



Research article

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New Digital Order and its Implications on Indian Family Relationships

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ABSTRACT

The extensive adoption of mobile devices in India has revolutionized family communication patterns, presenting new dynamics and challenges. This study investigates the role of mobile communication in various aspects of family relationships, including parent-child interactions, marital relationships, and intergenerational dynamics. The aim is to see the evolving landscape of family relations in the digital era on family communication patterns, psychological well-being, and social connectedness. Mobile devices facilitate frequent and convenient communication, allowing family members to stay connected despite physical distances. It has also been observed to increase monitoring and supervision by parents, which may positively influence parent-child relationships. However, excessive mobile usage and dependency may lead to neglect of face-to-face interactions, resulting in reduced family interactions and communication. It is essential to explore the potential consequences of excessive mobile usage and identify strategies to promote healthy mobile communication practices within Indian families. The researcher conducted ten semi-structured interviews in a suburban housing society in Mumbai suburbs with similar socioeconomic strata. The aim was to know more about how mobile phones affect family communications. Qualitative grounded theory analysis was used to find themes and interpret results. (Creswell, 2013) The study explores the role of mobile communication in family relationships, emphasizing the need for effective management of mobile device usage within households. Setting time limits, boosting digital literacy, and encouraging family activities offline are among tactics that could help lessen the detrimental effects of mobile communication on family dynamics. Furthermore, understanding the cultural context of Indian families is crucial, as it can influence the adoption and interpretation of mobile technology within familial relationships. The research concludes that the role of mobile communication and usage in Indian family relations is a complex and multifaceted process. While mobile devices offer convenience and connectivity, their impact on family dynamics must be considered. This research abstract highlights the need for further investigation into the effects of mobile communication on different aspects of family relationships in the Indian context.

INTRODUCTION

The Latin word "communis," which means "common," is the source of the English term "communication," which denotes a shared understanding. Communication is passing ideas, views, facts, information, and understanding from one person to another.

In the words of John Adair, Communication is the ability of one person to make contact with another and make himself or herself understood.

In human history, communication has played an extensive role in interaction and expression. Tracing it back to before the 15th century, from cave paintings, pictograms, and ideograms to verbal communications, the disruption came with the invention of the printing press. By the 17th and 18th centuries, newspapers and postal services changed the face of communication. The tangible steps came in the 19th century, with electricity incorporated into the communication channels. This combination of electricity and communications led to a chain of innovations in this field.

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Moreover, today, in 21st-century communication- the information age -the dominator is the mobile phone. People no longer need to be in the exact location for face-to-face communication. Commonly heard is that there is an app for everything, and if not found for the need, it is probably in the process of being created.

The introduction of the digital age has resulted in a significant restructuring of conventional communication paradigms, with far-reaching implications for Indian family structures. In the current digital era context, this study explores the complex interplay between mobile communication and Indian family ties. It aims to investigate the many facets of this phenomenon, from the usage pattern of family members to dynamics of communication patterns to the difficulties presented by digital connectivity, and lastly, the enormous challenges and implications for intergenerational and familial ties.

According to TRAI (Telephone *et al.* of India), the number of active wireless subscribers in May 2023 was 1043.41 million. This number indicates the density and popularity with which Indians have adopted mobile connections. No other product or service has scaled into consumer adoption at this level in such a swift manner. Many families have opted for different ways of communication through social media and other technological resources over a period of time (Blinn-Pilke, 2009). Various researchers have argued that mobile technology has been a defining moment in the media and communication landscape. It is permanently altering the landscape across geographies, different markets, and developing countries. (Castells, 2007). It is fascinating that the mobile has largely ignored demographics or class. It has impacted families from all socioeconomic classes and has served as a potent symbol of democratization.

The spread of mobile communication has become an integral part of contemporary life in the ever-evolving technology world, changing how people engage, connect, and navigate their relationships. As per data by statista.com, in 2023, the smartphone penetration rate in India reached 71%. A new era of communication has begun, dramatically altering the nature of family connections thanks to the pervasive use of mobile devices and the growth of digital platforms and applications.

The research aims to show the changing family connections due to the gradual integration of mobile devices into daily life. This transformation is redefining the very nature of familial ties and communication customs. This study seeks to clarify the intricacies of this transformation and the broader consequences of familial bonds in modern India.

METHODOLOGY

This study is centered on the mobile usage pattern in the urban family where at least one young family member is away from home. The challenges faced due to excessive

usage, the effect on quality family time, and the growing 'texting' culture and 'privacy' among the young in the family. There is also a cultural and intergenerational perspective, with all family members owning their mobile devices, irrespective of age. The result of the mobile time on changing roles and obligations and efforts to maintain meaningful connections in the middle of digital noise, and what it can mean for the family's cohesiveness. These objectives examine the changing family relations in the mobile communication era. The researcher conducted ten semi-structured interviews at a suburban housing society in the Mumbai suburbs with residents from upper socioeconomic strata. The average family size was five members, with one child studying abroad or in a private institution in another city in India, indicative of the upper socioeconomic strata of the society. The interviewees were women in their 40s. They were chosen purposively as the experiences and viewpoints of this group are diverse. While some parents enjoy a positive relationship with their children, others find it challenging to keep in touch when they live apart. Examining how women in their 40s adapt to and use these tools to stay connected with their children sheds light on generational differences in communication preferences. Significant societal developments, such as changes in gender roles, cultural standards, and technological advancements, have been experienced by Indian women of this generation. Understanding how these changes affect intergenerational dynamics can be learned by investigating their family communication.

The roles and expectations for women have changed over time in Indian society. Understanding family communication in this group can help researchers understand better how women manage these changes within the setting of their families.

The methodology adopted for the current study to collect data has been semi-structured interviews covering ten families of upper socioeconomic class from a suburban area of Mumbai city. Women in their 40s and children were chosen to answer the questions on behalf of the family as they were aware of the intergeneration scenario at home (children and parents-in-law). Most interviewed women have at least one child, staying away from family to pursue higher studies abroad or in another city in India.

Exploring these variations can help us understand family communication dynamics in more detail. The objective was to learn more about how family communications are impacted by mobile phones. A qualitative grounded theory framework was used to interpret the data.

Sampling

Participants

The researcher used 'purposive sampling,' a non-probability sampling technique where individuals with similar backgrounds, personally known to the researcher,

who were readily available and accessible, were chosen for the study. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interviews were conducted in quiet and neutral spaces or via video call as and when convenient for the participants.

The details of the ten participants are mentioned in the annexure at the end. All of them belong to the urban upper socioeconomic group with a minimum of bachelor's degree for educational qualification, and eight are working either as academicians or professionals. This study was limited by its homogeneity as the participants shared common characteristics such as age group, location, and socioeconomic group; it allowed an analysis of specific factors and variables within a relatively uniform group.

Data Collection

According to Corbin and Strauss (2015), semi-structured interviews address the same questions throughout the process. However, additional questions and remarks can be added based on the direction and flow of the interview. The interview was initiated by introducing the topic and its relevance, followed by a discussion of the actual discussions. Participants were each asked a few core questions, which led to sub-questions.

Questions ranged from how many hours they used mobile technology in their daily lives and how they viewed the use of the other family members. In-person and virtual interviews of an average duration of 15 minutes were conducted in August 2023. So as not to rely solely on the interviewer's memory, the author made exhaustive notes and used a recording device to record the same. The author then transcribed the interviews.

Data analysis

The author used grounded theory to analyze the data, noting repetition and forcefulness to aid in interpreting the data. During the transcription process, the author became familiar with the data and employed microanalysis as a technique for analysis to identify categories. (Corbin, 2015). The interviews were coded separately, and then each was analyzed to ensure consistency. From the ten interviews, there was an overlaying theme of duality of familial connection and estrangement. Extended family connection and immediate family disconnect is the mobile device dilemma.

Changing Family Communications

Numerous academic studies have examined how mobile communication has changed how people interact and how social structures are organized. Technology's influence grows more robust as it develops, changing societal dynamics and communication patterns. Incorporating mobile communication into daily life has created a complicated interplay between tradition and modernity in the Indian context, where family relationships have a substantial cultural value that goes far beyond simple technology acceptance.

Communication plays a significant role in any family functioning, mental health, and well-being of each family member (Oltean, 2020). Over the years, research has shown that technology is now very well integrated into maintaining social networks (Hertlein, 2012; Ortiz *et al.*, 2011). Family communication patterns (FCP) have been used in a variety of studies in the communication research area to predict information processing behavioral and psychological outcomes (see Schrodtt *et al.*, 2008 for a meta-analytical review). (Mishra, 2017). Studies have demonstrated that families as a unit are becoming smaller, with most families living in a nuclear family setup (Cowan, 2019). The study has a joint family setup.

Due to the mobile device's essential role in redefining young interactions, this presents itself in 'youth' even more intriguingly. Fascinatingly, technology assists culture in bringing people together, resulting in long-lasting social transformation. A mobile phone and an entirely new type of social contact have emerged for more than half of Indians, who previously had no access to one. The impact of the smartphone in bringing about this transition is covered in this research.

The family communication patterns (FCP) have been used in a variety of studies in the communication research areas to predict information processing, and behavioral and psychological outcomes (refer Schrodtt, Witt, & Messersmith, 2008 for a meta-analytical review).

COVID-19 has interrupted normal activities and surfaced as the most significant health and economic challenge after the 2nd World War (Organization, 2020). Stay-at-home and work-from-home strategies are recommended worldwide as the most useful to prevent infection at both individual and community levels. (Zubair Ahmed Ratan, 2021). This self-isolation encouraged people to turn to their smartphones to stay connected increasingly. Among the participants' families, each member of the family had their device. The largest family size - is six members and the smallest of three members. Family members' ownership of individual mobile devices has thus led to a disengagement from family life. (Sharon L. Storch, 2018). There is an attention fragmentation and reduced quality of face-to-face interactions, potentially contributing to feelings of neglect and detachment within the family unit. Moreover, the constant influx of digital information contributes to information overload, reducing family time and engagement.

Mobile phones, particularly smartphones, have revolutionized communication by providing integrated services that enable people to connect with others worldwide through social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and many more. As a result, mobile phones have emerged as one of the most widely used technologies for information exchange and interpersonal connectivity on a global scale (Lopez-Fernandez, 2017). Beyond age, culture, and technological

confidence, relevant reasons why people choose mobile devices are task capabilities, communication ease when traveling (mobility), and safety. (Sarker.S, 2003).

Challenges in planning and discussing family calendars, activities, and commitments can prove more straightforward with mobile devices. Coordinating activities, primarily children's schedules, is a positive use of mobile devices within the family dynamics. (Devitt, 2009; Khan, 2009; and Stafford, 2012. Additionally, follow-up communication, reminders, schedule changes, and time constraints can all be rapidly communicated to one or many people within seconds. (Khan, 2009; Stafford, 2009 and Linke, 2012).

In an article by the Uniformed Services University, 'Are cellphones ruining family time' smartphones have given an unmatched level of connectedness and convenience thanks to their capacity to keep families continually linked to the internet. How the mobile device is used around the family can affect the relationships. It goes on to state that mobile phones can make one feel more connected, but they also can distract the family from connecting in person.

New and growing forms of communication, notably those made possible by ICT in India, have changed the media landscape. The use of mobile phones among parents, particularly smartphones, has risen sharply as they seek connectedness with friends, children, partners, and work. Social networks are expanded by mobile phone technology since it reduce distances and enables closer contact between individuals. The mobile phone has decentralized our communication networks (Srivastava, 2005). Communication is possible from every point with every person with a mobile communication device. This provides the opportunity to be continuously connected. (Geser, 2006). The challenge is the continuous connection today. Smartphones are ubiquitous, and they can be used as mobile communication devices, Internet portals, social network platforms, personal organizers, and even mobile banks. Thus, smartphones have become part of the mainstream lifestyle in modern society. (Lian, 2021)

The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically transformed people's lives worldwide. Some have suggested that mobile devices have become even more essential during the COVID-19 pandemic to foster and strengthen social connections and overall well-being. (David M.E., 2021). A global survey estimated that total internet traffic increased by about 60 percent following the onset of COVID-19 (Development, 2020), with access to video call applications, news sites, gaming, and home-based work contributing to this increase.

A Paradox Connected yet Disconnected

While mobile communication offers unprecedented convenience and connectivity, it also brings forth many challenges within the family. Brandon T. McDaniel, a doctoral candidate in human development and family studies at Penn State, coined the term "technoference"

to describe the everyday intrusions and interruptions in couple interactions due to the technology devices and their always-on and ever-present nature. This "technoference" is being observed among parent-child and inter-generation families. (McDaniel, 2018)

According to studies by the Centre for the Digital Future at the University of Southern California, the percentage of people who spent less time with their families since the internet came home increased from 11% to 28% from 2006 to 2008. (Karin Romero-Ruiza, 2016) Consequently, the average number of hours spent declined to share with family about 26 to 18 hours per month. Mauritzson & Nordmark (Mauritzson-Sandberg, 2004) support this fact by stating that the decrease in family time coincided with the growth of social networks; while social circles and friends do not shrink, trends are replicated in most populations. In addition, increased use of the internet has been associated with increased symptoms of depression and solitude. One explanation might be that family communication facilitates the development of emotional connections within families and enables family members to express and share attitudes, values, and beliefs and to be flexible in changing the family's leadership, roles, and rules (Epstein, 1978) To disconnect with family members in face-to-face interactions might interfere with verbal conversations and prevent non-verbal behaviors, such as body language and eye contacts, which results in a family communication of less quality (Tehseen Nazir, 2016).

P003 stated that 'even parents' excessive need to connect socially could give the children a feeling of not being 'priority' for the parents. Parents with active social life tend to spend less time with children.' Mobile has evolved into a means of exploring previously unexplored spheres of virtual (yet accurate) socialization, becoming a crucial aspect of our lives and, to some extent, influencing how we organize our daily lives. Today, most children have a passcode for access to their phones. Mainly in the interviewed group, there was a policy of 'no passcodes' at home, but this was not a controllable factor. Anger and resentment among children was also reported when asked about passcode and to reduce phone usage. P005 felt that, unlike earlier times when friends' families were known, times are 'scary' as the peer circle is not known well enough. With the interviews, one emerging theme is individuality and privacy among the young. For P002, children sharing passcodes were not entertained by the children; they emphasized their privacy and individual space. A few other participants also resonated with this.

Beyond face-to-face mealtime interactions is the concern for absent family members who can use technology as a conduit for family communication, offering opportunities to

be present together (Licoppe, 2004). For most participants, one child being away from home, mobile video calls, like Facetime and WhatsApp, gave them ways to manage the distance and feel closer to their family.

Beyond virtual intimacy, technology creates opportunities to secure emotional support and offer caregiving to maintain intergenerational family cohesiveness. (Gonzalez, 2016). Distance was a substantial barrier to communication at one time, and now mobile devices serve to break down that barrier. (Wilding, 2006). P002 echoed the same thought: sending the child to another country was more manageable as she was accessible on mobile, and they could see her during the video calls. Sometimes, they logged in as a family for meals - breakfast for the child abroad and dinner for the family back home.

With most parents as working professionals and children in secondary or high school and involved in online classes, it is difficult to follow a dedicated ritual of a family meal time, though the participants make an effort. There is also a generational difference in view on using the mobile at dinner table. As mothers, having meals without phones is often imposed, but children disagree with the imposition. As technology continually evolves, the evolution and development of new media bring about new influences on family communication. (Carvalho *et al.*, 2014; Devitt & Roker, 2009; Linke, 2012; Livingstone & Das, 2010; Villegas, 2013). (Sharon L. Storch, 2018). The results of this media-driven communication can be positive or negative; however, research indicates that when using it properly, connectedness is maintained. (Padilla-Walker, 2012).

RESULTS

Participants considered their personal family and their extended family when defining family. The information demonstrated an engaged and disengaged dilemma. Participants frequently mentioned how using mobile devices brought them together. Despite the physical distance, they helped create ties with extended family, especially during festivals, occasions, or functions. Interestingly, each individual has a mobile yet feels that the engagement with immediate family is 'not what it used to be.' The paradox of being connected with extended family while being disconnected from immediate family was demonstrated.

Intergeneration Dynamics of Mobile

In urban India, the rapid growth of digital platforms and mobile devices has caused a significant change in how families communicate. According to the research, mobile phones are a crucial tool for families to stay in touch, especially with children staying away from home. According to a few participants, the drawback is that young people today tend to be less socially interactive. Participants mentioned that young children seem 'odd and fidgety' when meeting face to face. The mobile device in their hands gives them a sense of productivity, or else they seem to need help knowing what to talk or what to do. It has also made them information-dependent and taken away the pleasure of reading and associating with curiosity and

imagination. It has also led to a loss in emotional quotient, and though they may be using more emojis and pictures to communicate, the use of words and expressions is less than before.

Media has given an overexposure in every field. The mobile device was handed over as a COVID-19 necessity for education but is now out of control. Consuming the content also creates a false sense of security and takes away the sense of productive time.

Moreover, the ownership of a mobile is an essential step in a child's process of becoming independent from its parents and teachers: it is a medium for the assertion of its own identity and autonomy. Young users are, not surprisingly, more likely to personalize their mobile phones through ringing tones, wallpaper and covers than their adult counterparts. An important recent trend recently observed among young people is a distinct preference for SMS over voice calls. (Srivastava, 2005)

Mobile devices have proved to bridge the gap between generations. Children communicate with their grandparents and parents regularly as they stay away from Mumbai for education. P001 mentioned that speaking to her son (studying in Goa) every day after dinner is routine, which may have been different if he was studying in Mumbai. Her son also speaks to his grandparents every week. This was also recurring in the interviews with participants P005, P007, and P009.

Technology has been a boon for increasing social networks between people all over the world; it has brought the world together and helped people in social connectivity, bridging gaps and increasing a sense of cohesiveness among people (Wang MP, 2015)

For the participants, the number of hours spent on the phone each day was an average of five hours. These were all the purposes mentioned, like voice/video calls, text messages, social media/browsing the internet, online payments, and reading on mobile devices. This led to the next question of monitoring mobile phone usage, which was affirmative, at least for children. Parents, though, only have a little control other than time and again being reminded to keep a check on the usage, as owning their device takes away the power of the parent. It was interesting to note the efforts being made by families to spend non-mobile time together by either playing board games on weekends or catching up on a movie.

Based on information gathered from participants in a series of qualitative interviews, mobile devices have opened up new possibilities for fostering a great degree of connectedness. In Indian society, where individualized public expressions are restricted, this represents a paradigm change. These are now so widely known that a person's cell phone is viewed as an extension of themselves. Several participants discussed mobile devices' role in connecting with their children who are away to other cities/countries for higher studies. P003 and P0010 observed the

benefit of communicating with children and the comfort it provided to know that the child was only a phone call or a text away in the hostel, and they could know their child's safety and whereabouts. Based on the responses, it was clear that peace of mind was a primary benefit.

Moreover, the middle-aged generation is responsible for holding up the communication between them and the children and between them and the parents and parents-in-law. Communication opportunities have increased with mobile, yet it has reduced quality personal time among spouses, between parent and child, and between grandparents and grandchildren at home. There is an observed duality of familial connection and estrangement.

There is a feeling of disengagement among couples. Even while next to each other as each is with his/her device, as mentioned by P004 and P008. There needs to be more word communication regarding pushing the buttons and sending a text. With children, the struggle is to spend time as they are busy with academics, sports, and extracurricular activities. Although the quantity of communication has increased to find the whereabouts, the timings of classes, and through the anywhere and anytime functionality of the mobile, the qualitative aspect of communication has yet to improve correspondingly.

A partner's use of a mobile device to multitask distracted them from one another, according to P0010. When she and her husband go out to eat, they use their phones while waiting for their food to check their social media statuses rather than interacting with one another. Online shopping is another activity causing much grief to most participants as it is time-consuming and there is no communication.

Interaction with those present can be interrupted at any moment by interaction with a remote other—leading to a scenario of being 'always-on, always there' but 'never here.' It can, and has been, said that mobile phones tend to weaken communities (e.g., families or predetermined static groups) while at the same time strengthening networks, i.e., decentralized and constantly evolving social groupings constructed by each individual. (Geser 2002, Wellman 1999), (Srivastava, 2005). The mobile gadget, widely acknowledged as a superb facilitator of human connection, now demonstrates that it is also a superb impediment.

One significant effect of the mobile on the elders (65+) has been that they are less lonely as 'YouTube' has become a companion of sorts in many ways. From listening to 'bhajans' (Indian religious songs) and old movie songs to seeing recipes and understanding the relevance of important religious days, rituals, and traditions, 'doom scrolling' has replaced their reading time and 'killing time.' The mobile has connected them more to the outside world than people at home. They are connected and available positively, yet there is a lack of discipline in using the mobile. It also keeps the seniors away from depression to

a large extent as they can talk to extended family even if they are unable to meet them for functions, condolences, or festivals. Sharing messages and pictures and staying in touch through family WhatsApp groups also keep them preoccupied throughout the day.

The phone is seen as an individual's extension. Few participants mentioned that older mobile users tend to listen to music and bhajans and watch YouTube at high volumes and in-home living spaces rather than in their rooms. They also speak more loudly at that, resulting in the annoyance of other family members. Research has also shown that mobile phone conversations are more noticeable and annoying than face-to-face conversations at the same volume (Monk, 2004) (From Srivastava paper)

The influence of mobile phones on religious and cultural practices is also notable. With the mobile being such an integral part of everyday life today, it has even become a medium for collective prayer.

CONCLUSION

Most participants had a common refrain of how mobile technological development was the way forward. However, it disrupted the old communication order (face-to-face) at home amongst all age groups. It is also evident that technological development cannot exist in a vacuum, and no technological advances are possible without effect upon society. The development of mobile and its large-scale adoption by Indian homes has led to many new habit formations that affect family communications systems. Covid has played an essential role in making the mobile handset necessary in all hands and a part of daily lives.

Family communication and extended family connectedness are positive outcomes of the mobile device, yet there is a paradoxical estrangement with the immediate family living at home. The reason most participants did the same was taking family time for granted. As members are physically present, talking as they are, there may seem less essential. However, contacts on the phone or activities like browsing the internet and connecting through social media are essential to address at the exact moment, as they may need to be noticed. Scrolling through short videos, exchanging WhatsApp messages on family groups, attending family group calls, browsing the internet, and spending time on social media have taken precedence over face-to-face communication at home. Since mobile devices are all-pervasive, efforts are being made in the family to spend dedicated time 'off mobile,' whether during meals or while watching movies. For each of the three generations defined, all used their mobile device differently. While youngsters used social media more, middle-aged people texted more, and the older voices called more. The advantages of mobile devices for family interaction outnumbered their ill effects, yet it was with caution that eventually lost more time to the inhuman device than to the humans present at home.

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ANNEXURE

Table 1: Participants Information

| Participants | Age | Profession | Marital status | Number of children | Educational Level | Members away |
|--------------|-----|-------------------------|----------------|--------------------|-------------------|--|
| P001 | 48 | Academician | Married | Two | Masters | One child |
| P002 | 49 | Management Professional | Married | Two | Masters | Both with One child abroad |
| P003 | 43 | Homemaker | Married | Two | B.A. LLB | One child |
| P004 | 42 | IT professional | Married | Two | B.Tech | One child |
| P005 | 49 | Academician | Widowed | Two | M.Tech | Two children |
| P006 | 47 | Professional | Married | One | Masters | |
| P007 | 43 | Businesswoman | Married | Two | B.Tech | One child |
| P008 | 49 | Homemaker | Married | Two | Masters | Two with one away India and One abroad |
| P009 | 46 | Academician | Married | Two | Masters | One child |
| P0010 | 49 | Professional | Married | Two | Masters | Both abroad |