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# "Men Don't Need to Know Everything": Digital Kinwork, Gender, and Micro-Power in Polish Families

*Abstract:* This paper analyses how traditional gender divisions are negotiated, reinforced, or redefined in digital kinwork. Drawing on two qualitative projects, we examine how platformization intersects with gender and generational roles in practices of care, coordination, and recognition. We first provide an overview of common digital kinwork practices, then explore the gendered divisions that shape them, and finally show how platforms redistribute expertise and structure micro-power within family relations. Our findings reveal that digital platforms function as infrastructure for family life, with women often being the first to adopt messaging apps and social platforms, unlike past patterns where men led in technology use. Yet their expertise is framed as caregiving rather than prestige. We argue that digital kinwork extends beyond intimacy and connection, encompassing micro-power, the distribution of recognition, boundary-setting, and the negotiation of ambivalent relations of care and control.

*Keywords:* gender division of labour, family, digital kinwork, digital platforms, practices of care, qualitative research

## Introduction

Research on smart homes has concentrated on technical infrastructure, energy efficiency, and the management of household appliances. As Hargreaves and Wilson (2017) note, the dominant focus has been on performance and sustainability, with much less attention given to the social dimensions such as care, intimacy, and gender. Yet, as Spigel (2012) has shown, technologies in the home have never been neutral tools, but shaped imaginaries of modernity, femininity, and family order.

The domestication framework (Berker et al. 2005; Hirsch & Silverstone 2003) demonstrated that technologies are integrated into routines and meanings within households. From the washing machine to the home computer, these processes have been gendered. Contemporary smart home research extends these concerns. Maalsen (2020), for example, conceptualises the smart home as an assemblage of material, digital, and social relations that reconfigure how home is experienced and practiced. Chambers (2022) observes that "tech-work" in smart homes is often undertaken (and controlled) by men as a form of enjoyment, marginalising women. Strengers and Nicholls (2017) similarly describe how the pleasures of configuring, programming, and displaying smart technologies are gendered,

with men cast as technical authorities and women as "users rather than designers". Pink et al. (2022: 5) critique these masculinist imaginaries for failing to capture the contingency and processual nature of households.

In our paper, we conceptualise the home as an ecosystem of digital platforms[1] (e.g. WhatsApp) that are domesticated and integral to everyday family life (platformization of home and family as described by Livingstone & Sefton-Green 2025 and Mannell et al. 2025). We treat digital platforms as socio-technical infrastructures that shape how communication, coordination, and care are organised within families. Research shows that platforms introduce specific logics of visibility, traceability and datafication that reconfigure social practices (van Dijck, Poell & de Waal 2018; Livingstone & Sefton-Green 2025). In family contexts, platforms enable persistent contact, lightweight forms of presence, and routinised exchanges characteristic of digital family life (Taipale 2019; Erstad et al. 2024).

This lets us connect smart home research with studies of digital kinwork, emphasising the communicative, organisational, and emotional labour that sustains families across time and space (Braithwaite et al. 2017; di Leonardo 1987; Eklund & Sadowski 2023). Drawing on the concept of *doing family* (Morgan 2011), we examine how recognition, micro-power, and the negotiation of gendered and generational roles are enacted through everyday digital practices.

Our guiding question is: How are traditional gender divisions negotiated, reinforced, or redefined in the digital practices of doing family?

To address this, we begin with an overview of common digital kinwork practices, followed by an examination of the gendered divisions accompanying them. Finally, we connect research on digital housekeeping with kinwork to show how platforms redistribute expertise and shape micro-power in family relations.

## Literature Review

### *Kinwork and doing family*

Feminist scholarship pointed out that sustaining family ties involves labour that is unequally distributed. Di Leonardo (1987) conceptualised *kinwork* as the communicative and organisational work (letters, phone calls, arranging visits) that kept extended families connected. Later, Bryceson, Vuorela (2002) and others elaborated how such practices, often carried out by women, are central to the maintenance of family networks across households. Parallel research also emphasised the importance of emotional labour (Lin & Szczygieł 2023) and everyday care practices (Baldassar & Merla 2014), highlighting the many forms of work that underpin family life.

At the same time, family sociology moved away from institutional understandings of "the family" towards practice-based approaches. Morgan (2011: 6) reframed the discussion

[1] We follow here van Dijk, Poell, and de Waal's definition of digital platforms as "a programmable digital architecture designed to organize interactions between users (…). It is geared toward the systematic collection, algorithmic processing, circulation, and monetization of user data" (van Dijck et al. 2018: 4).

by introducing the idea of family practices. Instead of treating family as a fixed institution, he suggested analysing the activities through which family relations are enacted, affirmed, and sometimes renegotiated. This approach directs attention to the everyday, situated, and processual character of family life.

More recently, Eklund (2023) has shown how kinwork is reshaped under conditions of individualisation and digitalisation, shifting from household-to-household communication towards more individualised, technology-mediated exchanges. Extending this line of thought, Eklund and Sadowski (2023) introduced the concept of intimate family work to highlight the micro-practices through which intimacy is actively created and sustained in everyday family interactions.

### *Digital family*

The practices of doing family are increasingly mediated through digital technologies. The notion of the *digital family* (Taipale 2019) captures this shift by focusing on the everyday communicative routines that constitute family life in online environments. Digital platforms are part of care, intimacy, and recognition; they are used to seek information, share advice, and find emotional support (Danielsbacka et al. 2023; Odasso & Geoffrion 2023).

These routines are often discussed as *digital relationality*: small, repeated interactions that sustain coordination, ritual, and a sense of being together (Erstad et al. 2024; MacDonald et al. 2023). Families combine different modes (*polymedia*), from synchronous calls to asynchronous photo-sharing, emojis, or short text replies. Technologically assisted family communication shows that technology is often essential for maintaining family relationships and sustaining everyday rituals and a sense of being together via platforms (Barrie et al. 2019). Communication often runs through individual devices, consistent with the idea of networked individualism (Kennedy & Wellman 2007).

Literature on *digital family* or *digital relationality* mostly focuses on transnational families, where digital platforms function like a "new family member," maintaining contact across distance (Bryceson & Vuorela 2002; Kędra 2021; Pustułka 2015). In this paper, we analyse families living in the same country or even household. Platforms, especially WhatsApp and Messenger, are part of the ordinary rhythms of being together.

### *Digital housekeeping*

Digital housekeeping refers to the small, routine tasks involved in setting up, placing, and maintaining networked technologies so that they run smoothly as part of household routines (Horst & Sinanan 2021: 5). Typical activities include (1) installation and configuration of hardware, (2) management of software and apps, and (3) transfer of knowledge within the family. In many households, the first is often taken on by fathers, the second by younger generations acting as warm experts, and the third involves intergenerational teaching (Taipale 2019: 83).

The division of this work is gendered. Even though women do more domestic labour overall, men handle digital housekeeping (Kennedy et al. 2015) framed as a source of competence and enjoyment rather than a duty. Technical expertise confers decision-making

power over domestic technologies. Complex configurations can marginalise other users, and once someone has handled the technology, they are quickly recognised as the expert, household "guru" (Aagaard 2023; Rode & Poole 2018), which discourages others from learning (Kennedy et al. 2015); a pattern also noted around smart home systems (Strengers & Nicholls 2017; Chambers 2020). The common term WAF (wife acceptance factor; see e.g. Aagaard 2023) further illustrates how "approval" from a female partner is positioned within a male-led decision process, reinforcing power asymmetries.

In smart home contexts, men frequently describe this sphere as play or a hobby, and control over connected devices can align with broader household authority (Aagaard 2023). However, technologies can reconfigure how gendered practices are performed and interpreted—for example, apps can shift the meaning and ownership of tasks such as watering plants (Pink 2004; Aagaard 2023).

In this article, we treat digital housekeeping as an infrastructural layer: it governs access, convenience, and control over the home's technical environment. It is analytically distinct from the communicative and emotional work of doing family; the next subsection turns to that relational labour in digital kinwork.

### *Digital kinwork*

In its digital form, kinwork refers to the unpaid communicative and organisational labour performed through messaging platforms (e.g., WhatsApp, Messenger), small-group threads, video calls, and asynchronous exchanges (photos, emojis, brief replies; Holloway & Green 2017; Kędra 2021).

In many families, identifiable kinkeepers, mostly women (in Braithwaite et al.'s study, 91% [2017]), initiate talk, set tone, and hold information flows (Alkobi & Khvorostianov 2024). Others participate as "flickerers," while silent warm experts (typically younger kin) provide backstage technical help (Alkobi & Khvorostianov 2024; Holloway & Green 2017). In the Polish case, Pustułka (2015) demonstrates how capability constraints and motivation (related to age, social capital, and gender) filter who uses digital platforms within families. Surveys show gendered usage profiles: women are over-represented in "family-only" and "dual-high" (work + family) digital communication, suggesting a potential *digital double burden* (Hu & Qian 2024). Consistent with longer caregiving histories, adult children also report closer and more frequent tech-mediated contact with mothers (Barrie et al. 2019; Dare 2008).

Drawing on qualitative interviews, Eklund (2023) shows that some men now take on parts of digital kinwork and that younger women are less willing to perform it for men. However, other studies document enduring role imaginaries: in 15 Swiss families, fathers more often adopted a "geek" identity—more permissive toward children's media use—while mothers took the "good mother" role of regulator and safety manager (Balleys 2022 in: Erstad et al. 2024), consistent with norms placing digital safety work with mothers (Livingstone & Blum-Ross 2020 in: Erstad et al. 2024). In transnational contexts, Polish mothers describe the time, effort and emotion digital contact requires with photos used phactically to sustain connection (Kędra 2021). Together, these findings indicate cohort-specific shifts within a still gendered division of relational labour.

### *Power, visibility, and belonging in digital practices of doing family*

Family relations involve not only affection and reciprocity but also asymmetry, tensions, and unmet expectations. Digital channels can amplify these dynamics (Baldassar et al. 2007). On platforms, power is exercised in small, routine moves that organise access, visibility, and obligation.

Technical expertise confers decision power over the domestic digital environment: the "expert" selects devices, configures networks, sets permissions, and solves breakdowns. Complex setups can marginalise other users and make everyday dependence visible; this infrastructural layer quietly structures who can do what, when, and with whose help (Kennedy et al. 2015).

On platforms such as WhatsApp, recognition and boundaries emerge through small, routine moves: photo posting, tagging, and withholding function as recognition work. Mothers often act as archivists and disclosure gatekeepers, sustaining intergenerational exchange yet generating friction over children's visibility (Holloway & Green 2017). Membership in family chats marks belonging; invitations, removals, and the public nature of exits make boundary work ordinary. Many members lurk or mute and ignore long or awkward posts, staying but going quiet, which retains headcount while hollowing participation (Garcia & Vivacqua 2021). Kinkeepers start threads, set an upbeat tone, and coordinate plans, preventing silence but also positioning themselves as arbiters of inclusion and norms (Kamal, MdNoor, & Baharin 2016; Alkobi & Khvorostianov 2024). Together, these practices redistribute visibility and obligation and concentrate micro-power and coordination burdens in gendered ways (Kamal et al. 2016; Garcia & Vivacqua 2021; Alkobi & Khvorostianov 2024).

Platform functionalities, technical expertise, and role expectations create micro-power effects, shaping whose updates circulate across threads, whose presence is visible, and who carries the burden of coordination and accountability. These mechanisms intersect with the gendered division of digital labour outlined above, showing how everyday platform use reproduces and reworks power relations inside families.

Prior work shows that digital platform sustain ties in transnational families. In our paper, we shift to domestic, three-generation settings and show how gendered digital family work distributes recognition (whose updates and images matter) and micro-power (who initiates, decides, and follows up), intensifying women's load with limited room for change.

## Data and Methods

This article draws on data from two separate qualitative studies conducted in Poland, analysed jointly for this paper.

### *Study 1 (tri-generational families)*

Polish part of the EC (CHANSE) funded project, 'Platforing Families: Tracing digital transformations in everyday life across generations (PlatFAMs).'

Conducted in 2024–2025 within an international project on platformized family life, comprises 33 semi-structured interviews in 11 three-generation families (child aged 8–18, one parent, one grandparent), followed by two group interviews. Purposive sampling ensured variation in residence (rural, small-town, urban), family forms (including divorced, step- and transnational families), and socioeconomic position[2]. To capture everyday platform domestication, interviews combined open-ended questions with short elicitation techniques (platform mapping, imagined "ideal" family apps).

***Study 2 (empty-nest couples)***

Conducted in 2018–2020 in two metropolitan regions, it included 42 dyadic interviews with couples aged 50–64, whose children had recently moved out, followed year later by 45 individual interviews with spouses. Recruitment combined press adverts and snowballing. Most participants were middle class with higher education, with some socioeconomic diversity. The dyadic format captured shared and contested narratives, while the follow-up IDIs elicited more personal accounts, especially tensions and disagreements.

Although designed independently, the two projects share a qualitative orientation and parallel themes: i.a. family communication, intergenerational relations, digital practices. A joint analysis of these two projects captures the diversity of intergenerational families—those with younger (Study 1) and adult children (Study 2). For this article, we conducted a secondary analysis with a common analytical coding frame. Core questions on everyday communication, emotional support and digital routines were comparable across both studies, enabling analytical integration.

***Data handling and analysis***

Interviews (30 minutes to nearly three hours) were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and fully anonymised. Analysis followed a two-stage procedure in MAXQDA. First, deductive coding identified fragments on communication and platform use. Second, inductive coding developed subcodes on relational work (e.g., conversational tokens, recognition, gendered kinwork boundary work). Themes were refined through iterative, team-based comparison across generations (Study 1) and between partners (Study 2), allowing us to trace continuities and divergences in digital family practices.

***Ethics***

All participants received written information about the study and signed informed consent forms (in the case of minors, consent was obtained from parents). Protocols and recruitment procedures were approved by the relevant institutional ethics committees. To preserve confidentiality, all quoted names are pseudonyms.

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[2] Link to methodological report: https://www.uv.uio.no/iped/english/research/projects/erstad-platforming-families/methodology/platfams-documentation-report-final-front.pdf

## Digital Kinwork in Polish Families

Research on transnational families has shown that digital communication supports everyday coordination, emotional presence, and a sense of intimacy across distance (Eklund 2023; Kędra 2021; Madianou & Miller 2013). Our study suggests that many of these communicative routines are also found in families living in the same town or even household. These short exchanges sustain contact, affirm presence, and create a sense of "being together" without demanding extensive interaction, exemplifying what Madianou (2016) describes as ambient co-presence.

Someone writes 'Where are you? It's raining here', or something. So there's always this sort of semblance of contact, right? (S2_IDI_G11_M)[3]

Family chats mirror the everyday talk of kitchens, doorways, or garden tables. These updates may come through chats, video calls, or photos. The presence they maintain is often ambient rather than focused. Sometimes, a family member will place a tablet or laptop in the room to allow others to be "virtually present" in the background, without active interaction. Thus, digital media let relatives share everyday life in the background, making presence less tied to real-time attention (Madianou 2016).

What's going on in our Messenger? You see the kids, some urine test results. The younger one is climbing, probably some Tatra or Alps. (S2_DDI_8_M)

Right now, I know Jerzy is cleaning the windows, for example, because the photo was already posted. I mean, they're always somehow around me—not necessarily physically. (S2_IDI_9_F)

Contact persists through "conversational tokens" — light-touch media (memes, jokes, links, or app notifications) that sustain mutual presence, even when there is little to say. These practices preserve connection but also offer distance.

Sometimes I just reply with an emoji when I don't know what to say, so it's not stupid or something. (S1_IDI_F6_son_12)

Alongside this, digital platforms support more ritualised forms of interaction, tied to routine or symbolic events (Barrie et al. 2019). Unlike phatic signals, rituals are scheduled or scripted and create expectations of participation and reply.

I write to both grandmas 'good morning' (…) and there's a photo of a chick or something like that, something typical, something granny-like (…) and always at bedtime too (…) (S1_IDI_F8_son_16)

Photos are a central medium of family connection. Shared images initiate conversation and provide grounding for exchanges across physical and emotional distance. This is particularly important in shared custody arrangements or for grandparent–grandchild bonds. Photo-sharing, as shown in earlier research, functions both as relational activation and as a way of curating what aspects of family life become visible to whom (Holloway & Green 2017).

[3] All quotations are identified by study (S1 or S2), interview number, gender (M/F in S2) or social role (grandparent, parent, child), and age (in S1).

We have a shared album with the boys in Google Photos (…) both me and my ex-husband have access, the grandparents too (…) then the grandparents, for example, reach out and ask (…) it's also a starting point for discussions [with the kids], to talk about what they did at dad's. (S1_IDI_F1_mother_39)

Another common practice is the expectation to "check in"—confirm arrival at school, home, or a travel destination. As we show later, these requests for updates can be experienced as care, but also as pressure or surveillance, generating conflict if someone fails to respond.

Digital platforms are also used for practical decision-making and everyday coordination. Family members share photos of items or logistics-related information to seek or offer help. This includes managing deliveries for older relatives, consulting on personal purchases and arranging everyday matters.

Grzesiu is obsessed with shoes, he's always buying something like, 'Mom, what do you think of these?' (…). (S2_DDI_11_F)

These forms of everyday digital care resemble earlier kinwork described in feminist scholarship, particularly the coordination, filtering of information, and logistical support traditionally provided by women within families (di Leonardo 1987).

Family life on digital platforms is also shaped through a layered architecture of group chats. These vary in purpose and duration: some are permanent (e.g., "me and my sons"), others created ad hoc around specific events like birthdays. Group membership draws boundaries of belonging, defining who is included, left out, or expected to engage.

We have all sorts of groups, like circles in a math set. One chat is for the four of us, one is for the three of them, so they can talk about matches, about Lech Poznań — they're all hardcore fans. (S2_IDI_12_F)

In line with prior studies on digital family groups, these configurations serve as tools of kinship boundary-making, through which proximity and hierarchy are negotiated (Madianou & Miller 2013).

In sum, digital platforms have become a key layer of family infrastructure—much like kitchens, living rooms, or cars once were—hosting routine exchanges and organising shared life. As we will demonstrate, these routines reflect and reproduce divisions of labour, influence, and everyday authority. In this sense, our findings resonate with works arguing that platforms are not neutral tools but socio-technical systems that reconfigure power and dependence within intimate relations (Madianou 2016).

## Gendered Digital Kinwork

Gendered divisions offer a particularly valuable lens for examining the previously discussed practices of digital kinwork. The tension between framing technology as 'masculine' and kinwork as 'feminine' suggests a confrontation of divergent social discourses. As noted in the literature, despite ongoing social and technological changes, women largely remain kinkeepers, serving as family communication managers even in digital families (Braithwaite i in. 2017; Alkobi & Khvorostianov 2024; Kędra 2021). Similarly, in the Polish

studies, middle- and older-generation women predominated in using digital platforms for intimate family work (Eklund & Sadowski 2023): initiating and facilitating contacts, setting the tone, and coordinating information flows. To do so, they used platforms like WhatsApp and Messenger, as well as those traditionally linked to their roles, such as children's education (e.g. Librus), health (e.g. IKP), or shopping.

Our respondents often described mothers as the household information hub, receiving messages from various family members across different households.

> Recently, we were waiting for our daughter to give birth, and our son kept calling or texting [me], 'How's Natalia?' (S2_DDI_14_F)

The belief that mothers are the most well-informed family members persists, as they maintain communication channels with relatives, initiating conversations, checking in, and posting conversational tokens to prompt responses, often with the support of grandmothers.

> We have our own 'Family' group where we sometimes post shared things—some photos, a comment, some news—but apart from that, I keep in touch with the boys individually through texts. And honestly, I don't really know if my husband keeps in touch (…) I think I definitely do a lot more. (S2_IDI_1_F)

> Well, in general, grandma often initiates conversations. They often start with her sending me some video. She watches these short clips a lot—very post-apocalyptic ones. During COVID, she watched stuff about how COVID would kill us; now it's about a potential third world war… (S1_IDI_F6_son_13)

The sense of continuous connectedness ("ambient co-presence," Madianou 2016) facilitates emotional co-regulation (comforting, supporting, and motivating one another). The exchange of emotionally charged messages further sustains this sense of connectedness.

> Today I sent him [teenage son] a video that said, 'The person sending this wants you to know that as long as I live, you will always have someone who is proud of you in everything.' (S1_IDI_F8_mother_44)

> If someone got a bad grade on a test, you can lift their spirits, especially if they don't like getting low marks. (…) Once I got an average grade like that myself… (…) So I called. (S1_IDI_F7_son_11)

As one mother emphasized, the immediacy of contact enabled by platforms is particularly valued, allowing parents to respond to and share emotional experiences with their children in real time: 'And it's really good that we can share these emotions with the children right away… (…) we can be there for the child immediately' (S1_IDI_R2_mother_34). The fact that this immaterial emotional labour via platform infrastructures is largely performed by women shows that the gendered patterns of care work remain largely intact.

Another domain revealing significant gender differences among respondents was the coordination of family life and its routines. Mothers and grandmothers were usually more active in family groups on digital platforms, particularly in organising gatherings such as Christmases or birthdays. As in the Israeli study (Alkobi & Khvorostianov 2024), women in Poland often acted as keepers of family norms: reminding others about greetings to family members, maintaining contact with grandparents, and fostering the group's emotional atmosphere, e.g. by posting hearts under photos in the family Google album.

> I said [to her teenage daughter], 'Come up with some nice wishes for Adaś [her sister's child], something fun.' And (…) she said [to ChatGPT], 'Pretend you're Santa Claus.' (S1_IDI_F11_mother_43)

Our data show that gendered kinwork persists among middle and older generations despite the platformization of daily life, and that younger women are socialised to reproduce these patterns, often through participation in more intensive communication than their brothers and even sometimes creating women-only family groups.

I have more contact with his family than he [husband] does. I keep in touch with everyone, whereas he does not. (S1_IDI_F1_grandmother_72)

Our daughter is particularly communicative—she calls, writes on Messenger, sends photos. (…) With our son is different (…). (S2_IDI_9_M)

Interestingly, some shifts emerged among middle-generation women. Although they frequently communicated with their own and their partner's family, some deliberately limited their involvement with the latter, leaving it to their partner. While still far from the Swedish patterns (Eklund & Sadowski 2023), this suggests that debates on gender equality and the individualizing effects of contemporary technologies are beginning to shape kinwork in Poland.

I have one chat with my son, and one with my daughter-in-law—it depends on the topic (…). (S2_IDI_12_F )

As for my mother-in-law, it's mostly my husband, though sometimes I do contact her too, but definitely much less often. (S1_IDI_F6_mother_40)

While literature on gendered relational labour often focuses on women, the methodology of both projects also enabled examination from men's perspective. Most men, especially from older and middle generations, acknowledged that their family connections differed from those of their female partners, explaining it through (1) a traditional understanding of their role (informed, but not managing communication) and (2) a reluctance to use digital platforms to maintain family ties. This is striking, given the social perception of men as technologically attuned. Many older men (in their 60s and 70s) adopted platforms later than their female partners and often without mastering all functionalities. Some expressed embarrassment and attributed this to their 'laziness,' others to a deeper reluctance ('it's not my vibe').

I said, 'I won't write!' (…) I'd rather call and talk directly than write text messages, right? I don't like it when everyone is writing on these platforms, you know? Well, mostly the women. The young people too (…) I don't even have Messenger, I don't have Facebook, nothing, because when I want to, I'll just call, have a conversation. I can afford to call, so why would I be writing texts? (S2_IDI_14_M)

My wife is very good with her phone (…) As for me… I'm hopeless at it. This technology is just not for me (…) I don't have WhatsApp or anything like that." (S2_IDI_11_M)

Yes, my wife knows how to handle it [smartphone with Messenger]. And a person can be lazy when they know it's not necessary… If it were needed, I'd manage it. (S1_IDI_F11_grandfather_73)

While earlier forms of communication often allowed men to participate indirectly (e.g., joining kitchen conversations from other room or overhearing mother–daughter calls), refusing to use certain platforms or groups significantly altered their position within family communication circuits.

I rely mostly on what she [wife] conveys to me; I don't need to communicate with the children directly (…) They have their own group on Messenger, so they are constantly in touch there. I don't have Facebook, so I'm not on it (…). (S2_IDI_7_M)

P: So, when some photos arrive for my wife… Oh, like our grandson fell asleep on the dresser instead of going to kindergarten (…).
I: But it's your daughter who sends them to your wife, right? And your wife shows them to you.
P: Yes, yes. (IDI_F6_grandfather_69)

Men's limited participation in platformized family life cannot be explained solely by lack of digital skills: when family groups addressed topics of interest to them, middle- and older-generation men engaged intensively, often with pride. Fathers and grandfathers reported lively debates on politics, sports, or hobbies (e.g., fishing, hiking, cycling), where they assumed expert roles. This suggests that their lower motivation stems less from a preference for calling than from gendered notions of relational labour and their positioning within family dynamics. Prior research likewise shows that even before digital platforms, men avoided family exchanges via landline telephony, leaving them largely to women (Bird 2013; Moyal in: Morley 2011: 112).

…I'm turning 50 next year, but I still think I'm pretty much in touch with communication trends and so on. So naturally, with my son—if the contact is through WhatsApp or Facebook… during the day, if there's some event in politics or sports, we'll end up sharing it anyway, either sending a link or commenting on it. (S2_IDI_12_M)

…like going out on a bike ride and sharing a nice route, you know, he sends me the route he did, I send him mine. So basically, it's like a little fan club of bike routes — whose route is better, or which one someone likes more. (S2_IDI_8_M)

Among younger men (fathers aged 35–45), particularly those with higher cultural capital, we observed modest shifts in kinwork (Brown & DeRycke 2010). While gendered patterns persisted (these fathers were usually less involved in everyday family group exchanges and school-related communication), some showed greater engagement under specific conditions. These included ties to their own family of origin (allowing wives to scale back in-law relations), reflecting the enduring weight of bloodlines in kinwork (Alkobi & Khvorostianov 2024). This was evident in chat groups restricted to blood relatives (for instance, a group including the mother, adult son and daughter, but excluding spouses). Secondly, in situations of divorce, particularly under joint custody, fathers assumed more digital emotional labour, as captured in the words of a teenager:

So very rarely, during Dad's weeks [I contact Mom], but more often during Mom's weeks I'll write to Dad instead, because Mom sometimes likes to blame Dad for things. (S1_IDI_F9_son_12)

Thirdly, strong emotional bonds with a child or older parent ("daddy's girls" or only sons) encouraged greater involvement of men in their 30s and 40s men in kinwork. Finally, hardware-related tasks, such as configuring parental controls on devices like iPhones and negotiating with children were usually handled by fathers, while mothers more often managed apps such as Family Link. These cases highlight the continuing "geek father" versus „good mother" division (Erstad et al. 2024) and the paradox whereby technologies designed for intuitive use still reproduce gendered divisions of relational labour. A father of a teenager acknowledges his expertise:

I: [about restricted child accounts] Does that take some of your IT skills?
P: Probably, yes.
I: And who's responsible for it, you or Olka [wife—also an IT specialist]?
P: Mostly me, I handle it…(S1_IDI_F7_father_41)

This interplay between everyday practices and hidden hierarchies of responsibility directs attention to the notion of micropower, which frames the next part of our analysis.

## Everyday Micropower in Digital Kinwork

### *Micro-power and digital expertise*

Micro-power in families takes many forms, one of which is the authority that comes with digital expertise. Research on digital platforms shows that technical competence often establishes authority: once someone configures devices or applications, they become the "expert," discouraging others from learning (Kennedy et al. 2015; Rode & Poole 2018). In smart home systems, men frequently take this role (Aagaard 2023). In our material, however, a different pattern emerges: women, particularly in the middle and older generations, were often the first to learn, sometimes struggling, but motivated, because maintaining ties depends on their ability to navigate messaging apps and social platforms. One interviewee recalled being the first to master and install communication software for herself and her parents:

I think it was me—when it came to electronic matters, or managing something online, I was the one who could handle it best. Now it's my son, but earlier it was definitely me. And when it comes to my husband, even today it's still me (…). (S1_IDIF8_mother_44)

Younger generations often note mothers' attempts to operate on the same platforms they use (e.g.TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat), while fathers lag behind.

When I send something to my dad, he struggles to open it, because he doesn't have TikTok. And with my grandma it's similar—sometimes she can't open it or doesn't know how. But with my mum, she gets it, she knows how to handle it. (S1_IDIF8_son_16)

Expertise in communicative technologies can shift from men and younger "warm experts" (Taipale 2019) towards mothers as infrastructural anchors of digital kinwork. In the oldest generation, women often learned first and then taught their husbands basic skills:

But my husband learnt how to send a picture [via WhatsApp]. I taught him, I showed him where to press, and he was so happy. (…) As for me, it was my daughter and, above all, my grandson—he said, 'Grandma, look at the pictures, it's easy'. (S1_FGI_R6_grandmother_73)

This female expertise is not always recognised. While women manage communication platforms and act as the gateway to family interactions, their competence is rarely celebrated like male technical expertise around hardware or smart home devices, often framed as skill, hobby, or innovation (Aagaard 2023; Kennedy et al. 2015). Instead, women's digital expertise is treated as relational labour—taken for granted and embedded in the emotional maintenance of kin ties.

This reveals a gendered asymmetry: men's expertise is valorised as authority, while women's is functionalised as care.

### *Membership boundaries and everyday practices of inclusion/exclusion*

A major arena for negotiating micro-power was the dynamics of communication groups on digital platforms, where membership or exclusion were often keenly felt and tensions managed through platform features. In one family, this meant *ad hoc* groups for special occasions instead of stable chats, allowing members to regulate participation and intimacy of interactions and maintain closeness with the husband's sister without making it visible for the whole family.

I: And why are they a bit ad hoc—like just for name days, Christmas Eve—and not more permanent, like one group for all occasions?
P: My husband's sister, [his wife] and I get on really well. We spend quite a lot of free time together whenever possible. But (…) my husband's brother and his wife don't really, kind of, fit with our way of spending time. (S1_IDI_F10_mother_50)

In this way, group configurations become a tool for organizing emotional hierarchies—they allow everyday closeness with selected relatives while reducing the risk of open conflict with those whose relationality is seen as more problematic (cf. Alkobi & Khvorostianov 2024).

Another notable example of using platform features involves muting notifications to avoid tensions in family groups. The most common strategy was 'silent withdrawal'—muting notifications or passively ignoring content—which keeps members formally present while reducing engagement. More explicit strategies also occur, including open complaints about 'message floods' and even temporary removal of members.

P: (…) everyone would get annoyed, like in the morning when they had to go to work, and then all these notifications. Of course, you can always mute notifications, so..(…)
I: And was there a bit of bad blood?
P: Yeah, yeah. We later removed people from the group, [or] it happened that someone got offended and left the group on their own. (S1_IDI_F5_daughter_17)

Divorces particularly expose and petrify the boundaries of membership. In conflictual situations, shared communication spaces—such as family chats or shared photo albums—become sources of tension. In one family, a child was excluded from a family group, because both parents feared "leaks" of information to the other partner:

I: Do you have a family chat or not?
P: Neither mom allows me, nor dad, because… the rest of the family is connected there, and neither dad nor mom want their messages… I mean, the situations we have at dad's place, to leak to mom. Because mom can check at any moment. Like, when I'm with her during her week, she likes to check my phone, and she sometimes checks my chats. (S1_IDI_F9_son_12)

In another family the visibility of pictures in Google Photos album is carefully managed to avoid tensions between former partners:

I don't upload photos with [new partner], because I know it might still hurt him (…) his parents also have access to that folder, so I just don't flaunt our relationship there. He also rarely uploads photos with his partner and her kids. (S1_IDI_F1_mother_39)

These examples illustrate that in marital breakdown, digital communication and shared family archives become sites of struggle over information control. Practices such as checking a child's phone or avoiding documentation of new relationships help maintain emotional boundaries and prevent conflict, reflecting the "gatekeeping" functions described in studies of parental digital negotiations and domestic archiving (Holloway & Green 2017).

This boundary-setting extends beyond divorce to everyday generational negotiations, where children and young adults claim agency over their own visibility online, negotiating photo sharing with parents around privacy, peer recognition and autonomy. Such disputes illustrate "curated visibility" (Madianou & Miller 2013).

I don't have [photos of my son on Facebook], because he doesn't allow me. He's grown up now. (S1_IDI_F2_mother_34)

Patterns of participation in family digital spaces are also gendered. Women sometimes create, "women-only" threads, which normalize men's absence and allow efficient coordination without male oversight.

We have one group on Messenger, and it's me, my mom, my mom's sister, her daughter, and my grandma. We have this group, and we send everything there. (…) And it's just a women's group. Men don't need to know everything. (S1_IDI_F11_daughter_13)

Research shows that such channels serve not only as spaces of emotional support, but also as tools of soft information management within the family (Madianou & Miller 2013). While most male respondents accepted their marginal position in family communication circuits, some highlighted difficulties. One father, for instance, would welcome photos from his daughter but feels excluded because primary communication occurs along the mother–daughter line:

My daughter doesn't send me that kind of stuff. She always turns to my wife. Even just a small signal from time to time would be a nice gesture. (S2_IDI_9_M)

This phenomenon aligns with literature highlighting women's dominance in digitally coordinating family life, which reshapes micro-power within family's relational configuration.

### *Recognition: Whose Contributions Count?*

Micro-power within families is also enacted through the distribution of recognition—deciding which contributions count and which are dismissed as "trivial" or "women's chatter." In one family with a complex architecture of groups and subgroups, the wife was more active in a general chat, often conversing with her daughter-in-law and son about cooking—a space from which the husband distanced himself. Instead, he was active in a specialised sports subgroup, whose significance was underscored by its existence as a separate channel, one where his wife, "not knowledgeable," was absent:

(…) within the group there's a sphere, and probably equal in time and volume, that's culinary topics (…). But the comments are mostly between the three of them, not me, right? [To me, culinary topics are] simple—[something

is] better than pork chops or worse than pork chops—I'm joking, of course! (…) So my wife has that sphere, only it isn't carved out as a separate group." (S2_IDI_12_M)

The absence of men from women's groups is sometimes explained by wives as reflecting male disinterest in "silly things":

As for my husband, I don't think he'd want those… I mean, he's a very, let's say, organised person, so all those silly things we write to each other as women—I don't think he'd be interested in that at all. (S1_IDI_F1_mother_43)

Lack of recognition for everyday matters raised by women is also visible in comments contrasting "babbling" with "serious talk."

P: Maryla with her mother, my wife—they talk non-stop.
I: And does she call you too?
P: When something's needed, or I need something, then we, men, talk briefly. I've got friends as well, and we don't babble on the phone, just get straight to the point. (S1_IDI_F6_grandfather_69)

Practices of digital care—such as checking in on adult children or maintaining daily contact — are sometimes described not as recognition-worthy but as "nagging."

Elka probably nagged him every day. I had enough contact myself. But Elka probably nagged him—she knew if he was on the train or not, always keeping in touch, calling all the time… (S2_IDI_1_M)

Such framing is not always hostile—sometimes it is expressed with indulgence, as "typical mum behaviour":

P: On TikTok, for example, she [mum] always sends me things… little videos, like a picture saying, 'Mum loves her son very much,' that kind of thing.
I: And how do you feel when she sends you that?
P: Well, it's nice, sweet. Sometimes it's a bit annoying, but… (S1_IDI_F8_son_16)

These micro-power dynamics, amplified by platform functionalities, are not only gendered but also, reflect family hierarchies: whose contributions are acknowledged, responded to, or dismissed depends on their position within family power configurations. In some cases, fathers' posts were marginalised or explicitly banned:

Dad—we want to ban him, because he keeps posting cats and dogs, he's got a ban. (S2_DDI_9_F)

Thus, digital practices of care and communication are also stratified by family status. What "counts" as meaningful interaction depends on gendered expectations and the relational authority of the speaker within the family network.

### *Pressure to Keep in Touch: Micropower and Emotional Control*

Micro-power is also enacted through the emotional dynamics of care. Requests to "stay in touch" are framed as expressions of love and responsibility, yet may be experienced as pressure, surveillance, or even emotional blackmail.

That's the problem—Kuba doesn't call or write. I told him to at least send an emoji, a smiley, so I know he's alive. Once I even called, thinking, God, maybe something happened, because for the first week there was nothing. But no, all was fine—it just didn't occur to him that someone might worry. (S2_DDI_3_F)

Digital platforms amplify such tensions, making routines of care more visible and more contestable. Parents may use platform features to monitor children, while children employ the same settings to restrict parental access.

On Messenger, you can see what time they got home, so my older child deleted and blocked it, and now I don't know if she's there or not. The younger one hasn't yet. But when I said I was checking and saw she got back at 4 a.m., she got angry and said enough. (S2_DDI_7_F)

At times, surveillance is not rejected but reframed as care. A striking example comes from a daughter who gave her mother access to the Life360 tracking app to avoid sending constant updates. What begins as a gesture to reduce friction turns into a form of mediated intimacy:

P: Later my mum got angry that I wasn't telling her where I was. I said—fine, you've got my location. I didn't want to keep writing, so now she can just see. (…) She's the biggest fan of the notifications, especially when it shows how much battery I have. Then she messages me—charge your phone, you're at 10%. And I reply—leave me alone, woman. (…) If it was my dad, I'd feel bad about it. But it's my mum. (…) She's my best friend, really.
I: So you don't see this as control?
P: No, no, no. It's about safety. If my mum knows where I am, I feel safe. (S1_IDI_F10_daughter_18)

Clearly, technology allows shifting from emotional labour ("send me a message") to a built-in function ("just check the app"). At the same time, platforms expand the scope of care (from location to battery status) creating new reasons for parental involvement. The quote also shows the same practice is read differently depending on who performs it: if from the father it would feel intrusive, from the mother it is interpreted as care and closeness. The same practice is therefore experienced at once as control, irritation, and safety.

Our material shows that practices interpreted as "care" also carry the ambivalence captured by the Polish notion of *troska*: a blend of affection, responsibility and everyday worry. As Gitkiewicz (2023) argues, *troska* is not only kindness or support but also a vigilant concern responding to anticipated risks. This aligns with broader work on care as a relational practice shaped equally by attentiveness and anxiety (Fisher & Tronto 1993; Lynch et al. 2021).

On digital platforms, this ambivalence becomes more visible: features such as "last seen," battery level, or location sharing provide new cues that trigger worry and prompt check-ins, experienced as reassurance or pressure, depending on relational context. Thus, the tensions described by our respondents do not reflect a simple opposition between care and control, but show how care encompasses both closeness and anxiety, amplified by the functionalities of everyday communication platforms.

## Conclusions

Our study demonstrates that digital platforms in general, and communication platforms in particular, have become a significant infrastructure of family life in Poland. Much like kitchens or living rooms once structured co-presence, group chats and message threads now provide the space where presence is affirmed, coordination takes place, and relationships are enacted. These practices are not confined to transnational families but also shape the everyday routines of families living in the same town or even household.

Women play a central role in sustaining intergenerational family ties. Mothers and grandmothers were often the first to install communication apps, and they showed greater motivation to try new platforms (such as TikTok or Instagram) to maintain relationships—even when they found it difficult. This expertise placed women in central positions within family networks, but it was rarely recognised as prestigious. Unlike men's hardware or smart-home competence, which tends to be framed as authority or hobby, women's digital competence was naturalised as an extension of care and relational labour. This asymmetry extended to everyday talk: women's discussions of food and daily matters were dismissed as "women's chatter," while men carved out specialised subgroups for sport or politics, considered more serious. These dynamics reveal not only a gendered division of labour but also a hierarchy of recognition within digital family life.

Men were not absent, but participated peripherally, contributing "islands" of content such as links, hobby talk, or sports discussions, and occasionally managing hardware. Everyday maintenance of emotional and organisational ties was less common. Yet there were exceptions. Some men became more active in *bloodline* groups (with their family of origin), in contexts of divorce, or in particularly close father–child relationships. Across generations, we observed a slow shift: middle-generation men (especially with higher cultural capital) were more engaged in digital family communication than their fathers, though still less than their partners.

Digital platforms encourage individualised participation, linking access to personal devices and accounts and making presence or exclusion visible. This amplified gendered patterns: while men could once participate indirectly by overhearing kitchen talk or phone conversations, digital group membership makes presence and absence unambiguous, with belonging marked by inclusion in a chat or album and exclusion immediately visible.

Group chats and shared albums also became tools for managing closeness and distance. Families created groups and subgroups in different relational constellations that helped sustain preferred bonds while avoiding conflict. The boundaries of shared communication spaces became especially pronounced and required careful navigation during divorces.

Finally, digital platforms reshaped practices of care. Requests once voiced as "call me when you arrive" are now often reconfigured into built-in functions such as location sharing or app-based visibility. These practices were ambivalent: they could be experienced as support, safety, control, or pressure, depending on who performed it and in what relational context.

## Discussion

Our findings not only confirm but also advance research on digital kinwork: while prior studies highlighted its role in transnational families (Madianou & Miller 2013; Kędra 2021; Eklund 2023), we show that these practices also sustain presence, intimacy, and coordination within co-located family life. Messaging platforms are especially important, functioning as infrastructural layers of family life—digital extensions of kitchen tables or living-room sofas, creating spaces for interaction.

Moreover, our material confirms that women continue to bear primary responsibility for maintaining family ties, as feminist kinwork research long argued (di Leonardo 1987;

Braithwaite et al. 2017). Even in the era of platformization, women initiate contact, monitor family information flows, and sustain rituals. Unlike earlier research on the domestication of technologies, where men were often the first adopters and experts (Kennedy et al. 2015; Strengers & Nicholls 2017), here mothers and grandmothers emerge as family specialists in communicative technologies. This shift is driven less by hobby or pleasure, as in the case of men's smart-home management, and more by necessity: maintaining relational ties with different generations requires digital competence. Yet it is not valorised as expertise but taken for granted as part of women's caring roles. Our contribution is to show how platformization strengthens women's infrastructural position in families (as possible gatekeepers), while also reinforcing asymmetries of recognition. We also look closely to micro-power processes and argue that they also operate through recognition and boundaries. Women's conversations are often trivialised as "babble," while men's thematic subgroups are legitimised as more serious. Family hierarchies are enacted in whose posts are acknowledged and whose are ignored.

Our data also refine the picture of men's roles: although many of them remain peripheral, some participate selectively, especially in thematic subgroups (sport, politics), in contexts of divorce, or through bloodline ties. Middle-generation men are more digitally engaged than their fathers, though still less than their partners. This suggests slow generational change in the gendering of family communication.

Finally, our study adds nuance to the relationship between care and control. Digital platforms extend the scope of parental monitoring, but these practices are interpreted in ambivalent ways: as support, as intrusion, or as reassurance, depending on the relational context.

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