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Cultural value transformation across generations and its effect on language use:

A case of Estonia

Research paper

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Running head: Value change and language use

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Abstract

The present study investigated whether differences in the cultural values among different generations can be reflected in language use in socially sensitive contexts. In the study, participants living in a transitional society (Estonia) took part (N = 401). Three age groups completed a self-construal measure and responded to scenarios that varied in degree of face threat related to exam performance. Although older participants demonstrated higher levels of interdependent self-construal than the younger participants, no difference in language use was observed. Across all age groups, participants adjusted their language similarly depending on the social context, showing shared face-management strategies. These findings suggest that cultural value change and everyday communicative behavior may not be synchronized and that face-related behavior can remain stable despite generational shifts in value orientations.

Keywords: generations, cultural values, language use, face

**Põlvkondadevaheline kultuuriväärtuste muutumine ja selle mõju keelekasutusele:
Eesti juhtumiuuring**

Kokkuvõte

Käesolevas uuringus uuriti, kas erinevate põlvkondade kultuuriliste väärtuste erinevused kajastuvad keelekasutuses sotsiaalselt tundlikes olukordades. Uuringus osalesid üleminekuühiskonnas (Eestis) elavad osalejad (N = 401). Kolm vanuserühma täitsid enesekäsitlemise mõõdiku ning vastasid stsenaariumidele, mis erinesid näoohuga seoses eksamitulemuste kontekstis. Kuigi vanemad osalejad näitasid kõrgemat interdependentse enesekäsitlemise (interdependant self-construal) taset võrreldes nooremate osalejatega, ei ilmnunud erinevusi keelekasutuses. Kõigis vanuserühmades kohandasid osalejad oma keelekasutust sarnaselt vastavalt sotsiaalsele kontekstile, mis viitab jagatud näohaldusstrateegiatele. Tulemused viitavad sellele, et kultuuriliste väärtuste muutus ja igapäevane kommunikatiivne käitumine ei pruugi olla sünkroniseeritud ning et näoga seotud käitumismustrid võivad püsida stabiilsena ka põlvkondlike väärtusnihete korral.

Märksõnad: põlvkonnad, kultuurilised väärtused, keelekasutus, nägu

Cultural value transformation across generations and its effect on language use: A case of Estonia

Human values are important goals that guide our behavior and affect our decision-making (Kluckhohn, 1951; Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 1992). Although values are stable structures, they can change due to economic, political, technological and cultural transformations (Schwartz & Bardi, 1997; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). Values are developed during socialization at a young age and in their turn reflect broader cultural values. Those are shaped by the historical and cultural conditions in which individuals grew up and usually remain lifelong stable. As a result of that, different “value cohorts” or generations can coexist in the same society, reflecting different internalized historical and cultural conditions. One generation can be oriented towards stability and group harmony, whereas another generation can be oriented towards freedom and self-realization. Those changes between generations can be seen in everyday communication and behavior, with language as the potentially main mediator for expressing those differences.

Based on this perspective, the present study examines how the differences in cultural values affect language use and communicative behavior. Focusing on Estonia as a country that has undergone a rapid cultural transformation, we investigate the fact whether cultural value differences (collectivism vs. individualism, independent self-construal vs. interdependent self-construal) influence people’s self-presentation in the presence of others. Although face theory and the individualism-collectivism framework have been well studied across cultures, they were rarely applied to the differences within a single culture. Our present study addresses this gap by studying whether shifts in generational values are reflected in face management and self-presentation among speakers of the same language.

Individualism and Collectivism: A Cultural Value Dichotomy

One of the key aspects of differences among cultural values is individualism and collectivism dichotomy, as two different orientations and ways of organizing social bonds and self-identification (Triandis, 1995). Collectivism marks the importance of group harmony, interdependence, and social responsibility, prioritizing interests of the group higher than the individual’s ones. Individualism, in contrast, focuses on the preservation of autonomy, freedom and self-realization, and builds identity based on self-achievements and

independence (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In societies undergoing cultural transformations, these different orientations can coexist. Research shows that even despite having high individualistic tendencies in society, collectivistic orientation can be preserved and prevail in social ties, which creates internal cultural contradictions, but also creates a unique form of cultural synthesis, as for example in Japan (Ogihara, 2017).

Independent and Interdependent self-construal

Based on Markus & Kitayama (1991), self-construal is a deep cultural framework and culturally shaped way of construing the self, which refers to how people understand, define, and experience themselves in relation to others and the social context. It answers the question "Who am I in relation to others?". There are two main types of self-construal, one of whom is independent, and historically considered typical for many Western cultures. The independent self-construal is a separate, autonomous individual, whose self is distinct from others. The other one is interdependent self-construal, considered to be common in many Asian, African and other cultures. The interdependent self is connected to others and is defined by the roles, relationships, and social contexts. To illustrate these two self-construals, Markus and Kitayama (1991) describe a contrast between an American and a Japanese workplace. A small Texas corporation encouraged employees to enhance productivity by saying "I am beautiful" 100 times in front of the mirror, whereas employees of a Japanese supermarket were instructed to affirm one another by holding hands and saying that "he" or "she is beautiful", highlighting the relational basis of self-worth in interdependent cultures.

Estonia as a Transitional Society

Estonia is a particularly interesting example of a transforming society. In the last decades, Estonia's cultural profile changed drastically from socialist, collectivist orientation to a more individualistic one, in line with the embracing of liberal market and democratic principles (Raudsepp, Tart, & Heinla, 2013). During the Soviet period the country was functioning in a system with collectivistic values dominating. After gaining independence in 1991, Estonia focused on integration with the West world. Those processes were followed with the spread of global, mainly English-speaking culture, which in turn contributed to the formulation of new individualistic orientations, especially among young people. All of this makes Estonia a curious example of a country in which generations with different value systems coexist and interact.

Value transformation: Studies on the Estonian culture

It is possible to notice value transformation in the products of early socialization, such as children's alphabet books and children's games. For example, Kalmus (2004) in her research shows that Estonian children's books of the 20th century visibly reflect the change from collectivistic values to individualistic ones. Early alphabet books highlighted collectivistic motives - the importance of group and family, cooperation and mutual support. But closer to the end of a century, the books already emphasized individualism: personal initiative, independence, freedom and the right to choose. This change in narrative reflects a broad cultural shift from collectivistic to individualistic attitude. The way children play also changed, further illustrating the transformation. A study of children's games across different ages by Ugaste (2023) shows that older kid generations that were raised in outdoor game environments without intervention of adults were oriented toward group play, where reputation, mutual expectations, and respect within the group were important. Younger generations, socialized in the digital age with customized toys (e.g., LEGO), cartoons, and English-language online content, developed in a more controlled and personalized environment that encouraged self-expression and personal initiative.

Another research also confirms the complexity of the processes taking place. A three-generation study (Tõugu et al., 2017) shows that Estonian youngsters demonstrate a more pronounced individualistic attitude in comparison to their mothers and grandmothers but still elements of interdependence remain. Another study reveals similar results: Estonian mothers appreciate both values connected to self-direction and traditional values, demonstrating a combination of autonomy and conformity (Tulviste, Mizera & De Geer, 2012). This synthesis finds reflection in the autonomous interdependence, or autonomous-relational self-model proposed by Kagitçibaşı (1996). This model suggests that, especially in countries with a history of transition, a special type of cultural identity can be formed, where the desire for personal freedom does not exclude an emotional connection with loved ones.

Face Theory and Language Use: Cultural Value Effect on Communication

The change in cultural values affects not only products of culture and social practices, but also communicative behavior, especially in situations where politeness and self-presentation are important. For analyzing this dynamic, our study will be based on the "face" concept - a conceptual framework that explains how people manage their dignity and identity

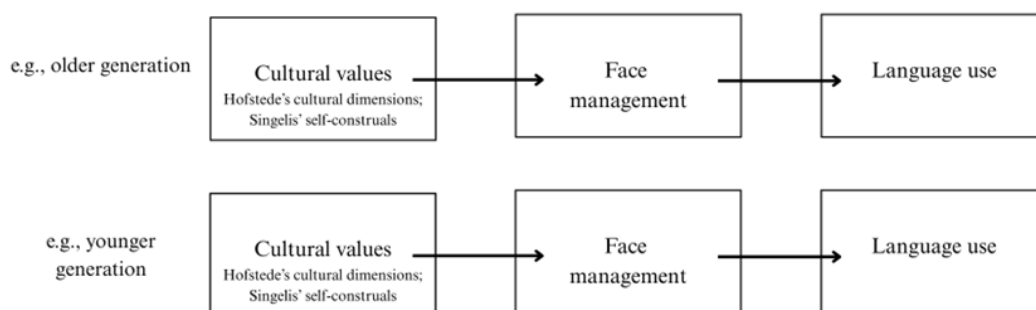
through communication. Originally introduced By Hu (1944) as a native Chinese concept, face refers to social importance or value of a person in the interactions, including both self-face and face of others (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). The concept was further systematized by sociologist Erving Goffman (1967), who viewed it as an “image of oneself” that a person strives to maintain in the eyes of others during interaction. Face management includes such aspects as ways to ask, support, disagree, or apologize. who viewed it as the “self-image” that a person strives to maintain in the eyes of others during interactions. Managing face includes aspects like ways of showing appreciation, asking questions, apologizing or disagreeing. While the desire to maintain face is universal, the ways of maintenance differ across cultural factors. Collectivist cultures emphasize maintaining the face of others and avoiding conflict. Individualistic cultures value maintaining one’s own face, demonstrating one's position and independence (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003).

The Present Study

The present study aims to examine how potential differences in cultural values affect people’s language behavior. As illustrated in Figure 1, generational differences in cultural values are expected to influence how individuals manage face in social interaction, which in turn may be reflected in their language use. The figure thus represents the theoretical pathway underlying the study: from generational value differences, through face management, to observable patterns of language use.

Figure 1

Visual representation of the study theoretical framework



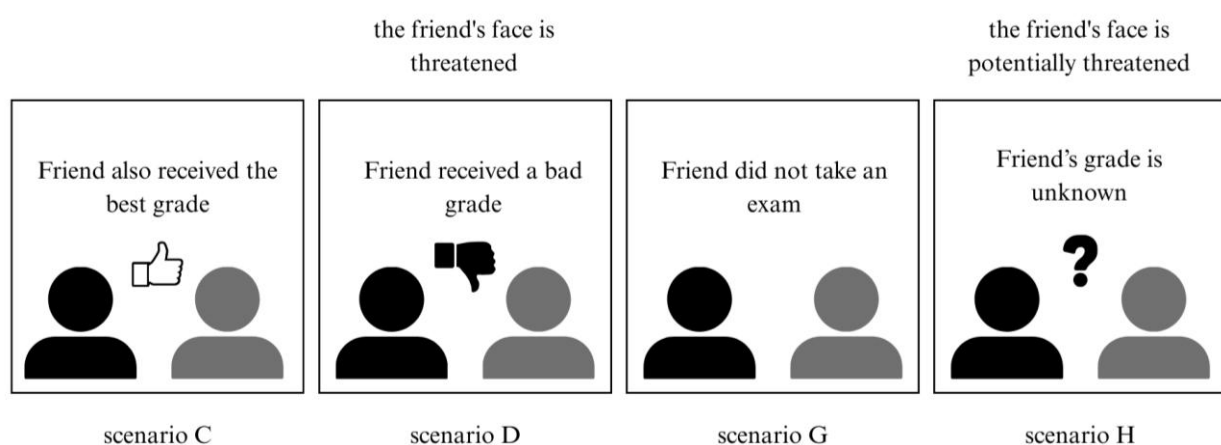
Note. Arrows represent the direction of the effect

We assume that in Estonia, there is a shift from collectivist to individualistic values from the older to the younger generation. The older generation, socialized within a collectivist culture, expected to be more concerned with preserving the other-face and avoiding direct threats in communication. The younger generation, raised in the context of individualization, is more expected to express self-face, that is, to assert their own position and emotions more directly. Thus, we assume that differences in values between generations lead to different strategies in language behavior affecting both lexical choice and strategies for managing the face in interpersonal communication, and we aim to examine that.

The study uses experimental scenarios simulating socially sensitive or neutral situations in which participants tell a friend about their successful passing of an exam. The experiment was as follows: all participants were asked to imagine that they had just passed an exam and got a very high score (e.g., an A in an A–F grading system). They were then asked to read a short description of a social situation involving their friend. They would randomly be given one of the following scenarios illustrated in Figure 2. The present study belongs to a bigger cross-cultural project that investigates more scenarios, and to keep it consistent with the dataset, we kept the conditions as C, D, G, H in the present paper.

Figure 2

Visual representation of the scenarios



Scenario C: A friend was present at the exam and received the same best grade. The situation is neutral, without a threat to the friend's face.

Scenario D: A friend was also present but received a very bad grade. The scenario simulates a socially sensitive situation with a threat to the friend's face.

Scenario G: A friend did not take the exam but is present during the conversation. The situation is again neutral; the face is not threatened.

Scenario H: A friend is present, but the result of his exam remains unknown. This is a socially sensitive situation with an element of uncertainty, allowing the participant to have freedom in choosing a speech strategy. Friend's face is potentially threatened.

Following the scenario, participants responded to the question "*How did the exam go?*", choosing one of eight answer options on an increasing positivity scale. These formulations ranged from "*I failed*" to "*It was great*" and reflected the degree of positive self-presentation.

We have the following three hypotheses:

H1. (No face threat vs. clear face threat, Scenario C vs. D) We expect that the difference in lexical choice between Scenario C and Scenario D will be similar across all age generations. That is, young, middle-aged, and older participants are expected to show a shared concern for the friend's face when the friend fails and no concern when the friend also succeeds.

H2. (No face threat vs. no face threat: Scenario C vs. G) We expect that the difference in lexical choice between Scenario C (both succeed) and Scenario G (friend did not take the exam) will be similar across age groups. Specifically, we expect that all age groups will treat Scenario G as equivalent to Scenario C, since both of them are not face-threatening, resulting in similar C–G differences across generations.

H3. (Ambiguous face threat: Scenario H vs. C and D) Age groups are expected to differ in how they interpret the ambiguous face-threatening Scenario H. Specifically, younger participants are expected to treat Scenario H as more similar to the non-face-threatening Scenario C, whereas older participants are expected to treat Scenario H as more similar to the face-threatening Scenario D. Thus, cross-generational differences are expected, particularly in the relative positioning of Scenario H between Scenarios C and D.

Method

Participants

A total of 405 participants took part in this study. Four participants were excluded because they did not pass the age and nationality check, resulting in a total of 401 participants, whose demographic characteristics are reported in Table 1. Participants were grouped into three age groups, i.e., young generation (age ≤ 24 yr), middle generation (age 25–35 yr), and older generation (age ≥ 36 yr). The three age groups were constructed based on historically distinct socio-cultural periods in Estonia, marked by major political and societal changes that could influence the development of generational value orientations. At the same time, the grouping also ensured the most balanced numerical distribution of participants necessary for reliable statistical analysis. The demographic information of the participants in each age group is given in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic information of the study participants

	Younger generation (N=138)	Middle generation (N=155)	Older generation (N=108)
Mean age (yr)	21.12	29.54	43.19
Minimum age (yr)	15	25	36
Maximum age (yr)	24	35	75
Male participants (N)	40	56	38
Female participants (N)	95	97	69
Other gender (N)	3	2	1

Note. yr – years, N – number of participants

The older generation (age ≥ 36) consisted of individuals raised in the late Soviet period, which emphasized collectivist norms, group harmony, and social interdependence. The middle generation (aged 25–35) was represented by those who grew up in the transitional decades after Estonia's independence in 1991, a period that was characterized by rapid change in society with the coexistence of collectivist and individualistic orientations. The younger generation (age ≤ 24) consisted of individuals who grew up in a post-digital, fully Westernized Estonia, where individualistic values, personal autonomy, and self-expression

were actively promoted through education, media, and everyday socialization.

The questionnaire was presented via the University of Tartu LimeSurvey platform (<https://survey.ut.ee/index.php/>), and a portion of the sample was additionally recruited through the online data collection service Prolific (<https://www.prolific.com>). Before beginning the survey, participants received an informed consent form and were required to confirm their willingness to take part in the study and allow the processing of their data. They could withdraw from the survey at any moment by closing the browser window, and all data collected in the study was anonymized.

Materials

The questionnaire was presented in the participant's native language (Estonian). The survey consisted of several parts. In the very beginning, participants were asked to write down their year of birth. Then participants were asked to imagine a situation where they passed an exam with their friend. To increase the believability of the situation, participants were first asked to think of a best friend and write down the friend's name. The name was referred to in the following question.

Then, in the first part of the questionnaire, the participants were asked to imagine themselves in a situation where they successfully passed an exam with a very high score ("A" or "5" grade) and were standing next to their friend when a stranger asked, "*How did it go?*". Different grading systems were applied in the questionnaires to the young and middle generations (i.e., A–F grading system, where A was used to describe a very high score in the scenario), as compared to the older generation (i.e., 1–5 grading system, where 5 was used to describe a very high score in the scenario), so that participants from each age group could perceive the scenario with the most valid information they were familiar with. An example of a scenario (C) is given below:

Imagine you came from an exam where you got a stupendous score of A. You feel very happy and are excited about your achievement. Your best friend also took the exam and got the same score. While you and your friend are standing together, a classmate from another course approaches you and asks about your performance: "*How did it go?*"

Participants had to answer the question by choosing one of eight answer options: "*I failed*", "*It was very bad.*", "*It was bad.*", "*It went so-so.*", "*It was ok.*", "*It was good.*", "*It was very good.*", "*It was excellent*". Next, they were asked to indicate their motivation in

choosing the wording: “*the desire to be truthful*”, “*to show my competence*”, “*to be modest*”, “*not wanting to brag*”, “*to not hurt my friend's feelings*”, “*to change the topic*”.

In the next part, in order to check the effectiveness of the manipulation, participants completed two blocks of test questions. In the first block, they were asked to determine which numerical scores, in their opinion, are bad, average, and good (on a scale from A to F or from 1 to 5 accordingly). In the second, participants were asked to rank the same verbal descriptions of the exam result by degree of positivity, where 1 is the most positive result and 8 - the most negative.

Then, participants answered four items from Hofstede’s (2013) Values Survey Module measuring the Individualism Index (IDV) to assess cultural orientation. Self-construal was measured using the 10-item short version of Singelis’s (1994) Self-Construal Scale, developed by D’Amico and Scrima (2016).

At the end of the survey, demographic information was requested: age, gender, level of education, employment, ethnicity, native language, number of languages used in everyday life, as well as self-assessment of their native language proficiency.

Ethical considerations

All components of this thesis — including the selection of theoretical framework, formulation of the research questions, study design, data collection, and analytical planning — were developed independently by the author under the guidance of the supervisor. In the preparation of this bachelor’s thesis, an AI-based language model (ChatGPT, OpenAI) was used as a support tool for text translation and grammatical revision, paraphrasing, clarification of structure, and further refinement of the author’s ideas, in accordance with APA 7th edition guidelines and principles of responsible academic writing.

Results

Data was analyzed using the statistical analysis program JASP. Four participants were excluded because they did not pass the age and nationality check, resulting in a total of 401 participants included in the analysis.

Manipulation Check

To verify that participants correctly understood the grading scales used in the experiment, a manipulation check was conducted separately for the letter (A–F) and numeric

	young	middle	older	young	middle	older	young	middle	older
5	94.5%	88.3%	94.5%			1.8%	1.4%		
4	1.4%	10.4%	5.5%	58.9%	44.2%	50.9%	1.4%		
3		1.3%		39.7%	53.2%	47.3%	9.6%	7.8%	7.3%
2				1.4%	2.6%		53.4%	44.2%	60%
1	4.1%						34.2%	48.1%	32.7%

Cultural Dimension and Self-construal

Individualism index was calculated using the Values Survey Module manual (Hofstede & Minkov, 2013). Reliability analysis showed that the short Hofstede individualism index demonstrated very low internal consistency ($\alpha = .352$), and therefore it was not suitable for use in further analyses.

Singelis's self-construal scores were calculated using a 10-item short version of Singelis's (1994) Self-Construal Scale, developed by D'Amico and Scrima (2016). In contrast with individualism index, Singelis's self-construal scales both demonstrated acceptable reliability - Interdependent self-construal ($\alpha = .637$) and Independent self-construal ($\alpha = .678$). The scores were calculated by taking the mean, with higher scores indicating a stronger independent or interdependent self-construal. A one-way ANOVA was conducted for the independent scores across the three generations, and another one-way ANOVA was run for the interdependent scores.

For the independent self-construal, the young generation scored the highest ($M = 3.981$), followed by the older generation ($M = 3.800$) and the middle generation ($M = 3.766$). However, this difference was not statistically significant, $F(2, 398) = 2.413$, $p = .091$, partial $\eta^2 = .012$. Post hoc comparisons confirmed that none of the pairwise differences reached significance (all $p > .10$). Therefore, no meaningful generational differences emerged for independent self-construal.

Regarding the interdependent self-construal, we found a statistically significant effect of age group, $F(2, 298) = 8.970$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .043$. The older generation scored the highest ($M = 4.363$), followed by the middle group ($M = 4.062$), while the young group scored the lowest ($M = 3.852$). Post hoc tests showed that the older generation scored significantly higher than the younger generation ($p < .001$) and moderately higher than the

middle generation ($p = .022$), while the young and middle generation did not differ significantly ($p = .143$).

Lexical Choice

We treated participants' lexical choice as an interval numeric variable. The lowest lexical choice "*I failed*" was coded as 1 and the highest lexical choice "*it was excellent*" was coded as 8. The descriptive results of the lexical choices are shown in Figure 3. We ran an analysis of variances (ANOVA) to test the two independent variables in our 4 (scenario) by 3 (age group) design. The ANOVA results are summarized in Table 4.

Figure 3

Descriptive results of the lexical choice

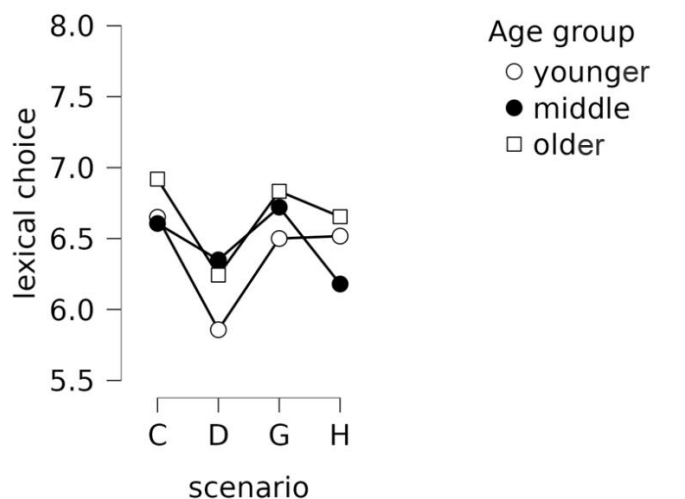


Table 4

ANOVA of the effects on the participants' lexical choices

Cases	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	η^2_p
Scenario	21.987	3	7.326	8.607	< .001***	0.062
Age group	4.199	2	2.100	2.467	0.086	0.013
Scenario * Age group	7.556	6	1.259	1.480	0.184	0.022

Residuals	331.084	389	0.851
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Note. *** $p < .001$; ** $.001 < p < .01$; * $.01 < p < .05$; η^2p – partial eta squared; Scenario – Scenario categories: C, D, G, and H; Age Group – Age group: younger than 24, 25–35, or older than 36.

There was a significant main effect of scenario on lexical choice, indicating that participants adjusted the directness of their responses depending on the social context. Post hoc (Tukey HSD–adjusted pairwise) comparisons showed that participants rated their performance significantly higher in Scenario C (both participant and friend succeeded) than in Scenario D (participant succeeded while the friend failed), $M_{diff} = 0.58$, $p < .001$, indicating sensitivity to face-threatening contexts. No significant difference was observed between Scenario C and the non-face-threatening Scenario G ($M_{diff} = 0.04$, $p = .993$), suggesting that participants treated these two contexts similarly. Scenario D differed significantly from Scenario G ($M_{diff} = -0.54$, $p = .002$). Scenario H did not differ significantly from either Scenario C ($M_{diff} = 0.28$, $p = .155$) or Scenario D ($M_{diff} = -0.30$, $p = .091$), indicating that the ambiguous scenario occupied an intermediate position between clearly face-threatening and non-face-threatening contexts. This finding supports H1, indicating that the C–D contrast was comparable across age groups, and that concern for the friend’s face was shared by younger, middle-aged, and older participants. This finding also supports H2, showing that the C–G contrast did not differ across age groups and that Scenario G was treated as equivalent to Scenario C by all generations.

The main effect of age group was not significant, suggesting that younger, middle, and older participants did not differ significantly in how they described their exam performance across scenarios. The mean lexical choice increased slightly from the younger group ($M = 6.38$, $SD \approx 0.80$), to the middle-aged group ($M = 6.46$, $SD \approx 0.84$), and the older group ($M = 6.66$, $SD \approx 0.83$); however, these differences were small and did not reach statistical significance. This pattern indicates that age alone does not meaningfully influence how positively participants describe their exam results.

The interaction between scenario and age group was not significant, indicating that all three generations responded similarly across the four social contexts. Figure 3 visually illustrates these patterns. Across all four scenarios, the three age groups show highly similar

trends in their mean lexical choices. As shown in Figure 3, although the lines representing the young (white dots), middle (black dots), and older generation (white squares) fluctuate slightly across conditions, they move in parallel and do not diverge substantially.

Specifically, the relative positioning of Scenario H with respect to Scenarios C and D did not differ across age groups: younger, middle-aged, and older participants all evaluated the ambiguous scenario in a similar way. This visual pattern corresponds to the non-significant age effect and supports the conclusion that the social context of the scenario affects lexical choice in a similar way across generations. Thus, participants across generations demonstrated comparable sensitivity to the face-related aspects of the scenarios, and our H3 regarding a generational difference in scenario H was not supported.

Motives

Across all generations, the most frequently used motive for lexical choice was “to be truthful”, which was chosen by more than half of the participants overall (214 selections or 53.4%). This motive was most common among middle-aged generation (90 selections or 58.1% of the generation), followed by older (58 selections or 53.7%) and younger generations (66 selections or 47.8%). The second most frequently reported motive across all age groups was “I did not want to brag” (110 selections or 27.4%), which was chosen by approximately one quarter to one third of participants in each generation group (young: 42 selections or 30.4%, middle-aged: 39 selections or 25.2%, older: 29 selections or 26.9%). Together, these two motives represent the most dominant reasons for lexical choice across all 3 generations.

Table 5

Motives of the participants lexical choice split by the age group (n)

Motive	Age group			Total across all generations
	younger	middle	older	
To be truthful	66	90	58	214
To show my competence	7	7	3	17
To be modest	11	14	7	32

I did not want to brag	42	39	29	110
To not hurt my friend's feelings	12	5	10	27
To change the topic	0	0	1	1
Total	138	155	108	

Note. n – number of participants who chose the motivation.

Discussion

This study investigated how people from different age generations communicate their good performance in socially sensitive contexts. Using an exam-related scenario, we examined whether generational differences in cultural values translate into differences in language use. In line with H1, participants across generations showed sensitivity to clear face-threatening contexts: they rated their performance higher when both they and their friend succeeded (Scenario C) and lowered their self-evaluation when the friend failed (Scenario D). H2 was also supported, as participants of all ages treated the neutral scenario, in which the friend did not take the exam (Scenario G), as functionally equivalent to Scenario C. By contrast, we did not find evidence for generational differences in the interpretation of the ambiguous face-threatening scenario (Scenario H), and H3 was not supported.

Language as a tool to manage face (H1 and H2)

Across all generations, we observed a robust effect of social context on lexical choice, indicating that participants adjusted their language use depending on the presence or absence of face threat. This finding replicates earlier work showing that language is used strategically to maintain interpersonal harmony and mitigate the risk of embarrassment (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998; Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003).

The usage of language as a tool for managing face in face-threatening contexts is studied and confirmed by other relevant works. For example, Bonnefon, Feeney, and Villejoubert (2009) demonstrated a very concrete mechanism of facework, where people interpret and use language differently depending on whether the information threatens the listener's face. When information is negative and face-threatening ("some people hated your

poem”), people are less likely to make positive assumptions, assuming that understatement “some” can be an intentional softening of the message to protect the listener’s face, and seeing it as politeness. In contrary, there were no such assumption when information was positive (“some people loved your poem”). Holtgraves and Perdeu (2012) also demonstrated the adjustment of language depending on the face threat. In their experiment, when telling dad that the car might need a transmission, which is considered as face-threatening information, speakers spontaneously choose more uncertain language to protect dad’s face and emotions (e.g. car “possibly” needs a repair instead of “definitely”), especially if the event was actually severe. Importantly, this effect disappeared when linguistic expression was statistically controlled, indicating that severity changed the language, and the language changed the judgments, so language was used as a tool for protection. Similarly, in the present study, linguistic softening happened precisely in contexts where the friend’s face was under threat. When participant succeeded but friend failed (Scenario D) speakers lowered their self-evaluation to protect the friend’s face, even if their performance was objectively good.

The usage of language as a tool for managing face in face non-threatening contexts is also visible. In the study of Bonnefon, Feeney, and Villejoubert (2009, when derived information is positive (“some people loved your poem”) and therefore not threatening the face of listener, the normal, direct interpretation of language happened. Similarly, in the study Holtgraves & Perdeu (2012), when reporting a low-severity event, speakers used more direct, stronger probability terms (e. g. car “definitely” needs a transmission). Both studies show that linguistic change only appears when someone’s face is at risk; when there is no face threat, speakers use direct, unmodified language, which is also what we see in our study in Scenario C and G, and which explains no difference between them. All of this provides evidence that language is used and modified strategically to manage face.

Perception of an ambiguous face-threatening scenario across generations (H3)

We did not find evidence for generational differences in lexical choice in response to the ambiguous face-threatening Scenario H, in which the friend attended the same exam but the outcome was unknown. Although we hypothesized that older participants would treat this scenario as closer to the clear face-threatening condition (Scenario D) and younger participants as closer to the non-face-threatening condition (Scenario C), this expectation was not supported. The non-significant interaction between scenario and age group indicates that

the positioning of Scenario H between Scenarios C and D was comparable across generations.

One possible reason that we did not find any cross-generational difference could be that our division of age group did not capture the cross-generational differences. Due to the difficulty of reaching the participants and limited final number of participants in older age ranges, individuals over 35 were grouped into a single “older” category. This may have reduced generational contrast and attenuated potential differences in lexical choice. And although the groups were defined based on historically meaningful periods of socialization, they still contained a degree of internal variability. Older participants, for example, ranged from individuals who experienced the late Soviet era to those who grew up during the early transition period, potentially introducing heterogeneity in value orientations. Increasing older generation sample size would help clarify whether generational patterns reflect true cohort differences or broader age-related trends.

Value change and shared communicative norms

It is worth noting that we found a cross-generational difference in interdependent self-construal. The finding that younger generation scored lowest in interdependence and highest in independence aligns with theoretical expectations, given that younger Estonians grew up in a more individualistic and digitally oriented environment. The older generation showed the highest levels of interdependence, which is also expected given the fact that they were socialized during the late Soviet period—a sociocultural context that emphasized collectivist norms, group conformity, and interdependent social relations. This pattern supports the assumption that Estonia is indeed experiencing a transition from more collectivistic to more individualistic value orientations and that cultural values in Estonia are indeed undergoing transformation.

Across all age groups, the dominant reasons for choosing a particular lexical item were “to be truthful” and “not wanting to brag,” motives that reflect a culturally shared preference for non-confrontational interaction. Notably, very few participants reported choosing their wording “to not hurt my friend’s feelings”—a motive that distinguished collectivistic respondents from individualistic ones in similar research (Tepp, 2025), or choosing the wording “to show my competence”, which is considered to be a classic individualistic motive. In our case, Estonians of all ages seemed to rely on modesty and truthfulness rather than explicitly other-oriented concerns or self-oriented concerns. This may suggest that

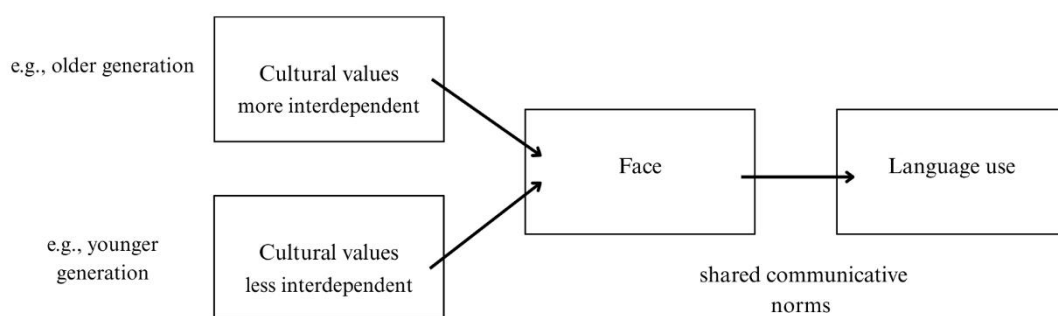
facework in Estonia is expressed more indirectly and subtly and is less dependent on value orientation.

The interdependent self-construal and motive findings align with the idea of “autonomous-relational self” proposed by Kagitçibaşı (2007), where independence in values can coexist with socially attuned behavior in everyday interactions. People grow up emphasizing personal freedom, uniqueness, and self-expression, yet they continue to be attuned to how their actions affect others, particularly in close relationships. This can produce communicative patterns where individuals feel more independent but still behave in socially considerate, face-preserving ways.

Combining the above-mentioned findings, the present study suggests that face-management norms may be more stable and culturally shared than expected, even in societies undergoing value change. Although younger Estonians grow up in a more individualistic and digitally mediated environment, the basic principle of avoiding unnecessary embarrassment to others appears to remain intact and widely practiced as reflected in similar lexical choices across scenarios. Taken together, these results indicate that value change and changes in communication patterns are not synchronized processes, and that face-related language norms can remain stable despite generational shifts in value orientations (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Revised visual model of the relationships between cultural values, face, and language use



Note. Arrows represent potential effect; the model illustrates that cultural values differ across generations, while face-management and language use remain shared.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. First, even though the experimental scenarios were designed to simulate socially sensitive interactions, they were hypothetical and relied on imagined responses in predetermined lexical options. As a result, they may not fully capture the complexity of real-life face-management or spontaneous language use. Second, the ecological validity of the exam scenario may have differed across age groups. For older participants, many of whom have not taken formal exams for decades, the situation may have been less personally important or emotionally engaging. This could have reduced the perceived face-threat and attenuated generational differences in lexical choice. Third, age-related differences may contribute to a generally more carefree or emotionally regulated approach to everyday social situations. Older adults often place less emphasis on social evaluation and more on emotional stability and positivity, which could reduce the impact of imagined face-threats.

The study has several promising directions for future research. There is value to explore face-management strategies in a wider range of everyday interactional contexts, such as, for example, workplace communication, family dynamics, or peer interactions, to investigate whether the stability of face norms observed here extends beyond academic settings. In order to examine how communicative behaviour patterns evolve as cultural value change deepens over time, longitudinal study designs would be particularly beneficial. Including older generational cohorts would allow to see more prominent generation-specific effects. Finally, in order to study a broader cultural pattern and compare it to the one observed in Estonia, comparative research in other transforming societies would be also very valuable.

Despite the limitations, the study provides a promising foundation for future work. It offers one of the first attempts to examine generational differences in language use within a single transforming cultural context and demonstrates that cultural value shifts and communication patterns may not be synchronized.

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Appendix A

Vignettes of the survey

C. Kujuta ette, et sa tulid eksamilt, kus sa said hämmastavalt hea hinde 5 hindekskaalal 1 kuni 5. Sa tunned end väga õnnelikuna ja oled enda tulemuse üle elevil. Sinu parim sõber {Name} sai ka hindeks 5, nagu sina. Samal ajal kui sina ja {Name} olete koos, tuleb teie juurde klassikaaslane teisest õppeainest ja küsib sinult sinu enda tulemuse kohta: “Kuidas läks?” Antud situatsioonis, kuidas sa vastaksid?

D. Kujuta ette, et sa tulid eksamilt, kus sa said hämmastavalt hea hinde 5 hindekskaalal 1 kuni 5. Sa tunned end väga õnnelikuna ja oled enda tulemuse üle elevil. Samas sinu parim sõber {Name} sai eksamil väga kesise hinde 2. Samal ajal kui sina ja {Name} olete koos, tuleb teie juurde klassikaaslane teisest õppeainest ja küsib sinult sinu enda tulemuse kohta: “Kuidas läks?” Antud situatsioonis, kuidas sa vastaksid?

G. Kujuta ette, et sa tulid eksamilt, kus sa said hämmastavalt hea hinde 5 hindekskaalal 1 kuni 5. Sa tunned end väga õnnelikuna ja oled tulemuse üle elevil. Sinu parim sõber {Name} ei osalenud eksamil. Pärast eksamit kohtud {Name}-iga ja ei jõua ära oodata, et talle oma põnevaid uudiseid rääkida. Samal ajal kui sina ja {Name} olete koos, tuleb teie juurde klassikaaslane teisest õppeainest ja küsib sinult sinu enda tulemuse kohta: “Kuidas läks?” Antud situatsioonis, kuidas sa vastaksid?

H. Kujuta ette, et sa tulid eksamilt, kus sa said hämmastavalt hea hinde 5 hindekskaalal 1 kuni 5. Sa tunned end väga õnnelikuna ja oled tulemuse üle elevil. Sinu parim sõber {Name} osales samuti eksamil, kuid sa ei tea tema tulemust. Samal ajal kui sina ja {Name} olete koos, tuleb teie juurde klassikaaslane teisest õppeainest ja küsib sinult sinu enda tulemuse kohta: “Kuidas läks?” Antud situatsioonis, kuidas sa vastaksid?

Käesolevaga kinnitan, et olen korrektselt viidanud kõigile oma töös kasutatud teiste autorite poolt loodud kirjalikele töödele, lausetele, mõtetele, ideedele või andmetele.

Olen nõus oma töö avaldamisega Tartu Ülikooli digitaalarhiivis.

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