – walks and ritual activities (picnics, fir tree decoration, snow games) in the fresh air together with the members of extended family or friends, e.g. in the forest or places inaccessible or less known by the wider public, such as rural private properties. However, the majority of the interviewed families acknowledged that they had spent Christmas and the New Year's eve in the space of their private house/flat in isolation among the members of their household or together with a representative of the older generation living alone:

For my mother, who comes from a Polish family, Christmas is a significant holiday. Many guests used to come to show my mom their respect; this was a big holiday. However, now, due to the living conditions and job difficulties, Christmas gradually declines in importance. It is sad, but such is a new reality. Before COVID, my mother tried to keep us together, but due to all restrictions of the pandemic, the celebration of holidays together is no longer a priority .... We celebrated it at the table, but only in [the circle of our immediate] household, [only] three of us. (Survilo, daughter)

Last Christmas was hard, especially because of the fear of contagion. ... we shared one day with two members of my family and another day with two members of my husband's family. In addition to the small number of people celebrating the festivities, the protocol of hygiene, gel, ventilation, a large separation between diners, etc. together with the fear of contagion limited the enjoyment of the meetings. (Martín, mother)

Negative emotions and the memories of fear were associated with a lack of enjoyment and togetherness: “we could not be reunited with loved ones” (Lopez, mother). However, the younger generation did not associate the imposed social distancing with the feeling of social disconnection:

The restrictions meant a radical break with our rhythm of life and our usual social relations (which in our case were many and varied). ... In general, we didn’t feel disconnected because we maintained our relationships thanks to technology. (Orol, fiancé)

Overall, the results confirm the findings of other studies conducted within the project (e.g. Kovzele et al.) that for the majority of interviewees celebrating winter holidays under the restrictions caused anxiety and web-based video communication with extended family members and friends could not fully satisfy the needs of belonging and mutual interaction.

## The Rise of the Video Calls and Videoconferencing Apps

Whereas Latvian-speaking families spent more time making video calls at Christmas, mixed or Russian-speaking families in Latvia did so more frequently when seeing-in the New Year. In Spain, there was no significant difference, with interviewees making video calls with relatives on both occasions during the day and night. Differences were observed in the use of applications. In Spain, the majority of families used WhatsApp: “video calls via WhatsApp with parents, siblings, aunts and uncles, cousins and grandparents. This social network was used because it was the only one we all had in common” (López, mother). Only one family reported using different platforms as they tried to find the best suitable to their needs: “We used all kinds of platforms to see the best ones – WhatsApp, Zoom, Skype, Hangouts, and other educational platforms, such as Google Classroom, Teams .... (Uribe, mother).”

In Latvia, the data showed that among the more frequently used applications were Zoom video conferencing platform, WhatsApp, and Viber – giving preference to video calls with more than two households in the former case, and video calls limited to two households in the latter two. The families explained the choice made in favour of Zoom not only in terms of their wish to unite the extended family under the coronavirus restrictions but also as an attempt to maintain and continue pre-pandemic festivity traditional rituals as long as possible through aforeplanned and mutually coordinated activities, though in a transformed and compressed way, namely, by using digital devices (both smartphones and laptops) and not exceeding the 40-min online allowed by Zoom’s basic plan. Activities in Zoom involved informal conversations, making toasts to one another, and opening gift boxes (especially in families with small children) exchanged while meeting each other in some COVID-19 neutral space outside or via courier services before holidays. The choice of WhatsApp and Viber was determined by a preference for everyday communication and wider accessibility in smartphones, as well as more spontaneous decision-taking for communication with other family members and friends on New Year’s Eve, so that during their holiday meal they could wile the time away until midnight, lessening their sense of social isolation:

When celebrating Christmas and the New Year, we got in touch with our relatives and friends by WhatsApp and Viber video calls, which is a good alternative for a situation when meeting each other in presence is impossible. We contacted them while having a meal at the table, at midnight and also shortly after midnight. Video conversations were not long. We made video calls to four relative households and four friend households. Feelings were positively neutral. (Ābols, mother)

Interestingly, there were differences among the families in which video calls were used previously. Some families confirmed that the pandemic brought new digital connections to relatives who rarely used technologies for social connection. Elderly people still preferred traditional phone calls since it was more functional for them and used video calls only if they had assistance or former experience: “Some family members use the video call on rare occasions and did so at those times” (Uribe, mother).

Part of the representatives of the middle generation, especially in Latvia, emphasised that, on the whole, they seldom use digital technologies in everyday life and do not use social networks at all; therefore,

it is hard for them to fully accept ICTs on holidays: “It was enough for me that I could simply talk [with my mother] on the phone and we could greet each other” (Zvaigznīte, father). In general, they make video calls only in the case that some family member is on a business trip outside the country or if this call is initiated from outside, asserting that video calls are still atypical for communication culture both in public and private spaces in Latvia, except in cases related to remote job duties under pandemic conditions.

Worthy of mention are also psychological barriers such as lack of motivation and weakening family ties. The respondents report that reaching an agreement about using video calls during holidays required a mutual wish and regular communication in everyday life. If such a tradition was not established beforehand, then during the first COVID-19 winter holidays, not everybody could, nor did everybody wish to switch to a different form of celebration. The interviewees also maintained that they had used video calls mainly to contact relatives living abroad, and, thus, it was unacceptable for them to make video calls as an alternative for communication with someone living only some hundred meters, or some kilometres away in a neighbouring city:

In general, digital technologies are used quite seldom by the family. We almost never use video calls to contact other households in Latvia. In one way or another, each household is *per se*. An exception is our relatives in Great Britain and Canada; we communicate with them via video calls. (Survio, daughter)

## Dissimilarities in Digital Connections by Age

The representatives of the younger and middle generation maintained that they would have willingly made video calls to their grandparents, but remembered they were facing multiple problems, for instance, while their grandparents had mobile phones they had neither smartphones nor computers with a web camera, therefore most often audio calls were made, or SMS sent.

For the representatives of the older generation who lived in separate households, digital technologies created unnecessary stress when they did not manage to join calls on their first attempt and, as their children and grandchildren reported, they needed several prompts to successfully make a video call. Although the representatives of the older generation participated in virtual conversations together with the representatives of the same household's younger generation who gave them a certain feeling of safety, they still felt tensed in front of screens and video cameras; this made them detached observers of the conversation. Some families observed limitations in the noise of conversations:

The older people sometimes did not follow the rhythm of the conversation (there were many of us and conversations were crossed), and the younger ones were at times amused and at other times exhausted from being called on the screen. (Uribe, mother)

Though children and young people represent the digital generation and have grown up and developed with modern technologies, they are still openly sceptical about making video calls during holidays. They speak about a deep longing for meeting “live” people (Zvaigznīte, daughter, Pika, daughter). Although most of them had felt quite happy and satisfied at communicating with their relatives online first for digital celebrations, the emotional exhaustion resulting from remote learning and the pandemic, in general, led them to express quite pessimistic opinions. Some teenagers stated that previously long-awaited winter-season festivities were today perceived unenthusiastically. Consequently, many families, including those who had followed and observed restrictions, are willing to reconsider their activities concerning the approaching holidays. The younger and middle generations' reported overuse of technologies due to teleworking or digital education may lead to avoidance of digital social connections:

Without them, the situation would have been harder .... they have helped children and adults in the family, but they also conveyed fatigue at having to communicate by this means and sometimes did not want to participate. (Uribe, mother)

## Valuing the Functionality of Digital Family Celebrations

The majority of respondents considered digital technologies as instruments for assisting in carrying out professional duties and for everyday communication when different social life problems were to be solved. As such, they were perceived as unfit and even inconvenient for marking festivities and holidays. Some families reported explicitly that in-presence and virtual interactions cannot be equalled:

They definitely helped us. Although a video call never equals face-to-face contact, it facilitates live encounters and conversations where you see expressions, affectionate gestures, kisses, etc. I consider that they were a great ally in bringing relatives closer together and making them feel closer. (Ruíz, father)... they [technologies] helped... some older people reported that these meetings were useful, but not fulfilling... you are not saying the same as in person. (Sánchez, mother)

Under conditions of restriction, modern digital tools with video calls, to their mind, serve as a short-term solution that are neither accessible for all social groups due to economic factors nor acceptable for all due to differences in generations' interests. Similarly, in the two countries, families reported the feeling of living an exception, something that has an end, consequently their use of digital tools was but a short-term adaptation:

The children understood the situation and we tried to make the parties as fun as possible by explaining the risks and reasons for the changes. We made an effort to adapt, thinking that it would be something exceptional and that the important thing was to see each other. (López, mother)

Some saw the prohibition against celebrating holidays outside one household as one that neglected cultural heritage and broke family traditions; a feeling of frustration was observed among some family circles and extended social networks. Most interviewed families admitted that using digital technologies to feel connected on holidays is far from an ordinary situation and, in the long-term, this may produce adverse rather than positive effects. Namely, people who at the beginning are denied the possibility of maintaining traditional rituals and are aware of their inability to defend them, become passive and “unwilling” in the long run, resulting in apathy:

There is a great threat not only regarding Christmas and the New Year .... People get used to the situation that they don't need to go anywhere, don't need to participate in anything, and they can be at home all the time. They have a false conviction that technologies can give just the same feelings that a real experience can. And the more passive a human is, the weaker family and religious traditions are later, and on the whole, we may say that this is a threat to the national culture and safety. (Ozols, fiancée)

When families were looking forward to the approaching Christmas and New Year in 2021, they felt anxiety, fear, anger, and strong determination to have a decent celebration with at least two households. Having been vaccinated against COVID-19, some of the interviewed families allowed of the possibility of non-compliance with public health measures justifying their belief that family practices may be “perfect” only when implemented in-person and that mental health should be among the priorities. For this reason, despite all technical possibilities and extensive digital offers, they planned to make video calls during the next winter season's holidays only in exceptional situations.

One cannot call technologies a hindrance; they sooner are an opportunity to get in touch under restrictions. All were our own people and felt free in front of cameras. If it is not possible to meet in person, we will use technologies next holidays. (Ābols, mother)

## Conclusion

Social disconnection resulting from physical lockdowns has a destructive effect on people's social wellness (Pandey et al.; Steffens et al.; Marinucci et al.). Moreover, family celebrations during winter holidays are,

traditionally, moments for reunion and development of a sense of belonging and togetherness, either with relatives or close friends. By culture or by religion these celebrations are also an intergenerational space for social connection, from which different meanings and social experiences are gained. The ways this niche of interactions was altered by the pandemic and supported by digital technologies had an influence on the families' perceptions of social connectedness.

The conducted research allows us to conclude that social connection is not properly established or experienced via technologies for the purpose of family celebrations. Digital communication via different web conference systems has limitations for interactivity, as found in other studies (Hacker et al.; Marinucci et al.); besides the preferences and user agreements, technologies impose shorter and one-by-one (not overlapping) conversations failing participants' expectations of connectedness. In addition, as Bowen claims, the pandemic has imposed a context for meaning-making, generalising the social restrictions toward the sense of family connection or even the frustration of enjoyment by sacrificing traditions and celebration, however, as an exception. Under such an exceptional conception, there were fewer opportunities to incorporate new digital practices, leaving little room for a "complete" sense of family connectedness via technologies. As a result, the "negotiated" perception of digital communication tools was disassociated with the idea of replacement, conveying the idea that video communication, although increasingly becoming mundane in everyday situations, is not preferred on occasion of celebrations as it is unable to substitute the emotions experienced together for family connectedness. In agreement with the idea that "[t]o make a video call is commonplace; to do so with family is routine, with a lover virtually a requirement" (Harper et al. 1), the study revealed that making a video call during festivities, which by their nature are opposed to the mundane, is perceived by families as an exception. Thus, "seeing and being seen" during the main celebrations of the year was perceived emotionally as insufficient.

Moreover, families reported a high number of negative emotions associated with the pandemic, within this "negotiated context," which may cause them to adopt digital communication opportunities for social connection or even for inclusion in future celebrations or traditions. A change in emotions was observed: during the 2020 winter celebrations, holidays were predominantly associated with fear of social connection and loneliness risks (Cabell et al.), their emotions later evolved into exhaustion at the end of 2021. COVID-19 vaccines had created a sense of protection, but old-style in-presence celebrations were still missing. Families expressed an extension of the recreated context of exception, with the intention to use digital communications, but again as a short-run adaptation, without continuity.

Results from the older generations evidenced that short-term digital opportunities are not changing traditions or rituals for family celebrations, in which social connections need to be lived in presence. Contrary to what was expected, the younger generations' convictions were even stronger, they reported video-call fatigue impacted by increasing everyday digital connections (Vidolov). Thus, the pandemic context has affected families' perceptions and could bridge the digital gap among generations with coordinated or negotiated conceptions of the functionality of digital tools. The intergenerational comparison testified to families acknowledging virtual celebrations as a new opportunity, on the one hand, and challenges, on the other, where limitations and inequivalent digital communication were perceived as triggers of stress, misunderstandings, and sometimes even withdrawal.

For the purpose of celebrating winter-holiday festivities under COVID-19, families reported reliance on digital technologies as a complementary tool to be used for family connection in atypical or emergency situations only. The benefits of digital communication were seen in their possibility to improve families' psycho-emotional wellbeing, avoid loneliness and experience a sense of belonging, rather than change an adopted lifestyle and family festive traditions. Although alternative ways of celebrations were valued as an exception, this intergenerational study demonstrates that in the future, families are determined to prioritise in-person over online gatherings during festive celebrations, including Christmas and the New Year.

Important avenues for future research on the topic include continued analysis of the contribution of digital tools and web-based visual communication to the "performance" of family lives across Europe; how semi-digital and digital celebration formats compensate the lack of face-to-face communication; and how they balance continuity and innovation within tradition.

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