



Social media and changing family relationships: a sociological study

Dr. Sabista Anjum

Assistant Professor, K. A. (PG) College, Kasganj, Uttar Pradesh, India

Corresponding author: Dr. Sabista Anjum

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Abstract

This research paper presents the sociological implication of social media on modern relationships in the family as per late modern society. The last 20 years have seen an increase in the use of digital platforms like Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Twitter that have changed communication trends, power dynamics, emotional intimacy, and generational relationships in the family. This study uses both constructive and disruptive aspects of digital interaction based on both classical and modern sociological theories such as functionalism, symbolic interactions, and network society theory. The paper opines that social media itself is not necessarily devastating to the life of the family; on the contrary, it is a changing agent that reinvents norms, boundaries, and expectations in the relationships within a home. The theoretical knowledge and practical research allow the synthesis of theoretical knowledge and empirical data into creating the overall picture of how family as a social institution will adjust to technological change in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Social media digital connectivity, Public-Private boundary, Digital literacy, Generational gap, Alone together, Digital networks

1. Introduction

The family has long been regarded as the fundamental unit of society. Historically, sociologists have understood the family as one of the main institutions where the process of socialization, emotional support, reproduction, and imparting cultural values takes place. Nevertheless, the fast evolution of technology in particular emergence of the social media has largely transformed the daily life. Digital communication technologies have penetrated intimate spaces, altering how individuals interact, express affection, negotiate authority, and manage conflict within households. In earlier eras, family communication was largely confined to physical proximity, Conversations occurred around shared meals, community gatherings, and face-to-face interactions. The emergence of smart phones and social networking platforms has extended communication beyond spatial limitations. Nowadays, even when separated, family members can be digitally connected during the day. Although the availability of this constant connectivity brings new prospects of sustaining relationships, it also brings with it new challenges which include less face-to-face interaction, surveillance on the Internet, privacy concerns, and emotional misunderstanding. This paper will discuss the multidimensional effect of the social media on family relationships. It examines the shifts in patterns of communication, generational hierarchies, parenting, intimacy and social implications in general. The paper lends a sociological approach to eclipse moral panic in favor of putting family change into broader structural dynamics of modernization and globalization.

2. Theoretical framework

The development of relations in the family in terms of their change needs theoretical underpinning. The functionalist perspective on the family considers the family as fulfilling key roles in society, which are primary socialization and emotional stabilization. In this respect, social media alters the processes by which these functions are fulfilled. Children are no longer being introduced to the outside world only through the family setting; they also get to learn about other cultures and the world through the internet. Symbolic interactionism focuses on the importance of communication and mutual meaning in the process of creating social reality. Social media introduces new symbolic forms such as emojis, memes, and digital gestures that reshape emotional expression. Affection, disagreement, and humor are increasingly mediated through screens. The interpretation of these symbols can vary, sometimes strengthening bonds and at other times producing misunderstandings. The theory of the network society by Manuel Castells implies that modern society forms itself around digital networks: Families currently work within an interconnected system of communication where the distinction between the public and the personal life becomes unclear. Online posts, photographs, status updates make domestic life partially visible. The shift radically questions the conservative concept of privacy and authority in family set-ups.

3. Literature review

There has been a sharp change in sociological literature concerning social media and family dynamics in the past ten years. Early research often focused on displacement" while

modern studies explore "Hyper-Connectivity and the blurring of boundaries between public and private life. Here is a review of the care sociological themes and findings regarding how digital platforms are reshaping the family unit.

3.1. The concept of the "Networked family"

Sociologists like Rainee L., & Wallman, B. (2012) ^[9] argue that the traditional, nuclear group has been replaced by 'network-individualism' Families no longer function as a single unit but as a collection of individuals who maintain their own separate digital networks while remaining together at the home.

- **Continuous presence:** Papacharissi, Z. (2010) ^[7] Social media allows for "ambient awareness"- family members know what others are doing (via stories or status updates) without direct communication. Studies show the line between 'public' and 'private' life is blurred, because we share so much digital platforms.
- **The Digital Hearth:** While the physical dinner table was once the center of family life, the group chat (Whatsapp, Message) has become the new digital hearth where daily coordination and emotional Bonding occur.

3.2 Impact on parent-child dynamics

Research in this area often highlights a tension between increased surveillance and the quest for autonomy.

- **Surveillance:** Parents use social media to monitor their Children's lives, leading to a "digital leash" effect that can prolong dependency.
- **Privacy concerns:** The Phenomenon of "Sharenting" (Parents posting photos or information about their children) has created new sociological debates about a child's right to a digital identity before they are old enough to consent.

3.3. The "Digital Divide" and the transformation of intimacy

Putnam, R.D (2000) ^[8] Studies a classical sociological text that argues community bonds are weakening. It refers to inequalities in access to digital technologies such as the internet, smartphones and computers. The concept of the digital divide became prominent around the late 1990s and early 2000s. Simultaneously, process of globalization and modernization have transformed intimacy. Giddens, A. (1992) ^[5] introduces the concept of "pure-relation" when individual stay in a relationship for emotional satisfaction. A relationship that is maintained only for own sake and based on personal choice. Sociological studies often point to a reversal of socializations where children act as "digital natives" teaching their parents (the "digital immigrants"). This can temporarily shift the power balance within the family hierarchy.

3.4. Maintenance of extended kinship

On a positive note, sociological research emphasizes that social media is a powerful tool for maintaining "latent ties" and kinship networks, especially in migrant or transitional families.

- **Kin- Keeping:** Traditionally women have been the "Kin Keepers" (sending cards, organizing Calls). Literature suggest social media has digitized this role, mapping it easier to maintain relationship with extended family (grandparents cousins) across distances.
- **Intergenerational Bonding:** Platforms like Facebook or video calling help bridge the gap between elderly family members and younger generations, reducing social isolation cord, for the elderly.

The Consequences in recent literature is that social media is neither purely destructive nor purely integrative. Instead, it acts as an amplifier" of existing family dynamics. Healthy families use it to argument Connection, while fragmented families may find it exacerbates existing distances. We can say that social media is a Double-Edged Sword. It offers the integration for families Separated by distance and Fragmentation for families living under the same roof.

4. Changing patterns of communication

The impact of social media is one of the most obvious and it starts to change the pattern of communication. Messaging applications also make real-time communication possible between relatives living in different geographical areas. Video calls and online group discussions are especially useful to transnational families who can be emotionally connected even after the migration and mobility. Nevertheless, continuous online communication can limit person-to-person communication. Research indicates that excessive Smartphone use during family gatherings diminishes the quality of conversation. The phenomenon of 'alone together' Turkle, S. (2011) ^[10] captures the paradox of physical proximity combined with digital distraction. Family dinners that were once the main bonding time are often ruined by notifications and scrolling. Furthermore, online communication is usually based on conciseness. Long conversations are substituted with short messages and emojis, which restrict the emotional richness. As communication is done more often, richness of dialogue could reduce. Thus, social media changes not only the frequency of communication within the family, but also the way this communication is emotionally connected.

5. Generational differences and authority

Wellma, B. (2001) ^[11] studies that internet does not replace physical communities but extends them. The effect of social media on family life is greatly determined by generational dynamics. The younger generations, also known as digital natives, are more technologically fluent. On the contrary, older members might have adaptation difficulties. This digital divide is capable of reversing the hierarchical regimes of the past because children might possess more technical expertise. There is always a dispute over screen time, privacy on the internet and what is acceptable. Parents are trying to control digital behavior and adolescents are aiming to have freedom. However, social media has the power to overcome generational divide. The example of grandparents who communicate with grandchildren with the help of the video calls shows how

technology helps to strengthen the bond between generations. Therefore, there is a conflict between generations alongside the possibility of new bonding.

6. Parenting in the digital age

Livingstone, S. (2009) ^[6] looks at the 'digital divide' within homes. Parenting practices have evolved considerably in response to digital culture. Digital monitoring is a common practice among most parents in order to make sure that the children are safe. Although this surveillance could safeguard against Internet dangers, it casts ethical doubts in terms of trust and independence. Sharenting-sharing lives of the children online- forms irreversible digital footprints that can potentially impact the privacy in the future. Digital parenting involves negotiating risks and opportunities. Parents must balance protective supervision with encouragement of responsible digital citizenship. Sociologically, this reflects shifting boundaries between private and public spheres, as intimate family moments become publicly visible.

7. Emotional intimacy and conflict

Social media is redefining the Emotional Intimacy. Social media has shifted intimacy from "quality time" to "constant Connectivity." Now intimacy is no longer restricted to the dinner table. Families use "micro interactions" (Sharing memes, liking photos, or sending quick emojis) to maintain an emotional pulse throughout the day). This creates a sense of "Connected presence" where the emotional gap created by work or school's bridged. Intimacy is increasingly performed for an audience. When family members post about their 'perfect' relationships, the emotional becomes tied to external validation (likes/Comments). Sociologists argue this can lead to "pejorative intimacy", where the image of the relationship becomes more important than the experience of it. Conversely, some family members (especially teens) find it easier to express deep emotions or "come out about personal issues via text on social media posts rather than face-to-face using the screen as an emotional buffer. Conflict often arises from surveillance Clark L.S (2013) ^[4] talks about digital parenting, parents using social media to track their children's locations or social circles can lead to a 'Smothering" effect. This triggers a struggle for autonomy, where children feel their private emotional space is being invaded, leading to 'digital rebellion' (blocking parents or creating "Finstas"- Fake Instagram account).

The social media has complex effects on emotional intimacy. Lovers communicate on messaging apps and this helps them stay in touch all day long thus increasing emotional intimacy. Nonetheless, it can lead to jealousy and lack of understanding because of the unclear online communication. Infidelity through the Internet, covert discussions, and indirect communications may add to the tension in relationships Family is moving online. The use of arguments in the public or non-inclusion in group chats can intensify conflicts. On the other hand, support networks are able to offer emotional support in times of crisis, enhancing resilience in the family.

8. Broader social implications

In the past, a sociologist such as Jurgen Habermas used to identify the family as a private sphere- a haven that was not subject to the influence of the state and the market. Social media has made this boundary porous. When family life is broadcasted for "likes" on monitored by algorithms, the family ceases to be a private refuge. This leads to the Commodification of domestic life. where family moments are curated as "Content" rather than lived as private experiences. Social media has amplified the sociological phenomenon of intensive Mothering/Parenting. By constantly seeing the "highlight reels" of other family's parents (especially mothers) feels heightened pressure to perform perfection. This leads to increased parental anxiety and a competitive domestic environment. Broadly, this changes how society views "successful" Child-rearing-moving it from a natural process to a high-stakes visible performance. Social media connects also highlights social capital difference between families- Wealthier families often have the "digital literacy" to limit screen time and protect their privacy, whereas lower income families may rely more digital devices for entertainment and childcare. This creates a new form of stratification whereas "offline time" becomes a luxury good, and digital connectivity becomes a baseline for the working class. Social media also shows fragmentation of intergenerational solidarity. Sociologists study shows that if children spend more time interacting with "peers and influencer" online Then with their elders, the traditional 'vertical' transmission of family values is replaced by 'horizontal' transmission from the internet. This can lead to weakening of traditional culture heritage and a shift toward a more globalized, homogenized identity that is detached from family roots and called networks society.

The transformation of family relationships through social media reflects broader processes of modernization, globalization, and individualization. The digital platforms facilitate the personal identity development that goes outside the control of the family. Online personas developed by individuals may be different in the offline position. Simultaneously, the social media creates new identities of collective belonging in virtual communities. The boundaries between work, leisure and home have to be renegotiated by families on an ongoing basis. Remote work technologies eliminate spatial boundaries and enhance professional affairs by incorporating them into households. Family change, therefore, must be viewed in broader structural changes that define the modern society.

9. Findings

Sociological data often categorizes effect in to communication patterns, power structure and emotional cohesion research identifies a phenomenon Called Phubbing (Phone snubbing), where family members ignore those physically present in favour of their devices. This leads to decline in "spontaneous conversation" during shared rituals like family dinners. Studies show families may be physically together in a room but emotionally disconnected, each occupied by their own "digital

bubble". There is a notable "digital literacy gap". Parents may view social media as a threat to authority or privacy, while youth view it as a primary site for identity formation and peer socialization.

10. Suggestions

- The study recommends to investigate the shift in "Primary socialization from parents to AI-driven social media feeds. Research should ask if algorithms are now more influential than family dinner table conversations in shaping a child's moral and cultural identity.
- Conduct longitudinal studies Gen Z (the first generation whose entire lives were documented online). Focus on how their children, now entering adulthood, negotiate privacy, legal autonomy, and potential resentment towards parents who shared their childhood without consent.
- Explore the invisible work of managing a family's digital life - such as coordinating school group chats, managing privacy setting. A key focus should be whether this create new gendered inequalities in the home.
- Move beyond viewing social media as a tool and instead view it as a technological member" of the family Study, how the presence of "always-on" devices alters traditional power hierarchies and the authoritative role of parents.
- Evaluate the fact that social media is simply altering the way families communicate or whether it is completely altering the concept of a family especially with the advent of virtual co-presence where people live together across the borders on their computers.

11. Conclusion

This research paper indicates a fact that social media has a substantial redefining effect on family relations without necessarily breaking the institution. Electronic technologies re-order the patterns of communication, power relations, the rules of privacy, and affective ties. The sociological difficulty is to analyze these changes without being subjected to technological determinism. Further studies on cross-cultural differences, long-term psychological impacts, and policy interventions to be applied to support digital literacy should be conducted in the future. Ultimately, social media acts as a transformative social force that both challenges and revitalizes family life in the twenty-first century.

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