

Exploring Components of Intergenerational Transmission of Stress in Adolescents

Armin. Khadem Fini¹, Seyed Milad. Saadati^{1*}, Sergii. Boltivets²

¹ Faculty of Education and Health Sciences, University of Limerick, Castletroy, Ireland

² Chief Researcher of the Department of Scientific Support of Social Formation of Youth. Mykhailo Drahomanov University, Ukraine

* Corresponding author email address: 24361836@studentmail.ul.ie

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The objective of this study was to explore the components and mechanisms through which stress is transmitted across generations within families and how adolescents experience and respond to these dynamics.

Methods and Materials: This study employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews to capture adolescents' lived experiences of intergenerational stress. A purposive sample of 18 adolescents, aged 13–18 years, was recruited from diverse socio-economic and family backgrounds in Ireland. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, were audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo 14 software, following a systematic coding process that progressed from open codes to subthemes and broader categories. Credibility was enhanced through peer debriefing and member checking.

Findings: Three overarching themes emerged from the analysis. The first, family stress dynamics, captured the spillover of parental work stress, marital conflict, and parental coping strategies into the home environment, shaping parenting practices and communication patterns. The second, adolescent responses to stress, included emotional reactions such as anxiety, sadness, and guilt, as well as behavioral outcomes including withdrawal, academic decline, risky peer relationships, and health complaints. The third, transmission pathways and protective factors, highlighted observational learning, role reversal, and cultural narratives as mechanisms of stress transfer, while also identifying personal resilience, external supports, and family warmth as protective buffers. Adolescents' voices emphasized both the risks of internalizing parental stress and the potential for resilience-building interventions.

Conclusion: The study demonstrates that intergenerational transmission of stress is a multifaceted process shaped by family functioning, communication patterns, cultural narratives, and resilience mechanisms. While family conflict and parental distress intensify adolescent vulnerability, protective factors such as resilience and external supports mitigate adverse outcomes. These findings underscore the need for family-centered and culturally sensitive interventions to disrupt cycles of stress transmission and promote adolescent well-being.

Keywords: *Intergenerational stress; adolescents; family functioning; resilience; coping*

1. Introduction

Adolescence represents a critical developmental stage marked by heightened sensitivity to family dynamics, stress exposure, and intergenerational processes that shape psychosocial outcomes. During this period, young people are particularly vulnerable to stressors transmitted from parents and caregivers, including those embedded in the broader family environment, parental coping strategies, and cultural or social expectations. The intergenerational transmission of stress can occur through multiple pathways, such as modeling, emotional contagion, communication patterns, and systemic family processes, which often lead to long-lasting implications for adolescents' mental health and development. Examining these processes is essential to better understand how stress permeates family systems and how adolescents internalize, resist, or reframe such influences across different sociocultural contexts (Yang et al., 2025; Yu et al., 2025).

The family stress model provides one of the most widely recognized frameworks for explaining the mechanisms through which parental stress influences adolescents. Within this model, parental financial strain, marital conflict, and psychological distress negatively impact parenting practices, which in turn affect adolescent outcomes. For instance, stressful conditions can undermine parental warmth, increase harsh disciplinary practices, and create a hostile emotional climate at home (Chen et al., 2023). Adolescents growing up in such environments often experience elevated anxiety, depression, or maladaptive coping patterns, highlighting the cyclical nature of stress within families. These findings have been corroborated across different national contexts, underscoring the universality of stress transmission processes while also pointing to the role of cultural variation (Alpysbekova et al., 2025; Chronopoulou et al., 2025).

Research also indicates that family functioning and relational patterns are pivotal in mediating the stress experiences of adolescents. In Greece, maternal

psychopathology and dysfunctional family interactions were found to predict adolescent externalizing behaviors, illustrating how parental distress spills over into adolescent adjustment (Chronopoulou et al., 2025). Similarly, longitudinal work with families from the former Soviet Union emphasized that cultural stress exacerbates parent–adolescent conflict, which, in turn, deteriorates adolescent mental health (Alpysbekova et al., 2025). Such findings suggest that both proximal family conditions and broader cultural contexts contribute to the intergenerational transfer of stress.

Moreover, the dynamic nature of adolescent development necessitates consideration of how stress influences and is influenced by reciprocal processes within the family. Evidence suggests that adolescents not only absorb stress from their parents but can also affect parental well-being, creating bidirectional cycles of influence (Boele et al., 2023). This perspective aligns with family systems theory, which views families as interconnected units where stress and adaptation are mutually constituted. Adolescents in families marked by conflict or psychological strain may adopt coping roles, withdraw, or engage in risk behaviors, further reinforcing the circulation of stress across generations (Bjørndal et al., 2024).

The broader emotional climate of the family also plays an important role. Studies from diverse contexts show that harmonious family environments buffer against adolescent stress, while disorganized or conflictual climates exacerbate vulnerability. For example, research during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted that family climate was directly linked to adolescents' stress levels, with those perceiving warm and supportive environments reporting better outcomes (Dahlia & Hastuti, 2022; Wong et al., 2022). Conversely, adolescents embedded in hostile or neglectful family climates may internalize stress and display symptoms of depression, anxiety, or psychosomatic complaints (Rayan et al., 2022; Windarwati et al., 2020).

Another important dimension is how adolescents themselves appraise and respond to stress. Research on

adolescent hardiness indicates that the quality of the parent–child relationship significantly shapes resilience and coping responses (Danilova, 2023). Those with secure and supportive relationships are better able to manage stress, while those with insecure attachments are more likely to adopt maladaptive strategies. Similarly, adolescents from disharmonious families in Indonesia reported distinct coping strategies, highlighting the role of context-specific family conditions in shaping stress management (Rahman & Paryontri, 2023). These findings demonstrate that adolescents are not passive recipients of intergenerational stress but active participants whose responses contribute to shaping the broader family stress ecology.

Adolescent stress transmission also manifests through behavioral, academic, and health-related outcomes. Family-based stress exposure has been linked to increased risk of depression and other psychopathologies (Okońska et al., 2025), substance use (Hamza et al., 2021), and diminished mental health more broadly (Maglica et al., 2021). In contexts where adolescents experience both family conflict and lack of openness, the intergenerational cycle of stress is reinforced by communication breakdowns (Maulina et al., 2024). This dynamic underscores the need to examine communication as both a mediating factor and a potential intervention point for breaking stress transmission.

Importantly, structural and environmental factors also shape the extent of stress transmission within families. Adolescents living in agricultural or rural contexts, for instance, face unique stressors related to economic uncertainty and social isolation, which further compound intergenerational patterns of distress (Rudolphi & Berg, 2023; Yang et al., 2023). Likewise, adolescents in high-risk urban environments encounter amplified parental monitoring challenges and family conflict, which directly feed into stress processes (Pizarro et al., 2020). These insights highlight that while intergenerational stress processes are universal, they are also mediated by environmental risk factors and socio-economic conditions.

Theoretical advancements also emphasize the role of personal and family strengths in moderating intergenerational stress. Family resilience, conceptualized as the ability to withstand and adapt to adversity, has been shown to promote adolescent mental health by enhancing personal strengths such as optimism and problem-solving skills (Yu et al., 2025). Similarly, adolescents' character strengths and perceptions of stress have been found to mediate the relationship between family functioning and generalized stress responses (Yang et al., 2025). These

findings suggest that resilience factors operate at both individual and systemic levels, mitigating the negative effects of stress transmission.

Cross-cultural research further underscores the variability in stress dynamics. For example, studies in Jordan and Qatar demonstrate that family harmony and cultural values significantly influence adolescent well-being, while substance abuse and family discord exacerbate psychological distress (Hamza et al., 2021; Rayan et al., 2022). In East Asian contexts, pre-pandemic family environments shaped adolescent psychosocial adjustment during the COVID-19 crisis, highlighting the long-term role of family dynamics in stress adaptation (Wong et al., 2022). Similarly, research in Croatia and Indonesia illustrates how school and family factors interact to shape adolescent mental health, reinforcing the view that intergenerational stress must be understood within broader ecological systems (Handayani, 2025; Novak et al., 2021).

The significance of positive family factors also emerges in research on LGBTQ+ adolescents, where familial warmth buffered against the effects of rejection and stress (Meanley et al., 2021). Such findings point to the nuanced role of both protective and risk factors within family environments, suggesting that resilience-building strategies may serve as effective buffers against intergenerational stress processes.

Finally, contemporary studies emphasize the importance of contextualizing adolescent stress within the global and digital age. With the rise of social media and changing modes of communication, family structures are increasingly challenged by new forms of stress exposure. Social media addiction, for example, has been linked to poor family functioning and psychological distress, underscoring the role of cognitive-emotional regulation in moderating these pathways (Rahimi et al., 2024). Adolescents' coping strategies are therefore shaped not only by parental behavior but also by digital influences and evolving socio-cultural contexts.

Taken together, the existing body of research demonstrates that intergenerational transmission of stress in adolescents is a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by family functioning, communication, parenting styles, cultural narratives, and socio-economic contexts. While risk factors such as conflict, parental psychopathology, and poor communication exacerbate stress, protective mechanisms including resilience, warmth, and supportive external systems buffer its effects. Despite significant advances, gaps remain in understanding how these dynamics unfold in diverse cultural contexts and how adolescents' own voices

can be integrated into models of stress transmission. This study aims to address these gaps by qualitatively exploring adolescents' lived experiences of intergenerational stress transmission in Ireland.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the components of intergenerational transmission of stress in adolescents. A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants who could provide rich and relevant insights into the phenomenon under investigation. The study involved 18 adolescent participants residing in Ireland, representing diverse socio-economic and family backgrounds. Inclusion criteria required that participants were between the ages of 13 and 18 and had direct experiences of parental stress in their households. Recruitment was conducted through community organizations, secondary schools, and youth support centers. Theoretical saturation was achieved after 18 interviews, at which point no new codes or themes were emerging, and further data collection was deemed unnecessary.

2.2. Measures

Data were collected using semi-structured, in-depth interviews that allowed participants to share their lived experiences in a flexible yet systematic manner. An interview guide was designed to ensure consistency while providing sufficient openness for participants to narrate their personal perspectives. Questions focused on adolescents' perceptions of parental stress, coping mechanisms, emotional responses, and perceived impacts on their own well-being. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted in a private and comfortable setting to foster trust and confidentiality. With informed

consent from participants and their guardians, all interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

2.3. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the interview data. Transcripts were imported into NVivo 14 qualitative data analysis software to facilitate systematic coding, categorization, and theme development. The analysis followed a multi-step process: initial open coding of meaningful units, grouping codes into subthemes, and refining them into broader themes that captured the key dimensions of intergenerational stress transmission. An iterative and reflexive approach was applied, with repeated comparison across transcripts to ensure consistency and validity. To enhance credibility, peer debriefing and member checking were used, where preliminary interpretations were shared with selected participants for verification.

3. Findings and Results

The study sample consisted of 18 adolescents residing in Ireland, including 10 females (55.6%) and 8 males (44.4%), with ages ranging from 13 to 18 years ($M = 15.6$). Participants were recruited from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, with 7 (38.9%) from working-class families, 6 (33.3%) from middle-class families, and 5 (27.8%) from upper-middle-class households. Regarding family structure, 11 adolescents (61.1%) lived with both parents, while 7 (38.9%) came from single-parent or blended families. In terms of educational status, all participants were currently enrolled in secondary schools, with 9 (50%) in junior cycle (ages 13–15) and 9 (50%) in senior cycle (ages 16–18). This diversity of gender, family background, and age allowed for the collection of varied perspectives on the intergenerational transmission of stress.

Table 1

Themes, Subthemes, and Open Codes

Category (Main Theme)	Subcategory	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Family Stress Dynamics	Parental Work-Related Stress	Long working hours, job insecurity, financial pressure, exhaustion after work, reduced family time
	Marital Conflict and Tension	Frequent arguments, emotional withdrawal, silent treatment, blaming, inconsistent parenting
	Parenting Style under Stress	Harsh discipline, lack of emotional support, inconsistency in rules, overprotection
	Emotional Climate of Home	Constant tension, lack of warmth, suppressed emotions, unpredictability
	Parental Coping Mechanisms	Substance use, avoidance, problem-focused coping, reliance on extended family

2. Adolescent Responses to Intergenerational Stress	Spillover of Stress into Parenting	Irritability toward children, low patience, neglect of child needs, heightened criticism
	Communication Patterns	Limited parent–child dialogue, avoidance of sensitive topics, misinterpretation of intentions
	Emotional Reactions	Anxiety, sadness, anger, helplessness, emotional numbness
	Behavioral Coping Strategies	Withdrawal from family, increased time with peers, sports participation, creative outlets
	Academic Impact	Decline in concentration, school absenteeism, reduced motivation, academic pressure
	Peer Relationships	Seeking emotional support from friends, peer conflicts, joining risky peer groups
	Health and Lifestyle Effects	Sleep disturbance, appetite changes, psychosomatic symptoms, risky behaviors
3. Transmission Pathways and Protective Factors	Self-Blame and Guilt	Feeling responsible for parental stress, internalizing conflicts, negative self-image
	Observational Learning	Modeling parental stress responses, imitating unhealthy coping, normalization of stress
	Communication Across Generations	Parents sharing worries with children, lack of boundaries, emotional oversharing
	Intergenerational Beliefs and Narratives	"Stress is normal," cultural expectations, intergenerational silence
	Role Reversal (Parentification)	Adolescents caring for siblings, providing emotional support to parents, financial contribution
	Supportive External Systems	Teachers as buffers, youth organizations, counseling access, extended family support
	Personal Resilience Factors	Optimism, problem-solving skills, future orientation, self-reflection
	Cultural and Social Norms	Irish family values, stigma around mental health, reliance on community networks

Family Stress Dynamics

Parental work-related stress was a recurring theme, with adolescents reporting that their parents' demanding jobs and financial worries often overshadowed family interactions. Long working hours, job insecurity, and exhaustion contributed to a strained home atmosphere. As one participant stated, *"When Dad comes home, he's so tired from work that he barely talks to us. It feels like his job is more important than spending time together."*

Marital conflict and tension between parents also emerged as a significant stressor. Adolescents described frequent arguments, emotional withdrawal, and inconsistent parenting styles resulting from these conflicts. One adolescent reflected, *"When my parents fight, I just hide in my room. Sometimes they don't talk for days, and it makes the whole house feel heavy."*

The impact of parental stress was also evident in parenting styles. Some participants reported harsh discipline and lack of emotional support, while others mentioned overprotective or inconsistent behaviors. As expressed by one adolescent, *"Mum gets really strict when she's stressed. One day she's yelling, the next day she doesn't care what I do."*

The emotional climate of the home was frequently described as tense and unpredictable. Adolescents highlighted the lack of warmth and constant underlying

tension. A participant noted, *"You never know what mood they'll be in. Sometimes it feels like walking on eggshells at home."*

Parental coping mechanisms played an important role in shaping family stress dynamics. Some adolescents observed their parents resorting to avoidance or unhealthy coping strategies, such as alcohol use, while others witnessed problem-solving behaviors. One participant commented, *"Dad drinks when he's stressed. It just makes things worse because then he shouts more."*

Spillover of stress into parenting was another common experience. Adolescents mentioned irritability, low patience, and neglect of their needs. One adolescent remarked, *"If Mum has a bad day, she takes it out on us. She snaps even if I just ask a simple question."*

Finally, communication patterns within families were described as limited, particularly around sensitive topics. Adolescents often felt their voices were ignored or misunderstood. As one participant said, *"We don't really talk about problems. If I try, they say I don't understand because I'm too young."*

Adolescent Responses to Intergenerational Stress

Emotional reactions to parental stress were prominent across participants. Adolescents described feelings of anxiety, sadness, anger, and helplessness. One adolescent

shared, *"Sometimes I just feel hopeless because no matter what I do, the fighting doesn't stop."*

Behavioral coping strategies varied. Some adolescents withdrew from family interactions, while others turned to peers, sports, or creative activities as outlets. A participant explained, *"I go for a run when things get too much at home. It's the only way I can clear my head."*

Academic impact was another recurring issue. Stress at home translated into difficulties with concentration, motivation, and attendance. As one adolescent described, *"When things are rough at home, I can't focus in school. Teachers think I'm lazy, but my mind is somewhere else."*

Peer relationships were often used as an alternative support system. Adolescents reported both positive outcomes, such as finding comfort in friendships, and negative outcomes, such as involvement with risky peer groups. One adolescent explained, *"My friends understand more than my parents. Sometimes I just stay out late with them to avoid going home."*

Health and lifestyle effects were evident, with participants reporting sleep problems, appetite changes, and psychosomatic symptoms. A participant stated, *"I get headaches when my parents fight. I just lie in bed and can't sleep."*

Self-blame and guilt were also significant, with adolescents internalizing responsibility for parental stress. As one adolescent admitted, *"I think if I behaved better, maybe they wouldn't argue so much. Sometimes I feel like it's my fault."*

Transmission Pathways and Protective Factors

Observational learning emerged as a key mechanism in intergenerational stress transmission. Adolescents noted that they often mirrored their parents' stress responses, even when they recognized them as unhealthy. One adolescent said, *"I shout at my brother the same way Dad shouts at me. I hate it, but it just happens."*

Communication across generations was another pathway, with adolescents frequently exposed to parental worries through oversharing. This blurred emotional boundaries and transferred stress directly. A participant noted, *"Mum tells me about her money problems. I want to help, but it just makes me more anxious."*

Intergenerational beliefs and narratives also shaped adolescents' perspectives. Many internalized the idea that stress was a normal part of life or that family struggles should remain private. As one participant explained, *"In our family, you just deal with stress quietly. Talking about it is seen as weakness."*

Role reversal, or parentification, was highlighted by several adolescents who felt responsible for supporting their parents emotionally or caring for younger siblings. One adolescent remarked, *"Sometimes I feel more like the parent. I look after my little brother when Mum is too upset."*

Supportive external systems acted as buffers. Adolescents cited teachers, counselors, extended family, and youth organizations as valuable resources. A participant expressed, *"My teacher noticed I was struggling and encouraged me to see the school counselor. That really helped."*

Personal resilience factors, such as optimism, problem-solving skills, and future orientation, also helped adolescents manage stress. As one adolescent described, *"I remind myself that things won't always be this way. I focus on my goals to keep going."*

Finally, cultural and social norms shaped the way stress was handled. Participants mentioned Irish family values, community reliance, and stigma around mental health. One adolescent commented, *"In our culture, people don't talk about mental health much. It makes it harder to ask for help."*

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study provide nuanced insights into the ways in which intergenerational stress is transmitted within families and how adolescents experience, interpret, and respond to these dynamics. Three broad thematic categories emerged: family stress dynamics, adolescent responses to stress, and transmission pathways alongside protective factors. These categories highlight both the risk factors that perpetuate stress across generations and the resilience mechanisms that adolescents employ to buffer its effects. Taken together, the results underscore the multifaceted nature of family influences on adolescent well-being and point to the complex interplay between parental stress, adolescent coping, and broader sociocultural contexts.

One of the clearest findings concerns the spillover of parental work-related and marital stress into the home environment, shaping both parenting practices and the overall emotional climate. Adolescents frequently reported that long working hours, job insecurity, and financial strain reduced the time and energy parents devoted to supportive interactions, leaving them feeling neglected or misunderstood. This finding is consistent with research demonstrating that family economic stress undermines

parenting quality and increases adolescent vulnerability to psychosocial difficulties (Chen et al., 2023). Similarly, evidence from Greece shows that maternal psychopathology and strained family functioning predict adolescent externalizing behaviors (Chronopoulou et al., 2025), echoing participants' accounts of parental irritability, harsh discipline, and emotional withdrawal during stressful periods. Such results reaffirm the family stress model, which posits that stress undermines parental capacity for warmth and consistency, thereby affecting adolescent adjustment (Bjørndal et al., 2024).

The theme of marital conflict and inconsistent parenting also aligns with existing studies highlighting the interdependence between family harmony and adolescent well-being. Previous findings illustrate that disorganized family systems exacerbate adolescent stress and mental health problems (Rayan et al., 2022; Windarwati et al., 2020). Similarly, adolescents in this study described constant arguments and emotional distance between parents as destabilizing forces that eroded their sense of security at home. Comparable evidence has been observed in Jordanian students, where family conflict was associated with heightened depression, anxiety, and stress (Rayan et al., 2022). The present findings thus extend prior work by illustrating how adolescents internalize marital tensions not only as immediate stress but also as ongoing uncertainty, reinforcing the sense of "walking on eggshells" described by several participants.

Another critical dimension involves communication breakdowns between parents and adolescents. Participants highlighted the lack of open dialogue and avoidance of sensitive topics, often leading to misinterpretations and feelings of alienation. This resonates with earlier research documenting that adolescents' lack of openness to parents reinforces intergenerational cycles of stress and miscommunication (Maulina et al., 2024). In line with this, Peruvian research has also shown that high-risk environments intensify parental monitoring challenges and disrupt healthy parent-child dynamics (Pizarro et al., 2020). Together, these findings emphasize that communication not only mediates stress transmission but also serves as a potential site for intervention. When adolescents perceive communication barriers, they are more likely to seek alternative support systems, sometimes constructive (e.g., friendships, sports) and sometimes maladaptive (e.g., risky peer groups).

The findings further revealed the breadth of adolescents' emotional and behavioral responses to intergenerational

stress. Adolescents reported anxiety, sadness, helplessness, and guilt, alongside behavioral manifestations such as withdrawal, academic decline, and risky coping strategies. These outcomes mirror prior work documenting associations between family dysfunction and adolescent depression (Okońska et al., 2025), substance abuse (Hamza et al., 2021), and reduced self-esteem among marginalized groups (Meanley et al., 2021). Importantly, participants also expressed self-blame, believing themselves to be the cause of parental conflict, which parallels evidence linking insecure parent-child relationships with maladaptive internalization of stress (Danilova, 2023). Thus, adolescents' experiences in this study confirm that intergenerational stress is not merely absorbed passively but actively interpreted, with internal attributions amplifying negative outcomes.

Observational learning and parentification emerged as salient pathways of stress transmission. Several adolescents reported imitating parental stress responses, including irritability and shouting, while others described taking on parental roles, such as caring for siblings or emotionally supporting distressed parents. This is in line with evidence suggesting that family functioning and adolescent well-being are dynamically co-constructed, with adolescents both influencing and being influenced by parental behavior (Bjørndal et al., 2024; Boele et al., 2023). Findings also resonate with studies from Taiwan, where family stress and lack of support directly reduced adolescents' quality of life (Yang et al., 2023), and from agricultural contexts, where family roles and hardships intensified stress experiences (Rudolphi & Berg, 2023). The theme of role reversal thus reflects both a coping adaptation and a stress perpetuation mechanism, highlighting the blurred boundaries that adolescents face in high-stress households.

Despite these risks, several protective mechanisms were evident. Adolescents described resilience factors such as optimism, future orientation, and problem-solving skills, which helped them navigate family stress. These accounts reinforce evidence that family resilience strengthens adolescent mental health by fostering personal strengths (Yu et al., 2025). Similarly, research indicates that character strengths and perceptions of stress mediate the relationship between family functioning and generalized stress responses (Yang et al., 2025). In this way, resilience emerges as both a systemic and individual factor, buffering adolescents against intergenerational transmission. Furthermore, external supports—such as teachers, counselors, and community organizations—were repeatedly cited as buffers, consistent

with Croatian and Indonesian evidence showing that school and community supports play a central role in adolescent mental health (Handayani, 2025; Novak et al., 2021). These findings highlight the importance of multi-level ecological supports in mitigating family-based risks.

Cultural narratives also shaped the way adolescents interpreted and coped with stress. Participants often described silence around mental health, normalization of stress, and stigmatization of help-seeking as barriers to open discussion. This echoes findings from cross-cultural research, such as work with families from the former Soviet Union, where cultural stress exacerbated conflict and undermined mental health (Alpysbekova et al., 2025), as well as research in Asian contexts highlighting that family norms before the pandemic influenced adolescents' ability to cope during COVID-19 (Wong et al., 2022). Studies in Jordan and Qatar further illustrate that cultural values and stigma influence adolescent well-being (Hamza et al., 2021; Rayan et al., 2022). Thus, the present findings reaffirm that intergenerational stress cannot be disentangled from its cultural context; instead, cultural norms around communication, emotional expression, and resilience play a decisive role in shaping adolescent outcomes.

Importantly, the integration of social media and digital contexts into adolescents' daily lives complicates the intergenerational dynamics of stress. While not a direct focus of the current study, participants occasionally referenced peer comparisons and online interactions as additional sources of stress or escape. This aligns with emerging research showing that social media addiction mediates the relationship between family functioning and adolescent psychological distress (Rahimi et al., 2024). Such findings underscore the need to contextualize intergenerational stress processes within the digital age, where adolescents' coping and stress exposure extend beyond immediate family interactions.

The findings of this study, therefore, advance the literature in three ways. First, they qualitatively capture the lived experiences of adolescents, emphasizing their interpretive role in stress transmission rather than treating them as passive recipients. Second, they highlight the interweaving of risk and resilience processes, showing how observational learning, communication breakdown, and parentification operate alongside optimism, external support, and resilience. Third, they situate intergenerational stress within cultural narratives and socio-ecological systems, reaffirming the need for culturally sensitive and contextually grounded approaches. In doing so, the study

contributes to existing frameworks of family stress (Bjørndal et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2023) by highlighting how these processes unfold in the Irish context, while still aligning with global patterns documented across Europe, Asia, and the Middle East (Alpysbekova et al., 2025; Rayan et al., 2022; Wong et al., 2022; Yu et al., 2025).

5. Limitations & Suggestions

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. First, the sample size of 18 adolescents, though sufficient for reaching theoretical saturation, restricts the generalizability of the findings. While the qualitative design emphasizes depth over breadth, broader quantitative studies would be necessary to validate the prevalence of these themes in larger populations. Second, the study relied on adolescents' self-reports, which may be influenced by memory bias, selective disclosure, or fear of stigmatization. Triangulating data with parental perspectives, teacher reports, or observational methods would strengthen the validity of the findings. Third, while the study situates adolescent experiences within cultural contexts, the focus on Ireland limits cross-cultural comparison. Including participants from multiple countries or immigrant backgrounds would allow for richer exploration of cultural influences on intergenerational stress. Finally, the cross-sectional nature of the study captures stress transmission at one point in time; longitudinal designs are needed to trace how these processes unfold across developmental trajectories.

Future research should expand upon these findings by employing mixed-methods designs that combine qualitative depth with quantitative breadth. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable in tracing how intergenerational stress evolves as adolescents transition into adulthood and how protective factors sustain or weaken over time. Comparative cross-cultural studies should also be conducted to examine how cultural norms and values shape stress processes in diverse contexts. Additionally, future research could explore the intersection of digital environments and family stress, particularly given the growing role of social media in adolescent coping and stress exposure. Finally, intervention-based research is needed to assess the effectiveness of family resilience training, communication workshops, and school-based support programs in reducing intergenerational transmission of stress.

The findings of this study carry several implications for practice. Practitioners working with adolescents should

prioritize family-based interventions that enhance communication, reduce conflict, and promote parental coping strategies. Schools should be equipped with resources to identify adolescents at risk of stress-related difficulties and provide accessible counseling and peer support systems. Community organizations can play a vital role by offering resilience-building workshops and fostering supportive networks beyond the family. Policies should address systemic contributors to family stress, such as economic insecurity and lack of mental health resources, to reduce the pressures that exacerbate stress transmission. Ultimately, holistic approaches that integrate family, school, community, and policy levels are most likely to mitigate the negative consequences of intergenerational stress and promote adolescent well-being.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

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

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed in this article.

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