

Communication Matters: Gender Variations in Openness, Affection and Support within Ghanaian Families

William Kodom Gyasi¹, Eugene Kwarteng-Nantwi²,
Pious Jojo Adu-Akoh^{3*}, Rita Akele Twumasi¹

¹Department of Communication Studies, University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast, Ghana, ²Counselling Centre, University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast, Ghana, ³Department of Education and Psychology, University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast, Ghana. *Corresponding Author's Email: pious.adu-akoh@stu.ucc.edu.gh

Abstract

This study investigated family communication standards among young adults in the University of Cape Coast, Ghana. The research assessed key dimensions of family communication, including openness, politeness, emotional support and structural stability. A descriptive survey design was employed. Descriptive statistics were used to assess overall perceptions of each communication standard, while independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine gender differences. The findings indicated that young adults generally perceived high levels of family communication across all assessed dimensions. Following the Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons, significant gender differences were observed in openness, emotional and instrumental support and humour and sarcasm, with females reporting higher levels than males. No significant gender differences were found in expression of affection and routine interaction, mindreading, structural stability, politeness, discipline, or avoidance. The findings suggest that gender differences in family communication are more evident in relational, emotional and socially expressive dimensions than in broader family norms concerning structure, respect and discipline. The study concludes that strengthening openness, emotional and instrumental support and positive relational interaction may promote healthy family communication among young adults. It recommends that parents, educators and practitioners promote communication practices that support emotional expression and relational connection while recognizing the influence of gender and Ghanaian cultural expectations on family communication.

Keywords: Communication Standards, Family, Gender, Parents, Perception, Young Adults.

Introduction

Communication is one of the most important needs of human beings. Human beings are social beings who make use of communication to understand one another and to make meaning out of their surroundings (1). If communication breaks down, communities risk losing the connection that binds them together and social cohesion cannot thrive without meaningful interaction and communication among members (2, 3). Effective communication is very important in shaping the behaviour, attitude and overall well-being of an individual (1, 4). In the Ghanaian context, family life is deeply rooted in collectivist and hierarchical cultural values where respect for elders, indirect communication and communal interdependence are central (4, 5). These values influence how openness, emotional expressiveness and authority are managed in everyday family conversations. As young adults, especially university students, go through the transition from adolescence to

adulthood, they face new communication challenges and are required to balance independence with familial expectations (4, 6).

Rationale for the Study

Family communication in Ghana is strongly shaped by collectivist, hierarchical values, but is being reshaped by urbanization, ICTs and social media. Extended families and elders historically anchor value transmission through oral narratives, shared caregiving and collective decision-making, especially among the Akan and other groups (7, 8). Communication is often indirect, using proverbs and carefully managed information flow, with elders controlling who is told what and how (9). These practices promote social cohesion and moral socialization but also reinforce expectations of respect, deference and appropriate conduct (7, 9). At the same time, smartphones, messaging applications and social media increasingly facilitate emotional, functional and moral support

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among geographically dispersed family members, while also changing established patterns of face-to-face interaction (5, 9). Young adults in Ghana generally value parents who are emotionally and physically available and who provide both emotional and financial support, although traditional gendered domestic roles remain influential (10). In sexual and reproductive health, many parents struggle to communicate openly; Young adults often seek peers or media instead and parental education predicts more open, "liberal" talk (11, 12). Limited or morally restrictive communication is linked to young adults' pregnancy risk (13).

Despite these findings, Ghanaian research has largely focused on sexual and reproductive health communication, parental guidance, young adult development and ICT-mediated family relationships (5, 14). Little is known about how young adults themselves conceptualize ideal family communication, or whether gender influences these standards. This gap is important because cultural expectations concerning respect, family authority, gender roles and emotional expression may shape how males and females understand appropriate family communication. This study therefore examines gender variations in nine dimensions of family communication among young adults in Ghana: openness, expression of affection and routine interaction, emotional and instrumental support, mindreading, humour and sarcasm, structural stability, politeness, discipline and avoidance. The study draws on the family communication patterns theory and family systems theory (15).

Current Study, Research Questions and Hypothesis

The study addresses the following research questions: (RQ1): What do young people report as their ideal family communication standards? (RQ2): Do females report different family communication standards from males? The following hypothesis also guided the study: (H_0): There is no statistically significant difference between male and female young adults in their perceptions of family communication on the dimensions assessed. (H_1): There is a statistically significant difference between male and female young adults in their perceptions of family communication on at least one of the dimensions assessed.

Empirics

Family Communication Standards in Ghana

Family communication standards refer to individuals' cognitive beliefs about how family members should ideally communicate (16). They serve as internal benchmarks for evaluating family interactions and encompass expressive and structural aspects of communication (16, 17). When communication meets these standards, family satisfaction, emotional well-being and cohesion tend to increase (18). In Ghana, collectivist values emphasize respect, hierarchy, communal identity, deference to elders, avoidance of confrontation and indirect expression through proverbs and storytelling (19, 20). However, young people increasingly negotiate these traditional expectations with modern ideals of openness, autonomy and emotional expressiveness (19).

Dimensions of Family Communication Standards

Key dimensions include openness, politeness, emotional and instrumental support, structural stability, humour and sarcasm, mindreading, discipline, affection, routine interaction and avoidance (16).

Openness involves sharing thoughts, feelings and experiences, thereby promoting trust, understanding, family unity and resilience (21). Politeness emphasizes respect, sensitivity, harmony and culturally appropriate communication, particularly in managing conflicts and power relations (19, 20). Emotional and instrumental support involves encouraging, validating and assisting family members, strengthening relationships and helping families manage challenges (17, 18, 20). Structural stability maintains family hierarchy, roles, authority and order, often reflecting conformity and respect for traditional values (16, 19). Humour and sarcasm can strengthen family bonds, reduce tension, facilitate conflict management and socialize young adults into acceptable emotional and expressive behaviours (18, 22). Mindreading involves expecting family members to understand one another's thoughts and feelings without explicit communication, although this may create unrealistic expectations (16). Discipline can be protective when characterized by clear expectations, consistency, communication and warmth, but harsh or punitive discipline may

contribute to internalising and externalising problems (17). Affection and routine interaction involve expressing love and maintaining regular family contact. In Ghana, affection may be communicated more through instrumental support than explicit verbal or physical expressions (23). Finally, avoidance involves deliberately avoiding sensitive or conflictual topics. Although potentially dysfunctional, avoidance can sometimes protect relationships, regulate emotions and maintain harmony, particularly where emotional restraint is culturally valued (24, 25).

Methodology

Participants and Procedure

The study employed a descriptive cross-sectional survey design. Participants were selected using convenience sampling. Although the study initially intended to recruit more than 100 university students aged 17–28 years, 100 students were available and participated in the study. The final sample comprised 50 males and 50 females. The equal distribution across gender groups occurred coincidentally rather than through predetermined quota. A power analysis was conducted to assess the adequacy of the sample. A priori power analysis indicated that 128 participants would be required to detect a medium effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.50$) with 80% power. Although the obtained sample was smaller, sensitivity analysis indicated that the sample provided approximately 86% power to detect an effect of $d = 0.61$ and 92% power to detect an effect of $d = 0.68$, which correspond to two of the larger effects observed in the study. The findings are therefore interpreted with caution, particularly for smaller effects that may have been underpowered. Data were gathered using a structured self-administered questionnaire adapted from Family Communication Standards Instrument (16).

The questionnaires were administered in classroom settings. It included lesson periods, with assistance from course tutors and research assistants. Before administration, the participants were informed about the purpose of the study. Participation was entirely voluntary. Participants were informed that participation or non-participation would have no effect on their academic standing or relationship with their course tutors. Participants completed the

questionnaires independently. Tutors and research assistants did not participate in or influence students' responses. These procedures were intended to minimise perceived pressure to participate and reduce potential social desirability bias. The confidentiality of participants' responses was maintained throughout the data collection process. Nevertheless, because some questionnaires were administered in the presence of course tutors and during scheduled class periods, the possibility of perceived social pressure cannot be completely excluded and is acknowledged as a limitation of the study.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Cape Coast and informed consent was secured from all respondents prior to participation. Data were screened for completeness before statistical analysis.

Measures

Family Communication Standards were measured using an adapted version of the Family Communication Standards Instrument (16). The scale assessed individuals' beliefs about ideal family communication across nine dimensions. Participants indicated their agreement with each statement on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree). The Family Communication Standards Questionnaire (FCSQ) was carefully designed to assess the perceived communication patterns and standards among young people within family settings. The instrument comprised nine dimensions that reflect key aspects of family communication dynamics. The items were adapted and structured to capture both the emotional and behavioural aspects of family communication. For instance, the openness subscale included items such as "My family talks openly about feelings and problems," The maintaining structural stability subscale examined the consistency of family roles and routines through items like "Our family has clear routines and roles that everyone understands." The expression of affection and regular routine interaction subscale focused on how families express love and connection in daily life, represented by statements such as "Family members show affection regularly (hugs, kind words, gestures)." Similarly, the emotional and instrumental support dimension captured the availability of emotional reassurance and practical

help through items such as “I can rely on my family for practical help when needed.” The mindreading subscale explored the intuitive understanding among family members with items like “My family members often understand how I feel without me explaining.” The politeness subscale measured courtesy and respect in communication, including statements like “People in my family treat each other with courtesy and respect.” The discipline subscale assessed fairness and consistency in rule enforcement through items such as “Parents or elders in my family enforce rules fairly.” In addition, the humour and sarcasm dimension captured how laughter and jokes contribute to family bonding, with items such as “We use humour to relieve tension and strengthen our relationships.” Lastly, the avoidance subscale focused on the family’s approach to conflict management, reflected in items like “We avoid unnecessary conflicts in our family.” The internal consistency of the total scale in this study was $\alpha = 0.90$. Demographic Variables included gender (1 = female, 2 = male) and age (in years). These background characteristics were used to describe the sample. All measures were adapted to the

Ghanaian context through minor language adjustments to ensure cultural relevance and clarity. A pre-test with ten students confirmed the comprehensibility of items before full-scale data collection.

Analysis

Data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28). Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) were used to summarize participants’ demographic characteristics. Descriptive statistics (Mean and Standard deviation) were also used to analyse participants’ response to research question. The study employed a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree). Mean scores of 3.50 and above were interpreted as agreement with the statement, indicating a high perception, while mean scores below 3.50 were interpreted as disagreement with the statement, indicating a low perception. An independent samples t-test was used to analyse responses to research question 2. The results were presented in tables below and interpreted in the context of existing literature.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics on Demographic of Respondents

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age Group		
17–19	16	16.0
20–23	72	72.0
24–28	12	12.0
Gender		
Females	50	50.0
Males	50	50.0
Ethnicity		
GaAdange	10	10.0
Gurunsi	4	4.0
Hausa	2	2.0
Konkomba	1	1.0
Krobo	2	2.0
Nzema	6	6.0
Akan	49	49.0
Dagbani	6	6.0
Dagomba	6	6.0
Ewe	14	14.0

From Table 1, the study sampled a total of 100 respondents, 50 males and 50 females whose ages ranged from 17 to 28 years. The participants have generally been referred to as “young adults” in this study. To facilitate analysis, the ages were categorized into three groups: 17–19 years, 20–23 years and 24–28 years. As shown in the frequency

table, the majority of respondents (72%) fell within the 20–23 years age group. This indicates that most participants were young adults, likely representing the dominant age bracket within the target population. The 17–19 years group accounted for 16% of the respondents, suggesting a smaller proportion of late young adults. The 24–

28 years group formed the remaining 12%, representing the older segment of the sample. The age distribution reveals that the sample was largely made up of respondents in their early twenties, implying that the participants were primarily at a youthful and possibly active stage of their academic or professional development. This distribution is consistent with studies typically conducted among tertiary-level students or young adult populations, where individuals aged 20–23 years are most represented.

The study also showcased a diverse array of ethnic groups in Ghana, offering a comprehensive representation of the country's multicultural

landscape. The Akan ethnic group emerged as the most prevalent, constituting nearly half of the sample with 49 participants. This was followed by the Ewe group, which made up 14% of the respondents.

Results

Respondents' views on Ideal family Communication

The first research question collected data on respondents' views about ideal family communication standards. The table results are listed in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics on Students' Perception About an Ideal Family Communication

Standards	M	SD
Openness	4.22	0.82
Maintaining Structural Stability	4.22	0.82
Expression of Affection and Regular Routine Interaction	4.25	0.65
Emotional and Instrumental support	4.25	0.79
Mindreading	4.21	0.75
Politeness	4.10	0.77
Discipline	4.47	0.54
Humour/ Sarcasm	4.28	0.61
Avoidance	4.28	0.63
Mean of Means (MM)	4.25	0.54

Note: M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation, MM = Mean of Means.

Among the dimensions assessed, discipline recorded the highest mean score ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 0.54$). The relatively low standard deviation indicates limited variability in participants' ratings. Humour and sarcasm ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.61$) and avoidance ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.63$) also followed. Similarly, participants reported high scores in expression of affection and regular routine interaction ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 0.65$) and emotional and instrumental support ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 0.79$). Moderately high ratings were also observed for openness ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 0.82$), maintaining structural stability ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 0.82$), mindreading ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.75$) and politeness ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.77$). The standard deviations indicate some variation in respondents' ratings across the dimensions, with the greatest variability observed for openness and structural stability ($SD = 0.82$). Thus, the dimensions recorded moderately

high to high mean scores, with an overall mean of 4.25 ($SD = 0.54$). The relatively low overall standard deviation indicates limited variability in participants' ratings. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of respondents' perceptions of ideal family communication standards.

Results on Gender Difference in Relation to an Ideal Family Communication

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to examine gender differences in views about ideal family communication standards among respondents. The results revealed significant gender differences in several communication standards. Table 3 presents the group means and standard deviations for male and female respondents across the nine family communication standards.

Table 3: Group Statistics

Standard	Respondent's Gender	M	SD
Openness	female	4.49	0.61
	male	3.96	0.91
Maintaining structural stability	female	4.17	0.84
	male	4.28	0.80
Expression of affection and regular routine interaction	female	4.41	0.60
	male	4.11	0.66
Emotional and instrumental support	female	4.49	0.61
	male	4.02	0.88
Mindreading	female	4.36	0.65
	male	4.06	0.82
Politeness	female	4.22	0.75
	male	3.98	0.77
Discipline	female	4.52	0.50
	male	4.41	0.57
Humour and sarcasm	female	4.46	0.56
	male	4.10	0.60
Avoidance	female	4.36	0.61
	male	4.20	0.66

Note: M = Mean, SD =Standard Deviation.

Table 4: Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	t-value	df	Sig. (2- tailed)
Openness	Equal variances assumed	7.104	0.009	3.404	98	0.001
	Equal variances not assumed			3.404	85.665	0.001
Maintaining structural stability	Equal variances assumed	0.228	0.634	-0.670	98	0.505
	Equal variances not assumed			-0.670	97.793	0.505
Expression of affection and regular routine interaction	Equal variances assumed	0.036	0.850	2.334	98	0.022
	Equal variances not assumed			2.334	97.151	0.022
Emotional and instrumental support	Equal variances assumed	5.578	0.020	3.096	98	0.003
	Equal variances not assumed			3.096	87.442	0.003
Mindreading	Equal variances assumed	2.061	0.154	2.019	98	0.046
	Equal variances not assumed			2.019	93.366	0.046
Politeness	Equal variances assumed	0.439	0.509	1.573	98	0.119
	Equal variances not assumed			1.573	97.941	0.119
Discipline	Equal variances assumed	0.208	0.650	1.021	98	0.310
	Equal variances not assumed			1.021	96.547	0.310
Humour and Sarcasm	Equal variances assumed	0.016	0.898	3.070	98	0.003
	Equal variances not assumed			3.070	97.453	0.003
Avoidance	Equal variances assumed	0.580	0.448	1.305	98	0.195
	Equal variances not assumed			1.305	97.469	0.195

Note: F = Frequency, Sig. = Significance, df = Degree of Freedom.

Table 4 presents the results of the independent-samples t-tests used to examine gender differences across the nine family communication standards. To examine gender differences in perceptions of family communication, independent-samples t-tests were conducted across the nine dimensions assessed. Because nine comparisons were conducted, the Bonferroni procedure was applied to control the family-wise error rate. This resulted

in an adjusted significance level of $\alpha = 0.0056$. Females reported significantly higher levels of openness ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 0.61$) than males ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.91$), $t(85.67) = 3.40$, $p = 0.001$. Emotional and instrumental support was also rated higher by females ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 0.61$) than males ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 0.88$), $t(87.44) = 3.10$, $p = 0.003$. Similarly, females reported higher ratings for humour and sarcasm ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 0.56$) than

males ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.60$), $t(97.45) = 3.07$, $p = 0.003$. These three differences remained statistically significant after the Bonferroni correction. Although females reported higher scores for expression of affection and routine interaction ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 0.60$) than males ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.66$), the difference was not statistically significant after correction, $t(97.15) = 2.33$, $p = 0.022$. Similarly, the difference in mindreading was not statistically significant after correction, despite being significant before adjustment, with females reporting higher scores ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 0.65$) than males ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 0.82$), $t(93.37) = 2.02$, $p = 0.046$, $d = 0.40$. No statistically significant gender differences were observed for structural stability, politeness, discipline, or avoidance."

Following the Bonferroni correction, three of the nine hypothesized gender differences were supported. Females reported significantly higher levels of openness, emotional and instrumental support and humour and sarcasm than males. The hypothesized gender differences in expression of affection and routine interaction, mindreading, structural stability, politeness, discipline and avoidance were not supported. The findings indicate that gender differences were evident in selected dimensions of family communication, but not across all dimensions assessed.

Discussion

Effective family communication is widely recognized as an essential part of healthy family functioning (26, 27). The present study was among the few to systematically examine the multidimensional nature of family communication. The study also assessed gender differences in communication standards, providing new insights into how male and female family members perceive and practice communication within the home (28, 29).

Openness

We expected that openness would vary by gender; females indeed reported higher scores on openness than males. This pattern is also consistent with global evidence that females often report greater openness and emotional communication within close relationships, suggesting that the observed difference reflects a broader pattern of gendered communications (28, 29). Research among emerging adults has similarly shown greater emotional self-disclosure among

females to both parents and peers, with disclosure to parents strongly associated with perceptions of open family communication and family cohesion (28, 29).

Within the Ghanaian cultural context gendered social norms around self-disclosure, emotional expressiveness, or perceived relational support may influence females' comfort with open communication more than males (28, 29). Furthermore, given that openness involves both willingness to share and comfort with being shared with, females experience greater acceptance of emotional disclosure and relational communication. Males face stronger expectations of emotional restraint; emotional restraint is often associated with masculinity within the Ghanaian cultural context. This should also not be taken to mean that Ghanaian males are inherently less open; rather, culturally defined expectations concerning appropriate masculine behaviour may influence how openly they communicate within the family. However, the study cannot establish that Ghanaian cultural norms directly cause lower openness among males (28, 29).

Maintaining structural stability

Structural stability is a core concept in family systems theory, which posits that predictable routines and clear roles provide young adults with a sense of security and order, supporting emotional regulation and adaptive functioning (27, 30). Consistent parental expectations and defined family roles have been linked to lower behavioural problems and higher academic engagement among young adults (30, 31). The absence of a gender difference suggests that structural stability is experienced as a universal aspect of family communication across both sexes (28). This consistency may facilitate young adults' ability to anticipate family responses, navigate responsibilities and form reliable expectations about family interactions.

This finding may also reflect Ghanaian family practices. Young adults are generally expected to participate in household responsibilities and follow established family expectations. Ghanaian research reveals that obedience, interdependence, cooperation and responsibility are important features of family socialisation. Young adults' participation in household duties is viewed as part of their development and preparation for adulthood responsibilities. These expectations

apply to both males and females, although particular responsibilities may sometimes be gendered (29, 32). Thus, shared family routines, roles and expectations may shape perceptions of structural stability more than gender. Moreover, stability may create an environment in which other communication standards, such as openness or emotional support, can function more effectively, as young adults perceive the family context as orderly and dependable (30, 32).

Expression of affection and regular routine interaction

Research shows that regular affectionate interactions provide a sense of security, promote positive self-concept and support social competence (29, 32). Such routines, including shared meals, family discussions, or daily check-ins, serve as opportunities for reinforcing relational bonds and modelling effective communication skills (29, 32). Females reported higher levels of expression of affection and routine interaction than males, but the difference was not statistically significant after the Bonferroni correction. This suggests that although the descriptive pattern favoured females, the evidence was insufficient to conclude that gender was associated with this dimension of family communication. In Ghanaian families, affection is often expressed through everyday care, respect, assistance and participation in family activities rather than through explicit verbal expressions alone. Such practices may be shared by both males and females, which could explain the absence of a significant gender difference (29, 32). This may also reflect socialization patterns in which both males and female are encouraged to express and perceive emotions more openly (28, 29). Routine affectionate interactions contribute to resilience, emotional stability and the capacity to form healthy peer and romantic relationships (29, 32).

Emotional And Instrumental Support

Females also reported significantly higher levels of emotional and instrumental support than males. This finding is consistent with international research showing gender differences in supportive communication. Studies found that mothers generally used more supportive speech than fathers and that mothers also tended to use more supportive communication with daughters than with sons (31, 32). Similarly, research on family communication competence has found that

women are more likely than men to report the ability to provide emotional support in interpersonal relationships (28, 29). The finding therefore corresponds with a broader pattern in which females may be more involved in communication that expresses care, empathy, assistance and relational concern.

Within Ghanaian families, support is connected to family responsibility, interdependence and relational obligations. Family members are generally expected to provide emotional assistance to one another (27, 30). The ways in which such support is expressed may be gendered. Recent Ghanaian research indicates that close and trusting parent-child relationships facilitate open communication and make young people more comfortable seeking advice and discussing personal concerns (31, 32). The higher female scores may therefore reflect greater participation in relational forms of family support. At the same time, cultural expectations of masculinity may encourage males to present themselves as independent and emotionally controlled. This may potentially reduce their willingness to seek or express emotional support. The finding can therefore be seen as a product of gendered socialisation and family interaction than as an inherent difference between males and females.

Mindreading

Mindreading, in the context of family communication, refers to the implicit recognition of an individual's feelings, needs, or desires without direct verbal expression. It has been linked to closer relational bonds, higher emotional security and reduced conflict in parent-young adults' relationships (26, 30). Females reported higher levels of mindreading than males; although the unadjusted result was significant the difference was not statistically significant after the Bonferroni correction. Our findings on the gender difference observed does not align with research suggesting that female young adults are more attuned to relational cues and emotional nuances in family interactions (28, 29). Rather, our findings suggest that sensitivity to family members' thoughts, feelings, or needs may be relatively similar among male and female young adults in this sample. The finding may indicate that mindreading in family relationships is influenced more by relational closeness and shared family experiences than by gender. Within Ghanaian family

relationships, sensitivity to the needs and feelings of relatives may be encouraged among both males and females through close family relationships and shared responsibilities. Consequently, cultural expectations of family connectedness may reduce gender differences in the ability to anticipate or understand family members' needs (33).

Politeness

Politeness in family communication involves respectful verbal and non-verbal behaviours, including listening attentively, using courteous language and showing consideration for others' perspectives (33). Research shows that families with high levels of politeness exhibit stronger cohesion, fewer conflicts and more positive parent-Young adult relationships (27, 30, 33). These qualities contribute to young adults' social competence, emotional regulation and ability to form respectful peer and intimate relationships (27, 30, 33). The absence of gender differences suggests that polite communication within the Ghanaian context is a socially and universally valued norm (28, 29). Young adults are generally expected to demonstrate respect through appropriate greetings, respectful forms of address, attentive listening and restraint when expressing disagreement with older family members. These expectations apply to both males and females, which may explain the similarity in their perceptions of politeness (28, 29). Moreover, politeness interacts with other communication standards, such as discipline and emotional support, to reinforce a supportive and structured family environment (27, 30, 33). Young adults who experience polite communication are likely to internalise respectful behaviour patterns and apply these skills in social and academic contexts (27, 30, 33).

Discipline

Discipline in family communication encompasses consistent rule enforcement, structured routines and appropriate behavioural guidance, which collectively contribute to young adult behavioural and emotional regulation (27, 30). The absence of gender differences in discipline suggests that disciplinary expectations are generally applied to young people regardless of gender (29, 30). Even more, in Ghanaian families, young adults are generally expected to demonstrate discipline and respect through obedience to parents and elders, the use of polite and culturally appropriate forms

of address, responsible conduct in fulfilling family and personal obligations and restraint in expressing disagreement or challenging authority. Respect is also demonstrated through appropriate greetings, listening when older family members speak and seeking guidance or permission where family norms require it. These expectations reflect the broader cultural value placed on hierarchy, self-control, responsibility and maintaining harmonious family relationships. We were not so surprised when the findings revealed absence of gender difference among participants.

However, anecdotal evidence and observation within the Ghanaian society reveal that stricter modes of punishment and discipline are given to males than females. Research confirms that males in Ghana are more exposed to harsh punishment than females and both male and female parents report using less harsh parenting than they themselves experienced, suggesting a generational shift toward less severe disciplinary practices. This may indicate a transition from older parenting methods to newer ones that emphasize fairness and consistency, as younger generations adopt alternative disciplinary strategies over time (34). Young adults who experience stable discipline are better able to anticipate consequences, internalize rules and develop self-regulatory skills essential for navigating both school and social contexts (35-37). Generally, when young adults perceive high levels of both discipline and supportive communication, they are more likely to engage in prosocial behaviours, experience lower conflict with parents and develop effective coping strategies (35-38).

Humour and Sarcasm

Research suggests that humour is an important component of interpersonal communication because it can strengthen relationships, reduce tension and facilitate interaction. Although females reported significantly higher levels of humour and sarcasm than males global research does not consistently establish a universal female advantage in humour use. Therefore, the finding does not reflect a general tendency for females to use more humour than males (35-38). Humour and sarcasm are established forms of everyday communication in Ghana. Research among the Ga people, for example, found that humour and sarcasm are used in everyday interactions for purposes including entertainment, criticism,

praise, advice and responding to inappropriate statements (27). Similarly, research conducted in Ghanaian marital settings found that humour can help communicate messages that may otherwise be difficult to express and can reduce interpersonal tension (39). The higher female scores may reflect gender differences in participation in relational and playful forms of family interaction. This finding may further suggest that humour and playful communication are more commonly reported by female young adults in their family interactions. Importantly, Ghanaian research also shows that sarcasm can serve both affiliative and corrective functions, meaning that its presence should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of greater closeness or positive communication (29).

Avoidance

No significant gender difference was found in avoidance. This finding is broadly consistent with global research which suggests that gender differences in the use of avoidance strategies are generally small and inconsistent. No significant gender differences have been found in the use of avoiding, accommodating, or collaborating conflict-management strategies (36, 38). The Ghanaian context is no different. The results may reflect the influence of Ghanaian norms concerning respect, family harmony and the appropriate management of disagreement. In Ghana, both males and females may avoid direct confrontation when discussing sensitive issues, particularly with parents or older relatives, because open disagreement can be perceived as disrespectful. Research on family conflict further indicates that family communication patterns, relational dynamics, age and authority of the family member involved and the nature of the conflict influences avoidance rather than gender alone. Selective avoidance may help prevent unnecessary conflict and maintain relational harmony (37, 38). However, chronic avoidance of important issues can inhibit problem-solving, reduce emotional closeness and hinder young adult coping and decision-making skills (36, 38). Young adults often interpret avoidance as a signal of care when used strategically to protect emotions or manage timing, rather than as a lack of support (36, 38).

University Experience as a Contextual Influence

An important contextual consideration in interpreting these findings is the university experience of the participants. University education represents a period in which young adults are exposed to individuals from different social, cultural, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds and encounter new forms of interpersonal interaction. Such experiences may broaden their understanding of openness, emotional expression, interpersonal support, respect and conflict management. Consequently, the relatively high ratings observed across the nine family communication standards may reflect not only communication practices learned within the family but also communication expectations that have been shaped or reinforced through tertiary education and interactions within the university environment. In particular, university life may provide young adults with greater opportunities to develop interpersonal autonomy and to encounter communication styles that differ from those traditionally experienced within hierarchical family structures. These experiences may be relevant to the relatively high ratings observed for openness and emotional and instrumental support in the present study.

Conclusion

The findings of this study are subject to several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design of the research prevents any causal inferences about the relationships among family communication standards and gender differences. It is not possible to determine whether higher perceptions of certain communication standards, such as openness or emotional support, lead to positive young adult outcomes, or whether young adults with better adjustment perceive family communication more positively. Additionally, Young adults' understanding of specific standards, such as mindreading or avoidance, may differ depending on cognitive development or cultural interpretation, which could have affected responses. Also, while this study included multiple dimensions of family communication, it did not consider other potentially relevant factors, such as parental education, socioeconomic status, or family structure, which could influence young adults' perceptions.

The study was conducted in a single region, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other populations or cultural contexts. However, because university exposure was not directly measured and the study did not include a comparison group of non-university young adults, it is not possible to determine whether the observed communication standards are attributable to university education itself. The findings should therefore be interpreted as reflecting the perceptions of university-enrolled young adults rather than young adults in Ghana generally. Future research could compare university students with non-university young adults and examine whether length of university exposure, year of study, residential experience, peer networks and exposure to diverse social environments are associated with differences in family communication standards.

Also, the demographic information reported only age, gender and ethnicity. Future studies should consider employing other aspects of the student's demographics and also consider longitudinal designs with wider contexts to examine how young adults' perceptions of family communication standards evolve over time and how these perceptions influence developmental outcomes, such as emotional regulation, social competence and academic engagement. Such designs would allow researchers to disentangle the directionality of the relationships and better understand causal mechanisms. Additionally, mixed-method approaches could provide richer insights into how young adults interpret and experience different communication standards.

Effective family communication is an essential part of young adult development. It influences emotional, social and cognitive outcomes. This study examined young adults' perceptions of family communication standards. The findings revealed that overall, young adults perceive high levels of family communication with notable gender differences in several standards. Specifically, females reported higher mean scores than males on openness, expression of affection and routine interaction, emotional and instrumental support, mindreading and humour and sarcasm; however, after Bonferroni correction, statistically significant gender differences remained only for openness, emotional and instrumental support and humour and sarcasm..

This suggests that females may experience or recognise relational and emotional aspects of family communication more acutely than males. The study highlights the importance of openness and emotional support as central components of family interactions, fostering trust, relational satisfaction and young adult well-being. High scores in structural stability and discipline indicate that families provide predictable routines and consistent behavioural guidance, creating a framework that enhances relational functioning. Humour and playful interactions emerged as significant for relational cohesion and stress relief, while avoidance reflected a nuanced approach to conflict management, balancing harmony with the need for open dialogue. The study suggests the need for families to actively cultivate standards such as openness, affectionate interactions and emotional support, which appear to benefit both genders but are especially perceived more positively by females. Second, the results suggest that certain communication standards, such as politeness and discipline, are consistently experienced across genders, indicating universal relevance in promoting functional family interactions. Third, the observed gender differences in perception means there is the need to consider individual experiences when designing family interventions, educational programs, or counselling strategies.

Recommendations

The findings from this study have direct implications for the Counselling Centre of the University of Cape Coast (UCC) and for other student-focused units such as the Dean of Students, Hall Counselling Units, Academic Departments and the University Clinic.

For the Counselling Centre, the results provide a framework for assessment and intervention. Intake and follow-up assessments should routinely include questions on students' perceptions of family openness, affection, emotional support, humour and conflict avoidance, as these dimensions are closely tied to emotional problems, depression and overall psychosocial functioning. Students who report low openness and emotional support, or high levels of threatening or highly conforming communication, should be flagged as at elevated risk for emotional difficulties. The Centre can also design psychoeducational workshops that help students reinterpret and

navigate less supportive family communication, strengthen their own communication and coping strategies and build compensatory support networks on campus, since parent-Young adult communication influences coping skills and self-efficacy. Given that girls often benefit more strongly from positive communication and are more vulnerable to unsupportive responses, counsellors should use gender-sensitive formulations and interventions.

Other units of the University can support this agenda. The Dean of Students' office, Department of Communication Studies and Halls of Residence can partner with the Counselling Centre to offer life-skills seminars on communication, emotion regulation and conflict management, drawing on evidence that conversation-oriented communication fosters socio-emotional skills, online prosocial behaviour and school adaptation. Academic departments; especially those in Education, Nursing and Social Sciences can integrate modules on family communication and emotional socialisation into their courses, preparing future professionals to recognise how communication patterns relate to mental health and resilience. The University Clinic and mental health services can adopt a family-informed lens in managing student depression and anxiety, given robust links between poor family communication, weaker family functioning and young adult depressive symptoms. Where appropriate, clinicians can involve parents (even remotely) in brief communication-focused interventions, in line with evidence that short family communication programmes can improve openness and reduce problems over time.

Finally, UCC can treat these findings as a basis for campus-wide prevention. Students arrive with different family structures and communication histories, yet research indicates that better family communication is strongly associated with higher satisfaction with family life across all types of families. By embedding communication, emotional literacy and gender-sensitive support into counselling, residence life, teaching and health services, the University of Cape Coast can help students leverage strengths from supportive families and buffer the risks associated with less functional communication environments.

Abbreviations

M: Mean, SD: Standard Deviation, UCC: University of Cape Coast.

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Author Contributions

William Kodom Gyasi: Conceptualization, Conducted the Fieldwork, Data Curation, Manuscript Draft Preparation, Eugene Kwarteng-Nantwi: Critical Revision for Intellectual Content, Pious Jojo Adu-Akoh: Formatting, Rita Akele Twumasi: Data Analysis. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Data Availability

Data have been securely stored and will only be released to any individual(s) upon appropriate request.

Declaration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Assistance

During the preparation and revision of this manuscript, the authors used OpenAI for language editing, structural refinement and assistance in checking the presentation of the manuscript. The authors reviewed, verified and take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, interpretation and final content of the manuscript.

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