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Rethinking the Family/Public Divide in Older Adults' Digital Facilitation: Warming Up Digital Public Services

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Abstract

As European welfare's digitisation advances, digital support strategies are increasingly relevant to assist the older segments of the population more at risk of digital and social exclusion. This chapter investigates digital support as social practices, both in familial environments and in formal public settings. Specifically, it adopts the concept of "warm expert" as an analytical lens to explore the nuances and tensions between intergenerational, family-based support practices and public institutional services of digital facilitation. It draws on two qualitative case studies conducted in Northern Italy: a longitudinal case study with older adults discussing their everyday life in digital societies and research with regional digital facilitation initiative workers. The findings from both case studies document the complex social and power relations that underlie the different social contexts in which digital support is produced. Concluding remarks also contribute to the warm expert literature and discuss the findings' policy implications.

Introduction

In recent years, societies in the global North have undergone a profound digitisation process. In the European context, especially with the European Union funding from the NextGenerationEU programme, the post-pandemic reconstruction has encouraged member states to invest in more up-to-date institutional infrastructures to implement, among other goals, public targets concerning digital innovation. In Italy, the National Plan for Recovery and Resilience (PNRR) designated funds to digital transformation as one of the principal investment areas – together with eco-logical transition (Campedelli & Vesan, 2023; Italian Government, 2021; Signorelli et al., 2024).

As welfare institutions pivot toward digital citizenship, public services provision increasingly relies on digital technologies that reshape state-individuals' relationships. While digital policies claim greater efficiency and accessibility, they also shift the burden of navigating digital public services onto citizens themselves. Indeed, public services' digitisation generates profound challenges for older populations who risk facing greater rates of (*grey*) *digital divide* [GDD], namely the social exclusion due to the inability to engage with digital technologies that specifically impact older generations (Millward, 2003; Morris, 2007; Friemel, 2016). Survey data discusses GDD in Europe, documenting the small uptake of digital technologies within older age groups: in Italy, only 27.37% of adults aged 65-74 years old possess at least basic digital skills, compared to an EU mean of 33% (Eurostat, 2025). When focusing specifically on digital services and e-government, data shows that only a minority of older adults are able to successfully navigate digital services; although there is an enlarged adoption of e-government services, in Italy the gap between 55-64 and 65-74 years old increased from 12.8% in 2010 to 17.5% in 2023. Differences across states pertain not only to individual-level and sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., gender, education, and digital skills) but also to the quality of digital infrastructures and the overall welfare digitalisation process (Sala & Kochergina, 2025). Over the years, a comprehensive and multidimensional definition of the digital divide has generated a strand of research wherein this issue is not discussed merely in terms of access or competence but as an issue that also encompasses structural constraints and the socio-cultural contexts in which older individuals engage with digital technologies (Ragnedda & Ruiu, 2017). This phenomenon is particularly evident in Italy, where digitalisation initiatives under the PNRR collide with the rapid rate of population ageing.

Two distinct yet interconnected processes are currently unfolding: a crisis of the welfare state (Collington, 2022) and a crisis of the family institution (Naldini & Saraceno, 2022). On the one hand, public services' provision faces several challenges in terms of welfare system sustainability, an issue that policymakers seek to address through digitalisation as a means of cost reduction and efficiency boosting (e.g., Higgs & Gilleard, 2022). The Italian welfare system is grounded on the family as the main organisation responsible for the well-being of its members through inter-generational support and informal care. As a result, public policies tend to neglect the need for active welfare services that could help reduce individuals' reliance on family support but rather reinforce that same dependence. On the other hand, the family institution itself is

changing, as declining birth rates and population ageing, along with heterogeneous family formation practices, reduce its capacity to provide informal support and care activities between generations that have long sustained social stability. With this regard, demographic ageing, and the changes in terms of population distribution affect both the organisation of the welfare system, particu-larly social security services, and family dynamics. While demography considers as older adults those reaching the threshold of 65 years old, we are aware that defining older age merely based on age criteria does not consider relevant aspects in older age. As underlined by Istat (2025), life expectancy has largely increased in the last decades, making room for other kinds of definitions, such as those assuming a dy-namic threshold of residual life and entailing adults who today reach 65 years old still facing many years of good health conditions, activity and social participation. Moreover, new generations of older adults qualitatively differ from those of the middle of last century, for example, considering the increased education level (Istat, 2025). As the rate of older adults grows, the demand for care and support services is expected to rise even though families are increasingly unable to meet those needs. From this perspective, welfare digitisation represents the point of convergence between these two different social processes: the crisis of the family institutions, which are finding it dramatically difficult to guarantee the provision of intergenerational care, and the digital transformation of public services, which is creating further support
needs for people who are less technologically literate.

Considering how both the welfare system and the organisation of familial responsibilities are culturally embedded, in this contribution we propose adopting a framework that acknowledges how these dynamics vary significantly across different (i.e., familial and institutional) contexts. In this sense, we deem that the analytical lens offered by the grey digital divide, although providing a rich and sound body of empirical literature, does not fully grasp the complexity of older adults' digital practices. As we will argue, we propose to move beyond a deficit-oriented perspective and towards a theoretical lens that sees digital engagement as a socially situated practice. Within this framework, older adults' engagement with digital services is thus shaped by (and nested in) the social ties and cultural and contextual conditions in which it unfolds.

In this chapter we argue that digitisation of public services might represent a form of social exclusion for some groups of the population, such as older adults, for whom support in navigating digital ecosystems might be crucial. A similar role is often covered by family networks, especially in Italy, where the *digital-by-default* approach to public services becomes grafted onto a *familialism-by-default* welfare system. However, what happens when familialism is in crisis? Here we discuss the nuanced figure of warm experts *within* and *outside* the family, presenting cases of formal institutional digital support to older adults, such as *digital care work and technological support services for seniors* (TSSS). Specifically, through the analytical lens of the "warm expert", we intend to explore how familial and public support strategies facilitate older adults' engagement with digital services. Thus, we pursue two interrelated research questions to: (1.) examine how familial and close networks, alongside public formal settings, respond to older adults' needs for digital support within the context of welfare digitisation, and (2.) investigate the social dynamics that shape support practices across these two distinct settings.

To address these objectives, we draw on data derived from two qualitative case studies in

the Lombardy region, in Northern Italy, that were both funded under the project Digital-by-Default[1]: the first one entails longitudinal narrative interviews with older adults in the rural Lodi area regarding their adaptation to a digitised society, while the second one explores the regional "Punti Digitale Facile" (Easy Digital Points) initiative from the perspective of facilitators and policymakers. By bridging these distinct studies, this contribution connects the experiences of older adults navigating digital public services and the organisational insights of those providing digital facilitation support.

The chapter opens with an introduction to the theoretical framework which guided our study by presenting the concept of "warm experts", used here as an analytical lens. As existing literature is divided among studies on family and close network members as assistants and research on institutional support, in this contribution we argue that the warm experts lens allows us to discuss and relate both environments for digital support. Then, we provide a background description on older adults' digital practices as subjective and social experiences, as well as on familial and close networks and public institutional settings where digital support strategies are enacted. Later, we present methods and data from the two case studies. In the "Find-ings" section we introduce an overview of older adults' needs in relation to welfare digitisation, and we depict familial digital support between care and dependence, and the public formal initiative explored in its *cold* and *warm* aspects. We finally discuss the nuances of "warm experts" in both familial and public settings, showing their promises and pitfalls and drawing concluding remarks.

Theoretical framework

As welfare provision and public services are undergoing digital transformations, support strategies for citizens who are potentially more vulnerable to social exclu-sion are increasingly needed. Especially in Italy, we need to consider how digital policy strategies may overlook the needs of older adults and of other populations more exposed to vulnerability and risks of social exclusion (Novello & Garavaglia, 2026). With this contribution we discuss the potential social exclusion generated by the advancing digital-by-default approach in welfare (Yates et al., 2015; Schou & Pors, 2019), focusing particularly on older adults (Olsson & Viscovi, 2023; Sour-bati, 2015), and the fitting support strategies enacted to mitigate these issues. Such strategies emerge in a variety of contexts and modalities: usually, the informal social and familial networks are those who have been providing everyday assistance with digital tasks for older adults in recent years; however, formal public initiatives within institutional settings have gradually been implemented by disparate stakeholders.

To address these processes, we turn to the concept of the *warm expert* – a figure who blends technical guidance with emotional support, contextual adaptation, and interpersonal trust (Hänninen et al., 2021; Korpela et al., 2024). Originally ideated by Bakardjieva (2005), the concept particularly thrived in Finnish literature, in a hyperdigitalised society where, as it was observed, the knowledge gap hampered older individuals' request of assistance from IT professionals. The warm expert is neither exclusively a "trainer" nor a "technician" but someone who has a personal relationship with older users. Their importance lies in their key

role as mediators between the (digitised) institutions and older individuals. Compared to the detachment of institutional procedures and digital infrastructures, warm experts are those who bridge the gaps between older adults and welfare institutions. From the perspective of older individuals, their role enables older users to navigate digital services not just by transferring skills but by building confidence, autonomy, and a sense of agency. It is no surprise that empirical literature usually points out how this role is embodied by people belonging to older adults' close social networks – such as friends, acquaintances, and family members (Taipale, 2019; Martinez & Olson, 2022). To the best of our knowledge, in literature, with few exceptions (e.g., Guzzo, 2026) the term *'warm expert'* relates only to close social and familial networks; thus, with this contribution, we attempt to connect the warm expert concept with support roles performed outside the family and social networks in public formal settings. While several scholars (e.g., Korpela et al., 2023) tend to juxtapose the idea of a warm expert with the cold institutional support, we argue that this dichotomy is overly simplistic. The concept of warm experts might indeed be effectively applied to the practices of frontline workers supporting older adults in navigating digital environments. As we will outline in the following paragraphs, this suggested theoretical expansion is particularly urgent in the specific convergence of two structural conditions characterising the Italian context: a digital-by-default welfare model (Schou & Pors, 2019; Yates et al., 2015) and a persistent familialism-by-default (Saraceno & Keck, 2010). In this scenario, the state's withdrawal from direct service provision via digitisation implicitly delegates the burden of mediation to the family. As digital support is investigated in the two contexts of public institutional environments and family and close networks, regarding public support, we will present the example of *Technological Support Services for Seniors* (TSSS) (Tirado-Morueta et al., 2023) and the concept of *digital care work* (Kaun & Forsman, 2024). Although promising, *digital care work* results specific to public support figures, being less suitable than the *warm expert* to relate with familial and close network environments. To address this phenomenon, we considered various theoretical and empirical strands. To begin with, such frontline workers can be conceived as street-level bureaucrats, drawing on the concept from Lipsky (2010) and the vast following literature in policy research, considering the aspects of working via face-to-face encounters and representing a public organisation. This specific research stream is mostly concerned with elements of discretion, which might interact with policy design and discretionary practices are at the centre of reflections in the stream even when it comes to digitisation processes (see, for instance: Alshallaqi, 2024; Busch et al., 2018; Busch & Henriksen, 2018; Johansson, 2025). However, the intent of the present study is not to contribute to the debate on how digitalisation might curtail or enable street-level discretion, but rather to focus on the social practices of digital support.

We have also examined the seminal work on emotional labour (Hochschild, 1979, 1983) which describes the management of emotions that characterises workers (women, in particular) in the service sector (see also Wharton, 2009). Research stemming from this broad debate focuses primarily on specific categories of service-sector professionals that involve interaction with customers, patients or other people (e.g., social workers, health professionals, teachers, etc.), also including workers in public services (Guy et al., 2014). Empirical research in this field focuses primarily on the organisational dimension and how this shapes the way in which service professionals comply with specific guidelines that shape their interactions in the workplace (Erickson & Grove, 2008; Leidner, 1999; Virkki, 2007). Moreover, to the best of our

knowledge, literature addressing interaction with digital technologies covered the switch from in-person service to online interactions among others (Nyanjom & Naylor, 2021). Some scholars have proposed investigating the interaction between warm experts and emotional labour (see Li, 2025; Wu & Chen, 2026). However promising, these studies nevertheless focus on informal digital support as a means of promoting active participation among older adults, but are difficult to apply to the phenomenon of digital support provided both in the informal and familial social context and by frontline service workers. In this sense, as we will discuss, the warm expert literature seems more appropriate to critically examine the social dimension of digital support and to compare the strengths and limitations of the different social contexts in which digital facilitation takes place. This concept accounts for the complexity of digital support relationships whilst allowing us to explore those aspects that are often overlooked by policy designs: specifically, the 'expert' dimension, which is typically associated with family relationships, and the 'warm' dimension, which is not usually considered in frontline digital support relationships.

Engagement with digital technologies as a social practice

To address the phenomenon of older adults' engagement with digital services, we refer to digital practices as subjective and social experiences. Drawing on studies on media and technology domestication into the household (Haddon, 2011; Silver-stone & Hirsch, 1992) and on Miller's appropriation framework (1987), this body of work describes the adoption and familiarisation of digital technologies as a process through which users gradually incorporate these objects into their own everyday routines. Scholars in this field take into special consideration the role of culture and social context: social actors and potential digital users attribute meaning to digital technologies, negotiating their role in a culturally mediated system of values. In particular, this literature highlights that patterns of digital adoption are not merely an issue of access or competence – they also encompass elements related to the social sphere. *Digital cultures* may vary across gender, age categories, life course paths, and social roles. With this in mind, it is important to consider the heterogeneity of older individuals, avoiding the risk of overgeneralisation (Loos, 2012; Hargittai & Dobransky, 2017). Diverse cultural contexts may thus shape specific media ideologies (Gershon, 2010), which shape beliefs, constraints, and affordances. In this respect, several scholars documented specific generational identities that influence older individuals' digital patterns (Aroldi et al., 2011; Haddon & Mante-Meijer, 2016; Loos et al., 2012; Loos & Ivan, 2024; Taipale et al., 2017). Far from being a monolithic age group, some embrace technology; others may resist it or subvert it, and many navigate it selectively, based on their life experiences, social networks, and perceived benefits (Hänninen et al., 2021). Empirical studies highlight generation-based digital practices (Colombo et al., 2018), wherein younger generations, e.g., from the family and the extended family networks, are often the social drivers for older adults' gradual engagement with digital technologies (Taipale, 2019). Studies also document socially situated experiences that blur traditional dichotomies between use and non-use (Carlo & Diodati, 2026; Fernández-Ardèvol, 2016; Gallistl et al., 2021) and challenge both the interventionist logics (Peine & Neven, 2019) and techno-enthusiastic ideas about the expectations for older adults to reach autonomy in the use of digital technologies (Carlo & Sourbati, 2020; Ragnedda, 2018). Following these critical debates, we discuss older individuals' agency in

mediating technology use within the family and institutional contexts (Gallistl et al., 2021; Loe, 2010).

Regarding digital services, several scholars support the need to adopt a user-centred perspective that pays attention to older adults' preferences and meanings (Sourbati, 2009; Laukka et al., 2024). Moreover, empirical literature has highlighted shared practices of use (Hänninen et al., 2021) that challenge individualistic assumptions about digital literacy and participation. This is also supported by recent studies that document how digital literacy does not predict digital services use among older adults, although those who reported seeking digital assistance (both from family and public formal settings) also reported higher usage intentions (Jokisch et al., 2022).

Digital support between familialism-by-default and digital care work

The digital transformation of public services – typically framed in a logic of enhancing efficiency, accessibility and bureaucratic simplification (Layne & Lee, 2001) – has increasingly shifted the burden of access onto citizens, thereby com-pounding the effect of ongoing welfare retrenchment (Collington, 2022). However, for those lacking digital access or literacy – as could be the case for many older adults – this burden could be mitigated by various forms of support coming from public employees, volunteers, or family members. Yet familial support can be understood as ambivalent. Although often represented as *warm* and affectionate in literature on warm experts and on cultural narratives, it can also reflect inequalities and gendered care expectations. Ultimately, this dynamic may create frustrating relationships both for the person providing care and the receiver. Empirical studies in this field document these nuances: although scholars often document older adults' preference for technical support within the family (among others, Haase et al., 2025), they have also shown how older adults' engagement with digital technologies is hampered by stereotypes among family and close networks (Birkland, 2024) and how media practices might produce intergenerational conflicts (Ivan & Nimrod, 2021). Family support, thus, plays a multifaceted and often contradictory role in digital support for older adults, acting as a primary gateway for technology adoption while potentially creating barriers to independent learning and technology use (Hunsaker et al., 2019; Korpela et al., 2024; Schreurs et al., 2017). As family members – particularly those from younger generations – serve as essential supporters, motivators, and occasion-ally, sources of frustration for older adults navigating the digital world.

Especially in Italy, more than in other European contexts, the family has historically served as the primary provider of care – including, increasingly, digital support. Family members often act as *warm experts*, as they offer personalised support. This process, however, reflects the dominant model of *familialism-by-default*, where welfare responsibilities are delegated to the family (Saraceno & Keck, 2010). However, this model is under strain from multiple interconnected perspectives. First, at the macro-level the nuclear family as a caring institution is transformed by emergent demographic changes: declining birth rates, population ageing, and changing family structures indeed reduce the family's capacity to provide informal care (Albertini & Pavolini, 2017) – including digital support. Then, at the micro-level, family relations are influenced by an idea of "care as a burden" (Cahill et al., 2009; Foster & Walker, 2021; Warnes, 1993) that older adults might not want to impose on younger family members. As this process is largely studied in literature

regarding care work (e.g., Pope et al., 2016; Barrett et al., 2026), a similar trend might emerge considering familial digital support (e.g., Schreurs et al., 2017). Thus, formal digital assistance and literacy initiatives outside of the familial environments, often implemented through public policy, offer a crucial support strategy. They serve older adults who lack or choose not to rely on kinship ties, as well as those who prefer navigating digital ecosystems with the aid of formal channels, rather than relying on the availability of family or social networks (Hunsaker et al., 2019).

Regarding public support strategies, contributions in the field of cultural and media studies, analysing the new forms of work related to the digitalisation processes, advanced the concept of *digital care work* – a form of emotional and practical labour performed by street-level bureaucrats who, beyond their formal duties, provide personalised assistance to bridge the digital divide (Kaun & Forsman, 2024). This work is rarely recognised as such: it is rather invisible, unpaid, or under-resourced, yet it represents an essential means to promote digitally – and socially – inclusive services. Within this context, the idea of emotional labour, largely associated in literature with service and care work, is extended to professionals performing digital support tasks – such as librarians, in the case study by Kaun and Forsman (2024). Thus, the social and emotional dimension of care lies at the centre of the concept of *digital care work*.

Other examples of digital support emerging from public institutional environments are described in the literature as *Technological Support Services for Seniors* (TSSS), namely «community-based services promoted by public institutions to facilitate material access to the internet and literacy support for older people» (Tirado-Morueta et al., 2023: 1413). Thus, we can understand public institutional digital support as digital access points, helpdesks, or training programmes designed to assist older adults in acquiring the necessary skills and confidence to effectively utilise digital tools for everyday bureaucratic and service tasks. However, institutional support often struggles to tackle down the social and intersubjective dimension of care. As the dominant perspective on welfare remains efficiency-driven, the design of support services hardly values and takes into consideration the need to promote situated relationships of care between service professionals and older users, encouraging sustained support and universal access.

Methods

Starting from the premises discussed in the theoretical framework, the overall aim of this contribution is to investigate the role of familial and public initiatives in supporting older adults' engagement with digital services, adopting the concept of "warm expert" as an analytical perspective. Specifically, we address the following, and interrelated, research questions:

1. Within the context of welfare digitisation, how do familial and close networks, as well as public formal settings, respond to older adults' needs for digital support?
2. What social dynamics shape the support practices in the two different settings?

The data for this analysis derive from two qualitative case studies conducted in different areas of the Lombardy region, in northern Italy. The first one relates to the changes of everyday

life and social and digital resources of older adults living in a cluster of villages in the southern province of Lodi, drawing on longitudinal narrative interviews that address participants' experiences and representations about the gradual shaping of a digitised society. The second study focuses on the regional implementation of the PNRR initiative "Punti Digitale Facile" (Easy digital access points), from the perspective of facilitators and policymakers. Bridging results from two different studies on the context represents an added value of this contribution, allowing us to discuss the experiences of older adults engaging with digital public services in relation to the ones of those working for digital facilitation services and organising them.

The "Older Adults' Everyday Life" longitudinal case study [ILQA]

The ILQA longitudinal case study investigates older adults' well-being and everyday life in a post-pandemic and increasingly digitised society. It first started in 2020 during the pandemic as exploratory research. The area covered by the case study covers a cluster of ten villages located in the southern part of the Lombardy region that ILQA. The aim of the research was to analyse the relationship between the use of digital technologies to maintain social relationships and the impact on older adults' well-being. The study was prompted by the digital acceleration that followed the pandemic (Gallistl et al., 2021), a phenomenon which has also led to an increase in social and digital inequalities (Litchfield et al., 2021). The study is conducted on a purposive sample of 40 older men and women over 65 years old. Participants are a heterogeneous group in terms of family composition, gender, and socioeconomic status. With regard to digital competencies, overall, participants possess basic literacy skills but experience some difficulty in carrying out various tasks related to everyday life; some of them had low to zero digital skills, while others showed high digital skills. However, everyone had basic access to digital technologies in order to take part in the interview (namely, they owned at least a smartphone with WhatsApp). Overall, participants are an active group of individuals: although some of them present health or social conditions, none of them reported serious elements of vulnerability, economic issues or signs of cognitive decline. All the research design phase, first-wave participants' recruitment processes, and data collection have been conducted fully remotely. Data is collected through yearly narrative video interviews, adopting inclusive and non-ageistic procedures aimed at maximising participation (Melis et al., 2021; Garavaglia et al., 2023), along with participants' engagement strategies such as annual in-person meetings and video messages with research updates and festivity greetings (Melis et al., 2022) that have been enacted in the effort to sustain research relationships in-between waves (Neale, 2020). In that respect, the preliminary research encounters with participants have been crucial to build participants' trust and negotiate the consent throughout the different waves. After the emergency pandemic had ended, the panel participants were interviewed about the changes in everyday life and the ageing process in an increasingly digitised society, with a particular focus on the digitisation of public services. Data for this analysis are based mainly on wave 5 interviews, which took place in the years 2024-2025 and focused on the digitisation of welfare services, digital-by-default innovation processes, and the related risks of social exclusion. 32 participants took part in the 2025 interview: 12 men and 20 women, with a mean age of 75 years old; most of them possess a secondary education, with only 3 participants with primary education and 1 with tertiary

education.

The "Helpdesk Digital Support" case study design [HDS]

The HDS case study investigates the "Rete dei servizi di facilitazione digitale" (Network of Services for Digital Facilitation) in Lombardy, with the aim of better understanding the implementation of a policy for supporting citizens in the so-called digital transition of welfare and public administration. Funded by Italy's PNRR, the initiative operates through a network of local helpdesks and digital facilitators. According to the Region's website, As of November 18, 2024, there were a total of 322 points across the entire region. Data were collected via semi-structured inter-views with key informants as well as local coordinators and frontline facilitators. To account for heterogeneity of municipalities within the Region, the research design ensured representation from all provinces, with the exception of Varese, where no interviews could be secured. Furthermore, to capture the diversity of urban, peri-urban, and rural contexts, municipalities were sampled based on the ISTAT "aree interne" classification, with the intentional oversampling of rural areas, where such services are typically less prevalent. Semi-structured interviews were conducted mostly on-line, through the web-conference software Webex (except for one interview in the organisation's space), between January and October 2025. The HDS study comprises 8 single interviews and 5 group interviews, with a total of 19 interviewees: 5 key informants, 5 local coordinators, and 9 facilitators. Specifically, the key informants are members of the regional administration and a provincial (Pavia) administration, of one labour services association and one professional training institution with a strategic role in the policy implementation. The local coordinators and facilitators are members of professional training organisations in the Sondrio and Bergamo provinces (rural areas), one ageing association in the Cremona province (peri-urban area), a labour services association in the Como province (urban area), a social ser-vices association in the Milano province (urban area), a local association in the Lodi context (peri-urban area) and one municipality in the Milano province (urban area). While 9 interviewees are women, 10 are men, providing a certain gender balance in responses. The majority of interviewees (10) are middle-aged adults, while 3 of them are young adults (2 key informants and 1 facilitator), and 4 interviewees are older adults (1 local coordinator and 3 facilitators).

Data Analysis

All the data collected within the two case studies has been transcribed verbatim, ILQA and archived following the procedures adopted in each research team (Melis et al., 2021). The two datasets have undergone a qualitative thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006) using NVivo 15, adopting a two-step procedure: first, data analysis was conducted separately for each case study; then, the results were compared and integrated across a selected set of common analytical dimensions. The separate data analysis allowed the peculiarities of each empirical context to emerge. Specifically, in the ILQA case study, the analysis focused on the experiences and representations of older people in relation to the digitalisation of welfare and public services. Particular attention was paid to the digital support practices within family and

local networks, the potential and limitations of digital literacy courses, as well as the digital support services provided in the area. In the HDS case, the analysis focused on the working practices of frontline service workers. Data analysis explored in depth the interaction between digital facilitators and older adults who have accessed the service, focusing on the tensions between the institutional design of the service and the care strategies implemented at an individual level.

After this first step, we compared the preliminary findings to identify points of convergence and tension between the two. Starting from the preliminary coding frame, we developed a codebook using as a sensitising concept (Blumer 1954; Charmaz, 2003) the literature on ageing and warm experts. We proposed a set of criteria that allowed us to identify the defining features of each context: specifically, tailored, sustained, trustworthy interactions were elements that identified *warmness*, whereas universal, once-only, top-down interactions identified the *coldness* in digital support practices. Moreover, we also coded *expertise* to take into consideration the competence that emerges both with respect to the digital technologies and in relation to the support provided. Finally, we coded *representations of ageing* to cover older adults' subjective accounts of digital support in relation to the ageing process – e.g., personal attitudes regarding digital technologies, issues of autonomy and agency, as well as their representations of dependence and burden when needing digital support. To highlight the complexity of the two domains in which digital support takes place, the findings presented in the next section will be discussed separately to present support in the family context and in public contexts.

Findings

As mentioned in the methods section, the analysis is focused on comparing the practices of digital support and digital care work (Kaun & Forsman, 2024) that have been enacted in the different contexts taken into consideration, namely the family dimension and the institutional support, drawing from the literature on *warm experts* (Bakardjieva, 2005; Hänninen et al., 2021; Korpela et al., 2024; Martinez & Olson, 2022; Taipale 2019). In that respect, the preliminary exploration of the data from the ILQA case study has provided an overview of older individuals' needs in relation to digital welfare services. According to the scholars that highlight the lack of homogeneity among the older population (Hargittai & Dobransky, 2017), the data portrays a variety of profiles differing not only in terms of socioeconomic background and life trajectories but also in relation to digital experiences and attitudes. Overall, ILQA participants do not appear overly "technophobic". They recognise the useful-ness of welfare digitisation processes, but despite the challenges they experience, they often produce contrasting attitudes toward these policies. Specifically, older individuals seem to find themselves caught between the expectations of being able to keep up with welfare innovations and the difficulties of pursuing these updates. In this regard, they try to navigate digital services by exploring welfare platforms through self-education, asking people from their close social networks for assistance or, when available, attending digital literacy training courses or other initiatives. However, the interviews sometimes reveal a certain level of discomfort with the methods employed to overcome these challenges. For example, they seem unsatisfied with the digital literacy courses they

have attended over the years, which, according to them, do not seem to be able to consolidate their skills, especially when it comes to tasks they have never encountered before.

To begin with, we present the experience of Sandra: she is a widow, lives alone and has no children but she keeps in touch with her extended family on a daily basis. Her weeks are full of volunteering activities, which also give her the opportunity to attend many training courses, such as those designed to familiarise her with the use of digital technologies. She supports the need for older adults to remain active and independent as long as possible, and for that she recognises the importance of possessing at least basic digital literacy. However, as documented in this excerpt, Sandra shows dissatisfaction with the course methods. Despite her commitment, she says, the course is unable to convey skills that last:

> *Well, they teach you, and you can see, learn, etc., but you still need someone to be there with you for a while, right? It's not like if they show you [once], then you learn. [...] At the time you thought you would have remembered, but in the end, you went back where you were before, didn't you? I mean, if you tried at home, maybe you missed a few steps… unless you wrote everything down, but in the meantime [that you take notes], the teacher goes on! And so, I really think that in order to learn, you need to have someone close by who guides you while you're doing it, at least for a while, until you have internalised the mechanisms… [ILQA, INT12, W5, F, 75-79]*

As a first example, Sandra's interview is particularly relevant because it highlights the issue faced by someone who, despite presenting a significant amount of social and cultural capital, nevertheless complains about her inability to transfer it into digital capital (Ragnedda 2018), proving the complex interaction between the different sources of privilege, social and digital inequalities.

This preliminary overview can now be expanded by considering Tina's experience. Widowed with two children, with a son that lives with her while her daughter lives nearby, on her own, Tina is engaged in volunteering as well but she presents some peculiarities: in the first place, she had a more difficult life path than Sandra, resulting in a different social background; in the second place, she only partially shares Sandra's opinions on the relationship with public institutions and welfare

services. While admitting to having little familiarity with navigating digital services autonomously, she argues that independence in the use of digital services should not be an obligation, and, instead, she is eager to ask for assistance from offices and services provided by the institutions:

> *I don't even touch it! I wouldn't be able to do it myself, for goodness' sake! However, I don't think that we should do everything by ourselves [...], staying at home all the time. There are services that provide us with what we need; they're almost free… [...] I like to go there and ask, get information, have a quick chat… I get things explained to me… I still go to the offices, to all of them. [ILQA, INT37, W5, F, 70-74]*

What appears most useful in Tina's interviews, apart from the existence of institutional services that undertake such delicate tasks on her behalf, is the opportunity to interact with the people who work in these various offices. Their presence seems to bring a sense of humanity to these tasks, and their reliability helps reduce the sense of defeat that sometimes arises when one is unable to successfully navigate digital services. Here we see another excerpt from Tina, who describes the relationship she pursues when going to the municipal offices to ask for help after trying unsuccessfully to obtain information by browsing their website:

> *Well, I [go] even to get information about the offices' opening hours, for ex-ample, which is not updated, and a lot of other things. [...] Now there's a new employee in the municipal office, but the site is not very updated and not easy to use either… even the employees have admitted it! They say they're trying to improve it; it's an old site... I don't understand it technically. I trust what they tell me, but yes, there is this difficulty here. [ILQA, INT37, W5, F, 70-74]*

It is interesting to mention how the employees of public offices realise and share the difficulties that can be encountered when trying to access digital services. From what we are able to observe, they often anticipate such challenges and offer to assist with certain tasks that are necessary to access digital welfare services.

Preliminary analysis from the ILQA case study, such as Tina's account, anticipates the complexities of the warm expert figure that we will discuss in the following sections. As we will argue, data indeed shows, on one hand, the nuances of family-based practices of digital support; on the other hand, it suggests that relationships of trust and digital support are not limited to the familial sphere but might extend to institutional environments and professionals with whom older adults engage in digital support relationships.

Digital support in familial contexts

Preliminary data explorations document how older adults' experiences in navigating digital services' ecosystems are grounded in pre-existing relationships and situated trust: a dynamic that within the empirical literature finds its most thorough expression in the *warm expert* figure, who offers digital support within the intimate sphere of familial networks. The excerpts presented so far showed how the relational intersubjective dimension of trust resulted in being poignant in support

relationships. We here deepen our investigation into the nuances of the warm expert role, understanding the dynamics unfolding *within* the context of familial networks – and later we will discuss them *outside* the family, in formal support environments. Indeed, interviews with frontline workers at helpdesks (HDS) confirm that trust is one of the foundational elements underpinning the digital support older adults receive in the domestic context. The following passage underlines how children are often the ones entrusted with *private* issues, such as digital identity:

> *Older adults struggle, as I was saying… Also because of the mistrust, I mean, SPID for them is something extremely private, so private they already don't trust it. If they have it, the child is managing it. And the child can't be bothered… [HDS, INT05_1, Facilitator, Lodi, middle-aged adult, W]*

Following the opinion of helpdesk workers, younger family members act as a trusted intermediary who legitimise the digital service ecosystem itself. Crucially, the older adults' hesitation to engage directly with SPID often reflects a perceived deficit in digital agency, rather than a lack of technical capability; the digital realm may be regarded as unsafe, as well as hostile and emotionally inaccessible. In this context, the role of younger family members – especially sons and daughters – outstrips technical assistance, shifting toward an emotional safeguard that makes technology usable, bridging the gap between fear and action. However, this reliance may introduce a new vulnerability as older adults' access to welfare services be-comes contingent on family members' availability, highlighting a fragility in this informal support model. Similarly, the following quote from a helpdesk coordinator underlines the double-edged nature of familial support:

> *It's not easy, also because the aim is to promote the service [...] On the other hand, we need to understand if the citizen really has the need for it, because maybe the older adult sometimes says "I'll never make it" or "well, I have my nephew, my son…". For example, [...] my father lives in Campania and I use my father's SPID. So, my father doesn't even know what SPID is, while I know it's there and I use it. Thus, if among your networks you have the nephew, or the child, or the daughter-in-law or a younger family member supporting you… It's clear you will make it. Let's say who comes here - a man of between 90 and 94 years old came once - I mean, to get engaged is not, is not easy, so it was a nice feeling for me too. So, it's also a bit subjective. [HDS, GRINT04_2, Coordinator, Como, middle-aged adult, W]*

Thus, while the presence of a younger family member could guarantee access to digital service in some situations, it may simultaneously reinforce the older adult's self-perception of inadequacy. The coordinator's observation that engagement is "not easy" and "subjective" underscores a critical tension: the goal of "promoting the service" clashes with the reality that informal networks often act as a substitute for, rather than a bridge to, digital agency.

The interviews with older digital users show in more depth the ambivalences that emerge from family practices of digital support. In the following excerpt, Mariano relates with frustration the reversal of social roles between him and his children and the power imbalances that this entails: although his adult children seem to be willing to help him when he has difficulty

accessing welfare services, apparently they do not seem inclined to take the time to teach him how to perform these tasks independently, justifying this choice on the basis of their father's alleged inability to learn.

> *R: Is there anything you would like to learn that you find particularly difficult? I: What makes me angry is when I say to my children, "Explain it to me!" "Yes, but afterwards you don't remember; it's useless! When you need something, you ask me!"... They ignore me like this and that's that! I argue, "I've taught you some things; maybe I know a little more than you think," but nothing, "if you need anything, just ask." We'll see… it's just that when I ask… they're always busy, never have time, you know… That's life; I have to be patient, even though I've never been patient! [ILQA, INT21, W5, M, 75-79]*

This example shows the contradictions that arise in family caregiving. When support is not paired with efforts to encourage autonomy in navigating digital services, the practical role of support that their children assume leads to a loss of agency and invalidates the older adults' sense of self.

Furthermore, data from the interviews with the helpdesk workers (HDS) confirm that digital support within families is not always the preferred modality of help for older adults. Among the elements reported at the helpdesks in the decision to seek institutional support is the older adult's perception of the unavailability of the younger family members, frequently compounded by the distress caused by their children's perceived lack of time and attentiveness. As shown by the following excerpt, individuals with existing family networks might nevertheless refer to the helpdesks when younger family members are not available for support:

> *Older adults, not exclusively alone, [are coming for support] because they of-ten tell us, "I come here because my son never has time to listen to me", some came for this reason, so not exclusively people living alone. I mean people with a familiar network [HDS, GRINT02_1, Coordinator, Cremona, older adult, W].*

As a complex social arena, the enactment of digital support within the family is grounded in complex mutual care practices, power relationship imbalances and other social roles that complicate the picture. In the example, pressuring younger family members with the expectation to obtain digital support might be met with the refusal of assuming undesirable care roles.

Furthermore, even when they are willing to provide support, younger family members may often lack both the technical expertise and the soft/teaching skills required to deliver adequate and comprehensive digital support, as we can read in some excerpts here reported.

> *She was a relatively young lady, married with daughters, [...] and as a matter of fact at home she couldn't make it, because they [daughters] were telling her "No, mum, don't do this task because you blow it." The husband as well. So, she was like "what do I do now?" So, I need to turn to someone, let's say, neutral, who may understand me." She indeed was thanking us later, she came twice, and I have to say without our help she wouldn't improve as she was desperately hoping to. [.] The husband was mocking her and the daughters even worse.*

"Do not touch absolutely anything, otherwise nothing works." [.] It is a point of pride for the person going back home and saying "now I feel confident, I can operate autonomously, I don't need anyone" [HDS, GRINT02_1, Coordinator, Cremona, older adult, W].

In this quote we understand once again how digital support should not be dis-cussed in dichotomous terms, wherein the warmth of the family dynamics is opposed to the detachment of institutional practices. In this regard, data from both case studies documents several occasions wherein familial support is not perceived as *warm*. In situations of scarcity of resources, such as time or teaching skills, younger family members may opt to entirely perform tasks for an insecure older adult, thus neglecting the procedures that older individuals need to perform or even raising issues for their autonomy.

Here we present another testimony from Tina's interview, from the ILQA case study. Tina draws a parallel between the digitisation of welfare services, as opposed to traditional practices involving physical offices and face-to-face interactions, and the issue of autonomy in old age. Indeed, given her difficulty in accessing adequate digital support, Tina feels that having to rely on her daughter to manage sensitive data that is only available online poses a risk not only to her privacy but also to her autonomy.

[I sense] A little agitation, a little worry… They take away my independence; I always have to ask someone to help me do my things. I might not even tell my daughter about my bank account, for example, or my health status, so that she doesn't worry or else… So, I wonder, why am I forced to have my medical records sent to me via computer? So that I have to ask my daughter to deliver me my medical records and have a chance to have a look at them before giving them to me? Instead, I could very easily go out, to the hospital or the designated office, ask for my medical records, even pay my 20 euros – I don't know whether

you're supposed to pay or not – but still go home with my paper… Why should I always ask other people to do it? [ILQA, INT37, W5, F, 70-74]

On the one hand, we are unaware of Tina's daughter's attitude towards digital assistance, as her role as a warm expert is not necessarily a free choice but rather another implicit demand in the ongoing process of welfare digitisation. On the other hand, Tina's experience addresses the multiple levels of autonomy simultaneously at stake, wherein the use of digital services – and therefore the inability to access and navigate on her own – seems to be the least important. What appears to worry her the most are, in fact, the risk of losing control of her personal data and the lack of autonomy in managing a relationship with her daughter, which, due to the need for digital support, inevitably changes the nature of intergenerational relationships. In light of this issue, in Tina's experience, the material affordances of institutional support services emerge as a symbol of resistance, counteracting the erosion of independence. Indeed, such erosion could be conceived as a direct consequence of the coercive compliance required by digital services' environments. This dynamic also highlights that lack of access and competence to successfully navigate digital services should not be confused with lack of older adults' agency, which may manifest, for example, in the choice to seek institutional digital support. It is with this perspective in mind that we will analyse the experiences that take place when older adults turn to service and helpdesk professionals, presented in the next section.

Warming up the support within public institutions

The critical issues that emerged while discussing the role of warm experts in the family context show that close family ties are not necessarily the best choice for older adults when it comes to assistance with digital welfare services. In this section, we will address public digital support through the warm expert perspective. As we will argue, data often documents how the dichotomous perspective which contrasts the qualities of digital support within familial environments with the coldness of relationships with workers in public institutions may return a naive and simplistic picture. Frontline workers at helpdesks, generally assumed to be operating within the *cold* policy initiative framework, indeed shape *warm* interactions with older users as well in order to assist them with digital public services tasks.

The analysis of ILQA data also revealed that the role of the warm expert was more blurred than the traditional boundaries between family and institutional contexts. For example, Sandro's interview provides us with a clear example of this phenomenon. Overall, he seems to conduct an active life within and outside the family. He helps look after his grandchildren and his older brothers and sisters while relying on his daughter's help with the most difficult administrative tasks. Meanwhile, he is also an active member of his small community. The sense of belonging and the mutual support that comes from the close connections with the various members of his small community, as he says, is what appears to help him overcome some of the difficulties he faces in using digital services. In this excerpt, he documents how he managed to activate the digital public identity (SPID, *Public System of Digital Identity*), which is necessary to access all kinds of welfare services, such as Italy's national security agency (INPS, *National Institute of Social Security*) and navigate all his health records:

I got it at the post office. I went to pay a bill and the employee – this is typical of small towns – said, "INTERVIEWEE, let's do the SPID!" "Look, I would do it, but I don't have [my documents] with me," I replied. "Look, you don't need anything. Come here, I'll do it for you right away!". I gave him my personal details, and within a few seconds I received the text message. [...] I had wanted to do it for a while because I really needed for the INPS and for my health records… [ILQA, INT09, W3, M, 65-69]

These experiences are mirrored in the HDS case study, wherein data shows how helpdesk professionals strategically appropriate warm practices to bridge the gap between rigid institutional processes of policy implementation and the lived realities of older users. This tension is particularly evident in the training phase: facilitators frequently describe the official training programme as impersonal and technically focused, failing to equip them with the intersubjective and relational tools necessary for the daily interaction. As one coordinator and frontline worker noted:

In my opinion, training is, besides sad, anonymous, because [...] it's you and your PC, this voice speaking, slides moving. They are beautiful, really, [...] they did interesting things. [...] However, it is a little bit cold and people, especially older people, don't need it to be so cold. It's already so cold, the social world, you know? So, I find it, and we find it, wrong to also have a relationship with technology that is so cold. We indeed created this nice synergy [emphasised by the interviewee], this friendly connection, you know? So it's not a mathematical operation to make, but a more humanistic operation. One that brings to basic problems resolution, related to technology, which remains the focus of my presence to their side when we meet. [HDS, INT02_1, Coordinator, Sondrio, middle-aged adult, M]

Other structural deficits are identified by various interviewees, such as the "once only" design of the initiative, which allows only one access to helpdesks by a single citizen. Frontline workers face efficiency-oriented design that overlooks support continuity and intersubjective *warm* elements. To compensate, they rely heavily on resources such as their own personal dispositions, specifically their availability, patience, and in some cases, expansive personalities, to humanise the service provided. In doing so, the professional boundary often blurs, as facilitators may find themselves transcending their formal role to act as friends, surrogate children, or even guardians of safety for the older adults they assist. This shift is vividly captured by the aforequoted interviewee, who explained:

I have an open and outgoing personality, so I immediately can create a father-son/ mother-son kind of relationship every time. And being very welcoming, people are more trusting. [HDS, INT02_1, Coordinator, Sondrio, middle-aged adult, M]

This care work extends well beyond the expected roles of skills transmission and the physical boundaries of the helpdesk. In some instances, the trust established is so profound that it leads to interventions in the private sphere of the older adult's lives, addressing vulnerabilities that are entirely non-digital. As another facilitator described regarding winter evenings:

During winter, it was night and someone even entrusted me to give them a ride back home. Now, a random unknown Mr. X says "I can give you a ride, if you want". But they are older folks you know? [I've felt bad] to see them go home by foot, "if you want, I'll give you a lift". And they were saying yes to me. So, even unasked, they'd tell me where they lived. I mean… it takes trust for an older folk to be given a ride home. [HDS, INT05_1, Facilitator, Lodi, middle-aged adult, W]

Furthermore, to overcome the limitation of the "once-only" access rule, frontline workers often reinterpret the policy to provide recurrent support. Facilitators strategically organise small, recurring groups that return to the helpdesk, working iteratively on individual issues within a collective setting. By fostering recurrence and peer-to-peer social interaction, these workers effectively bridge technical learning needs with crucial social dimensions in their support practices. Thus, the effectiveness of helpdesks is reported to depend less on the Region's structural framework given for the policy measure and more on the individual worker's ability to capture the full spectrum of older adults' support needs – needs that transcend mere technical assistance to encompass crucial intersubjective and social dimensions.

Discussion and concluding remarks

The social transformations produced by the digitisation of welfare, as part of a broader process of digital innovation in contemporary societies, have led to a re-configuration of social relationships and given rise to new risks of social exclusion. Older adults, who present on average less digital competence than younger age groups, might encounter more difficulties in complying with the request to switch their interactions with the public sphere to online-only environments, thus resulting in potential sources of marginalisation. For these reasons, it is necessary to take into account the practices of digital support that have been enacted within familial and close networks to mitigate the difficulties faced by older generations, along with the experiences of public support recently implemented to overcome these issues. To address this phenomenon, the overall aim of this contribution has focused on the role of familial and public strategies in supporting older adults' engagement with digital services, adopting the concept of "warm expert" as an analytical perspective. In doing so, in this contribution we have presented the integration of two case studies, both conducted in the Lombardy region in Italy: longitudinal research on older adults' everyday practices in digitised societies (ILQA) and an investigation on helpdesk digital support services and frontline workers' practices of support (HDS). The combined analysis of the two case studies allowed us to grasp the challenges related to the digitisation of welfare services from different perspectives: on the one hand, the interviews with older participants, as digital services' users, focused on the social issues in relation to the use of digital services, looking at the relationships of support in the familial and close networks and with public service professionals; on the other hand, the interviews with frontline workers in digital assistance services showed how their role was performed in the support encounter, highlighting the differences between the top-down institutional design of public support services and the bottom-up social and subjective strategies put into practice. In this sense, the "warm expert" concept proved to be a promising analytical perspective, as it makes it possible

to identify the nuances in both domains wherein digital support takes place. Specifically, findings show that digital support provided within familial contexts is embedded in a complex network of relationships of mutual care where attitudes towards digital support collide with attitudes towards ageing: for this reason, requests for support directed at family members, although on average more likely to be available, carry with them the risk of further reducing older people's independence. At the same time, the caregiving responsibilities that already exist within family dynamics can lead to digital support being perceived as a double burden: on the one hand, older people may avoid asking their family members for digital support so as not to feel like a burden. On the other hand, it is important to recognise that, in a familistic culture, family members simultaneously feel the burden of providing constant support, without necessarily having the skills or resources to do so. Moreover, findings show that the interactions within public support services can also foster the sense of trust and familiarity needed to empower older adults when it comes to everyday digital tasks. However, it is important to emphasise that this opportunity is left entirely to the initiative of frontline service professionals.

With our research questions, we attempted to investigate the social dimension of support strategies enacted by familial and close networks, as well as by formal public initiatives, to assist older adults in navigating digital service ecosystems. This analysis originates from a complex context in which a top-down, centralised process of digitisation appears characterised by a digital-by-default approach (Schou & Pors, 2019; Yates et al., 2015) that places the responsibility to continually adapt to new digital platforms onto individuals, with insufficient public support. Considering this void, the main burden falls on family and informal networks. This dynamic reflects Italy's longstanding tradition of familialism-by-default (Saraceno & Keck, 2010). Within these structural patterns, this tendency is also increasingly showing the pressures caused by demographic changes that are eroding its foundations. Data in this respect confirms that familial and close social ties remain the main resources that older adults rely on when they need help accessing digital welfare services.

At the same time, however, our findings reveal the issues associated with these practices of support: the digital care work (Kaun & Forsman, 2024) within the family is often documented as demanding and carried out without specific preparation nor the intent to transfer digital competences onto older family members. A crucial distinction thus emerges between the delegation of digital tasks and the act of enabling older individuals to access and manage their engagement with welfare services on their own. This mechanism, although carried out unintentionally by younger family members, appears to be producing a reversal of intergenerational power relations wherein the autonomy and agency of older adults, rather than being supported, risk being inevitably undermined.

Our research question intended also to investigate practices of support within the public institutional sphere enacted by the helpdesk digital support service, especially taking into consideration frontline service workers. Findings in this domain show that the "coldness" metaphor used to represent public institutions' structural detachment from citizens and digital users, often fuelled by the lack of formal support due to inaccessible design and the very same digital-by-default approach, does not fully capture the social practices of digital support that are performed within interactions between older users and support service professionals. Contrary to this picture, frontline workers often emerge as capable of adapting universal procedures to situated

support encounters. These workers are shown to be negotiating the coldness of digital welfare designs by performing caring support practices that largely surpass their professional mandate, offering reassurance and translating digital and bureaucratic complexity into accessible, enduring processes. If we discuss these findings through the warm expert lens, we could add a new perspective to digital support literature: if usually the warm familial practices are juxtaposed to the cold public formal initiatives, we here argue that a micro-level approach to institutional practices reveals how often rigid policy protocols are reinterpreted based on everyday support needs. This process, however, entails a fundamental care work in providing digital support, a dimension at the core of the warm expert concept which tends to remain unacknowledged. If a caregiving burden and emotional availability is often taken for granted within familial networks, with the downside of placing care expectations onto younger family members, the care aspects of digital facilitation performed by workers risk being under-recognised and underpaid (Kaun & Forsman, 2024).

Thus, based on these remarks, we identify two considerable policy implications of this work. The first one relates to the need to design adequate, *warmer* public digital support, tailored for older adults' specific experiences and needs and considering the heterogeneity of digital practices among this target population. Specifically, building on our findings, *warmer* support could be obtained by envisioning recurrent access, relational continuity, and adequate staffing. A tailored design of digital public support service could also provide guidelines on how to adapt these interactions to older adults' specific needs while recognising that support services that are implicitly expected to go the extra mile in order to provide a more efficient intervention might also overlook the risk of emotional labour. With that in mind, the suggestion is to fully recognise the care work performed by frontline workers. This requires integrating communication and care models into professional training programmes and ensuring adequate remuneration for the job, rather than taking emotional labour for granted.

By all means, while promising, the results here presented show various limitations. First, our study is situated in a specific regional geographical context. Thus, an expansion on a larger, national scale would be beneficial in order to advance knowledge on the topic. Secondly, despite our attempt to combine similar case studies, it is worth mentioning that our results partially referred to different contexts: specifically, the ILQA study was conducted in the southern province of Lodi, while the HDS study refers to different areas within the larger Lombardy region, with only one interview conducted with a frontline worker in the same area of the ILQA case. Moreover, the present study does not analyse data coming directly from family members and close networks: interviews with these kinds of informants would have deepened findings on the role of the family in digital support. Therefore, we invite future research addressing this phenomenon to also investigate these processes in the situated contexts in which support strategies are implemented, paying attention to the different social groups at stake – older digital users, family members and close networks, and frontline digital support service workers – in order to disentangle the complex interplay of each of these actors in this phenomenon.

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Key terms and definitions

Digital Care Workers: a figure of street-level bureaucrat performing a form of emotional and practical labour, beyond their formal duties, providing personalised digital assistance (Kaun & Forsman, 2024)

Digital-by-Default: a social system wherein public services are provided through digital means, without an on-site alternative (Schou & Pors, 2019; Yates et al., 2015)

Familism-by-Default: a social system that is heavily dependent on the support provided by family members (Saraceno & Keck, 2010)

Generational Media Practices: a theoretical approach that explores the shared practices of media use and how these meanings are socially constructed as part of a generational identity (Haddon & Mante-Meijer, 2016; Loos et al., 2012; Loos & Ivan, 2024; Taipale et al., 2017)

Grey Digital Divide: drawing from the broader concept of 'digital divide', which addresses the social exclusion due to the inability to engage with digital technologies due to lack of access, attitudes, support, etc. (see, among others, van Dijk, 2005; Hargittai, 2003; Ragnedda & Muschert, 2013), the 'grey digital divide' is focused on the digital divide that specifically impacts older generations (Millward, 2003; Morris, 2007; Friemel, 2016)

TSSS: Technological Support Services for Seniors, community-based initiatives driven by public institutions aimed at ensuring older adults' material access to the internet and providing digital literacy support (Tirado-Morueta et al., 2023)

Warm Experts: a figure who blends technical guidance with emotional support, contextual adaptation, and interpersonal trust in providing digital support (Bakardjieva, 2005; Hänninen et al., 2021; Korpela et al., 2024)