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Presentation Topic: The role of the Internet as a communication medium in parent-child relationship at the later stages of the family life cycle

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## Abstract

The Internet, as a new tool for communication, has brought dramatic changes to our way of lives in the past decade. It provides a fast and cheap way for people to communicate with others. Meanwhile, it helps to overcome the barrier of time and space in communication. This convenience makes people more willing and ready to initiate new relationships with people and also encourages people to maintain existing relationships, such as parent-child relationship. Even though the number of elders having experiences of using computer is still limit nowadays, some of them share a view that using the Internet is helpful for them to have better communication with their children. Actually, the Internet may have certain positive impact on communication because of the widely use of the Internet as communication tool among people and the advanced functions found in it. For those who use the Internet as an additional way to communicate with their child appropriately, it is expected that this change of communication pattern may affect the quality of interaction, most likely, in a positive way.

This paper records the behavioral changes of 12 older parents from 9 families. Besides, 12 adult children have been interviewed at the same time in order to know the situation from different point of views. Semi structure in-depth interviews are used as the principal method to collect data from the older parents as well as their adult children. Data analysis focuses on the changes in communication pattern and quality of relationship. Three main observations are found among the cases. Firstly, some similarities and differences are observed among cases. Secondly, changes are found in

both the communication patterns as well as the quality of parent-child relationships. The part of discussion tries to account for the observations and find out the relations of them.

### **Background**

Today, no more study is required to prove how powerful the Internet is as we all can experience this in our daily lives. In this paper, the author tries to examine one of the important applications found in the Internet, the function of communication. Communication has been taking place around us every second everywhere since the existence of human being in the world. Interpersonal communication is the most prevalent application found in the Internet and it seems to be replacing the role of traditional communications gradually. The Internet, as a new communication medium, has changed our lives dramatically in a short period of time. Hong Kong, as one of the countries with the highest Internet penetration rate in the world, there were over 3.7 million Internet users which equals to 60.8% of the population aged 10 or above in 2006. Although Hong Kong is one of the cities with highest usage rate of the Internet in the world, the usage of the Internet is still limited to the younger generation. The percentage of the Internet users of the group aged from 10 to 14 and the group aged from 15 to 24 were 96.4% and 97.4% respectively in 2006. However, elderly is one of the groups suffering from this unequal adoption of technology. There are only 4.2% of people aged over 65 having experience of using the Internet service in the past twelve months in 2006. (*Census and Statistics Department, 2006*)

The problem of Digital Divide aroused public's concern since 1990's when the world was overwhelmed with the trend of Information Technology. In order to ease the situation of Digital Divide, Hong Kong Government has been conducting several programmes to encourage people to learn to use computer since then. In 2001, Social Welfare Department sponsored a certain amount of funding for some social services agencies to conduct basic computer training courses for elders in communities. In the meantime, a strategy policy "Digital 21 strategy" was launched by Information Technology Services Department (now is known as Office of Government Chief Information Officer) in 1998 to encourage more people, especially for the deprived groups like elderly, new-immigrants, women in communities to learn to use computer and to access to the Internet. (*Digital 21 Strategy Website, 2004, 2001, 1998*)

Several programmes have been conducted in Hong Kong to train up the older group to use the computer in the past few years. After a certain period of time, a group of older adults have been equipped with basic computer skills and started enjoy their lives in the world of Information Technology. Thus, what is the impact of the Information Technology on the older group when they start to use this new technology? Although the number of elders having experiences of using computer is still insignificant, some of them are willing to share their learning experiences in the interviews with mass media. The elders reported that they learnt to use internet due to certain reasons, including self- enhancement, want to keep pace with society and want to have better communication with their families, e.g. their children. (*Chan, Phillips & Fong, 2003*) Actually, what happens among the parent and their adult child in the later stages of the

family life cycle when the parent has been equipped with the skills of using the Internet? This study attempts to draw a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon observed.

### **Research questions and Methodology**

This study attempts to find out the role of the Internet as a communication medium in helping the parents to maintain a satisfactory relationship with their adult child in the later stages of the family life cycle. The key aspects include:

1. What are the reasons that people select to use the Internet or not? This reflects who does benefit from this new technology and who does not.
2. In what ways does the Internet to be used by people as a communication medium and how do people make it work?
3. To what extents does the Internet help the elderly parent to have a satisfactory relationship with their adult child?

The 9 selected families were mainly found from a Non Governmental Organization (NGO), XXX which aims at promoting the Information Technology usage among elders in Hong Kong. XXX provides computer training for elderly in Hong Kong and there are over 2,200 elders registered as her members and joining their computer courses regularly as at April 2007. Therefore, the researcher could easily find the suitable cases for the study from this organization.

The Interviews of the elderly parents were mainly conducted in face to face while two of them were conducted over the phone and one was conducted via email. The interviews of the children were carried out either in face to face or via email. The main focus of this study is the relationship between communication and the quality of parent-child relationship. The researcher addresses the changes found in the following two areas. First one is the changes in communication pattern before and after the usage of the Internet as a communication tool. Second one is the dynamics of the parent-child relationships over different stages from living together to living apart as well as from use the traditional communication tools to using the Internet in addition.

**Summary of the families interviewed**

<b>Case</b>	<b>Parent characteristic</b>	<b>Usage of the Internet of the parents</b>	<b>Children characteristic</b>
YK	Female (64) Married Tertiary edu. Part-time Retired Mandarin teacher	Near 10 years email / ICQ & MSN / Blogging	1 daughter (married) live in Australia separated: 3 years No Grandchildren
NY	Male (70) Married Tertiary edu. Clerical work	Less than 3 years Email only	
LKT	Male (70) Widowed, Secondary edu. Retired Factory worker	over 5 years email and Blogging	1 son (married) live in Hong Kong separated: near 10 years 1 Grandchildren
WCH	Male (60) Married Secondary edu. Retired Civil Servant	over 3 years email / MSN / Blogging	2 sons, (both married and live in U.S.) separated: near 20 years 3 Grandchildren
LL	Female (57) Married Secondary edu Managerial Secretary	over 10 years email	

PS	Male (75) Married Primary edu. Retired Restaurant Waiter Living in Shengzhen	over 6 years email only	1 son (married) live in Shengzhen separated: over 30 years 2 Grandchildren
LWK	Female (65) Widowed Primary edu. Retired Hospital workman	over 7 years email / MSN / Blogging	4 sons (eldest and 3 <sup>rd</sup> married) eldest son: live in Hong Kong 2 <sup>nd</sup> & 4 <sup>th</sup> son : live together 3 <sup>rd</sup> son: live in Australia. separated: over 10 year (3 <sup>rd</sup> son) More than 2 Grandchildren
KL	Female (58) Married Secondary edu. Retired Department store sales	Near 5 years email and MSN	2 daughters (both single and one living in Macau and one living in Shengzhen) separated: less than 10 years
WU	Male (60) Married Secondary edu. Retired sales in Gold shop	Less than 5 years Only basic Internet skills, email only	

LYO	Female (60) Married Primary edu. Retired Factory worker	over 7 years email / MSN / Blogging	1 daughter and 2 sons daughter: single and live together elder son: married and moved away younger son: single and moved away No Grandchildren
WWC	Male (91) Widowed Secondary edu. Retired Clerical work	Near 7 years email and Blogging	1 daughter and 3 sons daughter: married and live Canada elder son: married and live Canada 2 <sup>nd</sup> son: married and moved away younger son: married and moved away More than 2 Grandchildren
*NWS	Female (70) Divorced Secondary edu. House wife	less 3 years email only	2 daughters and 2 sons eldest daughter: married and live US 2 <sup>nd</sup> daughter: married and live Taiwan 3 <sup>rd</sup> son: married and live HK youngest son: single and live New York More than 2 Grandchildren

\* Cases selected from other NGOs (not XXX members)

### **Findings and Analysis**

Three main observations are found among the cases in this study. Firstly, some similarities and differences are observed among cases. According to the similarities of personal and environmental aspects found in this study, people with certain characteristics seems to be more ready and willing to use the Internet as the communication medium to maintain connections with their parents or children.

The characteristics found in this study include good relationships between the parent and child, openness to accept the new technology and willingness to spend a lot of time to learn and practice among elderly parents. These factors seem to be some necessary conditions for people to initiate their communication via the Internet. Without strong enough motivations to communicate and willingness to try to use the Internet, the changes in communication pattern and quality of parent-child relationships are impossible to be found in the later stage.

Considerate personality is commonly found among the elderly parents. They always put the needs of the children at the first place. The older parents chose to the Internet as one of the main communication mediums in their daily communication practice in order to match the needs of the children. This point helps to explain why the older person keeps using the Internet in family communication after they have been equipped with such skills. On the other hand, it is generally believed that there are several differences in communication between male and female. Actually, gender difference in communication, including online communication, has been discussed in

local and overseas studies for a long period of time. Although gender difference in online communication is not the focus of this study, an interesting point is found here. Female seems to be more responsible for family communication in some cases.

On top of personal characteristics, environmental factors may have influences on communication as well. Retirement let the older parents have more time to learn and to practice the compute skills and their interests at the new technology seems to be easily aroused after the retirement. Another more practical consideration in usage is that the Internet helps a lot in the families with children living overseas to have frequent connections since it overcomes the barriers of time and space.

Secondly, significant changes are found in the communication pattern between the older parents and their adult children. In this study, almost all the interviewed parents worried about intruding the live of their children and thus they prefer email than making phone call. While instant net meeting provides a feeling of closeness, the blogs allows both to have a more in-depth understanding of the thinking and concern of each other. In this study, interviewed parents and children would use email, instant messaging and most recently blogs to keep in touch with each other. The new medium provides a new avenue to continue their contacts. Surprising, it does not only improve the quantity of contacts between parent and child by increasing the frequency of contacts and amount of content to be delivered in each message, but also demonstrate a qualitative improvement in communication.

The Internet, as a communication medium, provides more and better ways to communicate. On the other hand, by the way the parents approach the various communications tools, it reveals an interesting part of the parent-child relationship. Being able to use ICT, in itself raises the self-confidence of the parents. It earns them extra respects and appreciations from their children. This empowerment effects affects not only the power distribution in communication pattern between parents and child, but also exert direct influence on the quality of parent-child relationship and well-being of the parents themselves.

The third observation noted in this study is the change in quality of parent-child relationship. Besides enhancing the positive provisions and reducing negative provisions in parent-child relationships, the interviewed parents seems to be with better balance in the sense of cohesion and adaptability. These changes can be treated as the indicators of the improving of parent-child relationship.

### **Discussion**

The above changes in communication can be explained by four characteristics of the Internet. Firstly, the casualness and sharing culture of the Internet promotes the connections between parents and children in a positive way. People are more willing and feel easier to initiate connections with each other. Secondly, the Internet creates a new mode of communication between the elderly parents and their adult children in all cases including those with children living overseas and local. Under new communication

environment, new communication rules have been formed. Something that did not happen before now becomes possible. More in depth feelings are easier to be disclosed with each other when the Internet has been used. In addition, direct negative conflicts between parent and child have been reduced since people could choose to use the Internet, a comparatively indirect way to express the opposite opinions in a moderated way. Thirdly, the Internet could be viewed as a totally new topic for parent and child to communicate. Among the interviewed cases, almost all the parents admitted that computer became a popular topic in their communications with children. Moreover, many children were willing to teach their parents computer skills when they had time. This new topic helps the interviewed people have more things to share, i.e. increase in quantity. At the same time, it pulls parents and children closer by providing a sense of commonness of the involved persons and this sense of commonness is important to deepen people sense of belonging to the group, i.e. improvement of the quality of relationship. Lastly, being equipping with computer skills gives it users a strong empowerment impact as the positive value of Information Technology in our society. There is a belief that people who is capable to use the Internet equals that he is able to acquire information. Meanwhile, it represents the one is with certain level of ability and not being lag behind.

As admitted by the interviewees, the Internet helped them to keep frequent and quality communication with their family members. In a nutshell, the Internet shows certain positive influences on parent-child relationship in all the selected cases but the level of impact varies from case to case. The extent of impact could be viewed in two

aspects, amplifying and transformative effects. Amplifying effect could be reflected by the increase of frequency of connections and amount of content delivered in each message to a certain extent. However, the level of impact might be due to the rapid development of other ICT which was more traditional like the existence of SMS and 3G in mobile phone as well as the sharp drop of the price of international calls. Therefore, it was difficult to have a clear conclusion on the effectiveness of the Internet in amplifying aspect.

Transformative effect was even more difficult to have a quantitative measurement. Although the extent of impact was difficult to have an objective measurement, some valuable insights were found among cases. The Internet transforms people's views on what communication is and who they are. When the Internet is used as a communication medium, this new communication environment produces some new communication rules for its users. Under new circumstances, there is something new found in communication and such things have never happened before. People become more willing and feel easier to disclose in depth feelings and share opposite opinions with each other, such sharing is not easily found in traditional communication medium. These changes let people have a new perception on communication which becomes more casual, less planned, diversified as more things, including positive and negative, could be shared among people. Another transformative effect is how the elderly parents perceive themselves. Extra respects and appreciations have been earned from their children when the parent had been equipped to use ICT. Parents find themselves better in self image and believe that they have performed their roles as parent well. This

significant transformation of parents' self perception is important in both parent-child communication and quality of relationship.

On top of in what ways and to what extent that the Internet helps in parent-child communication listed in the three research questions of this study, another question to be tackled in this study is about who uses the Internet as a communication tool and what the reasons affecting them to choose to use this way to communicate. Some common characteristics of personal and environmental aspects were found in the selected interviewed cases. Even though generalization is not easily made in qualitative research such as the limitation of sample size, it is important to know more if the findings are transferable to other cases or not.

Actually, similarities and differences found in the cases helped to not only account for the changes of communication pattern of the interviewees, but also exerted direct and significant impacts on both the quality of parent-child relationship and well-being of the parents. For example, elderly who are with optimistic and outgoing character might find easier to adapt to the leave of the children and the retirement life, and leads to better well being. It is not a linear relationship. Personal and environmental characteristics, on one side, affect the communication patterns between people. On the other side, they affect the quality of parent-child relationship and well-being of the parents directly. Meanwhile, the change of relationship never happens in one direction only. Interpersonal interaction pattern and quality of relationship are correlated and they affect each other. People with better quality relationship tend to have closer interaction

pattern while better communication certainly helps to gain improvement in quality of relationship as found in the interviewed cases in this study.

### **Limitations of study**

The Internet has been wide spread for only around 15 years, a comparatively short period of time. It is questionable if it is an appropriate timing to evaluation its impact at this stage as the immaturity of the development. Similar to other studies in the field of Social Science, it is difficult to create a pure experimental environment for studies of human beings and societies. Meanwhile, the findings always are time and context specific. Facing all these factors, the researcher believes that the only way to understand more about the impacts of the Internet on human beings is conducting more researches and studies in this area under different circumstances and at different time of points. Any additional information is certainly helpful to understand the situation to a certain degree. Even though the Internet is difficult to study independently from other ICT devices and there is a question about the immaturity of the Internet, it is important to have in-depth analysis of the development and its impact with different themes and targets at different timeslot in order to give hints to the further direction of studies in the future.

This study attempts to shed some lights on the future development of the Internet in the field of elderly services to see how to use it to bring better lives to the elderly. For the field of elderly services, understanding how the elders can be benefited from this

new technology is helpful to both the design and implementation of suitable services for the older group. The degree of generalization much depends on the level of resemblance of the group with the general public. In this study, the degree of generalization may be limited because of the possible low resemblance of characteristics between the interviewed older parents with the general elderly population in society. Actually, the percentage of elderly with experience of using the Internet is still insignificant so far. As mentioned in the earlier part of this paper, there are less than 5% of people aged 65 or above have experience of using the Internet according to the statistics obtained from the government. Therefore, the successful experience of using the Internet among the interviewed parents might be quite different to the general elderly population. There is an undiscovered side of the truth that what happens to the group who does not use the Internet to communicate with their children. What are the obstacles preventing them to use this new technology? How do they perceive the Internet and adapt to the leave of their children. Such questions are not tackled in this study.

However, the experience of the interviewees provides insights of how these changes have actually taken place under similar circumstance. And more importantly, understanding of such experiences and insights would let us know how other elders with similar conditions could be assisted to change in a positive way and have better quality of life, meanwhile, how our society as a whole could be beneficial from the new technology as well. Actually, this is a totally new area in this field of both academic and social services, so any additional information of this new topic surely can help us to

move to a new era. Besides, this study can demonstrate the importance of the Internet not only for the younger generation but also for the elderly to some extent in some cases. The information obtained in this study can give some valuable insights for the further studies in this area.

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