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Intergenerational Communication in the Workplace Among Teaching Staff at Universities

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ABSTRACT

In organisations characterised by generational diversity, information and knowledge exchange present both challenges and opportunities. Managing intergenerational relationships among teaching staff at higher education institutions necessitates, among other efforts, a critical review of communication processes. However, few studies have explored the implications of generational diversity for organisational communication, particularly in university settings. This study aimed to examine intergenerational communication in the workplace among teaching staff at Spanish public universities. The Workplace Intergenerational Climate Scale questionnaire was administered to 1,751 Spanish academics. The findings reveal that teaching staff exhibit certain age-related stereotypes that influence communication. When intergenerational communication is perceived as effective, it tends to focus predominantly on academic tasks. Age-related differences and associated beliefs significantly influence the quality, quantity and nature of intergenerational interactions. Additionally, other variables such as gender, institutional size and the intensification of managerial responsibilities play important roles.

1 | Introduction

Organisational improvement and development are closely linked to effective knowledge exchange processes. Burke (2022) pointed out that one of the primary objectives of organisational development is to drive changes aimed at achieving higher levels of participation and interaction among members in decision-making processes, which directly contribute to the improvement of their roles.

Knowledge sharing is inherently complex, requiring, among other factors, a well-designed communication strategy. As Ahmad and Karim (2019) have argued, communication within organisations is fundamental not only in fostering interactions

but also across the entire knowledge management and exchange process. Knowledge sharing occurs through social interactions and diverse communicative processes (Howell and Annansingh 2013). Luring and Selmer (2011) found that sharing knowledge facilitates employee interaction and thus encourages greater openness, while also fostering more frequent and meaningful exchanges even in highly diverse groups. Furthermore, knowledge sharing cultivates positive attitudes in communicative interactions.

Workplace communication studies often focus on analysing the factors that influence workplace communication at the personal (i.e., performance, learning, creativity, satisfaction and motivation), group (i.e., trust, problem-solving and cohesion) and

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institutional levels (i.e., socialisation, innovation, process improvement and the fostering of positive attitudes towards diversity in its various forms; Ahmad and Karim 2019).

However, significant gaps remain in the study of organisational communication. Izak et al. (2024) identified a dearth of research focusing on communication in the workplace, particularly its implementation and organisation and individuals' roles in organisational processes; paralinguistic analyses, which are challenging to formalise; and the exploration of communication models in nontraditional organisational contexts, particularly those that adopt non-Western paradigms.

Mehra and Nickerson (2019) found that organisations often need to adapt their communication approaches to create a culture that respects generational diversity. They noted that specific aspects of organisational communication—such as providing feedback, leveraging technology and empowering and engaging employees—can vary significantly between generations. In public universities, up to four generations can coexist due to factors such as constrained public spending, inadequate planning for generational replacement and the natural growth of faculty staff (Castro-Ceacero et al. 2023). These generations include Baby Boomers (aged 55–73 years), Generation X (aged 39–54 years), Generation Y or Millennials (aged 25–38 years) and Generation Z (aged up to 25 years).

Lyons and Kuron (2014) linked generational differences in the workplace to factors such as personality traits, work values and attitudes, leadership preferences, work–life balance, career trajectories and teamwork dynamics. The interactions and knowledge exchanges between these generations directly impact intergenerational communication processes.

Research on intergenerational communication remains limited, and there are even fewer studies conducted in the context of higher education institutions (HEIs). The unique characteristics of HEIs demand a tailored approach to understanding and addressing intergenerational communication, yet there is a clear gap in the literature: most research on intergenerational communication has focused on business environments, with few studies exploring in depth how this process takes place among academics within universities, particularly in the Spanish context. Mehra and Nickerson (2019) reviewed intergenerational communication in organisations and suggested that generational differences may be more pronounced in organisational settings than in other contexts, such as family or social environments. Those scholars also emphasised that communication dynamics vary significantly between generations and that excessive generational differences can create substantial communication barriers. Howell and Annansingh (2013) noted that the interaction and sharing of knowledge have been extensively studied in the context of for-profit organisations and argued that knowledge plays an equally, if not more, vital role in HEIs given their primary focus on learning, teaching and research. Considering these factors, this study offers a novel perspective by specifically focusing on public Spanish universities and employing the WICS scale to analyse the challenges, dynamics and opportunities of intergenerational communicative interactions among academic staff.

2 | Intergenerational Communication in Workplace Contexts

As previously highlighted, communication strategies are a critical factor in facilitating knowledge exchange among different age groups (Burmeister and Deller 2016). The benefits of intergenerational communication, particularly in terms of knowledge acquisition and the acceleration of learning processes, are increasingly recognised in 21st-century organisations. Effective communication between age-diverse groups fosters the development of distinctive competencies, creates competitive advantages in the workplace and drives innovation and improvement (Bergman et al. 2016; Kim et al. 2024; Li et al. 2021). From the perspective of Communication Accommodation Theory, the openness and frequency in knowledge exchange are enhanced when employees adjust their communicative styles to accommodate generational differences, thereby fostering inclusion, cohesion and more effective knowledge transfer within heterogeneous teams (Galois et al. 2005; Harwood et al. 2005).

Traditionally, senior employees have been viewed as the custodians of valuable knowledge gained through experience, who are thus charged with the responsibility of transmitting this information to younger generations, who are often considered passive recipients. Studies have supported this view by categorising senior employees as knowledge senders and their junior counterparts as knowledge receivers.

However, several authors have challenged this binary perspective (Burmeister et al. 2018; Deal et al. 2010; Ropes 2013). The modern paradigm of workplace communication emphasises bidirectionality: Employees, regardless of age, simultaneously act as both senders and receivers of knowledge; each generation contributes unique insights and expertise, leading to a more collaborative and reciprocal exchange of information (Gerpott et al. 2017).

This two-way communication often centres on specific topics of interest. For instance, veteran employees value younger colleagues' insights regarding emerging technological trends, new concepts and the latest research (Satterly et al. 2018), while younger employees benefit from senior colleagues' informal organisational knowledge, including insights into 'how things are done here' (Meister and Willyerd 2010). This exchange not only adds value to their roles but also provides cross-generational networking opportunities (Hewlett et al. 2009).

Each generation has distinct needs, and the knowledge exchanged between them contributes to personal (Bakiera 2010), professional (Mehra and Nickerson 2019) and organisational development (Van Gramberg and Baharim 2005). For such complementarity to occur, what Liebowitz et al. (2007) have described as a two-way flow of knowledge must be fostered through various organisational structures, strategies, modalities and activities.

Training within organisations has been identified as a key strategy for promoting intergenerational communication. The creation of organised, structured spaces for the

exchange of experiences represents a strong commitment to encouraging communication and mutual learning among employees (Illeris 2011). Additionally, organisational support for designing work processes that promote interaction between diverse age groups serves as a vital enabler of effective communication and intergenerational learning (Geeraerts et al. 2016).

Technology plays a significant role in facilitating intergenerational communication (Lewis et al. 2005). Mehra and Nickerson (2019) studied intergenerational communication and job satisfaction and observed notable differences in how different generations use email for task performance. Surprisingly, Generation Y/Millennials showed the least comfort using email in this context. These findings align with McDermott and O'Dell's (2001) earlier observations, which highlighted that Baby Boomers tend to prefer telephone communication and face-to-face interactions, whereas Millennials demonstrate a stronger inclination towards social media platforms.

Age-related stereotypes and meta-stereotypes can hinder communication and knowledge transfer in the workplace (Sprinkle and Urick 2018). McNichols (2010) identified a generational gap that obstructs the flow of tacit knowledge from Baby Boomers to Generation X employees, with this gap acting as a significant barrier to knowledge transfer. Despite the wealth of experiential and intellectual knowledge Baby Boomers possess, they are often undervalued and underutilised as organisational assets. De Blois and Lagacé (2017) suggested that older workers could mitigate age-related discrimination through active participation in knowledge transfer and communication processes. Research has indicated that communication barriers in the workplace that are attributable to generational differences often stem from divergent perceptions of delegation and accountability. Boehm and Kunze (2014) have argued that the increasing diversity of age groups in organisations may exacerbate coordination and communication challenges. Additionally, younger employees may struggle to communicate effectively with older colleagues due to perceived experiential gaps, which can foster distrust (Pekala 2001). A lack of confidence in their ability to share knowledge with more experienced colleagues further widens the communication gap. As mentioned, theories of intergenerational communication patterns, particularly those focused on accommodation and nonaccommodation, suggest that older workers often perceive themselves as adapting their communication to meet the needs of younger colleagues (De Blois and Lagacé 2017).

Although universities, as workplaces for teaching staff, are not immune to the challenges generational diversity poses, limited research exists on how to conceptualise internal communication across generations within academic institutions. In this regard, Howell and Annansingh (2013) conclude that institutional culture and path dependence are crucial factors determining the willingness of UK universities to generate and share knowledge, exhibiting different expectations and cultural practices shaped by their history. Thus, within the university, more convergent communication accommodation dynamics, for example, are more readily manifested in

informal contexts, where social pressure and the necessity of maintaining specific roles may be less pronounced.

The details of how intergenerational communication occurs in universities, the identification of potential obstacles, the delimitation of topics that constitute the main focus of communication among faculty and researchers and the recognition of possible stereotypes in intergenerational communication remain areas that are still scarcely investigated.

3 | Method

The fieldwork of this exploratory study was carried out between February 2021 and December 2021 and involved conducting a self-administered online survey questionnaire. In the 2021–2022 academic year, the Spanish higher education system employed a total of 133,484 academics, comprising 58,299 women and 75,185 men. The teaching and research staff had an average age of 49.4 years, with nearly 7% aged over 67 and only 8.6% under 35 (Ministerio de Universidades 2023). A simple random sampling was used to select 1751 university lecturers employed in public universities. The maximum margin of error was $\pm 2\%$ at a 95% confidence level ($p = q = 0.50$; $k = 2$). All research subjects provided informed consent before participating in the study. Respondents' average age was 48.04 years ($SD = 11.58$) and 52.8% were male. They had 18.01 years ($SD = 12.23$) of teaching experience on average, with the largest proportion holding the rank of associate professor (27.9%). The independent variables in this study were derived from the demographic and institutional data the respondents provided.

3.1 | Demographic Information

- **Generation:** Categorised into four generational cohorts:
 - Baby Boomers (born 1949–1967)
 - Generation X (born 1968–1983)
 - Generation Y/Millennials (born 1984–1999)
 - Generation Z (born 2000 or later)
- **Gender:** Classified into three categories: male, female and nonbinary.
- **Academic position:** Based on standard professional ranks in Spanish universities: adjunct lecturer, predoctoral researcher, postdoctoral researcher, assistant lecturer, associate professor, professor and emeritus lecturer
- **Years of teaching experience:** Measured as the total number of years an individual has spent teaching in HEIs
- **Years of management experience:** Assessed as the cumulative years spent in formal academic management roles, such as department head, dean or equivalent positions
- **Teaching and research periods:** Each variable was divided into seven categories, reflecting the (maximum of) six periods recognised in the Spanish university system
- **Knowledge field:** Grouped into five academic areas: Arts and humanities, sciences and biosciences, health sciences, social sciences and law and engineering and architecture

3.2 | Institutional Characterisation

- **University size:** Recoded into three categories based on enrolment data from the Ministry of Universities (for the 2021–2022 academic year):
 - Small universities: Fewer than 25,000 students
 - Medium-sized universities: 25,000–40,000 students
 - Large universities: Over 40,000 students

3.3 | Other Independent Variables

Additional variables, such as perceptions of generational stereotypes, intergenerational affect, workplace intergenerational inclusion and intergenerational retention, were assessed using King and Bryant's (2016) Workplace Intergenerational Climate Scale (WICS). The WICS has four subscales, each measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *Strongly disagree* to 7 = *Strongly agree*. Factor analysis revealed an acceptable four-factor structure ($KMO=0.792$; significant Bartlett's test result: $p=0.000$), with factor loadings ranging from 0.590 to 0.900 and explaining 60.54% of the total variance. The reliability analysis of the four subscales yielded Cronbach's α values of 0.642, 0.623, 0.801 and 0.629 respectively. The subscales are described in detail below.

- **Lack of generational stereotypes:** This subscale follows King and Bryant's (2016) original proposal and comprises four items that measure the degree to which university faculty agree with statements that reflect their behaviours in an organisational context. Example items include 'Co-workers outside my generation are interested in making friends outside their generation' and 'Co-workers outside my generation don't complain more than coworkers my age do'.
- **Intergenerational affect:** This subscale assesses the affective dimension of ageism using two items: 'My co-workers outside my generation are interesting and unique individuals' and 'Working with co-workers of different ages enhances the quality of my work life'.
- **Workplace intergenerational inclusion:** This subscale comprises three items from the original WICS that evaluate university faculty perceptions of age-friendly and inclusive practices in their workplace. Example items include 'I believe that my work environment is healthy for people of all ages' and 'Workers of all ages are respected in my workplace'.
- **Workplace intergenerational retention:** This subscale addresses tensions related to workplace succession. It contains three of the original four items King and Bryant (2016) proposed, including 'My co-workers make older workers feel they should retire' and 'I feel pressure from older workers to withdraw'.

The study examined four dependent variables: intergenerational communication attitudes and three types of intergenerational communication, namely task-related, nontask-related and personal communication. Intergenerational communication attitudes were assessed on a 7-point Likert scale used to measure

agreement or disagreement via three items comprising statements reflecting faculty attitudes and communication skills with colleagues from different generations. Example items are 'I feel comfortable when co-workers outside my generation try to make conversation with me' and 'I enjoy interacting with co-workers of different generations'. Factor analysis revealed an acceptable single-factor structure across these three items ($KMO=0.679$; significant Bartlett's test result: $p=0.000$). Factor loadings ranged from 0.773 to 0.859, collectively explaining 68.56% of the total variance. The reliability analysis showed a satisfactory Cronbach's α of 0.770.

The three remaining dependent variables were each measured using a single item. Items were evaluated on a 7-point Likert-type frequency scale ranging from 1 = *Never* to 7 = *Always*. The items are 'How often do you have conversations with co-workers outside your generation?', 'How often do you have conversations with co-workers outside your generation relating to things other than work?' and 'How often do you talk with co-workers outside your generation about your personal lives?'

Analysis was conducted using SPSS version 27. The process included univariate and bivariate descriptive analyses of the data, employing relevant association measures and significance tests (Table 1). Four regression models were developed to examine the independent effects of the predictor variables on the four dimensions of intergenerational communication: intergenerational communication attitudes and task-related, nontask-related and personal intergenerational communication (Table 2). The regression models included the calculation of coefficients (B), standard errors (SE), t -tests and standardised beta values. F-tests and R^2 values were used to assess the significance and overall fit of the models. No violations of key assumptions were observed during the regression analyses.

4 | Results

Overall, the associations between sociodemographic variables and intergenerational communication are modest. However, the *Generations* variable and other factors strongly associated with age in the Spanish university system (e.g., position, teaching experience, recognised teaching and research periods and management experience) show slightly higher correlation values. These results suggest that younger faculty and those in the early stages of their academic careers (e.g., with fewer years of teaching experience, fewer recognised teaching and research periods and minimal management experience) exhibit the lowest likelihood of engaging in intergenerational communication. These groups also report fewer intergenerational conversations across all types, whether task-related, nontask-related or personal (Table 1).

Regarding gender and the knowledge field, male faculty and faculty in the arts and humanities domain engage in the fewest personal conversations with colleagues from different generations. Regarding institutional size, although the correlations remain weak, we observed a trend indicating that larger universities facilitate more frequent intergenerational communication of

TABLE 1 | Means, standard deviations and correlations of observed variables ($N = 1751$).

	M	SD	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)	(15)	(16)
Generations ^f (1)	1.93	0.90	—															
Gender ^g (2)	1.50	0.58	0.071 ^e	—														
Position ^h (3)	4.07	1.66	-0.530 ^e	-0.058 ^b	—													
Teaching experience (years) (4)	18.01	12.23	-0.769 ^e	-0.114 ^e	0.705 ^e	—												
Teaching periods ⁱ (5)	2.68	2.32	-0.747 ^e	-0.097 ^e	0.805 ^e	0.910 ^e	—											
Research periods ^j (6)	1.77	1.90	-0.593 ^e	-0.106 ^e	0.805 ^e	0.728 ^e	0.777 ^e	—										
Management experience (years) (7)	4.22	5.84	-0.464 ^e	-0.035	0.455 ^e	0.573 ^e	0.564 ^e	0.404 ^e	—									
Knowledge field ^k (8)	3.04	1.34	0.047 ^b	-0.098 ^e	-0.052 ^b	-0.023	-0.026	-0.176 ^e	-0.027	—								
University size ^l (9)	2.29	0.75	0.068 ^e	0.004	0.016	-0.041 ^a	-0.037	-0.016	-0.078 ^d	-0.012	—							
Lack of generational stereotypes (10)	4.97	1.28	-0.173 ^e	-0.057 ^b	0.168 ^e	0.169 ^e	0.164 ^e	0.138 ^e	0.099 ^e	0.024	-0.008	—						
Intergenerational affect (11)	5.81	1.21	-0.047 ^a	0.028	0.032	0.017	0.016	0.011	0.060 ^c	0.027	-0.018	0.284 ^e	—					
Workplace intergenerational inclusion (12)	5.35	1.69	-0.095 ^e	-0.060 ^c	0.076 ^d	0.096 ^e	0.098 ^e	0.079 ^d	0.128 ^e	0.033	-0.023	0.318 ^e	0.446 ^e	—				
Intergenerational retention (13)	6.27	1.08	0.080 ^e	-0.041	-0.050 ^b	-0.062 ^c	-0.062 ^c	-0.044 ^a	-0.023	-0.003	-0.014	0.339 ^e	0.236 ^e	0.336 ^e	—			
Intergenerational communication attitudes (14)	6.19	1.05	-0.181 ^e	0.015	0.131 ^e	0.149 ^e	0.142 ^e	0.100 ^e	0.127 ^e	0.031	0.023	0.320 ^e	0.588 ^e	0.454 ^e	0.258 ^e	—		
Intergenerational task-related communication (15)	5.59	1.49	-0.128 ^e	0.025	0.187 ^e	0.154 ^e	0.157 ^e	0.131 ^e	0.155 ^e	0.022	0.059 ^b	0.252 ^e	0.346 ^e	0.287 ^e	0.114 ^e	0.393 ^e	—	
Intergenerational nontask-related communication (16)	4.34	1.88	-0.146 ^e	0.029	0.152 ^e	0.148 ^e	0.145 ^e	0.099 ^e	0.149 ^e	0.030	0.076 ^c	0.303 ^e	0.283 ^e	0.260 ^e	0.142 ^e	0.338 ^e	0.587 ^e	—
Intergenerational personal communication (17)	3.63	1.88	-0.078 ^d	0.063 ^c	0.123 ^e	0.092 ^e	0.093 ^e	0.030	0.127 ^e	0.066 ^c	0.062 ^c	0.277 ^e	0.264 ^e	0.213 ^e	0.097 ^e	0.299 ^e	0.496 ^e	0.753 ^e

^a $p < 0.1$.

^b $p < 0.05$.

^c $p < 0.01$.

^d $p < 0.001$.

^e $p < 0.0001$.

^f1 = Baby Boomers, 2 = Generation X, 3 = Generation Y/Millennials, 4 = Generation Z.

^g1 = male, 2 = female, 3 = nonbinary.

^h1 = adjunct lecturer, 2 = predoctoral researcher, 3 = postdoctoral researcher, 4 = assistant lecturer, 5 = associate professor, 6 = professor, 7 = emeritus lecturer.

ⁱ0 = zero, 1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three, 4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six.

^j0 = zero, 1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three, 4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six.

^k1 = arts and humanities, 2 = science and bioscience, 3 = health science, 4 = social sciences and law, 5 = engineering and architecture.

^l1 = small, 2 = medium, 3 = large.

TABLE 2 | Multiple regression models for workplace intergenerational communication in higher education institutions.

	Intergenerational communication attitudes			Intergenerational task-related communication			Intergenerational nontask-related communication			Intergenerational personal communication		
	B (S.E)	Beta	t	B (S.E)	Beta	t	B (S.E)	Beta	t	B (S.E)	Beta	t
Constant	2.400 (0.171)		14.061 ^e	1.799 (0.289)		6.221 ^e	-0.142 (0.368)		-0.386	-0.459		-1.228
Generations												
Baby Boomers	-0.084 (0.061)	-0.038	-1.376	-0.085 (0.104)	-0.027	-0.820	-0.031 (0.132)	-0.008	-0.238	0.142 (0.134)	0.036	1.062
Generation X	-0.176 (0.082)	-0.070	-2.137 ^b	0.143 (0.139)	0.04	1.027	-0.025 (0.177)	-0.005	-0.139	0.187 (0.180)	0.041	1.041
Generation Y/Millennials	-0.366 (0.140)	-0.075	-2.610 ^c	0.206 (0.237)	0.03	0.868	0.050 (0.302)	0.006	0.166	0.420 (0.307)	0.048	1.371
Generation Z												
Gender												
Male	0.067 (0.040)	0.032	1.695 ^a	0.115 (0.067)	0.038	1.547	0.202 (0.085)	0.054	2.369 ^b	0.299 (0.087)	0.079	3.451 ^d
Female	0.189 (0.304)	0.011	0.62	0.797 (0.515)	0.034		1.218 (0.656)	0.041	1.857 ^a	0.666 (0.666)	0.022	1.001
Nonbinary												
Position												
Adjunct lecturer	-0.105 (0.106)	-0.028	-0.992	-0.124 (0.179)	-0.024	-0.695	-0.474 (0.228)	-0.071	-2.081 ^b	-0.341 (0.231)	-0.051	-1.476
Predoctoral researcher	0.079 (0.103)	0.017	0.766	0.244 (0.174)	0.036	1.401	0.204 (0.221)	0.024	0.922	0.411 (0.225)	0.049	1.832 ^a
Postdoctoral researcher	-0.001 (0.075)	0	-0.010	0.338 (0.127)	0.087	2.652 ^c	-0.052 (0.162)	-0.011	-0.323	0.184 (0.165)	0.037	1.116
Assistant lecturer	-0.041 (0.090)	-0.019	-0.452	0.282 (0.153)	0.091	1.846 ^a	0.001 (0.194)	0	0.003	0.288 (0.197)	0.074	1.459
Associate professor	-0.017 (0.121)	-0.006	-0.140	0.302 (0.205)	0.075	1.472	0.018 (0.261)	0.004	0.07	0.489 (0.265)	0.096	1.845 ^a
Professor	-0.021 (0.257)	-0.002	-0.082	-0.189 (0.433)	-0.011	-0.435	0.043 (0.552)	0.002	0.078	0.343 (0.560)	0.016	0.612
Emeritus lecturer												
Teaching experience (years)	0.007 (0.004)	0.077	1.475	0.007	0.059	0.94	0.011 (0.010)	0.071	1.131	0.006 (0.010)	0.038	0.593
Teaching periods												
None	0.064 (0.094)	0.015	0.681	0.217 (0.160)	0.035	1.356	0.243 (0.204)	0.031	1.196	0.113 (0.206)	0.015	0.546

(Continues)

TABLE 2 | (Continued)

	Intergenerational communication attitudes			Intergenerational task-related communication			Intergenerational nontask-related communication			Intergenerational personal communication		
	B (S.E)	Beta	t	B (S.E)	Beta	t	B (S.E)	Beta	t	B (S.E)	Beta	t
One	−0.131 (0.097)	−0.038	−1.346	0.175 (0.165)	0.036	1.064	0.616 (0.210)	0.099	2.938 ^c	0.534 (0.213)	0.086	2.507 ^b
Two	−0.030 (0.106)	−0.009	−0.286	0.126 (0.180)	0.026	0.698	0.167 (0.229)	0.027	0.727	0.111 (0.233)	0.018	0.477
Three	−0.081 (0.118)	−0.023	−0.691	0.149 (0.200)	0.03	0.744	0.203 (0.225)	0.032	0.797	0.041 (0.258)	0.006	0.158
Four	−0.080 (0.130)	−0.025	−0.613	−0.099 (0.220)	−0.021	−0.448	−0.040 (0.281)	−0.007	−0.141	0.132 (0.285)	0.023	0.465
Five	−0.042 (0.148)	−0.016	−0.284	0.088 (0.251)	0.023	0.35	0.115 (0.310)	0.024	0.36	0.249 (0.325)	0.052	0.768
Six												
Research periods	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
None	0.160 (0.081)	0.047	1.972 ^b	−0.029 (0.137)	−0.006	−0.214	0.053 (0.175)	0.009	0.306	−0.049 (0.177)	−0.008	−0.276
One	0.136 (0.081)	0.045	1.677 ^a	0.158 (0.137)	0.037	1.151	−0.004 (0.174)	−0.001	−0.022	−0.245 (0.177)	−0.045	−1.384
Two	0.116 (0.087)	0.037	1.327	0.106 (0.148)	0.024	0.718	0.056 (0.188)	0.01	0.299	−0.223 (0.191)	−0.040	−1.170
Three	0.099 (0.103)	0.028	0.961	0.026 (0.175)	0.005	0.15	−0.176 (0.223)	−0.027	−0.790	−0.434 (0.226)	−0.068	−1.920 ^a
Four	0.022 (0.125)	0.005	0.179	0.078 (0.212)	0.013	0.371	−0.252 (0.269)	−0.034	−0.935	−0.795 (0.273)	−0.107	−2.909 ^c
Five	−0.315 (0.144)	−0.064	−2.185 ^b	−0.202 (0.245)	−0.029	−0.828	−0.467 (0.311)	−0.053	−1.501	−0.738 (0.316)	−0.084	−2.337 ^b
Six												
Management experience (years)	0.003	0.014	0.618	0.018 (0.007)	0.07	2.569 ^c	0.027 (0.009)	0.083	3.019 ^c	0.026 (0.009)	0.082	2.905 ^c
Knowledge field	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Arts and humanities	0.032 (0.065)	0.012	0.49	0.129 (0.111)	0.034	1.167	0.151 (0.141)	0.032	1.07	0.013 (0.143)	0.003	0.091
Sciences and biosciences	−0.013 (0.066)	−0.005	−0.198	0.223 (0.113)	0.054	1.979 ^b	0.250 (0.143)	0.048	1.746 ^a	0.298 (0.145)	0.058	2.048 ^b
Health sciences	0.042 (0.057)	0.019	0.729	0.046 (0.097)	0.015	0.478	0.139 (0.124)	0.035	1.123	0.168 (0.126)	0.042	1.34
Social sciences and law	0.037 (0.071)	0.012	0.53	0.136 (0.119)	0.031	1.137	0.108 (0.142)	0.02	0.708	0.259 (0.154)	0.047	1.681 ^a
Engineering and architecture												

(Continues)

TABLE 2 | (Continued)

	Intergenerational communication attitudes				Intergenerational task-related communication				Intergenerational nontask-related communication				Intergenerational personal communication			
	B (S.E)	Beta	t		B (S.E)	Beta	t		B (S.E)	Beta	t		B (S.E)	Beta	t	
University size	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Small	−0.029 (0.057)	−0.013	−0.516		0.145 (0.097)	0.047	1.497		0.105 (0.123)	0.027	0.849		0.063 (0.125)	0.016	0.508	
Medium	0.103 (0.054)	0.049	1.891 ^a		0.273 (0.092)	0.091	2.967 ^c		0.418 (0.117)	0.111	3.569 ^e		0.337 (0.119)	0.09	2.836 ^c	
Big																
Lack of generational stereotypes	0.063 (0.017)	0.076	3.673 ^e		0.142 (0.029)	0.121	4.889 ^e		0.279 (0.037)	0.189	7.576 ^e		0.297 (0.037)	0.202	7.942 ^e	
Intergenerational affect	0.396 (0.018)	0.456	21.878 ^e		0.308 (0.031)	0.249	10.027 ^e		0.264 (0.039)	0.169	6.749 ^e		0.270 (0.040)	0.173	6.797 ^e	
Workplace intergenerational inclusion	0.119 (0.013)	0.191	8.791 ^e		0.112 (0.023)	0.127	4.905 ^e		0.118 (0.029)	0.106	4.051 ^e		0.083 (0.030)	0.075	2.810 ^e	
Intergenerational retention	0.066 (0.020)	0.069	3.349 ^d		−0.026 (0.034)	−0.019	−0.763		0.020 (0.043)	0.011	0.465		−0.055 (0.043)	−0.031	−1.257	
Model summary	0.440 (0.429)				0.205 (0.189)				0.192 (0.176)				0.163 (0.146)			
R ² (adjusted R ²)	38.200 ^e				12.516 ^e				11.573 ^e				9.444 ^e			
F of the model	1736				1736				1736				1736			
Sample size	—				—				—				—			

^a $p < 0.1$.^b $p < 0.05$.^c $p < 0.01$.^d $p < 0.001$.^e $p = 0.00$.

all types. Together, these findings suggest that both structural and individual career factors are associated with the extent to which faculty engage in meaningful communication across generations.

The results show that intergenerational communicative attitudes are consistently associated with greater engagement across the three types of conversations (task-related, nontask-related and personal communication). A stronger correlation was observed between nontask-related conversations and personal conversations in work contexts ($r=0.753$, $p=0.000$), underscoring the role of everyday dialogue in sustaining intergenerational connections.

Contrastingly, the explanatory variables, namely lack of generational stereotypes, intergenerational affect, workplace intergenerational inclusion and workplace intergenerational retention, show stronger and more significant correlations with communicative attitudes and conversation types ($r=0.097$ to $r=0.588$, $p=0.000$). These results suggest that an age-friendly organisational climate characterised by positive and inclusive relationships and low generational stereotypes fosters better intergenerational communication attitudes and a higher frequency of conversations.

The results indicate that although certain age-related stereotypes persist among university teaching staff ($M=4.97$, $SD=1.28$) and the perception of intergenerational inclusion remains moderate ($M=5.35$, $SD=1.69$), these factors do not seem to undermine positive regard and appreciation for colleagues from different generations. For instance, there is strong agreement that working with colleagues of various ages enhances the quality of all employees' professional lives ($M=5.81$, $SD=1.21$). Furthermore, respondents generally report the absence of both age-based pressure to leave their roles and barriers to career advancement ($M=6.27$, $SD=1.08$; Table 1).

Regarding intergenerational interactions and communication, university lecturers describe their attitudes and communicative skills with colleagues from other age groups as highly positive (e.g., 'I enjoy interacting with co-workers of different generations'; $M=6.27$, $SD=1.08$). However, these interactions predominantly focus on work-related matters, while personal discussions and conversations unrelated to specific tasks are relatively infrequent, suggesting that intergenerational communication tends to be professional in nature, with limited opportunities for informal or relational dialogue.

Following the bivariate analysis, four multiple regression models were constructed to investigate the independent effects of various factors on intergenerational communication (Table 2). These models focused on intergenerational communication attitudes ($F=38.200$, $p=0.000$, $R^2=0.440$), intergenerational task-related communication ($F=12.516$, $p=0.000$, $R^2=0.205$), intergenerational nontask-related communication ($F=11.573$, $p=0.000$, $R^2=0.192$) and intergenerational personal communication ($F=9.444$, $p=0.000$, $R^2=0.163$).

The results of the bivariate analyses highlight a clear relationship between variables associated with the age of teaching staff (e.g., generation, academic position, teaching experience,

recognised teaching and research periods and management experience); however, the four regression models reveal an uneven effect of these variables. For instance, consistent with the bivariate findings, younger generations, such as Millennials and Generation Z, are the least effective at communicating with colleagues from other generations and derive the least enjoyment from these interactions ($Beta=-2.137$, $p<0.05$; $Beta=-2.610$, $p<0.01$ respectively; Table 2).

Academic position, a variable traditionally linked to age, partially explains the three types of communicative interactions analysed. Assistant lecturers, who are in the early stages of their academic careers, are the most likely to engage in task-related conversations with colleagues from different generations. Contrastingly, predoctoral researchers, who are also early in their careers, are the least likely to engage in nontask-related intergenerational conversations, indicating more limited informal interaction across age groups. Regarding personal communication, postdoctoral researchers and professors, despite being at different stages of their academic careers, are the most inclined to have personal conversations with colleagues from other generations, suggesting that intergenerational dialogue of a more personal nature emerges at both transitional and established stages of the academic career.

The influence of teaching and research periods on intergenerational communication appears to be limited and in some cases, these results contradict the bivariate findings. Teachers with two recognised teaching periods are the most likely to engage in intergenerational nontask-related or personal communication, whereas those with more research periods (4–6) tend to participate less in these exchanges. Although general teaching experience does not have a statistically significant impact on teachers' intergenerational communication attitudes or practices, management experience exerts a substantial effect. Teachers with more managerial experience are significantly more likely to engage in conversations with colleagues from other generations, whether these discussions are task-related ($Beta=2.569$, $p<0.01$), nontask-related ($Beta=3.019$, $p<0.01$) or personal ($Beta=2.905$, $p<0.01$).

Gender also emerges as a significant factor influencing intergenerational communication. Female faculty demonstrate more age-inclusive attitudes and, particularly in the health sciences, are more likely to engage in personal conversations with colleagues from different generations. Consistent with the bivariate results, institution size is a strong predictor of intergenerational communication processes and policies. Faculty at large universities (with over 40,000 students) are significantly more likely to demonstrate positive attitudes towards intergenerational communication and engage in diverse conversations with colleagues of different ages.

As shown at the bottom of Table 2, the variables that define universities' intergenerational climate—lack of generational stereotypes, intergenerational affect, workplace intergenerational inclusion and intergenerational retention—show the strongest effects in all four models. However, subtle differences between these variables warrant further discussion. A lack of generational stereotypes significantly increases the likelihood of nontask-related and personal communication ($Beta=7.567$

and $Beta = 7.942$ respectively; $p = 0.000$). Moreover, intergenerational affect exerts the most consistent and pronounced impact. Lecturers who find working with colleagues of different ages to be rewarding report improved work-life quality, enhanced communication effectiveness and greater enjoyment of conversations. Similarly, age-inclusive university environments positively influence intergenerational communication. Faculty in these settings are more likely to feel comfortable when colleagues from other generations initiate conversations ($Beta = 8.791$, $p = 0.000$).

Lastly, perceptions regarding the pressure on older faculty to retire or on younger faculty to step down contribute only to explaining intergenerational communication attitudes. The promotion of intergenerational retention fosters an environment where faculty feel more at ease engaging in conversations with colleagues of different generations ($Beta = 3.349$, $p < 0.001$).

5 | Discussion

Spanish universities face significant intergenerational challenges, particularly in overcoming negative perceptions and stereotypes that hinder positive interactions in the workplace.

Research indicates that intergenerational communication within academic institutions is influenced by various factors, such as job stability, academic roles and gender. Faculty with stable positions or leadership responsibilities tend to engage in more frequent and diverse intergenerational exchanges.

Age differences and divergent perceptions of work norms between generational cohorts often create communication barriers, as each group interprets organisational dynamics from a different perspective. Overcoming these gaps to foster knowledge sharing and intergenerational learning is a pressing concern in universities, reflecting similar challenges observed in other organisational contexts (Kuyken, Ebrahimi, and Saives, et al. 2018).

However, intergenerational interactions are not only conditioned by age but are also influenced by the specific cultural codes that prevail in each social context. Communicative interaction, generational identity and dominant sociocultural values constantly interact, shaping and conditioning each other. Ackerman and Chopik (2021) found that countries with collectivist cultural values tend to show lower levels of age bias, both implicit and explicit, as well as greater affinity towards older adults, compared to highly individualistic societies.

In the Spanish context, as in other Western cultures, there is a marked tendency to undervalue age, which in turn diminishes recognition of the values it represents, such as preserving cultural identity and guiding future generations. This cultural orientation can contribute to the persistence of age-related stereotypes and hinder the development of inclusive intergenerational relationships in academia. Next, we will present the factors that our study has identified that influence intergenerational communication in the workplace among university professors.

5.1 | Age Stereotypes

Intergenerational communication among university faculty is influenced by age-related stereotypes (Gerpott et al. 2017); however, these do not negatively affect the emotional bonds shared across generations. In other words, while stereotypes persist, they do not disrupt organisational dynamics, communication processes or perceptions of professional development within academic institutions. Senior faculty members do not feel pressured by younger colleagues to relinquish their teaching, research or administrative roles. Likewise, junior faculty do not perceive older colleagues as imposing barriers that hinder their career progression. This suggests that, despite generational differences, inclusive mechanisms can be developed to foster positive social interactions (Montepare et al. 2020).

5.2 | Types of Intergenerational Conversations

Intergenerational conversations among university faculty primarily focus on academic tasks. Secondary topics include academic discussions not directly tied to specific responsibilities, followed by informal or personal exchanges. When universities create spaces for intergenerational dialogue and actively work to reduce generational stereotypes, communication between age groups becomes more frequent and encompasses both professional and personal dimensions.

A clear distinction emerges in the nature of conversations—whether task-oriented or personal—based on faculty members' teaching and research experience. Intergenerational interactions are shaped not only by age but also by career trajectories, hierarchical status and the various stages of academic careers (Kraimer et al. 2019). For instance, younger faculty from Generation Y tend to engage less frequently and with less interest in cross-generational communication. Several factors contribute to this trend: the contractual instability and precariousness of early academic careers, which often require juggling nonacademic jobs (Sancho 2001); limited familiarity with institutional networks; and a lack of understanding of academia's often opaque and unwritten norms. However, these communication gaps tend to narrow as faculty members secure more stable positions.

5.3 | Intergenerational Communication and Academic Career Stages

Greater job security correlates with more frequent and diverse intergenerational communication, as well as more positive attitudes towards collaboration. These findings align with Mehra and Nickerson (2019), who observed that Generation X employees, feeling secure in their careers, are more likely to engage in open dialogue and share their views. They also noted that Generation Y employees, while respectful of organisational hierarchies, often feel compelled to maintain polite but superficial conversations with older colleagues, which can negatively impact job satisfaction. Intergenerational interactions among university faculty are shaped not only by career trajectories but also by the specific roles and responsibilities they assume. As faculty members become more deeply involved in teaching, research and teamwork—and take on greater responsibilities—their

academic positions become more consolidated. This stability fosters a greater tendency to seek input and validation from colleagues of different generations and creates a more conducive environment for personal conversations, which are less common during the early stages of academic careers.

5.4 | Academic Leadership and Management Positions

The nature of academic responsibilities also affects the frequency and diversity of intergenerational communication. Faculty members who have held administrative positions exhibit the most robust intergenerational interactions across all types of communication. This pattern can be attributed to the demands of leadership roles, which require regular engagement with colleagues of varying ages and across a broad range of topics (Spendlove 2007). Intermediate leadership roles, such as deanships or departmental management, are particularly associated with high levels of intergenerational contact due to their close involvement with faculty. Conversely, older and more senior faculty tend to engage less frequently in informal, personal intergenerational conversations. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that the enjoyment and satisfaction derived from communication tend to decline with age (McCann et al. 2005). At the same time, younger faculty may avoid conversations with older colleagues due to perceived expectations of formality and deference, which can inhibit spontaneous interaction.

5.5 | Gender and Intergenerational Communication

Mishra (2020), from a Western cultural perspective, highlighted the distinctive communication patterns of women in academic settings, noting their higher frequency of interaction across groups, topics and contexts. This aligns with our findings, which show that female faculty exhibit a more favorable attitude towards building communication and relationships with colleagues from all generations. Among university professors, those in the social sciences show a marked tendency to engage with colleagues of different generations, particularly on personal matters. These patterns may be linked to traits commonly associated with women—such as empathy, interpersonal connection and a collaborative spirit—as well as the inherent focus of the social sciences on human experiences and societal dynamics. Puyal and Sanagustin (2006) observed that women are naturally attuned to the human aspects of interaction and often demonstrate greater empathy, teamwork orientation and participatory leadership styles. In the context of the social sciences, where understanding human experiences and social dynamics is essential, personal conversations can enrich academic insight. Women, historically associated with caregiving roles, may be more inclined to engage in such interactions, fostering connections and facilitating the exchange of life experiences.

5.6 | University Size

Faculty at large universities with over 40,000 students demonstrate a more proactive attitude towards intergenerational

communication. These institutions typically feature greater demographic diversity—including differences in age, career paths and disciplinary expertise—which fosters the exchange of ideas and experiences across generations. Moreover, large universities offer more resources and opportunities to support cross-generational collaboration, such as research funding, advanced academic infrastructure and professional development programs specifically designed to encourage intergenerational engagement. They are also more likely to implement structured initiatives aimed at promoting dialogue between generations, including interdisciplinary seminars, discussion groups, mentoring programs that pair faculty from different generations and social activities that facilitate integration and knowledge exchange among educators of varying ages.

We can conclude that institutional support is essential to addressing these challenges. Universities can enhance communication through explicit policies, designated spaces for interaction and structured processes that promote the sharing of knowledge. Formal mechanisms—such as materials, infrastructure and technological tools—also play a key role in ensuring consistent communicative flow and driving organisational improvement.

Despite its contributions, this study presents certain limitations due to its methodological scope and the lack of empirical research on communication patterns in nonbusiness organisations. In this regard, longitudinal studies could offer deeper insights into how generational communication evolves throughout academic careers. Furthermore, qualitative approaches may help illuminate apparent contradictions, such as the coexistence of ageism with positive intergenerational affection among university faculty.

Future research could explore the specific stereotypes prevalent in academic contexts by examining their relationship with generational cohorts, academic ranks and stages of professional development. Investigating how these stereotypes vary across faculty roles and functions would also be valuable. Moreover, identifying and analysing the strategies and mechanisms used to mitigate generational stereotypes in university settings could provide actionable insights for fostering a more inclusive and collaborative academic culture.

Author Contributions

Dra. Mentado, Dra. Serrat, Dr. Rodríguez and Dr. Castro worked collaboratively on the conceptualisation and methodological design of the study. All four authors jointly participated in data collection by administering the Work Intergenerational Climate Scale (WICS) to a representative sample of university faculty, as well as in the statistical analysis of the data using descriptive and multiple regression techniques. Likewise, the interpretation of results and the drafting of the manuscript were carried out collectively by all authors. The literature review, integration of theoretical frameworks and critical discussion of the findings in relation to international literature were undertaken collectively. All aspects concerning the writing, revision and approval of the final version of the article were directed and supervised by Dr. Mentado, who assumes full responsibility for the integrity of the work presented.

Ethics Statement

This manuscript presents original work that has not been published previously and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. The

authors confirm the absence of plagiarism, including self-plagiarism and affirm that the data presented have not been fabricated, falsified or manipulated in any way. All individuals who have made a significant contribution to the research are duly recognised as authors. Each author has read and approved the final version of the manuscript and agrees to be accountable for all aspects of the work, ensuring its accuracy and integrity. The research involving human participants was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after providing them with comprehensive information about the study, including their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Measures were taken to minimise any potential risks and to ensure that the anticipated benefits of the research outweighed those risks. Participants' autonomy and dignity were respected throughout, and equitable recruitment practices were applied, ensuring no discrimination based on sex, race, socioeconomic status or other factors.

Confidentiality and privacy of participant data were rigorously protected according to relevant data protection regulations. The authors declare no conflicts of interest that could have influenced the research. The study adhered to all applicable national and international ethical guidelines and standards. The authors collectively take full responsibility for the quality, scientific rigour and ethical compliance of this work.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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