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To What Extent Is "Who You Associate With" a Reflection of "Who You Are"? Individual Agency in Maintaining Social Ties Beyond the Influence of Age, Gender, and Political Orientation

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Abstract

Social ties are fundamental to social life, personal satisfaction, and social support. The nature of these ties may change across different stages of the life course, generational identities, genders, and political orientations. This study aimed to investigate how individuals of different political orientations, genders, and age groups value and allocate time to their family, romantic, friendship, workplace, and community networks. An observational, cross-sectional study was conducted using a structured questionnaire administered in public spaces. The sample consisted predominantly of women (64.4%) and individuals who identified as politically right-wing (54.6%), with a mean age of 38.8 years. Right-wing participants reported more friendships formed through sports and religious gatherings, whereas left-wing participants reported a higher proportion of friendships established online. Politically centrist participants reported more friendships originating from the workplace, family connections, or friends of romantic partners. Men reported more friendships formed through sports (29.9% vs. 17.9%) and the internet (22.2% vs. 7.1%) compared with women. Age was negatively associated with time spent with parents, children, and coworkers, while a more right-wing political orientation was associated with more days of contact with coworkers. Participants expressed a desire to spend more time with their parents and less time with coworkers. Individuals aged 70–79

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years exhibited the highest overall dissatisfaction with the time devoted to social ties, indicating a desire for more frequent contact with parents, friends, and children. These findings highlight associations between sociodemographic characteristics, political orientation, and patterns of social ties, as well as discrepancies between actual and desired contact frequency, particularly among older adults.

KEYWORDS: Way of life; Social ties; Population characteristics; Friendship; Lifestyle.

Introduction

Social ties are central components of human life, encompassing different types of relationships, including family, romantic, friendship, professional, and community relationships. These relationships serve distinct functions: family members tend to provide greater unconditional support, whereas friends and other nonfamily contacts may facilitate shared activities and interests, as well as exposure to new ideas and experiences (Rözer, Mollenhorst & Volker, 2016). Thus, maintaining diverse social ties may help satisfy different needs for social interaction, companionship, and support, whereas more homogeneous networks may be associated with a greater risk of isolation or lack of social support (Rözer, Mollenhorst & Volker, 2016).

The composition of social relationships may be influenced by age, different stages of the life course, and generational identity. Throughout the human lifespan, social ties traditionally tend to undergo reorganization: initially, relationships are primarily centered on parents and siblings; subsequently, peers and romantic partners tend to become more central; and, with the formation of partnerships, parenthood, the transition to grandparenthood, and older age, new patterns of interaction emerge (David-Barrett et al., 2016). Normative life events, such as marriage, parenthood, and entry into or exit from the labor market, may also modify

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the opportunities and resources available for maintaining friendships, either by creating new spheres of interaction or by reducing the time allocated to existing relationships (Augustsson et al., 2025). In parallel, the literature indicates that aging is generally associated with a reduction in social network size, particularly through a decrease in more superficial contacts, whereas emotionally close relationships may remain more stable, preserving their importance for overall well-being (Bruine de Bruin, Parker & Strough, 2020).

Beyond the natural temporal dynamics of social relationships throughout life, other factors play important roles in the composition, formation, and maintenance of social ties, including gender differences. From early stages of life, men and women may be socialized differently regarding emotional expression, displays of affection, and ways of establishing interpersonal relationships (Liebler & Sandefur, 2002). Women tend to place greater emphasis on emotionally intimate relationships, emotional exchange, and affective support within relationships, as well as maintaining smaller, more private social circles. In contrast, male friendships have traditionally tended to prioritize forms of interaction less centered on emotional self-disclosure, potentially facilitating the formation of more diverse connections (Bank & Hansford, 2005; Vigil JM, 2007). However, these tendencies are not necessarily universal or determined exclusively by gender (Cohn-Schwartz & Schmitz, 2024).

Political orientation, understood as the practical stance adopted toward societal issues, may also exert considerable influence on the formation of personal relationships, although this association remains relatively understudied. Its relevance is particularly evident within families, through the intergenerational transmission of ideologies and their influence on marital dynamics. Political disagreement between romantic partners may be associated with higher levels of stress, conflict,

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and greater difficulty resolving problems, although such differences do not necessarily determine the quality or continuity of these relationships (Fangmeier et al., 2020). Additionally, family dynamics may contribute to the development of young people's sociopolitical identities. When young individuals adopt ideologies that differ from those of their parents, they may seek additional sources of influence, such as friendships, thereby placing greater value on forming new social ties (Van Ditmars, 2023). In this context, ideological proximity may facilitate identification with others and the formation of friendships among individuals with similar political views, whereas political differences may influence the willingness to establish or maintain relationships with individuals holding divergent perspectives (Poteat et al., 2011; Van Ditmars, 2023).

Despite the considerable body of research examining each of these dimensions separately, few studies have integrated age, gender, and political orientation within a single investigation, simultaneously comparing different types of social ties, including family, romantic, friendship, workplace, and community relationships, using equivalent measures in the Brazilian context while accounting for the additional complexity introduced by relationships mediated through digital social networks. Most existing studies examine one relational domain at a time or compare groups separately, without considering how these three dimensions may operate differently depending on the sphere of life being analyzed (Van Ditmars, 2023; Fieder & Huber, 2018).

Against this background, our objective is to investigate how individuals of different political orientations, genders, and age groups value and allocate time to their family, romantic, friendship, workplace, and community networks. In doing so, we aim to contribute to the understanding of the factors that structure the current hierarchy of social

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ties and the extent of individual agency in determining which relationships individuals wish to have more or less present in their lives.

Methods

A structured questionnaire was administered to individuals in public spaces. The compiled dataset included 329 participants aged 18 to 93 years. The questionnaire was administered at a single time point and therefore relied on participants' recall.

The data collection instrument included age, gender, highest level of education completed, and self-reported political orientation. For descriptive analyses and graphical representations, participants were categorized into the following age groups: 18–29, 30–39, 40–49, 50–59, 60–69, 70–79, and 80 years or older. Current frequency of contact with different social ties, desired frequency of contact, contexts in which current friendships were formed, and, for participants aged 30 years or older, retrospective frequency of contact were also investigated. The retrospective question used different reference periods: participants aged 30–39 years were asked to refer to 10 years before the interview; those aged 40–49 years, to 20 years before; those aged 50–59 years, to 30 years before; and those aged 60 years or older, to 40 years before.

The social ties investigated included parents, children, romantic or marital partners, friends, and coworkers. Contact frequency was expressed as the mean number of days per month for current, desired, and retrospective contact. Regarding the origins of friendships, participants were instructed to select three contexts in which they had met most of their current close friends: school/university, workplace, family or

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romantic partner, neighborhood, religious gatherings, sports, internet, and community groups, with an option to specify the latter.

Political orientation was measured using a scale ranging from 0 to 10, where 0 represented the strongest left-wing alignment and 10 the strongest right-wing alignment. This measure was treated as a quantitative variable in the contact frequency models and categorized in analyses of associations with friendship origins. To investigate the association between political orientation and each of the 11 friendship origin categories, the political scale was grouped into left-wing (0–4), center (5), and right-wing (6–10). Contact frequency with social ties was also descriptively presented according to the age groups defined above.

Information regarding friendship origins was organized into binary categorical variables, indicating whether each participant had mentioned a given origin (1) or not (0) among the three most important contexts. Contingency tables were constructed to investigate the associations between each friendship origin category and gender and categorized political orientation. These associations were assessed using Spearman's chi-square test, adopting a statistical significance level of 5% ($p < 0.05$).

To investigate the associations of age, gender, and political orientation with the current frequency of contact for each of the five categories of social ties considered, five generalized linear models (GLMs) were fitted using a negative binomial distribution and a logarithmic link function. In each model, the number of days per month of contact with parents, children, friends, romantic partners, and coworkers was considered the dependent variable. Age, in years, and political orientation, measured on the 0–10 scale, were included as quantitative variables and centered around their respective means; gender was included as a categorical variable, with women as the reference category. All three explanatory

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variables were included simultaneously, allowing the association of each variable with contact frequency to be estimated after adjustment for the effects of the others.

To assess the discrepancy between current and desired contact frequency, an indicator termed the Social Dissatisfaction Index (SDI) was developed and calculated for each participant and social tie by subtracting the actual number of contact days from the desired number of contact days: SDI = desired days − actual days. Positive values indicated a desire to increase contact frequency; negative values indicated a desire to reduce it; and values equal to zero indicated satisfaction with the correspondence between current and desired contact frequency. The age group of 80 years or older was excluded from this analysis because it contained only one participant, thereby preventing a single observation from being considered representative of an entire group.

Results

Data were collected from a sample of 329 individuals, comprising 117 men (35.6%) and 212 women (64.4%). Regarding the political spectrum, participants were classified as right-wing (n = 179; 54.6%), left-wing (n = 93; 28.4%), or centrist (n = 56; 17.1%) **(Figure 1).** Examination of the distribution along the 0–10 left-right political scale revealed frequency peaks at values of 5 and 10, corresponding to the political center and the strongest right-wing alignment, respectively **(Figure 2).** Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 93 years, with a mean of 38.8 years and a median of 34 years. The histogram showing the age distribution of participants indicated a non-normal distribution **(Figure 3).**

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Figure 1. Percentage distribution of participants by political orientation. Colors represent the different political alignments: right-wing (blue), left-wing (red), and center (black).

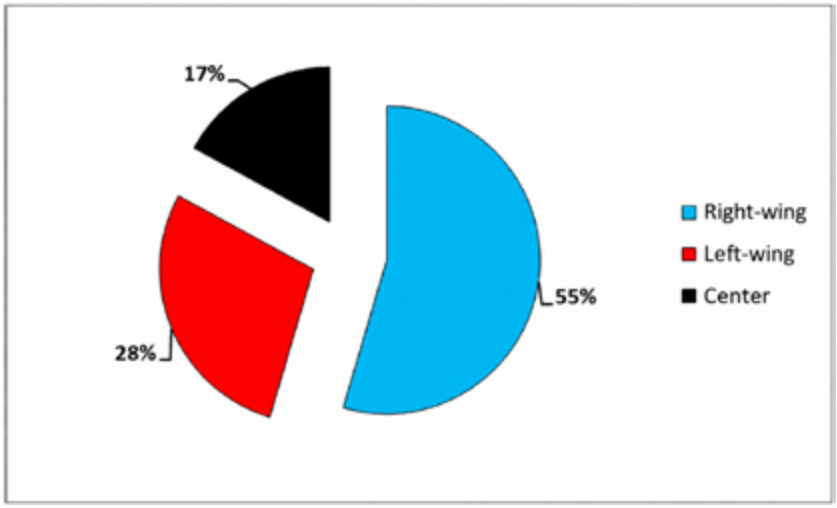
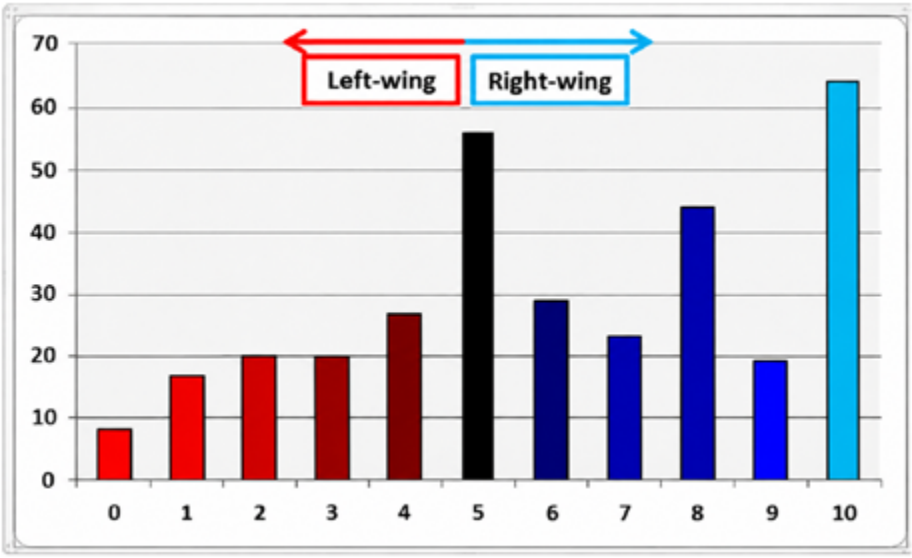
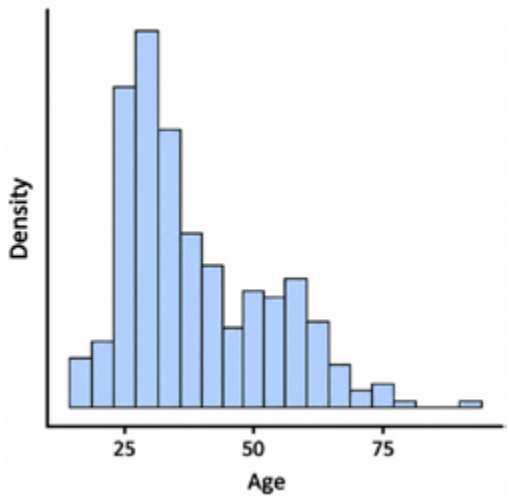


Figure 2. Stratified distribution of the sample across the political orientation scale. Values closer to zero indicate stronger left-wing alignment, a value of five indicates centrist political alignment, and values closer to 10 indicate stronger right-wing alignment.



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Figure 3. Histogram showing the age distribution of participants who completed the questionnaire.



The analysis of the association between political orientation and friendship origins revealed no statistically significant associations for the categories Friends from school/university, Friends from the neighborhood, Friends from children's schools, Friends from events, Friends from community groups, and Friends of friends ($p > 0.05$). In contrast, statistically significant associations were observed for the remaining friendship origins analyzed. Centrist participants reported higher percentages of Friends from work (69.6%; $p = 0.031$) and Friends through family/romantic partners (67.9%; $p = 0.035$). Right-wing participants exhibited higher proportions of Friends through sports (26.3%; $p = 0.045$) and Friends from religious gatherings (26.8%; $p = 0.007$). Finally, left-wing participants reported a significantly higher frequency of Friends met online (18.3%; $p = 0.043$) **(Table 1).**

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Table 1. Association between political orientation and friendship origins. Within each political orientation category, percentages represent the proportion of participants who identified a given friendship origin category as important. Bold p-values indicate statistical significance ($p < 0.05$).

Friendship origins	Center	Right-wing	Left-wing	p
School/university	41 (73.2%)	131 (73.2%)	74 (79.6%)	0.485
Work	39 (69.6%)	93 (52.0%)	59 (63.4%)	**0.031**
Family/romantic partner	38 (67.9%)	88 (49.2%)	45 (48.4%)	**0.035**
Neighborhood	14 (25.0%)	35 (19.6%)	21 (22.6%)	0.646
Sportsw	6 (10.7%)	47 (26.3%)	19 (20.4%)	**0.045**
Religious meeting	7 (12.5%)	48 (26.8%)	12 (12.9%)	**0.007**
Children's school	0 (0.0%)	2 (1.1%)	0 (0.0%)	0.433
Internet	9 (16.1%)	15 (8.4%)	17 (18.3%)	**0.043**
Events	1 (1.8%)	2 (1.1%)	0 (0.0%)	0.494
Community group	1 (1.8%)	11 (6.1%)	2 (2.2%)	0.182
Friends of a friend	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.6%)	0 (0.0%)	0.659

The analysis of the association between gender and friendship origins revealed no statistically significant associations for the categories Friends from school/university, Friends from work, Friends through family/romantic partners, Friends from the neighborhood, Friends from religious gatherings, Friends from children's schools, Friends from events, Friends from community groups, and Friends of friends ($p > 0.05$). In contrast, statistically significant associations were observed for the remaining friendship origins analyzed. Men exhibited a higher proportion of Friends through sports (29.9%; $p = 0.012$) and a higher frequency of Friends met online (22.2%; $p < 0.001$) compared with women (17.9% and 7.1%, respectively) **(Table 2).**

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Table 2. Association between gender and the contexts in which friendships were formed. Within each gender category, percentages represent the proportion of participants who identified a given friendship origin category as important. Bold p-values indicate statistical significance ($p < 0.05$).

Friendship origins	Female	Male	p
School/university	157 (74.1%)	90 (76.9%)	0.565
Work	128 (60.4%)	63 (53.8%)	0.250
Family/romantic partner	116 (54.7%)	55 (47.0%)	0.180
Neighborhood	46 (21.7%)	25 (21.4%)	0.944
Sportsw	38 (17.9%)	35 (29.9%)	**0.012**
Religious meeting	42 (19.8%)	25 (21.4%)	0.737
Children's school	2 (0.9%)	0 (0.0%)	0.292
Internet	15 (7.1%)	26 (22.2%)	**<0.001**
Events	2 (0.9%)	1 (0.9%)	0.935
Community group	7 (3.3%)	7 (6.0%)	0.249
Friends of a friend	1 (0.5%)	0 (0.0%)	0.457

The generalized linear models examining the distribution of time, expressed in days per month, devoted to parents, children, friends, and romantic partners indicated a marginally significant ($p < 0.10$) negative effect of male gender on time spent with parents, romantic partners, and coworkers (β = -0.1748, -0.0969, and -0.0503, respectively), after adjustment for the effects of the other variables, suggesting that men tend to devote less time to these social ties. Age, in turn, showed a statistically significant negative effect ($p < 0.05$) on time spent with parents, children, and coworkers (β = -0.0130, -0.0083, and -0.0061, respectively), after adjustment for the effects of the other variables. Finally, political orientation showed a statistically significant positive estimated effect on time spent with friends and coworkers (β = 0.0153), after adjustment for the effects of the other variables, indicating that individuals with a stronger right-wing political orientation spend more days per month with their coworkers **(Table 3).**

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Table 3. Results of the generalized linear models estimating the effects of gender (male compared with female), age (continuous variable), and political orientation (continuous variable) on the number of days per month spent with parents, children, friends, romantic partners, and coworkers. Bold estimated effect values indicate statistically significant associations ($p < 0.05$).

		Male-Female	Age	Political orientation
Parents	Estimated effect	-0.1748	**-0.013**	0.0144
	P value	0.082	0.002	0.4
Children	Estimated effect	-0.07495	**-0.00834**	0.00665
	P value	0.395	0.011	0.654
Friends	Estimated effect	0.02428	-0.00553	0.00201
	P value	0.789	0.082	0.896
Partner	Estimated effect	-0.09691	0.00367	0.00726
	P value	0.078	0.072	0.431
Work	Estimated effect	-0.05034	**-0.00612**	**0.01531**
	P value	0.081	<.001	0.002

The time spent with parents, children, friends, romantic partners, and coworkers differed significantly across the age groups considered in the overall test (ANOVA, $p < 0.05$), although time spent with friends was the only category that did not show a statistically significant difference over time. Time spent with parents showed a decreasing trend across age groups, whereas time spent with children increased up to the 40–49-year age group, followed by a plateau at 50–59 years and a decline beginning in the 60–69-year age group **(Figure 4).**

The Social Dissatisfaction Index (SDI), which represents the degree of dissatisfaction with the time devoted to each category of social ties, indicated that the greatest negative dissatisfaction was associated with time spent with coworkers, suggesting that participants wished to spend fewer days per month with individuals in this category. Conversely, the highest positive dissatisfaction was associated with time spent with

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parents, indicating a desire to spend more days per month with them. Participants aged 50–59 and 70–79 years expressed a desire to spend more time with their parents than they currently did. The 70–79-year age group exhibited the highest overall level of dissatisfaction with social ties, indicating a greater desire to spend more time with parents, friends, and children than all other age groups **(Figure 5).**

Figure 4. Time, in days per month, that participants in each age group spend with each of the social ties categorized in the present study. Age groups are represented on the x-axis. Each social tie is represented by a different color.

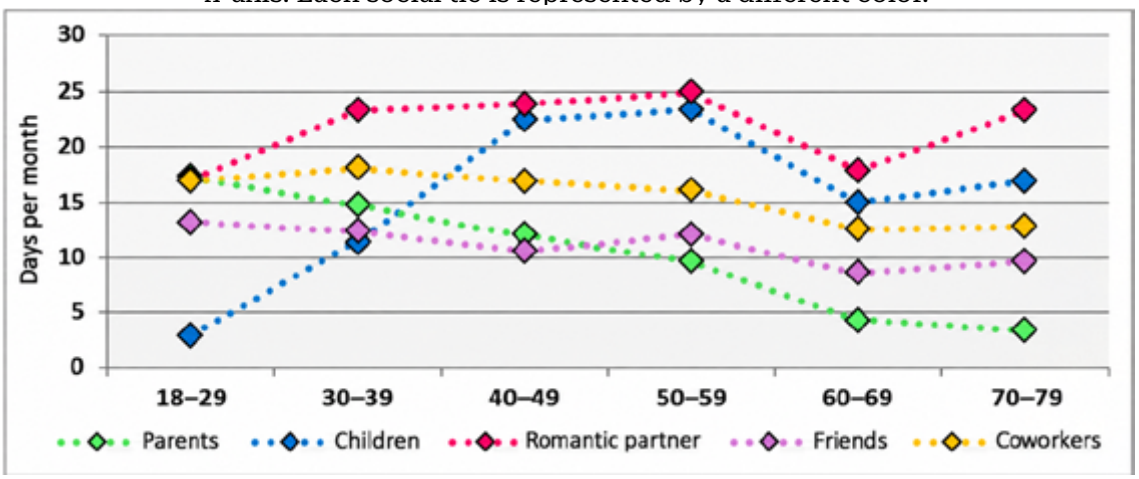
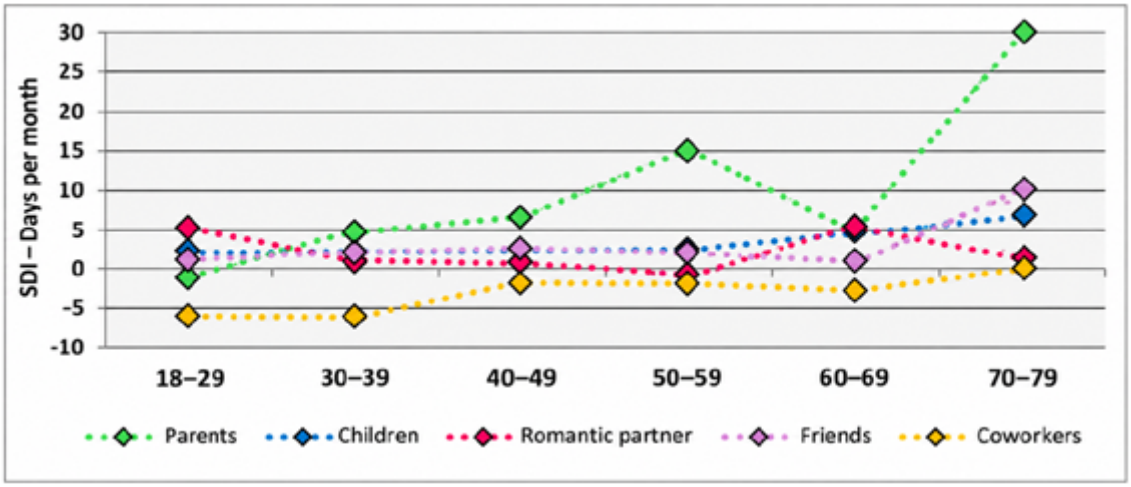


Figure 5. Social Dissatisfaction Index (SDI), in days per month, regarding the time devoted to each of the social ties categorized in the present study, according to age group. Age groups are represented on the x-axis. Each social tie is represented by a different color.



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Discussion

Age was significantly associated with the time spent with parents, children, and coworkers. This perspective was presented in the model proposed by Antonucci and Akiyama (1987), known as the social convoy model, which considers that individuals are accompanied by networks of relationships that change and become organized around their experiences, needs, and transitions throughout life and development. Furthermore, according to Wrzus et al. (2013), life events and changes in social roles are associated with the reorganization of relationship networks. Thus, the findings of the present study reinforce the importance of investigating changes in family relationships throughout life, considering both the amount of time spent together and individuals' expectations and needs regarding social contact.

In this context, individual life trajectories appear to be associated with a reduction in time spent with parents. This may be attributable to factors such as residential independence, the formation of new family units, and increased professional involvement, which are closely linked to this process. To explain this phenomenon, Wrzus et al. (2013) conducted an integrative analysis of 277 studies, identifying important changes in the composition of social circles and support networks throughout adulthood, highlighting the dynamic nature of these relationships. The negative association between age and time spent with parents identified in the present study suggests that increasing physical distance leads to a reduction in the time devoted to these relationships, even when the importance attributed to them has not diminished.

Overall, the dissatisfaction observed among older individuals regarding the time they spend or would like to spend with their social networks deserves particular attention. Regarding the greater dissatisfaction with

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time spent with parents among individuals aged 50–79 years, parental illness and/or death should be highlighted as factors that significantly affect opportunities for contact or its absence. Dissatisfaction with time spent with children and friends among individuals aged 70–79 years suggests factors related to perceived social isolation and emotional abandonment (Marcelino et al., 2024). Conversely, dissatisfaction with time spent with parents may be associated with reflection on family relationships, including feelings of regret, awareness of the finiteness of life, and greater recognition of the inevitability of death (Talu et al., 2026). These factors suggest that reduced contact does not necessarily correspond to a decline in the value attributed to social and emotional ties.

The social tie associated with the greatest negative dissatisfaction, meaning the one with which participants wished to spend fewer days per month, was coworkers, with this dissatisfaction being most pronounced among individuals aged 18–39 years. This pattern indicates dissatisfaction with the work environment during this age range, when individuals tend to have less established careers and, consequently, less autonomy over their daily routines and professional decisions (Mujcic & Oswald, 2025).

Time spent with children was negatively correlated with age, which may also be related to changes in family organization throughout life. Time spent with children was initially lower in younger age groups, increased during adulthood, and subsequently declined after the age of 60 years, revealing a pattern suggesting that different stages of the family life cycle influence opportunities for contact. The higher proportion of childless individuals among young adults is consistent with an international demographic trend toward delayed parenthood and declining fertility rates in younger age groups (OECD, 2024; Van Wijk, 2024), which may contribute to lower overall mean values. However, the greater dependence of children during their parents' middle age, an economic trend observed in different

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parts of the world and associated with difficulties entering the labor market, rising living costs, and barriers to housing access (OECD, 2025; Minkin et al., 2024), tends to intensify family contact and the importance of this social tie. Subsequently, as children become more independent and develop their own diverse social ties, the time shared between family units decreases, a phenomenon often associated with the so-called empty nest period (Mitchell et al., 2015).

Regarding marginally significant variables, a tendency toward less time spent by men with their parents and spouses was observed, along with a possible positive association between age and time spent with romantic partners. These trends may be discussed in light of differences in the roles traditionally assigned to men and women in the organization and maintenance of interpersonal relationships (Schmidt et al., 2023) or biologically determined predispositions (Archer, 2019). Vigil (2007), when investigating preferences regarding friendships and social interactions, observed differences in socialization patterns between men and women. The author demonstrated greater male participation in interactions mediated by shared activities, such as sports and social gatherings, whereas women showed greater participation in social contexts characterized by interpersonal communication and the sharing of experiences that reinforce emotional security. Although the author primarily investigated friendships, these findings offer the possibility of extrapolation to better understand potential differences in the distribution of time devoted to these social ties. Similarly, our results indicate that men tend to attribute greater importance to friendships formed through sports activities and the internet, which tend to involve weaker emotional bonds (Scott et al., 2022; Fox, 2024).

Regarding the tendency for time spent with spouses to increase with age, changes in household composition and the transition to retirement may contribute to greater opportunities for time spent together as a couple.

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Stancanelli and Van Soest (2016) demonstrated that retirement may alter the allocation of individual and shared leisure time. However, because the associations identified in the data analysis were only marginally significant, these interpretations should be regarded as hypotheses rather than conclusive evidence of gender- or age-related differences.

The absence of a significant association between political orientation and time spent with parents, children, and spouses may suggest that, in this sample, ideological orientation was not an independent factor associated with the duration of these interactions. However, it is important to emphasize that participants were not asked to describe what they understood as defining someone as "left-wing" or "right-wing," limiting more detailed and specific analyses of this issue.

Returning to the perspective of the social convoy model proposed by Antonucci and Akiyama (1987), interpersonal relationships evolve alongside individual and family changes and are influenced by changes in living conditions and opportunities for social interaction. The greater degree of social dissatisfaction observed in older age groups, particularly regarding time spent with friends and children, indicates that limited agency over the time devoted to the most valued social ties throughout life is associated with emotional abandonment rather than the intensity of professional and social demands, which are more characteristic of middle age.

Conclusion

The conclusions are limited by factors inherent to our sampling design, including the representativeness of the sampled population, recall bias, and individual perception bias. Future studies may minimize these limitations by employing larger and more diverse samples across

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age groups, genders, and political orientations. Furthermore, conclusions regarding self-reported political orientation are limited by each individual's understanding of what it means to be "left-wing" or "right-wing," as different socioeconomic factors may influence this perception. Nevertheless, our findings represent an important effort toward improving our understanding of the factors that influence the structure of social networks throughout life in a context of increasingly individualized experiences, both in personal life, through social media, and in professional settings, through the expansion of remote work.

Author contributions

Conceptualization: BFMC; PCD; SFN; IVLFF; IECP; GMRSO

Data curation: MFPN

Formal analysis: GAM

Methodology: BHL; ACAG; GQC

Writing – original draft: HAFRX; MMBR; LGSSG; NM; DPM; GSDC; GZ; GSS

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to this study. This work was conducted independently, without influence from institutions, organizations, or sponsors that could affect the results or the interpretation of the data presented.

Data Availability

The authors declare that the data supporting the results of this study are available in the article. Derived data supporting the study's conclusions that are not found in the article may be requested from the corresponding author.

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New Researchers

The first author declares that they meet the eligibility criteria for the 'New Researchers' category and requests that the manuscript be submitted under this category.

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