

Inequalities in digital social contacts in Europe

This paper uses data from the innovative ESS 10 module on digital social contacts (DSC), a rich source of data on an array of factors that impact the use of DSCs in work and family life, including in Nordic countries. Based on the cross-national file, we map cross-national differences in digital social contacts, particularly in family life, and then analyze social inequalities in these digital contacts within and between countries using a multi-level model approach.

The paper builds on previous research on the "digital divide" to identify variation in DSC, especially in terms of the frequency and significance of those contacts, by family background and respondent socio-economic status. While the ESS' "Topline Results" on the DSC items showed significant cross-national variation, the role of social inequality and country-specific factors remain unexplored. Therefore, using EU data on the cost of mobile and fixed-line broadband across European countries, we are also investigating the degree to which the cost of broadband (on a PPP basis) impacts inequalities in digital social contacts, which could also provide actionable insights for policy makers interested in reducing such inequalities.

While our initial results are only preliminary, it does seem to be the case that the cost of average broadband access, along with low respondent socio-economic status, has a negative impact on written digital communication with children and other family members. The paper also explores other cross-national factors, such as relative economic development. Lastly, the paper also presents results on family status, especially how DSCs may improve communication between teenage children and parents who do not live with them. Overall, the paper makes an important contribution to the analysis of the DSC module and the role of digital technologies in processes of social stratification. The finalization of the paper before submission to a journal would benefit from the feedback from conference participants.