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'Who introduced Granny to Facebook?': An exploration of everyday family interactions in web-based communication environments

ABSTRACT

The aim of the study was to explore the reasons that Estonian three-generation families use different web-based platforms for family interaction. Semi-structured interviews (N=13) were carried out with representatives of four Estonian families to study their motivations for communicating with each other through web-based communication channels. Furthermore, we were interested in learning how they had selected the platforms for communication, what topics they discussed and what information they exchanged while communicating online. The findings of our study suggest that web-based communication channels were firmly domesticated in the everyday family routines of our respondents. Our interviews revealed that the Internet and web-based communication channels play an enormous role in supporting and partly also re-establishing inter-generational communication and, thereby, strengthening family bonds.

INTRODUCTION

Recent studies suggest that in today's information society different technological opportunities brought about by information and communication technologies (ICTs) have become key elements in bridging generational gaps (Madden 2010) by helping to promote and strengthen family ties and experiences (Gonçalves and Patrício 2010).

The present case study set out to explore the reasons that Estonian three-generation families use different web-based platforms for family interaction. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with representatives of four Estonian families to study their motivations for communicating with each other through web-based communication channels. Furthermore, we were interested in finding out who had initiated the online communication and what their main themes while communicating online were.

We believe that web-based communication practices of Estonian families provide an interesting case study for several reasons. First of all, the Internet penetration rate among Estonians is high: 78% of the population use the Internet (Internet World Stats 2012). In fact, almost everyone aged 16–34 uses the Internet in Estonia, and in recent years we have witnessed a growing interest in the 65–74 age group in starting to use the Internet (Baltic News Service 2010). On average, Estonian children start using the Internet at the age of 8 (Livingstone et al. 2011), and overall Internet use among the youngest age group (11- to 18-year-olds) is 99.9% (Kalmus et al. 2009). Considering that 'mobile-phone technology is firmly domesticated' (Bolin 2010: 69) in the everyday practices of the population, the majority of Estonians of all ages have various opportunities to be constantly connected to the Internet and, hence, to each other.

At the same time, Estonian scholars have expressed their concern about 'the continued weakening of bonds between the generations (parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren)' (Kutsar and Tiit 2003: 73). In fact, due to several important factor – e.g. average life expectancy for particularly men is rather low, women give birth at a later age and young families prefer to live separate from their own parents – 'many children are actually growing up without significant participation by their grandparents' (Kutsar et al. 2004: 85). In a context where less than 10% of Estonian children live in multi-generational families, including families with one or two grandparents (Kutsar et al. 2004), digital technologies may offer valuable opportunities to strengthen family bonds.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We have witnessed a growing interest in the topic of 'generations' among media studies scholars during the past decade (Colombo and Fortunati 2011). Although, in the context of the present article, the term 'generation' is used in more of a biological than sociological sense, we consider it important to give a short overview of the sociological debate on the topic.

It is suggested that one of main reasons for such a notable return of the topic of 'generations' has been initiated by the rapid changes brought about by the development of ICTs, which 'have radically changed the forms of cultural transmission and socialisation, stressing gaps and differences between social groups and between age cohorts' (Aroldi 2011: 52). In fact, media technologies have become popular elements in generational identity-building in connection with attributes, manifestos and labels associated with

supposed differences in the generational use of these technologies (Vittadini et al. in press). For instance, present-day teens and young adults are often referred to as the 'net generation' (Tapscott 1998), and are supposed to have a specific intra-generational homogeneity stemming from very easy and intimate contact with digital technologies. In other words, authors (Buckingham 2008, Vittadini et al. in press) have argued that the concept of a 'generation' has expanded beyond the borders of demography and acquired new, cultural meanings. Hence, rather than referring to people who happen to be born and live in a particular time, authors suggest that generations are also formed by people who happen to experience the same formative events and thus share a collective memory, i.e. 'the we sense' (Corsten 1999).

There has been a substantial amount of research exploring the various dimensions of generational differences in online practices (Kalmus et al. 2011) and the search for digital specificities of the young generation (Kalmus et al. 2009; Siibak 2009) – making claims referring to the need to stop overstating the digital differences between generations (Herring 2008). These arguments have resulted from the claims by some scholars (Tapscott 1998; Prensky 2001) that digital technology has produced a new type of mind and intelligence and has made people, who have been brought up with these technologies, process information in a fundamentally different manner. In contrast to these technologically deterministic views, which present technological developments and technology as a whole as the key reason for social change, some authors (Herring 2008; Buckingham 2008; Siibak 2009) have started to emphasize the need for socio-deterministic approaches which argue that generational identity is influenced by the social meanings ascribed to new technologies in broader social and economic contexts (Vittadini et al. in press).

GETTING TOGETHER ONLINE

Although research indicates that the Millennials, i.e. 'the first generation to come of age in the third millennium' (Taylor and Keeter 2010: 4), are the ones mainly involved in the whole 'cyberkid discourse' (Holmes 2011: 2), the opportunities offered by the new media are actually also actively taken advantage of by members of older generations. For instance, the findings of the Pew Internet and American Life Project study 'Generations 2010' indicate that there are currently members of six consecutive generations online in the United States: Millennials (ages 18–33), Generation X (ages 34–45), Younger Boomers (ages 46–55), Older Boomers (ages 56–64), the Silent Generation (ages 65–73) and the G. I. Generation (ages 74+) (Zickuhr 2010). Still, younger family members are often the instigators of the older adults' forays onto the Internet and teach them to make use of various communication technologies with the aim of enhancing cohesion between the elderly and the young (Tsai et al. 2011).

In recent years, the previous technology-knowledge gap between present-day youth and the members of previous generations has been diminishing. Older adults, in particular, have become more and more motivated to learn basic skills of web-based communication and, by doing so, have become more aware of the opportunities to access their children's online worlds and to help guide and supervise their Internet use (Livingstone and Haddon 2008). Having a chance to follow the lives of their grandchildren is usually seen as the one of the main motivating factors for grandparents to start learning and

using web-based communication environments (Gonzalez et al. 2012). In fact, studies (Taylor et al. 2006) indicate that older members of families have acknowledged that new media technologies may offer them opportunities to reach out to the young, who otherwise seem to be out of reach.

Mainly due to the relatively good quality and low cost of various web-based communication technologies (Kang 2012), social networking sites (SNS), Skype and MSN Messenger have become popular means for keeping in touch and maintaining family ties (Kang 2012, Tsai et al. 2011). Studies indicate that although older members of the family, in particular, still prefer the phone as the main tool for inter-generational family communication (Lindley 2012; Lehtinen et al. 2009), e-mail has also become quite a frequent mode of communication between family members (Holladay and Seipke 2007). Some geographically separated families have also started to use blogs (Harwood 2004), videos (Furukawa and Driessnack 2013) and photos (Gonzalez et al. 2012) to keep family members connected and up-to-date with each other's lives.

OPENING UP ON THE WEB: MAIN TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

Previous studies indicate that the main topics for discussion between family members either on the phone (Tsai et al. 2011) or through video-mediated communication (Furukawa and Driessnack 2013) mainly evolve around everyday matters: interesting daily events, feelings and life experiences. Although the findings of V. Lehtinen et al. (2009: 49) reveal that older adults often perceive the Internet as 'a "cold" way to interact' with their loved ones due to the lack of social cues, studies on inter-generational communication through SNS (Cornejo et al. 2010) reveal that information shared through Facebook, for example, is sometimes more detailed and more emotional in nature than interaction on other web-based communication channels. For instance, through Facebook, family members may learn not only about each other's daily whereabouts, activities and upcoming events, but also about each other's feelings and moods (Cornejo et al. 2010: 328).

At the same time, studies report that older people hold different views about sharing detailed descriptions of their lives through web-based communication. On the one hand, older adults are found not only to highly appreciate the chance to learn more about the lives of the young through such a medium, but also to eagerly start engaging in online content creation. For instance, members of the older generations have been found to be active in talking about family matters and relationships, especially with their grandchildren, on their personal websites (Harwood 2004) and, on some occasions, in sharing their opinions and knowledge of the world with the young through personal YouTube videos (Harley and Fitzpatrick 2009).

In other families, however, older adults have been found to be more conservative in their opinions about what kind of information is appropriate and safe to spread through the Internet. Older adults participating in the study by Lehtinen et al. (2009), for example, did not feel that SNS and e-mails were safe enough ways to discuss intimate topics or share secrets on confidential matters. Furthermore, they believed that sharing detailed information of their daily lives on Facebook was a form of boasting (Lehtinen et al. 2009: 52) and, hence, not socially approved behaviour.

In addition to using oral and written modes of communication to share news with family members, research indicates that photos also offer a nice

opportunity to share experiences. Studies report that especially young parents often post photos of their babies on various online photo-uploading sites or Facebook so as to keep family members informed about their new role as parents (Gonzalez et al. 2012). In addition to uploading photos of children, young families often share photos of their holidays and special events happening outside the home, with members of extended families living abroad (Gonzalez et al. 2012: 82).

METHOD AND SAMPLE

Given the objectives of the study, the following main criteria were followed when compiling the sample: in every family forming the sample, at least one child, parent and grandparent had to be accustomed to using different new media platforms, e.g. SNS, blogs, MSN messenger or Skype, to communicate with each other.

Our final study sample included thirteen individuals from four Estonian families. The oldest family members interviewed were between 57 and 69 years of age, their children 27 to 42 and their grandchildren 9 to 20. The majority of the participants in the study were women (N=11), as men were more reluctant to be interviewed on the topic.

The living arrangements of the families, as shown in Table 1, indicate that in only one family did all the interviewed family members live in the same town. In all the other cases there was at least one family member who, due to work or study obligations, lived separate from the others. The majority of the interviewees lived either in bigger cities (Tallinn, Tartu or Viljandi) or smaller towns (Kohila or Rapla) on the mainland of Estonia, while two interviewees from one family lived on the island of Saaremaa. The interviews indicate that, in every family in our sample, there were some extended family members who also lived abroad.

An overview of the sample and their usage of interpersonal communication platforms are provided in Table 1. To protect the confidentiality of the respondents, only codes are used to designate the interviewees.

The sample families were found by employing the 'snowballing' method. The first contact was located through a student organization list from the University of Tartu, and the following sample chain developed from that. Forming the sample was rather complicated, because especially the members of older generations considered themselves to be rather passive social media users with no adequate experience or technological know-how. Therefore, it is important to note that the grandparents interviewed for the present study were more experienced and more active new media users than many others of their generation.

The qualitative method used for the study was the semi-structured interview. This method was chosen as it allows greater flexibility of coverage and enables the interviewer to question the interviewees' responses in greater detail. Furthermore, similar to J. Horton et al. (2004: 340) we believe that semi-structured interviews helped us reveal novel areas we had not previously identified, and thereby helped us produce richer data.

The style of the interviews was based on a qualitative interviewing technique (Patton 2002). A prepared interview schedule with open-ended questions was used to help guide the interviews. The interview questions were listed in three blocks of themes: reasons for taking up web-based communication channels as a means of family communication, usage

APPENDIX 1

	Code (gender+age)	Place of residence	Form and duration of the interview	Usage of interpersonal communication environments
Family 1	F9	Viljandi	Face to face (45 minutes)	MSN Messenger, Facebook, SNS rate
	F27	Viljandi	Face to face (60 minutes)	MSN Messenger, Facebook, inactive user of SNS rate, e-mail, inactive user of Skype
	F59	Viljandi	Face to face (40 minutes)	MSN Messenger, Facebook, e-mail
Family 2	F12	Kohila	Skype/e-mail (120 minutes)	MSN Messenger, Facebook, e-mail, inactive user of Skype, Twitter, blog
	F35	Kohila	Skype (150 minutes)	Facebook, e-mail, Skype, blog, Twitter, Flickr
	M36	Kohila (with frequent trips abroad)	Skype (120 minutes)	Facebook, Skype, inactive blogger, Twitter
	M57	Rapla	Skype/e-mail (180 minutes)	Facebook, e-mail, Skype, Geni
Family 3	F20	Tartu	Face to face (50 minutes)	MSN Messeneger, Facebook, e-mail, Skype, Google Talk, inactive blogger
	F42	Tartu	Face to face (60 minutes)	MSN Messenger, Facebook, e-mail, Google Talk
	F69	Tallinn	Face to face (40 minutes)	Facebook, e-mail, Google Talk, Picasaweb
Family 4	F19	Tartu	MSN Messenger (60 minutes)	MSN Messenger, Facebook, e-mail, inactive user of Skype
	F34	Saaremaa	MSN Messenger (90 minutes)	MSN Messenger, Facebook, e-mail, Skype, inactive user of SNS Orkut
	F57	Saaremaa	MSN Messenger (120 minutes)	MSN Messenger, Facebook, e-mail

Table 1: Description of the sample.

practices among family members and the role of online communication practices in inter-generational relationships within the family. We were interested in learning why the families had started to make use of different web-based communication options, and intrigued to discover their main topics of conversation. Furthermore, we also asked our respondents to reflect upon their own motivations for using these web-based options and to analyse the possible impact such communication platforms had had on the inter-generational relations between family members.

The interview questions were the same for all respondents regardless of age. The interviews were conducted individually with each family member, so that the presence of other members of the family would not distract the respondent and responses would be as honest and complete as possible. As the sample families were geographically located across Estonia, interviews were conducted both face to face and online (MSN Messenger, Skype and e-mail). The selection of interview mode was dependent on the respondent's preferences (see Table 1).

Compared to face-to-face interviews, one of the greatest challenges of online interviews is the need to operate in an environment where much of the contextual information, e.g. non- and paraverbal information, is unavailable. Hence, similar to the practices of other researchers (Hinchcliffe and Gavin 2009), we tried to compensate for the absence of non-verbal signals on MSN Messenger or in e-mail interviews by asking additional questions, or through follow-up probes, to confirm the responses we had received.

As presented in Table 1, the interviews conducted through Skype or MSN Messenger were much longer than the face-to-face interviews. The longer duration of online interviews can also be explained by the fact that it proved to be more difficult to motivate the respondents to concentrate on the online interviews. This is also why two of the interviews had to be finished by e-mail. Although e-mail interviews have been criticized for a lack of spontaneity in the responses received (Bampton and Cowton 2002), and are hence more likely to produce 'socially desirable' answers (O'Connor et al. 2008), both of these criticisms can also work in favour of the study process. Considering that our respondents could choose when to respond to our questions, we believed such an approach would be the best way to receive carefully considered, reflective replies from interviewees who were pressed for time. For instance, our experience shows that those respondents who formulated their answers on MSN Messenger or by e-mail did this more thoroughly than they might have done in verbal interviews.

The interviews were analysed through a combination of qualitative data analysis and the procedures of the grounded theory approach, as described by A. Strauss and J. Corbin (1998). After the interviews had been conducted and transcribed, they were coded line by line and analysed. During open coding – the comparison of each theme group with other theme groups – repeated responses formed dominant and discriminative codes, as well as items that were comparable in different interviews, thus making it possible to link the interviews in terms of similar questions. The selected approach enabled us to identify the major issues related to the aims of our study.

All the interviews were conducted in Estonian, the mother tongue of the respondents. Extracts from the interviews were translated by the authors to illustrate the analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reasons for using web-based communication channels

Our interviews indicate that one of the most important motivations for using web-based communication platforms for family interaction was the feeling of connectedness these platforms created. While the youngest members of the family saw web communication as an additional way of staying in touch with friends, older interviewees were mainly motivated by the opportunity to stay conveniently and, if needed, almost on a minute-by-minute basis in touch with their family members:

> The most important role [the new media play] is that I am, almost on a minute-by-minute basis, aware of the activities, worries and thoughts of my children.
>
> (Male, 57, Family 2)

Furthermore, some interviewees claimed that engagement on Facebook had enabled them to reconnect and socialize with members of their extended families and long-lost relatives. Especially older interviewees told stories about starting to communicate with their relatives after 'friending' them on Facebook, or suggesting that their children and grandchildren 'friend' some members of their extended families with whom they would not have communicated very often if it were not for Facebook.

Similar to the findings of others (Harwood 2000), it appears that the feeling of closeness that web-based communication channels trigger was crucial, especially for those family members who lived far away and hence did not get to see their loved ones often. Our interviews indicate that web-based communication channels were eagerly used by the families whose members did not live under the same roof, i.e. they had moved out, due either to work-related obligations, studies or other life changes. Hence, it can be argued that mediated communication helped the families overcome temporal and spatial separation by creating a 'connected presence' (Licoppe 2004), thus allowing them to be more actively involved in each other's lives. For instance, one of our youngest interviewees claimed to be chatting almost daily online with her father, who worked abroad, or regularly contacting her grandparents and aunt, who lived in another town, through MSN messenger with schoolwork-related questions and concerns.

However, our interviews illustrated the fact that distance was not the only reason families preferred using web-based communication platforms to get in touch with each other. Our findings indicated that web-based communication channels were also in use daily in families whose members lived under the same roof. In the case of the families interviewed, it can even be noted that family members residing in the same household socialized more frequently with each other through new media in comparison to socializing with family members separated by distance. In fact, it appears that web-based communication was most often used for micro-coordination, which involved scheduling events, and for coordinating responsibilities 'on the fly' so as to meet the needs of every family member (Wajcman et al. 2008). For instance, the interviewed families made use of various chat opportunities (e.g. Facebook chat, Skype chat and MSN messenger) to organize practical daily matters (e.g. shopping and household duties), as well as to plan events:

The last common activity which brought together several members of the family was when my son-in-law posted in the [Skype] chat group 'My People' that it was already 80 degrees in the sauna and that the water for the barrel sauna was about to get hot as well. Quite a few sauna-goers from our family travelled to Kohila that evening.

(Male, 57, Family 2)

Our interviews indicated that such an active adoption of the new technologies by all members of the family resulted in a situation whereby the first contact with family members was sought via such synchronous online communication channels as MSN Messenger or Skype. Due to the ability to engage in asynchronous communication, families often organized online 'family meetings', which allowed them to discuss and plan various matters both one-on-one and in larger groups:

Why do you use web-based communication channels with the members of your family?

Well, I communicate with family members [in this manner] because it's cheaper, quicker and more convenient. Everyone can answer in their own time and, as the family is large, I can forward the information to all of them at once. For instance, we have a family chat group on Skype and also on Facebook, where all the members of the extended family are included.

(Female, 35, Family 2)

Such chat opportunities were also preferred due to their more private and individualized type of communication, rather than posting messages to be viewed by the large potential audience of social media. Furthermore, it appears that such new media applications were also used because of the ability to get almost an immediate response, as many family members were always logged on to these platforms.

In fact, the oldest members of the family viewed Internet communication as a substitute for face-to-face communication. Although the interviewed grandparents confessed that they still preferred telephone communication to online options, they had all discovered the wonders of Facebook, for example, which enabled them to stay up-to-date with their children's and grandchildren's activities and thoughts. Hence, similar to the findings of others (Morris et al. 2007, Selwyn et al. 2003), our oldest respondents explained that their family and friends were their main motivation for adopting ICTs. Furthermore, being able to interact with others and maintain social contacts was essential in maintaining the quality of life of older people (Kanayama 2003). In this respect, web-based communication platforms offered grandparents the much-needed opportunity to share their own everyday events and to hear about the daily happenings of their children and grandchildren.

At the same time, previous studies (Siibak and Murumaa 2011, West et al. 2009) have revealed that young people are not always happy to add their parents, or adults in general, as Facebook friends. It appears that the youngest members of the families we interviewed also had mixed emotions when first encountering their grandparents on social media. Nevertheless, after

discussing the matters amongst themselves, they soon became accustomed to having their family members on their online friend lists:

> […] not half a day had passed when my oldest daughter posted 'Who introduced Granny to Facebook?' on Skype [laughs]. This was a truly perplexed and somewhat even annoyed question. But then I explained the situation and she found that it was actually quite nice that Granny can communicate with other people, and welcomed her to the computer environment.
>
> (Female, 42, Family 3)

Hence, although S. Livingstone (2003) claims that technology has had a revolutionary effect in promoting individualization and privatization among young people as far as their family orientation is considered, our findings also confirm that web-based communication platforms help reunite family members from different generations. In fact, in the context of Estonia, where grandparents play a relatively small role in the everyday lives of their grandchildren (Kutsar et al. 2004), communication in various web-based communication environments can be seen as an opportunity that enables families to keep in touch and hence start strengthening weakened inter-generational relations. Considering the above, we agree with G. S. Mesch, who claims that 'rather than serving to blur family boundaries, the Internet contributes to their preservation facilitating the sharing of information between parents and children through messages and exchange of photographs and information' (2006: 135).

Selection of platforms and content

Our respondents named Skype, MSN messaging and Facebook as the platforms they used most often to keep in contact with each other. Although some of the interviewees were also bloggers, blogs were referred to less often as platforms for family communication.

All these commonly used environments were mainly adopted at the initiative of the middle-aged members of the families, who were most daring in experimenting with technology and were hence viewed as the main role models for the youngest and oldest family members alike. Hence, in comparison to the previous studies, which suggest that the Internet has provided the young with a position of greater authority and control within their family (Livingstone and Bober 2005), our findings reveal that adults are mainly in charge of mediating their family members' new media practices. Still, it has to be noted that grandparents acknowledged their grandchildren's role in getting them acquainted with computers and various platforms:

> When my grandchildren were small, one was two years old and the other was five or six, they already took it [the computer] for granted. Then they started to tell me to click on this and click on that, how something opens, etc. I didn't know a single key – they showed me where I needed to click. And from that I got my courage, so that I needed to start writing as well … It was mainly the younger children who told me to go to YouTube and … I also got my first e-mail about Facebook from this 11-year-old boy, saying 'Granny, make yourself a Facebook account; I've got really interesting games for you'.
>
> (Female, 69, Family 1)

The interviews indicated that the preference for synchronous communication channels for family conversations derived from the personal nature and privacy of such channels, which enabled respondents to send messages to a selected person or group. This was also what the respondents claimed allowed them to talk more about personal concerns and joys, e.g. being pregnant, moving abroad or changing jobs, through Skype or MSN messenger. At the same time, similar to the findings of H. T. Christensen (2009) (who studied mediated family communication practices in Denmark), our results show that the content of messages posted through rapid communication channels usually fell into one of three categories: instrumental (e.g. 'We've run out of milk; go and get some'), expressive (e.g. 'how you doin'?') or a combination of the two (e.g. children asking for help in solving homework assignments, etc.).

In fact, it appeared that even though a number of web-based communication channels facilitate verbal contact, the interviewed families preferred to communicate in writing. Our respondents justified their preference by stating that text-based communication platforms enabled them not only to share their posts with numerous people, but also to think through and formulate their messages in a more coherent manner. Furthermore, their preference for web-based communication channels was sometimes also related to the desire to replace the intensity of face-to-face verbal communication with the more subdued and neutral form of expression of a written text. For instance, one of the youngest family members we interviewed said it was easier for her to hide her real emotions, especially her worries and negative moods, while chatting with her mother online, in comparison to communicating by phone:

> On MSN it's easy to hide your worries and emotions. When I speak on the phone, my mother always understands when there's something wrong with me.
>
> (Female, 19, Family 4)

The extract above also reveals why several of our respondents claimed to prefer phone and face-to-face conversations to chatting online: they believed they were unable to express their emotions and feelings fully through web-based communication channels. Hence, they agreed that, in a way, web-based communication meant less emotional involvement and possibly a higher degree of disengagement in the communication.

In comparison to the more private communication and topics shared through various rapid communication channels, our respondents believed the posts on Facebook contained more casual and shallow interactions. Still, our interviews indicated that even the public Facebook posts of family members served as reminders of matters that would have otherwise been long forgotten, or offered totally new information. For instance, one of the young people we interviewed first heard about her sister being baptized by reading her post in Facebook, while the parents in another family learned that their child was 'in a relationship' by looking at her Facebook profile. Furthermore, similar to the findings of R. Cornejo et al. (2010), our interviewees claimed they learned of various smaller details through Facebook, e.g. location, activities and upcoming events, which they had had no previous knowledge about. In addition to more private news that sometimes tended to be forgotten (e.g. a brother's wedding anniversary or work and travel plans) or might seem too embarrassing to talk about in person (e.g. relationship issues), all the interviewees also claimed to enjoy reading about each other's impressions of a recent theatre or

movie visit, having a new tasty recipe recommended or being invited to read an interesting article. Having a chance to upload as well as view photos from various trips or family events was another advantage that communicating on Facebook offered to our respondents. Such practices have been suggested as being seen as 'ways of establishing common ground across generations' (Lindley 2012: 41).

CONTENT SHARING AND PROPER BEHAVIOUR

Although parents and grandparents claimed they had often felt a surge of positive emotions when reading through the public Facebook posts of the youngest family members, they also admitted sometimes being concerned and irritated by their apparently superficial and simple postings; i.e. adults often considered the overall topic and content of the postings to be unimportant and trivial:

> Sometimes it seems like I would like my younger daughter to not be such a typical adolescent, or I find her postings and reactions there uninteresting or stupid, empty, trivial. […] That's what irritates me – these are my kids and I feel annoyed, wondering why this is happening to me, and why my child is so trivial. Their environment isn't like that, and it shouldn't facilitate it.
>
> (Female, 42, Family 1)

A fully developed sense of criticism and the desire not to clutter the environment with postings that have no real substance were some of the main reasons our oldest respondents also saw themselves as observers in the new media environment rather than active content creators. At the same time, the interviews with grandparents revealed that their content creation practices were also influenced by an overall lack of trust in the online environment. In fact, similar to the findings of Lehtinen et al. (2009), the grandparents we interviewed expressed concerns about the operating principles of Facebook (e.g. 'How can Facebook suggest users to me whom I should "friend?"', 'How does the system know all this stuff?'), as well as doubts about the safety of the online environment.

Regardless of the fact that both grandparents and parents claimed to keep an eye on the online activities of the young for safety reasons, the interviews with the youngest family members indicated that they often perceived faults in the content creation practices of the adults in their family. For example, children mentioned that their parents sometimes posted private family photos on social media without their consent. In such cases, representatives of older generations themselves lacked the required sense of self-awareness and foresight as, evidently, they had not been able to foresee the possible consequences of the practices described:

> […] the boys in my class have taken to following my mum's Flickr and then making fun of me at school. I once wrote an essay in school that we had to post on a blog; I added a picture to the essay and, when you clicked on it, it took you to my mum's Flickr. Yes … and then they [the boys at school] photoshopped my pictures and posted them.
>
> (Female, 12, Family 2)

Thus, our interviews indicated that the members of both older and younger generations actually struggled to find the right balance between the advantages

of constant connectivity and the fact 'that this very connectivity inevitably gives others access, licitly or illicitly to private information' (Leary 2011: 1037). For instance, two of our younger respondents confessed that, due to sharing a platform like Facebook with their family members, they had sometimes decided to refrain from sharing certain things (e.g. playing tricks on teachers at school or relationship issues) so as not to anger or upset them:

> *Is there any information you refrain from sharing because you know that the members of your family might also read the post?*
>
> I don't know. I don't have many experiences like that. Well, at school we do various stuff my mum knows nothing about and therefore I don't post about it. These things will be kept only between me and the people I do this stuff with.
>
> *What is it that you do?*
>
> For instance, we have a music teacher who we don't like at all. And once we put all kinds of books and CDs inside the piano and when the lesson started and she started to play the piano there was this loud noise and she was so furious.
>
> <div align="right">(Female, 9, Family 3)</div>

Furthermore, in addition to keeping certain things to themselves, some of the youth from our sample actually started to take steps in order to avoid the constant online supervision by their parents. For instance, some of the parents had noticed that their children not only pretended to be 'offline' to them, but also sent encrypted messages to their friends:

> Then I do know that she [the daughter] sits in front of her computer half the night and communicates there. But she also knows as well as I do that I don't like it and that's why she's filtered me out so that I won't be able to see how much time she spends online. […] There are these insinuation games with girlfriends and things that make me a bit nervous. Along the lines of: 'this lies buried in history and we're not going to talk about it'. But I don't consider that a problem for me; if they want to keep quiet about something and be secretive, so be it.
>
> <div align="right">(Female, 42, Family 3)</div>

Recently, scholars (boyd and Marwick 2011; Oolo and Siibak 2013) have detected that the use of social steganography, a social privacy technique that helps hide the real meanings behind posts from the eyes of direct authority figures, such as parents, teachers and coaches, i.e. the 'nightmare readers' (Marwick and boyd 2011), is an increasingly frequent strategy among the young.

CONCLUSION

The main aim of this article has been to analyse why Estonian three-generation families have started making use of different web-based communication platforms for everyday family interaction. We aimed to study their motivations for communicating with each other through web-based communication

channels, and were also interested in learning how they had selected the platforms for communication and what kind of topics and information they exchanged while communicating online.

The findings of our study suggest that web-based communication channels are firmly domesticated (Silverstone and Hirsch 1992) in the everyday family routines of our respondents. In fact, similar to the findings of Christensen (2009), our interviews revealed that the feeling of 'connected presence' created by socializing through web-based communication channels on an everyday basis helped reactivate and strengthen family bonds. In other words, the opportunity to make use of various web-based communication channels has led to the fact that the interaction between three-generation families in Estonia, as well as in other countries (Tsai et al. 2011), is no longer limited to face-to-face communication. Our results indicate that such an opportunity has become crucial for both establishing and maintaining emotional bonds and enhancing connectedness in contexts where the 'notion of "family" as a source of immediate social support has eroded within modern industrialised societies with families rarely remaining in a particular locality from generation to generation' (Harley and Fitzpatrick 2009: 3). In this respect, Estonia, as the context of the present study, serves as an excellent but sad example of a country where 'geographical distance separates generations and stops grandparents from having a substantial role in their grandchildren's upbringing' (Kutsar et al. 2004: 119).

Based on our interviews, we believe the Internet and new media play an enormous role in supporting and, partly, re-establishing inter-generational communication. The active use of various web-based communication platforms by the young has also motivated members of older generations to adapt to this new environment. Despite the technology-knowledge gap, which is mainly perceived by grandparents, family members from different age groups are motivated to learn and actively engage in using the same online platforms. While children and grandchildren are often viewed as technologically skilled role models and mediators of older adults' Internet use, communication through web-based communication channels has also offered a quicker and more convenient way for grandparents to serve as mentors to the younger members of families. The grandparents in our sample, for instance, became used to sharing their recipes, offering suggestions about home renovation or helping younger family members with their school assignments through web-based communication channels. In this respect, our findings not only support the idea of two-way socialization (Kalmus 2007), but also confirm the findings of M. Madden (2010), according to whom engagement on new media platforms, especially social media, bridges generational gaps, pooling together users from very different parts of people's lives and providing the opportunity to share skills across generational divides.

Although the present study has provided some interesting findings on the reasons behind using web-based communication channels for family communication and the intra-generational relations on these platforms, the study has a number of limitations. The small size of the study sample does not allow us to make any generalizations from the findings. The target group of our study included three generations from each family, but finding families in which members from different age groups were willing to participate proved to be a more difficult task than expected. This is also why we were unable to conduct face-to-face interviews with all the respondents, but rather had to rely on the interviewees' preferred mode of communication.

Despite these limitations, we believe the study enhances the knowledge about the current forms of family communication. In fact, our results give us reason to believe that traditional forms of family interaction are going through a dramatic change. Although some authors (e.g. Turkle 2011) have taken a very critical stance against the preference for web-based communication platforms, others see the changes in a more positive light, believing that the Internet helps expand family boundaries (Mesch 2006). Additional studies on this issue are needed. Not only are we in need of studies that analyse where the traditional forms of communication are heading, but we also need to gain a more thorough understanding of the possible impact ICTs have had on inter-generational relations. For instance, future researchers should consider studying how the phenomenon of 'context collapse', i.e. a situation in which multiple audiences are brought together into a single context (boyd and Marwick 2011) – which occurs on social media platforms – has affected the inter-generational relations between family members.

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