Socialization Aspects of Parents, Children, and the Internet

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates how parent-child relationships affect, and are affected by, parents' and children's Internet use. Findings suggest that parental warmth positively contributes to children teaching parents about the Internet and acting as parents' Internet brokers.

INTRODUCTION

Observers argue that the digital revolution will have major effects on our society, including possible changes in family relations and consumer behavior. This paper describes an exploratory, qualitative study that is part of the initial phase of longitudinal work on how parent-child relationships affect, and are affected by, parents' and children's Internet use. It contrasts with traditional parent-to-child research on consumer socialization (Carlson and Grossbart 1988), by examining aspects of reverse socialization.

Background

An increasing number of children have access to the Internet. Children are in most U.S. households with on-line subscriptions and in many of the nearly half of the estimated number of homes with Internet access. Their access to personal computers (PCs) and the Internet is due, in part, to parents' beliefs that PC use develops children's investigative skills, critical abilities, and academic potential (cf. Tapscott 1998). Observers also indicate that home PCs and Internet access may increase parents' and children's computer literacy and technological awareness and affect their activities, behaviors, and relationships (Pollack 1982; Venkatesh and Vitalari 1985; Moschis 1987).

Yet, children also have Internet experiences outside their homes. For instance, besides using PCs at home (36 percent), many teenagers use them at school (49 percent) and elsewhere (66 percent; Tapscott 1998). More generally, the so-called Net Generation (ages 2-22) has had life-long exposure to PCs and digital technology. Thus, many children are more comfortable with this technology and learn to use it at a faster rate than their parents. In some cases, children may surpass their parents in Internet knowledge and skill levels, due to their greater comfort levels with new technology, faster learning rates, and opportunities to learn about the Internet outside the home. These factors increase the likelihood that children may influence parents' understanding of the Internet and use the Internet on parents' behalves (Papert 1996; Tapscott 1998; Moschis 1987).

Despite much speculation, little evidence exists on children's influence on parents with regard to the Internet. From a consumer socialization perspective, it also is not clear how general aspects of parent-child relationships may affect variation in children's roles and influence on parents with respect to the Internet. Insights on these matters may expand knowledge about consumer use and consumer socialization related to the Internet.

Exploring these issues requires recognition of consumers' multi-faceted view of the Internet. As Maignan (1996) notes, they see it as: an information source for social learning; a communication tool that allows interaction; a social system for affiliating or avoiding interaction with others; and/or a place or object of consumption that is consumed or fosters consumption of other goods and services.

Thus, Internet use may involve technology, communication and language, and consumer socialization and research on children's influence on parents in these areas offers useful insights for this study.

CHILDREN'S INFLUENCE ON PARENTS

Reverse Socialization, Prefigurative Conditions, and Technology

In most depictions of parent-child socialization, the child learns from the parent and influence primarily flows from parent to child. However, these roles may be less differentiated and even be reversed if the parent is disposed to learn from the child (Peters 1985; Brim 1980). Such cases involve reverse socialization, which generally refers to the ways in which younger people influence and alter their elders' views and behaviors. It is most likely to occur when children possess new or recently accepted views, knowledge, skills, or behaviors that parents have not acquired. For example, parents are more open to adolescent's influence in areas in which adolescents are seen as having expertise, e.g., clothing styles and new cars (Baranowski 1978; Brim 1968; Ritzer, Kammeyer and Yetman 1979). This idea is consistent with the expectation that children may be agents of social change in terms of digital media (Tapscott 1998). In such cases, children may be sources for parents' exposure to new knowledge and norms (Peters 1985; Papert 1996).

Mead (1970) describes societal and cultural conditions that lead to reverse socialization. Prefigurative culture develops when people are faced with unfamiliar and significantly changed circumstances, as when a new era unfolds. In such situations, elders are limited in adaptability by knowledge and experiences that are tied to the past. The youth in a prefigurative culture primarily focus on the present and future and are less bound to the past than their elders. Consequently, young people and their elders have different perspectives, due to their differing frames of reference. Thus, children in a prefigurative culture may lead the way rather than follow in the footsteps of their elders.

In these circumstances, major changes and resocialization of adults may result from actions of the young (Bell and Harper 1977). Some changes may be due to young people's activism and challenges to adults' attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Vietnam war protests), but parental resocialization may also result from children's less rebellious activities. For example, Sussman and Steinmetz (1987) note that historical trends, events, and phenomena, which offer each generation unique experiences, can have a major impact on the structure and meaning of parent-child interactions and relationships.

New technologies that are often linked with cultural change are examples of such phenomena (Mead 1970). They are awash in the unknown and their negative and positive potentials create new ambiguities, complexities, fears and expectations that can trigger social change (Venkatesh and Vitalari 1985). The digital revolution and Internet are a case in point. Arguably, they may create a significant reversal in the parent-child knowledge hierarchy. For the first time in many families, children may have more expertise than parents about an innovation that is central to society—digital media.

Observers suggest that children are more comfortable, knowledgeable, and literate than their parents with regard to digital media (Sussman and Steinmetz 1987; Tapscott 1998). Thus, children may

bring the new technological culture into the traditional family landscape (Negroponte 1996). In such a prefigurative society, resocialization (or reverse socialization) is likely. Some observers argue that these conditions lead adults to rely on children for information about, and help with, the new technology (Peters 1985; Campbell 1975; Tapscott 1998). In terms of this study, an implication of these observations is that children may teach parents about the Internet. However, this influence may not occur in all families, because some parents may be pleased but others may feel alienated if children learn things that they do not know about the Internet (Papert 1996).

Language Brokering

Interestingly, in discussing prefigurative society and its social and technological changes, Mead (1970) refers to adults as immigrants in time and children as the first generation in a new country. Research on language brokering offers parallels to Mead's depiction of prefigurative conditions. Immigrant children often learn a new language and culture faster than their parents, due to experiences at school and with peers. Thus, they may socialize their parents by teaching them and by doing tasks for them in the new language. Some children who act as language brokers may become decision makers in the family, rather than just translators. They convey important cultural information, about school, government, and business procedures, in interactions with teachers, neighbors, friends, and others. They influence the content and nature of communication and affect parents' views and decisions. In these roles, they may act as socializing agents and influence parents' success in the new society (Tse 1995).

For this study, this evidence suggests that two indicators of a child's influence are teaching a parent about the Internet and acting as a parent's Internet broker (e.g., by shopping, evaluating, and choosing alternatives). Yet, research suggests that effects of language brokering are varied. Child language brokers differ in whether they see themselves as parents' teachers or socializers and recognize their influence in areas such as popular culture and language (McQuillan and Tse 1995; Tse 1995). Research also does not reveal which types of parents are affected by or resistant to children's language brokering (Ambert 1992). The variation in language brokers' views and gaps in knowledge about parents' reactions underscores the relevance of consumer socialization research.

Parental Receptivity to Influence and Consumer Socialization

Work on child socialization and consumer socialization indicates that parents' receptivity to children's influence depends on the general character of parent-child relationships. Children are more apt to influence warmer (democratic and equalitarian) parents than cooler (autocratic and ignoring) parents (Baranowski 1978). Compared to cooler parents, warmer parents typically offer children more opportunities to learn decision-making responsibilities, perhaps because they are more supportive of their children and share more affectionate bonds with them (Elder 1962). This evidence is consistent with findings that indicate that optimal socialization occurs in families in which affectivity and respect between parents and children are mutually high (Peters 1985).

Consumer socialization research also indirectly supports the thesis that warmer parents are more receptive to children's influence than cooler parents. For example, authoritative and permissive parents (who are warmer) communicate more with their children about consumption than authoritarian and neglecting parents (who are cooler). Their communication includes discussing consumption and coshopping with children and focusing on their autonomous development and opinions about consumption (cf., Carlson and Grossbart 1988). This evidence is consistent with expectations that, in terms

of the Internet, children of warmer parents should be more influential than children of cooler parents. Thus, compared to children of cooler parents, children of warmer parents are more apt to teach their parents about the Internet and act as parents' Internet brokers.

METHOD

Study Design and Data Collection

Qualitative methods were used, due to the lack of prior work in the area and the exploratory nature of the research. Data were collected from 18 informants via thirty to sixty minute in-depth, semi-standardized interviews. Informants were mothers of children seven to sixteen years old, middle class, married, and Caucasian (except for one single and one Asian informant). They were selected via convenience and snowballing procedures, using criteria that insured that their children were Internet users and varied in age (see Table 1).

The tape-recorded interviews were conducted in the informants' homes by three of the researchers. This technique resulted in thick description of the issues from the informants' perspectives. It enabled interviewers to ask questions about parental warmth and Internet usage, probe responses, explore motivations and explanations for behaviors of interest, and uncover new insights and issues (Berg 1998; Lofland and Lofland 1995).

Procedure

A three step analytic procedure was used. First, the interviewer reviewed each transcript, to identify the informant's parental warmth, the more accomplished Internet user (mother or child, as indicated by informants' designations and checked against their estimates of their own and their child's duration and amount of Internet experience), and evidence of the child teaching the parent about the Internet and acting as the parent's Internet broker. The interviewer also conducted a content analysis to examine motivations and explanations for the behaviors and provide new insights, which were explored in later interviews. Second, in a peer debriefing process, two other interviewers reviewed and reanalyzed each transcript. Third, the fourth researcher acted as an auditor, for added reliability. Consistency among the interviewers and auditor was high. The few disagreements were resolved via discussion and reanalysis, which led to mutual comfort, objectivity, and recognizability in interpretation (Berg 1998; Lofland and Lofland 1995).

FINDINGS

Parental Warmth

Comments by the eight of the 18 informants with warmer parental styles reflect warmth in relationships with children, as described by Carlson and Grossbart (1988; e.g., an accepting orientation, child centeredness, and use of explanation and reasoning).

[C]hildren need to be with their...parents....That interaction needs to occur for them to be successful in the world where you have to interact with people....We read every night at bedtime ....I really value lap time....[and] reading a book together....[Our communication is] two-way....My very big goal is to say things over and over to them, especially now when they are at the stage when we talk about every opportunity.... It's two ways. They come home and this happened or that happened or ask questions or you know....[W]e've stayed pretty open. (Didi)

We really work hard to keep the communication lines open and I think he...confides in us....I've made a point since my kids were very small kids to spend half an hour each night with each

TABLE 1
Informant Profiles

	Informant		Child			
Name	Warmth level	Relative ability[a]	Age	Sex	Teach	Broker
Didi	warmer	mother	10	male	yes	yes
Donna	warmer	mother	10	male	yes	yes
Susan	warmer	mother	7	male	no	yes
Ann	warmer	mother	10	female	no	yes
Kandi	warmer	child	15	female	yes	no
Kathi	warmer	child	15	female	yes	no
Rita	warmer	mother	11	female	yes	no
Chris	warmer	mother	15	male	yes	yes
Cheri	cooler	mother	10	female	yes	no
Lisa	cooler	mother	10	male	no	no
Laura	cooler	equal	12	male	yes	no
Sharon	cooler	mother	10	male	no	no
Deb	cooler	mother	16	female	no	no
Coleen	cooler	child	15	male	no	no
Danette	cooler	mother	8	female	no	no
Cheryl	cooler	area specific[b]	12	male	yes	no
Jane	cooler	child	12	male	yes	yes
Becky	cooler	area specific[b]	15	male	no	no

[a] Informants' designation of more accomplished Internet user
[b] Mother and child are more accomplished Internet users in different areas (e.g., web site navigation, downloading content, and games)

of them....either them reading to me or me reading to them and then that sort of is a time to talk....That's when they tell me stuff....And we always try to eat together and plan our schedule around our family and then the activities are second and not the other way around. (Donna)

Comments by the ten of the 18 informants with cooler parental styles differ from those of warmer parents. For example, cooler parents indicate that they may limit interaction with their child and/or communicate with their child in a manner that is: one-way (from parent-to-child) versus two-way, instrumental versus socioemotive (e.g., to efficiently schedule activities and monitor the child), and group-focused (e.g., in a family meeting) versus on a one-to-one basis with their child.

What irritates me is that he spends all of his time in his room on the computer, instead of help, interacting with me, or helping around the house, whatever.....I tried to make a half-hearted attempt to limit the amount of time he was spending on the Internet....but it caused so many fights and...he seemed to get into trouble when he wasn't. It's like a big pacifier. You know, when he's not on the Internet he's breaking something....he doesn't seem to want to interact with me much and he just seems to cause upsets, so I just, umm, kind of let him go his way. (Becky)

I'm pretty directive...I mean she does what she's been told to do, and then we trade off. I mean, if she's done her thing, what she needs to do, then she gets to do whatever she wants to do. Within reason....I think we've talked about it [using the Internet] and got to the point where I tell her, you know, don't do this and don't do that, and this is what you can do.... We've been trying...[she] is very resistant to everything... we try to talk things through now, and then at some point it comes over I'm

telling, you must do this, you have to get it done because we need this. (Danette)

[W]e have a family meeting every week where we talk about, you know, the coming week, how we're going to get through the week, how we're going to, um, how we are going to coordinate schedules and you know, and how, you know, how school work is going. (Laura)

Child as teacher

Based on the noted research, we expected warmer mothers to be more likely than cooler mothers to be taught about the Internet by their child and to ask their child to use the Internet on their behalf. As Table 1 and the following discussion suggest, the incidence of children teaching parents about the Internet and parents using their child as an Internet broker is more evident among warmer than cooler mothers.

Most of the warmer informants learned about the Internet or how to do things on the Internet from their child, compared with a minority of cooler informants.

My daughter taught me...she was emailing her friends and family and I just said, I would like to learn how to email, and so she sat me down and taught me on AOL...I just asked her and she taught me. (Rita)

The instant messaging thing where you can chat with a friend, you know. I came home one night from a meeting and he was talking to his cousin about thirty miles from here, chit-chatting, and I thought that was kind of cool, so he taught me how to do that, and now I do that with my friends too a little bit. (Chris)

They are always showing me new things. Just the other day, we had to get a new computer and new Internet, so they showed me again how to get into the email and access the Internet line since

now everything's different. And [she] showed me on the old one, too... it probably did cross my mind that this could be a really positive thing—that she could be the teacher and I would be the student. (Kandi)

You get into the 'here's what they're teaching me at school,' and him wanting to do that, which is cool, cause then I'm learning stuff too. (Didi).

As these comments suggest, warmer parents tend to express a positive attitude toward learning about the Internet from their child. This inclination is also reflected in warmer parents' tendencies to be taught about the Internet by their child regardless of whether the mother or child is the more accomplished Internet user.

He can show me stuff on the Internet....I kind of figured I'd be showing him stuff for a long time and he'd be sort of learning it gradually and instead....a lot of times I am looking for something and I don't have time to find it I'll tell/ask [him] if he can find it for me. (Donna)

And he said, 'You don't have to do all that, mom (to use search engines).' It's like, 'I don't?'....I'll say 'my son showed me', [be]cause I want the kids to know I can learn from them. (Didi)

In contrast, among most cooler parents in our sample, teaching occurs if the mother believes the child's Internet abilities equal or exceed her own. Cooler mothers who see themselves as more accomplished Internet users often cite their relative ability as the reason why teaching does not occur.

She's tried to say do this, this, and this and I was like, no child, your mother knows more than you do. (Danette)

No, I think I've pretty much got it down, too. (Coleen)

I was in a chat room and there was one woman who wanted to send a pic [sic]...and he happened to wander in at that point and I said, 'well, how do I send a picture?' and he wasn't much help, he just said 'email it.' So... (Becky)

Thus, warmer parents are inclined to learn from their child even if they are more highly skilled than the child, whereas cooler parents are less open to learning from their child unless s/he is an equally or more accomplished Internet user than themselves. These divergent stances are consistent with parental style research in other contexts, which indicates that warmer parents are more likely than cooler parents to: view children's and adults' roles as complementary; try to enrich the child's environment with educational activities; have supportive and affirmative interactions with their children; expect mature behavior; and parent with a balance that changes over time (Carlson and Grossbart 1988). Thus, warmer parents' expressed tendencies to learn from their child correspond to the idea that parental warmth fosters a prefigurative family environment in which children teach parents about the Internet.

Child as Internet Broker

There is a greater discrepancy between warmer versus cooler parental styles, in terms of the child acting as the parent's Internet broker than in the child teaching the parent about the Internet. Brokering occurs in most of the warmer relationships but in only one of the cooler relationships.

[He] sent a few emails for me...I was out working, and I needed them sent, so I just called back and told him what to do. (Chris)

A lot of times I am looking for something and I don't have time to find it. I'll ask [him] if he can find it for me. He can find it quicker than I can....I asked my son to find out what airfare would be, and so he went into one of those travel sites and he looked up the airport code and looked up the dates and figured out all the travel fares, which I thought was kind of nice....We went last summer to Lake Okeboji. We wanted to know if there were water parks and what else there was besides the lake and so he got some information. I think he actually was able to get into a tourism commission site and pull up all kinds of information....He found green fees for my husband. He was going to go to Oklahoma City and wanted to know how far he had to make reservations in advance and what the green fees were for different courses in the area so he got that for him. (Donna)

We had him look up the weather in a place that we were going to visit. (Susan)

When I order new software I use my children. They love it. It's a two-way street. I say figure out how to do this and teach it to me. They love it because they are getting to use new software, I love it because I don't have to sit and figure it out. I can cook dinner while they figure it out and go down and in five minutes they can give me a quick overview and then I can get into it. (Didi)

I'll sometimes have my daughter log on for me, or download attachments, things like that that you have to wait for. She waits and gets it all ready for me so then I can just sit down and work on it. (Ann)

As with teaching the parent about the Internet, warmer parents express more openness to Internet brokering than cooler parents and its occurrence does not depend on the relative Internet abilities of the mother and child. Brokering occurs, even if the mother is sufficiently skilled to do the task herself.

By contrast, cooler parents seem to be less open to the idea that their child may be able to perform a task on their behalf, regardless of the child's Internet skill level. Their comments suggest a view of brokering that differs from that of the warm parents.

I guess I never think of having her do it. (Danette)

I'm sure he couldn't do the research quite as well as I could. And he even told me once, 'Whenever you go looking for something, you find it. And I don't.' (Becky)

In the rare instances in which cooler parents report children's Internet brokering, it is restricted to cases in which the child is described as "definitely more accomplished" (Jane).

These findings differ from language brokering research, which suggests that parents' low skill (language) levels foster brokering. Our data indicate that Internet brokering occurs even in cases in which warmer parents see themselves as highly skilled. This evidence suggests that other factors underlying children's Internet brokering should be considered. Probing parents about this phenomenon reveals other motivations for Internet brokering that seem to be related to warmth in parent-child relationships. Among the mothers in our sample, these motivations include asking the child to do tasks on the Internet to: fulfill the child's desires to use the Internet; build the child's

confidence in his/her Internet abilities; keep the child from involvement in less-desirable activities on the Internet (e.g. chat rooms and playing games); reinforce positive uses of the Internet; and involve the child in other family activities (e.g. planning a vacation).

DISCUSSION

This exploratory study investigates how parent-child relationships affect, and are affected by, parents' and children's Internet use. It underscores the link between parental warmth and parents' receptivity to children's influence in Internet-related matters. In particular, it reveals how warmth in parent-child relationships positively contributes to a child teaching a parent about the Internet and acting as a parent's Internet broker. These findings may have important implications, in terms of children's influence on parents' technology-related purchase decisions, word-of-mouth communications, and consumer learning. Future studies should examine the possible effects of children's teaching and brokering in these areas.

This research can be extended in other useful ways. Our focus is on mothers. However, several informants also mentioned the child's influence on fathers and interactions with other family members (e.g., siblings and grandparents) in Internet related matters. The relevance of these other relationships should also be examined, to provide a more complete picture of family dynamics with respect to Internet uses and socialization.

Our interviews focused on one child, selected because of his/her Internet use and age. Although we concentrated on warmth in parent-child relationships, our findings also suggest that older children (over 11 years old, in this study) may be more apt to teach parents about the Internet than younger children. However, there is no clear pattern of findings on possible links between children's ages and Internet brokering or children's sex and teaching or Internet brokering. Research on families with parents with disabilities suggests that there may be variation, in terms of which child in the family is apt to act as a broker for parents and that this role is often taken by the oldest child (Buchino 1993; O'Neill 1985). Future studies may uncover age and birth-order effects on the likelihood that children teach parents about the Internet. Birth-order may also be related to Internet brokering for parents.

Researchers should also investigate ways to gauge parents' and children's relative abilities to use the Internet. Our findings suggest that estimating global abilities may be inadequate, due to the Internet's multi-faceted character and the area-specific nature of family members' Internet abilities.

Our research may also be extended by investigating children's perceptions and reactions to teaching and brokering for their parents. Do children teach and broker happily, or begrudgingly? Does it make them feel good about themselves and their skill levels? Does it alter their perceptions of their parents? Are children aware of parents' motivations for engaging in these behaviors?

Other dynamics may also be involved. In this study, our focus is on prefigurative (child-to-parent) influences, which is consistent with the cited work on technology, language brokering, and socialization. We found, but did not analyze, examples of postfigurative (parent-to-child) and reciprocal (two-way) influences with respect to aspects of Internet interest, knowledge, and use. These influence patterns may not be mutually exclusive and may co-exist. Gauging these co-existing influence patterns offers rich possibilities for future research on how the Internet is integrated into family life.

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