

The influence parental figure(s) have on students studying experience

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between family communication, student experiences, and mental health. Through a mixed-methods approach, does this research explore the role of family communication in fostering positive study experiences and enhancing mental health resilience among students. Drawing upon literature review, survey data, and focus group discussions, does this study show the diverse dimensions of family communication and its impact on various aspects of student life. Findings indicate that open and direct communication within families plays a crucial role in creating positive student experiences, particularly in academic and social domains. Moreover, does this study highlight the significance of addressing personal boundaries and the role of guilt in students' experiences, Overall, this research puts emphasis on the importance of family communication in shaping positive student experiences and fostering mental health resilience. Implications for practice and directions for future research are discussed.

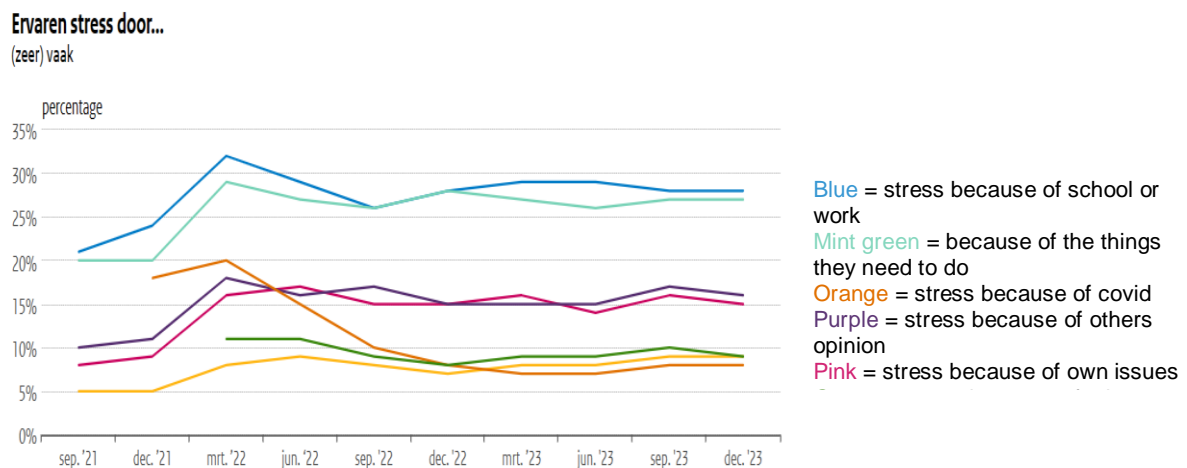
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Introduction

My world, like many others, changed when the global pandemic started. It felt as if everything stopped, and then slowly began turning again. For me, that turning point was

when I started university, which one can see as the first phase of adulthood. Looking back, the pandemic had a major impact on everyone, especially on individuals' mental health. Research conducted by Statistics Netherlands (Hupkens, 2021), also known as CBS, showed a massive increase in mental health issues across the Netherlands, and this trend is a global issue as well. Overall, there was an increase in loneliness, sadness, anxiety, stress, and many more factors, with specific groups such as the elderly, women, parent(s) with young children, and youth being more vulnerable to these issues. Focusing on youth, research conducted by the RIVM (RIVM, n.d.) showed that the younger demographic, specifically students, still have similar mental health issues currently compared to the COVID years. In fact, the number of students who have experienced mental health issues slightly increased from 34% in 2022 to 37% in 2023. In figure 1, you can see the main reasons that cause mental health issues among the participating students of the research.



As can be seen, the biggest factor that students list as a reason for their mental health problems is linked to either school or work. This can also explain why the second highest reason, "things they need to do," is a significant factor as well. Students need to balance different aspects of their lives, socially and academically, and feel pressured to balance both. Interestingly, the home situation is the lowest reason for creating mental health problems among students.

According to Zarnaghash and colleagues (2013), all individuals seek mental health and happiness for themselves and others within their community. To reach that goal of happiness and mental health, there is a need for a sense of family to contribute positively. The role of family can therefore be seen as immensely important to individuals, including students. This could be one possible explanation for why the home situation of students is listed as the lowest stressor for mental health issues, as academics see the role of family as the opposite of a stressor. Additionally, according to Ruiz-Hernández and colleagues (2022), mental health is heavily intertwined with students' studying behaviour and positive student experiences. Based on this, it could be argued that the sense of family could be linked to the success of a student's educational career. Having a family relationship could be a reason to limit the mental health issues students feel due to school, work, and balancing it all out.

Therefore, this paper will present research conducted on how family can influence students' study experiences and have a positive influence on their mental health, specifically focusing on how communication with family plays a role in creating this positive study experience. The research question that will be answered within this paper is: "What is the role of family communication in fostering a positive study experience?" To answer this main question, three sub-questions can help identify different factors that play a role as well. The sub-questions are as follows:

1. Which aspects of communication can be linked to a positive student experience?
2. How does family communication influence the academic success of students?
3. How does family communication influence the social success of students?
4. What role does study resilience play in a positive student experience and how can family influence resilience?
5. How can family communication foster stable mental health among students?

Before continuing, there needs to be a clarification that for this research, students are not limited to university students only, which is the common association when talking about this specific group of society. In this paper, the meaning of student is broadened to those

studying at any level of post-secondary education, who are the targeted audience for this research. This is also one of the main reasons why this study can be important. In general, there is a research gap on students studying in post-secondary education but not attending a university or a school of applied sciences. Therefore, this research can be very helpful since it concerns all levels of education. Furthermore, this research has added value since it was conducted from the perspective of a student and therefore a part of the target audience, rather than being written by someone who is not part of this group. Overall, this research provides helpful contributions and insights to different fields such as educational science and psychology.

The paper will cover the background of the research question, including explanations of terms and a theoretical framework which forms the basis of this research. After this comes the methodology, followed by the quantitative and qualitative results. Then there will be a discussion, followed by a conclusion of this research.

Theoretical Framework

To find out answers for this study there is a need to come up with different factors or categories in which one can see where the influence of family communication has an effect on students and the study experience they have. For the purpose of this research, it is understood that study experience encompasses every factor or event that happens in a

student's life that can be related to their time in post-secondary education. Within the next section three different sub-factors that are mentioned by lots of researchers will be introduced that stand relevant to this experience, being academic success, social success and study resilience. But before these experiences are described, an idea will also be sketched on about the basic theories and concepts surrounding family communication.

Family communication

In general it can be argued that overall there is a consensus on what family is. Yet the exact meaning of it can be vastly different due to the many different family structures there are, it is a concept that is very situational. Therefore it can be very hard to define what family communication exactly is. The most inclusive and broad meaning of family communication that was founded within the literature is from Poire (2004), who defined family communication in the following way; messages that are typically sent with intent, perceived as intentional, and that have consensually shared meaning among individuals who are related either legally, biologically, or through marriage-like commitments and who control and nurture each other.

Family communication pattern theory

When looking into family communication there are many different models and theories that could be applied. One model that has been coming up a lot and is seen as one of the main theories surrounding family communication within the communicational psychology field is the family communication pattern theory (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006). According to Ireland (2017), is this theory originating from the 1970's by Jack Mcleod and Steven Chaffee. Family communication patterns theory, also known as FCP, talks directly about the socialisation process of individuals by explaining that families create a shared reality through repetitive communication behaviours that eventually become embedded in models of personal relationships or relational schemes. To say it in a more simplistic manner, within the family, and in communication in general, a consensus is made on how something is perceived or seen based on the fact that multiple people within a family agree upon this.

So if a parent that is from the upper class says potatoes are for the poor, and the oldest child agrees, consensus is created within the whole family that all members will eventually agree upon the fact that potatoes are for the poor. Ireland (2017) also mentions that in general, FCP's research focuses on two different factors, privacy management within a family and conflict styles. These two factors can for example be linked to the creation of boundaries, and so to speak looks into the perspective and attitudes of individuals on having some form of conflict, whether internal or external, and the resolution of this conflict that occurs. This is referred to as boundary turbulence, and can be either problematic or functional based on the person and the context the individual is in and from. For example, going back to the potato statement, the youngest child may really like eating mashed potatoes with grated cheese, but due to the families consensus of not eating potatoes since it is below their status, may the child either ignore or confront the personal conflict they have in regards to eating potatoes within their families context. This ofcourse is a very simplified example, but for more context is FCP also for example used in research about how bigger conflicts, such as rape, gets handles within a family structure.

Also do Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2006) explain the different typologies that a family can be assigned to within this theory. These typologies are consensual families, pluralistic families, protective families, and laissez-faire families, which can be seen in table 1. These families are structured in this way based on how they handle two different factors within their communication, which are conversation orientation and conformity orientation. Within their book do Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2006) define conversation orientation as the climate the family has to allow each member to participate in any type of interaction on any topics. Families that score high on this scale interact a lot with each other and share most of their lives, they are associated with open communication. In addition, these are also families that allow other members to help or discuss certain issues or decisions that affect only one specific member. Those on the low end of this spectrum are the opposite and share limited information to each other, and are not all members listened to equally. The second factor,

conformity orientation is described as the level of which there is homogeneity in beliefs. Families that have a high level of conformity orientation are according to Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2006) described as uniform in attitudes, and therefore are their interactions based on harmony and conflict avoidance. Also are the different members more dependent on one another, and are the children more obedient to their parent(s) and other adults. In general is this associated with the more traditional and hierarchical ideas of what a family is supposed to look like and act like. If families score low on the conformity level it means that they are associated with independence of members, individuality stands central and beliefs are heterogeneous.

In table 1 one can see the different typologies and the levels of the previous mentioned orientations they have. These types of family structures are different from general family structures that are commonly used within the field of family communication. But as Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2006) mention, unlike others it does not focus on whether these types are functional and better than the other. Rather it emphasises the importance of the fact that communication theory should not be one size fits all. But needs to be based around how the behaviour that is shown within a certain type of family, to be determined whether the communication is effective for that environment, FCP surrounds itself with the importance of context.

Table 1

| | High conversation orientation | Low conversation orientation |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| High conformity orientation | consensual families | protective families |
| Low conformity orientation | pluralistic families | laissez-faire families |

Social exchange theories

But, even though the typologies shared above give insight into how families converse and what their structure is, it is also important to look beyond the how and what of family communication and delve into why individuals talk to their relatives. Within communication psychology, theories commonly used originate from other fields such as sociology or cultural anthropology. One overarching concept is social exchange theory, a constellation of theories from the 1950s and 1960s that share similar attributes (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006).

Social exchange theory is centred on the idea that individuals engage in conversations with an expectation of mutual benefit. People seek to maximise their gains and minimise their losses in these exchanges. Relationships are sustained when the rewards consistently outweigh the costs, making them more likely to continue (Paat, 2013). This theory is relevant because it emphasises that communication is a two-way street, requiring both parties to engage reciprocally. For families, maintaining a healthy and valuable relationship relies on this reciprocal communication (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006). Most relationships thrive on the principles of reciprocity, and for families, this involves not only talking to each other but also fulfilling each other's well-being. When one perceives an imbalance or feels that the costs outweigh the benefits within the relationship, it can lead to tension, stress, and conflicts (Paat, 2013). Thus, understanding the motivations behind family communication is crucial for fostering relationships that are perceived as equitable and rewarding

Context related factors influencing parental communication

As mentioned earlier, family communication is a reciprocal relationship that is highly context-dependent. One reason that could be used when discussing why parental figures are or are not involved in their child's study life could be related to their educational level. According to Eccles and Harold (1999), parent(s)' interest in participation in their children's education decreases as they get older. Due to this decline in interest, communication

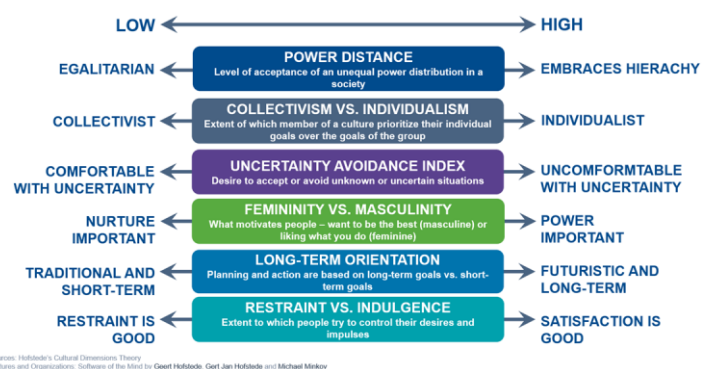
between students and their parent(s) can decrease, negatively affecting the students' well-being. Additionally, Hoover et al. (2010) argue that the lack of interest is more likely among parent(s) with a background in lower forms of education. To relate it back to this research target group, if, for example, a university student has parent(s) who have finished MBO or just high school, it is theorised that they would show less interest in their child's education. Furthermore, it is noted that, in general, those who are seen as lower-educated are more likely to come from minority groups (Hoover et al., 2010).

This is also where culture comes into play as a context-related factor, as many studies have shown the relation between education and parental influence is heavily influenced by culture. One main theory that can be used to discuss culture in relation to family communication is Hofstede's theory of cultural differences (Hofstede, 1986). Figure 2 provides a visual representation of Hofstede's six cultural dimensions. Hofstede argues about the effects of cultural differences on educational attitudes. For example, in some cultures, parent(s) do not involve themselves with education because it is not part of their culturally assigned responsibility. Within

their culture, there can be a distinct division of tasks, where parent(s) focus on other aspects of their children's development and leave educational-related aspects up to professionals, such as schools and lecturers. However, research has shown

that this minimal involvement is not as effective as its opposite, since higher levels of parental involvement are associated with children's higher achievement and engagement with their education (Walker & Berthelsen, 2010).

Another cultural aspect that can be considered is the perceived social value of education. In many cultures, obtaining a high-level degree grants individuals good social status, earning them respect and admiration. Therefore, parent(s) might motivate their children to excel



within their education to elevate the family's position within society. This cultural perspective can create significant pressure on students to meet high expectations (Yamamoto et al., 2022).

Hofstede's dimensions, as seen in Figure 2, illustrate that understanding these cultural factors and motivations is essential for understanding the diverse ways families communicate and interact regarding education. It's also important to note how gender plays a role within these context-related factors, as gender and the way genders are perceived are closely linked to culture as well as other social and historical factors. Dilawar and colleagues (2023) have researched how gender roles influence parental communication and concluded that there is a communication gap between parent(s) and female children from an early age onwards. The girls have a desire for equal love, attention, and expectations, for example, when it comes to socialising and achievements in their later life. Socialising encompasses making friends, communication expectations, romantic relationships, etc., and with achievements, it refers to job opportunities, educational development, and more. These findings from Dilawar and colleagues (2023) highlight the importance of addressing gender-based differences in parental communication to ensure equality.

Aspects of a students study experience

Now that basic knowledge is created on what family communication is and how different contexts and factors can influence this communication and family bond. It is also important to move onto the study experience that is influenced by family communication. As mentioned before does the literature mention study experience with three different aspects being academic success, social success, and study resilience. Within the next part are these

different aspects explained, to see what exactly their role is within study experience and how these are affected by family communication.

Firstly, academic success is defined as achieving good performance on standardised achievement tests or educational attainment in longitudinal studies, such as obtaining a bachelor's or master's degree (Christenson et al., 1992). According to Sadiku and Sylaj (2019), academic success is positively influenced by a healthy parent-child relationship. This influence arises from a healthy relationship between parents and students, based on the idea that expectations and aspirations are openly communicated and upheld by both sides. Within this healthy relationship, students feel encouraged to pursue academic success, knowing that their parents are invested in their educational journey. Additionally, family communication about setting academic goals and openly discussing challenges students encounter while studying could also potentially enhance academic success, as both parents and students are aware of the situations they are facing (Sadiku & Sylaj, 2019).

Additionally, non-academic success, which stands in the opposite of academic success, also has valuable insights on the experience of studying. Social success can be defined as every single achievement that has happened within a studying period, but is not related to the academic side. For example; getting a promotion at your job, or learning how to ride a unicycle, having a stable friend group, etc. The non-academic success lays more emphasis on the social development of an individual rather than the academic one. According to Booth- Butterfield en Sidelinger (1998) is it good to consider that during the transition from teenager to adulthood, parent(s) and children often renegotiate boundaries of their relationship and establish rules regarding privacy and communication, this sets the precedence of the social development that happens during study time, when students many times do not live with their parent(s) anymore and are more independent. It has been found that continued discussions enhance development of higher levels of moral reasoning, strengthening students decision making, which is of especial importance when children are

going to study. Therefore does family communication influence social success since it can be encouraging for students to develop and express opinions, ideas, searching solutions and passions of their own (Booth- Butterfield & Sidelinger, 1998).

But social success can also be limited by the means of communication, due to the rise of social media. According to Başaslan (2022), do young people prefer to spend time on the internet instead of engaging in social activities. And this researcher concludes that the reason why young people use the internet can be a cause of poor family and friend relationships, leading to a decrease in social success. Eventhough the use of social media makes it easier for everyone to establish a relationship by eliminating challenges, like lack of time or distance, it begins to replace the face-to face relationship. Which can have a negative effect on good family communication.

And lastly there is academic resilience, which, as defined by Jowkar and colleagues (2011), is "the capacity of students to attain academic and social success in school despite exposure to personal and environmental adversities." In essence, it means that the tactics and tools individuals use to overcome struggles, which are common in a school environment, are effective and beneficial to them. These coping mechanisms are often created by our parents through upbringing and communication strategies. Effective communication during times of difficulty or challenges, as highlighted by Jowkar and colleagues (2011), plays a crucial role in fostering academic resilience within students. Therefore, is the supportive role of parents, both emotional and practical help, during challenging times significantly important to the ability to navigate the study time. For example; think of the pandemic, all of a sudden there was a lockdown and all of life stopped for a while. The quick changes that happened within the worlds environment, caused students to test their resilience. And according to Noorafshan and colleagues (2013) , pluralistic families, which was discussed earlier in the FCP theory, seem to have children with the highest resilience. This is because this is the typology with the highest level of open communication but has a low conformity, meaning

that the individual still can hold its own point of view central. These factors are what creates open communication about problems student face and the stress they feel, which leads to cultivation of resilience (McKinley & Lilly, 2021).

In conclusion, this section showed the different ways family communication and students' study experiences were influenced by various factors such as academic success, social dynamics, and resilience. The complex meaning and understanding of family communication, influenced by factors such as educational background, cultural norms, and gender roles, shows the different ways in which a positive and healthy relation can help with maintaining a good wellbeing of students.

Research Methods

The following section presents the methodology of how this study was conducted. The aim of this study was to explore how the different factors mentioned in the theoretical part actually apply to the real lives of students. The research design consists of two steps, with the first step involving a survey, created in Qualtrics, that was distributed among students of different academic levels. This survey mainly included quantitative questions, but also a few qualitative questions. The goal of the survey was to find out as much as possible

about the basic communication between students and their parental figure(s) and to hopefully broaden and exemplify the theoretical background of this research. In addition, the survey allowed me to examine certain perspectives on which theoretical research is scarce, such as geographical factors or research on students from lower levels, such as MBO. The second step involved focus groups held with students from different educational levels. The focus groups were semi-structured and conducted more informally. The aim of this step was to create a conversation and discussion on the topic, in the hope that certain factors or terms would emerge as main themes or issues within this research.

Ethical Considerations

The study raised no major ethical concerns and was therefore approved by the ethics committee from the University of Groningen, Campus Fryslan. In both studies, it was made clear that the goal was not to delve into the most in-depth issues with individuals and their parental figures but to describe the general state of their communication and how this affects them. Additionally, within both studies, it was clarified that "parental figure(s)" is a more inclusive term to ensure all different ideas of parent(s) are considered, not just biological parents. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were free to withdraw from the focus groups or survey at any time and were given the right to refuse to answer questions or quit working on the survey. The survey data was completely anonymized. In the focus group transcriptions, participants' names were replaced with numbers (e.g., participant 1, participant 2). Furthermore, all data from the focus groups and surveys will be deleted after the project is completed.

Step 1

Participants

The participants for the first study were students from all different levels of education within the secondary educational system. The levels ranged from MBO to Master's students

and even included a few students from the Dutch police academy. A total of 66 participants voluntarily completed the survey. The participants were mainly Dutch, female, and from the bachelor level of education. They came from different age groups, ranging from below 18 to over 25, with the largest group being between 18-21 years old. Recruitment for the study was conducted through WhatsApp, with the survey shared among multiple group chats and personal contacts within the target group. Participation in the survey was voluntary, and participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study. They were assured that their responses would remain confidential and anonymous. The inclusion criterion was that participants needed to be students still studying or who had finished their studies within the 2023-2024 school year.

Procedure

The survey was designed to collect mainly quantitative data, with some qualitative parts. Due to the demographics of the contacts and targeted participants, the survey was available in both English and Dutch to increase comfort and accuracy in the participants' answers. Participants were provided with a clear explanation of the study's purpose and potential risks, and informed consent was obtained before participation. The survey consisted of three sections. First, participants were asked a combination of open and closed questions about themselves and their educational background. Next, they were asked to describe what parental figures mean to them and to elaborate on their contact with them. This was done using a combination of closed and open questions. This was followed by a few open questions about the participants' general experience with communicating with their parental figures, linking to the different terms and topics relevant to this research. The survey link was distributed via WhatsApp to a sample of students.

Data Analysis

The collected data from the surveys conducted in Dutch was not translated to English to preserve context-related nuances. All responses were analysed using thematic analysis,

identifying patterns, themes, and commonalities within the survey responses, as previously done with the literature review. Certain themes or patterns were related to specific parental-student situations, such as geographical location. Some questions' themes were converted into qualitative data to create a clearer overview of different factors influencing a student's study experience. The quantitative data from the surveys was analysed using Google Spreadsheets software, and some general statistics and correlations were automatically generated in Qualtrics software.

Step 2

Participants

The participants in the second study were personal contacts, including participants from social, professional, and educational circles, all currently studying at the secondary educational level. Only one participant joined the study based on a survey call-out to join the focus groups. In total, four different focus groups were held: three with six participants each and one with five participants, totaling 23 students. The participants were mainly Dutch, female, and bachelor-level students, mostly aged between 18 and 21 years old. The research included one minor, who was 16 years old.

Procedure

The focus groups were semi-structured, with one group held online. Two focus groups were conducted entirely in Dutch, and the other two in English. All focus groups lasted between an hour and an hour and a half. The facilitator asked a few questions regarding the research, and the group discussed these questions. The discussion was intended to be informal and conversational, simulating a group of friends talking about their families. This approach stemmed from the fact that the idea for this research originated from similar conversations. The focus groups provided an opportunity to address gaps identified during the preliminary

survey analyses and to help identify main topics and focal points. The interviews were recorded; before recording, the procedures and participants' ethical rights were explained, and participants gave their verbal consent to be recorded.

Data Analysis

The collected data from the focus groups was transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis, identifying patterns, themes, and commonalities within the focus groups and literature review. The themes were then organised into categories to create an overview of different factors that influence a student's study experience in relation to their parental communication.

Results

Within the following section are listed the main results of the two-step study that was conducted. These results are going to be helpful towards answering the research and sub-questions(s). First will the survey be discussed, followed by the results from the focus group.

Step 1 - Survey

The survey had a total of 66 participants. To be considered, an individual needed to finish a minimum of the first 13 questions. The survey had a majority of women respondents, with 48 out of 66, followed by 17 male participants and 1 non-binary/third gender individual.

The main age group was between 18-21 years old, which comprised 65% of the participants. 24% were between the ages of 22-25, 8% were older than 25, and 3% were below 18 years old. The participants came from 18 different institutions and represented over 13 different nationalities. Most participants were from Campus Fryslan or were Dutch. Around 23 students had followed a program before their current one, and most are in bachelor programs. In Figure 3, an overview of the different levels of programs can be seen.

Ten of the participants live at home with their parent(s), and only 1 participant says that they never see their parents. The largest group of participants, 19 in total, live around 50-150 km away from their parents. Additionally, about 17 people answered that their parents live more than 300 km away. It is assumed that these participants do not live in the Netherlands.

In Figure 4 below, a pattern can be seen in the amount of time students visit and communicate with their parents. Those who visit their parental figure(s) on a more regular basis tend to communicate with their parents more often. Conversely, those who visit their parents less frequently also communicate with them less.

Figure 3 What level do you currently study?

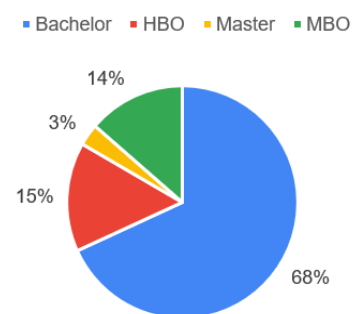
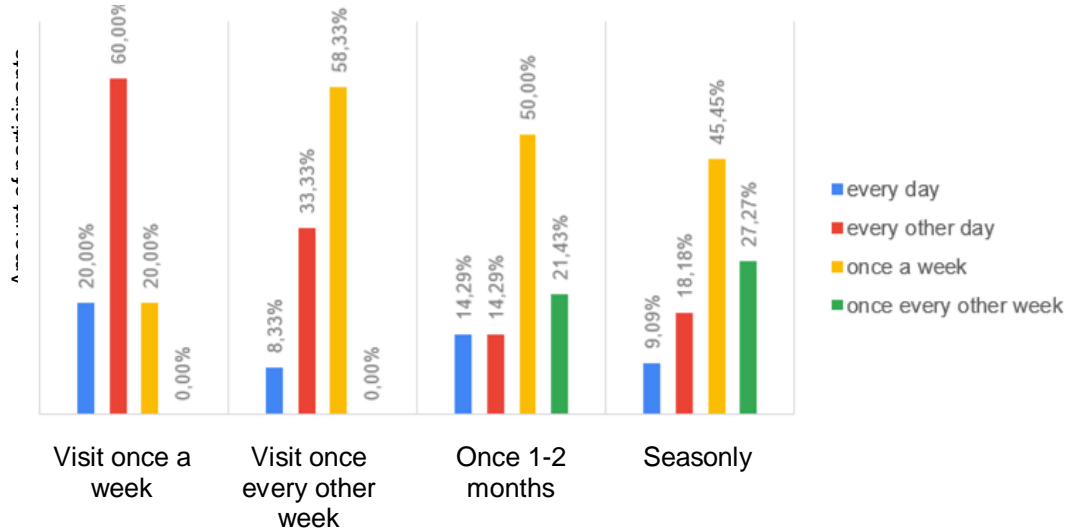


Figure 4: Percentage of communication per participant



Parents' level of education varied as well, but in general, everyone was quite highly educated. Only 11 out of 66 participants had parents who obtained an MBO level or lower. Overall, using their phone for either calling or texting through WhatsApp is the most popular means of communication.

The participants were also asked questions regarding different concepts and their meanings. For example, they were asked to describe what a healthy study-life balance is to them. The three main themes mentioned were balance, social life, and routine. One response that stood out was: "I'd say taking breaks, not studying too late, which means knowing when to stop and not always expecting the best of yourself." This understanding of a healthy study-life balance was the only one that mentioned being fulfilled with one's own work and positively reflecting on oneself.

In addition, participants were asked about the influence of culture on the way their parents communicate. Although 51 participants agreed that culture has an effect, many answered yes but were not fully sure why.

Participants were also asked about the influence parental communication has on three aspects mentioned in the theoretical framework: academic resilience, academic

success, and social success. The responses for academic and social success were quite similar, with the majority of participants agreeing that parental communication affects both. The main reason mentioned was that parents care for the overall well-being of their children, providing advice, loving words, or motivation to push towards better well-being. However, responses regarding academic resilience were more diverse. Although the majority answered that it has an effect, a significant number of participants said no. Those who said no believed that their resilience was linked to their own achievements and not created by their parents. For example:

Lastly, participants were asked about what they talk about with their parents and why they decide to engage in conversations with them. As expected, people mainly talk about their daily lives or important decisions such as financial or educational matters. One participant expressed gratitude for talking to their parents, saying, "sometimes they need a kick in the butt." Overall, many participants spoke positively about their communication with their parental figures. However, some mentioned negative aspects. For example, one participant said, "they make me remember what I'm doing it for, but this comes with a feeling of fear of failure and disappointing them." Other similar responses indicated that students also feel a lot of pressure when talking to their parents, feeling obliged to be the best or do amazing things, which is not always the case.

step 2 - focus groups

The focus groups consisted of participants from many different levels and backgrounds. Overall, most of the students had a good relationship with their parents or set boundaries for themselves to create/maintain a good relationship. Participants 4 and 6, for example, mentioned that moving out and creating physical distance between themselves and their parents helped them establish and maintain a good relationship.

Within all focus groups, there was a lengthy discussion on how some students felt indirectly influenced negatively by their parents' lack of understanding of their educational

careers. Some even said that their parents stopped being able to help them since high school. There was no consensus on whether students with less educated parents feel disadvantaged compared to those with highly educated parents. Some participants expressed frustration that parents with lower education levels do not understand the institutional issues their children face or fully grasp what student life is like. Participants also noted that their parents sometimes have unrealistic expectations, oversimplifying assignments and adding stress and frustration.

In focus group 4, it was mentioned that those with higher educated parents benefit socially, living in better student housing since their parents or their friends' parents own it, and worrying less about financial issues. The topic of finances came up in all focus groups and will be discussed later on within this section.

It was very noticeable within the focus groups that most students mentioned they either call or text their mother. Most participants said they mainly communicate with their mother rather than their father. And talk to their parents to get support or advice on certain things like household duties or decisions about the future. Siblings were also mentioned; for example, in focus group 2, there was a discussion about how participants learned to communicate with their parents based on their siblings' reactions. Essentially, they learned what to say or not to say based on their sibling's trial and error. In focus group 3, it was also brought up that siblings can be an added stressor, especially when one sibling is not seen as good of a student by the parents as the participant. It was pointed out that parents can put a lot of pressure on one child to achieve as much as possible, leading to feelings of being overwhelmed. However, this is not the case for all siblings. For example, in focus group 4, one participant's sibling had just won an academic achievement award, and they stated: "I don't really feel bad pressure or anything; I'm really just happy for him that he's doing well."

The topic of culture was also brought up in the focus groups, with focus groups 1 and 2 sharing valuable insights. Both groups acknowledged that culture plays a role, but some

participants found it hard to articulate how since they come from a very Western culture. It was interesting to note that after focus group 1 ended, and the recording was stopped, participant 3 told participant 2 that they related to each other's answers more because both were not raised within Western cultures.

Lastly, the topic of guilt was found within all groups. In some way or form, guilt was mentioned in most of the questions asked to the participants. From feeling guilty about having better academic achievements than their siblings, moving to a different country to study abroad, not calling their parents enough, and being financially or emotionally dependent, all participants directly or indirectly linked something to guilt. Many acknowledged that guilt is not always a bad thing or holding them back from living their student life. However, what made most students feel guilty was the fear of disappointing their parents or making them feel like they are just a funding system. The financial aspect linked with guilt was a recurring theme that generally had a negative impact on participants. A participant from focus group 2 mentioned: "I feel guilty, as I see my dad as a bank, and my mom sees herself as a housemaid for me." This quote shows that sometimes it is hard for students to see when they are crossing the line of taking their parents' help for granted. This was also linked in focus group 3, where a participant talked about how hard it is to switch fields since their parents have invested money into their education. They don't want their parents to feel like their money and efforts go to waste.

Discussion

Now that the most important literature and results have been drawn out, it is time to use these findings to answer the main research question. This can only be achieved if the sub-questions are addressed as well; therefore, this section will provide comprehensive answers to all the sub-questions to the best of our abilities.

The first sub-question that needs to be addressed is: which aspects of communication can be linked to a positive student experience? According to the literature, it is not solely specific aspects that can be directly linked to a positive experience. All forms of communication, particularly family communication, are highly context-dependent. It can be said that open and direct communication positively influences the majority of students. The survey participants demonstrate that many engage in open discussions about various topics, and such loving conversations can lead to good motivation for their studies. This, in turn, can result in better academic and social success, ultimately influencing how students perceive their study experience retrospectively. Whether verbal communication more positively affects study experience remains unclear. Although social media is often seen as a hindrance due to its limitation on face-to-face interaction, the current student population heavily relies on it to stay connected with their loved ones. Criticism or limitations on this mode of communication may exacerbate the guilt experienced by students, which has been a recurring factor in the focus groups and could have a more significant negative impact on their study experience.

The next question that requires addressing is: how does family communication influence the academic success of students? The literature readily provides links on how this influence occurs. Both the survey and focus groups indicated similar results to the theory, suggesting that parental communication significantly impacts academic success. Open communication can provide emotional support, motivation, and advice, contributing to students' well-being and academic performance. However, it also highlights the potential

negative effects of unrealistic expectations and pressure on students. Therefore, it is crucial to emphasise the importance of open dialogue in family communication to mitigate such issues.

Following is the question: how does family communication influence the social success of students? The answer to this question can also be related to academic success. Rather than solely motivating academic performance, family communication can positively influence the social success of students. Parents equip their children with the tools to establish communication boundaries, and the nature of these boundaries, whether strict or more lenient, significantly impacts students. As seen in the focus groups, stricter boundaries with parents can affect social success and overall well-being positively. Participants also expressed guilt about not contacting their parents enough, which sometimes impacts their social interactions as they juggle responsibilities and desires. This could explain why stressors mentioned in the RIVM research introduction have an impact on students. Additionally, it's noteworthy that students with highly educated parents often experience greater social success, as suggested by focus group 4, due to better living conditions and fewer financial worries, allowing them to participate more actively in social activities and build networks.

Next, what is the role of study resilience in a positive student experience and how can families influence this resilience? While resilience may not resonate with all individuals in this study, families are believed to provide tools for resilience by offering support when needed and encouraging independence. Though independence is not directly mentioned in the literature, it can be inferred from the findings of this research. A balanced approach from parents, knowing when to intervene and when to step back, is crucial in equipping children with resilient tools for studying.

Lastly, how family communication can foster stable mental health among students. Throughout this report, various aspects of mental health or well-being have been mentioned directly or indirectly. Family communication plays a vital role in creating stable mental health

among students by providing emotional support, promoting open conversations about different aspects of students' lives, and encouraging their goals and aspirations. As highlighted by the survey respondents, communication with family establishes routine and structure in daily life, contributing to overall well-being. This, in turn, influences how students handle various stressors they encounter during their study experience, building resilience to withstand challenges like a global pandemic or other stressors mentioned by the RIVM in the introduction.

limitations

Overall, this study has several limitations. For step 1, the survey, it is very challenging to explore cultural and gender aspects. The main culture discussed is Dutch, and although the Netherlands has a diverse population, there is no way to determine the specific ethnic backgrounds of the participants from their answers. Additionally, analysing gender is difficult because males were vastly underrepresented in both the focus groups and the survey. Furthermore, my survey sample is somewhat limited due to a lack of diversity in gender and nationality, as well as a scarcity of master's or PhD students.

For step 2, the focus groups, there are also some limitations. Firstly, focus group one was markedly different from the others. Being the first focus group for this research, it was more general compared to subsequent ones, which had more specific questions or nuances inspired by previous sessions. Additionally, it is evident that the English focus groups were more structured and provided more in-depth insights compared to the Dutch focus groups. This difference is likely because the English focus groups primarily consisted of Global Responsibility and Leadership students, who are trained to answer questions broadly and critically, even when they don't have complete answers. Moreover, Dutch people are known for their directness, which may have affected the depth and breadth of insights in this research. Lastly, focus group 4 was conducted online, limiting the extent of interaction among participants.

Finally, this research encompasses various concepts and aspects that are interconnected and can be linked through the findings. Unfortunately, there is currently a massive research gap in this topic, and there is a need for more diverse arguments. Much of the existing research on this topic presents similar arguments, indicating a limited pool of knowledge. While there was enough information to draw upon for this research, the similarity in existing knowledge suggests a need for more varied perspectives and insights.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study aimed to explore the relationship between family communication, student experiences, and mental health. The findings illuminate the multifaceted nature of communication within families and its impact on various aspects of student life. The study sought to address the research question, "What is the role of family communication in fostering a positive study experience?"

Firstly, it became evident that while family communication is highly contextual, open and direct communication within families consistently emerges as a key factor in creating positive student experiences. Despite variations in context, the findings suggest that open communication is often the most effective and successful approach.

It's crucial to openly communicate about boundaries, as resilience plays a vital role in shaping a positive study experience. Resilience can only be fostered through an understanding of personal boundaries, which can only be achieved through open communication between students and parents. Additionally, the central role of guilt in students' experiences, though underexplored in existing literature, emerged as a significant aspect in this research. Future studies should delve deeper into the role of guilt in students' study experiences, as addressing this issue may improve overall well-being and potentially reduce mental health issues among students.

In summary, this research underscores the importance of family communication in shaping positive student experiences and fostering mental health resilience. Moving forward, further research is necessary to explore additional dimensions of family communication and its interplay with guilt.

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Appendix

Appendix 1:

Part 1 – demographic questions (obligated questions)

- What is your age? (range)
- What gender do you identify as?
- What is your nationality?
- Where do you currently study?
- What are you studying ?
- Is this your first study ? (for example: double bachelor, or you started in history, quit and are doing law now)
- What is your level of education?

Part 2 – general questions

- Could you describe what your parental figure(s) look like? Eg; mom & dad, non-binary & mom, dad only, grandmother, guardian, none, etc.
- How often do you visit your parental figure(s)? Or do you live at home?
- If you do not live at home anymore, how far away do you live from your parental figure(s)?
 - o Either Kilometers or same village, province, country etc
- On average, how much do you talk to your parental figure(s) on a weekly basis?
- What means do you use to communicate with your parental figure(s)?a
- What is the highest level of education your parental figure(s) have obtained?

Part 3

- What would you describe as a healthy study life?
- Do you think that your culture from your home country plays a role in your communication with your parents? Why or why not?
- What is the difference between communication between high school and now? Has your communication with your parental figure(s) changed?
- Why do you talk to your parental figure(s)? eg; listening ear, just to talk, financial support, celebratory moments, etc

- When are moments when you are really grateful that you can communicate with your parental figure(s)?
- What are the main topic(s) you talk to each other about?
- Do you specifically talk about your study experience? And how is it brought into conversation?
- Do you think that your parents' communication has an effect on your overall positive study experience? Why or why not?
- Do you think that your parents' communication has an effect on your academic achievements? Why or why not?
- Do you think that your parents are helping you with building academic resilience?

Academic resilience = the capacity of you as a student to attain academic and social success in school, despite exposure to personal and environmental difficulties.

- Do you recognize any of the following communication techniques that your parents use when talking to you? (choices: feedback, advise, gossiping, open communication, criticism, gaslighting, choice that was not mentioned above)

Appendix 2: Guiding Questions focus groups

Questions for focus groups:

- Introduce yourself and the project
- The focus group will be around 1 hour, try to answer as openly as possible
- Ethical considerations: keep things in the room, don't talk over each other, i will record this but after my research remove, everyone will introduce themselves but I will change names in recording to participant 1, 2, etc

Intro questions:

- What are parental figures for you?
- And how often do you communicate with them and through what means?
- Do you think that the way you talk to them affects your relationship?

Level of education

- Are your parent(s) understanding of the level of education that you are doing currently?
- If they don't understand, do you ignore the topic of school with them? And how do you handle it with your parental figures?
- Has their understanding limited you in your study experience?

Resilience

- When something goes wrong or you had a bad day do you call your parent(s)?
 - Why or why not?
 - How do they help you?
- What do you do when your parent(s) do not agree or support you with someone?
How does this affect you?
- Do your parent(s) push you, even though you don't want them to? How do you handle that?

Distance

- Do you think the amount of time you communicate with your parent(s) limits your independence?
- Do you feel negative emotions when you don't talk to them? And does that limit your day to day life?

Covid

- How did covid influence your mental health?
- Did you notice a different relation between your parent(s) and you existing?
 - If yes, does your communication help or worsen that relationship?