

Welcome to Facebook: How Facebook Influences Parent-Child Relationship

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To examine the influence of Facebook on the intimacy level of parent-child relationship, 17 parent-child pairs were interviewed respectively. Findings revealed that the increased intimacy was due to a deeper mutual trust, a smaller intergenerational gap, equality and a lack of policing behavior from parents. The results supported the cues filtered out approach of computer-mediated communication in which Facebook facilitates communication of affection while reducing the feelings of awkwardness. This study further proposes that equalization phenomenon observed as the reduced of social status cues propels both parents and child to communicate with each other as equal-leveled individuals on Facebook. Overall, the findings suggest that the Internet has become a new and positive mean of communication between parents and child.

KEYWORDS: Intimacy, Parent-Child Relationship, Facebook, Computer-Mediated Communication

1. INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a fragile stage of development in which it requires special attention and care from parents. Research showed that parents who are warm, accepting and involved, their children usually turn out well-adjusted (Aunola, Stattin & Nurmi, 2000; Steinberg, 2001). Furthermore, it was found that connectedness between parent and child during adolescence stage is crucial as it improves child life satisfaction and mental well-being (Ciairano, Kliever, Bonino & Bosma, 2008; Levitt, Guacci & Weber, 1992; Thornton, Orbuch & Axinn, 1995). Closeness to parents was also found to prevent problems such as maladjustment at school and needing care for emotional and behavioral issues (Amato & Rivera, 1999).

However, connectedness between parents and children of information age can be challenging due to the intergenerational gap. For children of information age, the Internet plays an important part in their lives in which it is regarded as their new attachment figure as opposed to physical approximate-seeking behavior in infancy and childhood (Lei & Wu, 2007). Consequently, as the Internet is playing an important role in lives of adolescence, parents who are lack of such exposure and knowledge may find it difficult to connect with their children through this technology.

On one hand, the widespread of Internet usage among adolescents have attracted criticism such as how it has negatively affected the quality relationships between parents and child (Nie, Hillygus & Erbring, 2002, as cited in Mesch, 2003; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008). On the other hand, the *cues filtered out approach* (Culnan & Markus, 1987, as cited in Giuseppe, 2002) argues that Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) can facilitate a positive development of relationship by omitting the physical and social cues that are found in face-to-face interaction. One advantage of this is that it helps individuals to overcome social barriers in which through online communication people feel less self conscious and more liberal with their expressions. Thus, it creates a comfortable atmosphere where people are willing to share their inner thoughts and feelings.

In the family context, Schwartz (2004) proposes that the Internet can serve as a tool to remove interpersonal barriers within families that encounter obstacles in open communication. For it is observed that youths are more open to share their problems in an online environment, because (1) it takes the intensity out of the eye-to-eye contact, as with more free flow of conversations in the setting of car rides, (2) due to the asynchronous nature of communication, the user has time to compose his or her thoughts and comments, (3) it removes non-verbal cues that may complicate communication. Thus, the Internet is an alternative vehicle for parents to communicate in a language and space that their children are more accustomed to (Schwartz, 2004).

1.1 Facebook: A Force Not to be Reckoned With

Boyd and Ellison (2002) defined Social Networking Sites (SNSs) as:

“Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.” (p.211)

When users surf on SNSs, they may not necessarily be networking or looking to meet new people. Instead, they are using the SNSs to communicate with those who are part of their extended social network such as family and real life friends.

Recent years, SNSs have increased its popularity and Facebook is ranked as one of the most popular sites worldwide, having more than 90 million registered users (Hamsphire, 2008). The popularity of Facebook among college students are most prominent with about 85% of them are registered users and 60% log on to the sites daily (Yadav, 2006). On average, an American child spent 1.46 hours per day on his/her Facebook account and another 1.10 hours on others' accounts, and log into the account 4.19 times per day (Raacke & Raacke, 2008).

Lately, there are increasing numbers of parents register as Facebook users and adding their children as “friend”. The observed trend has been explained as parents viewing Facebook as a bid to connect with their children while befriending with their children’s friends as well (Aratani, 2008). However, there are mixed reactions from children having parents joining them on Facebook. Some welcome their parents by helping them to create their profiles. Others view this as an easy and convenient method to update their parents about their ongoing lives, and they view their parents as being “cool” for using Facebook (Kornblum, 2007). While some express their welcoming gestures, others respond negatively by joining anti-parent groups in Facebook such as “At Least My Mom Isn’t on Facebook!”, “Against Parents Invading Your Facebook (Yes Mom that Means You!) and “What Happens in College Stays in College: Keep Parents Off Facebook!” (Aratani, 2008; Kornblum, 2007; Liew, 2007).

With more parents joining and using Facebook as a tool to communicate with their children, it would be interesting to investigate how this phenomenon would affect the parent-child relationship.

1.2 Investigating Parent-Child Relationship: Intimacy

Intimacy has been proposed to be an important element in all relationships (Mitchell et al., 2008; Schaefer & Olson, 1981, as cited in Mitchell et al., 2008). It is believed to be the essence of human life, as well as a vital aspect in the development of relationships (Golish, 2000; Parks & Floyd, 1996). Research has confirmed the significance of intimacy in the bonds between people (Greef & Malherbe, 2001; Toldstedt & Stokes, 1983, as cited in Mitchell et al., 2008).

Intimacy is believed to improve an individual's well-being in a romantic relationship (Schaefer & Olson, 1981, as cited in Mitchell, 2008). It also influences the mental well-being of individuals in relationships (Prager & Buhrmester, 1998, Waring & Patton, 1984, as cited in Mitchell et al., 2008). Therapists have identified problems in intimacy as one of the most challenging situations to deal with, as well as being able to potentially inflict dire consequences on the relationships (Whisman, Dixon & Johnson, 1997, as cited in Mitchell et al., 2008).

Scholars believe that youth is the time period when a person starts to develop the concept of intimacy as an individual. Attainment of this state where an individual experiences an increasing need for intimacy is believed to follow a progressive pattern (Sullivan, 1953, as cited in Romig & Bakken, 1992). The individual first starts off feeling a desire to meet his external needs for closeness, fulfills this need by finding companionship, then moves on to settle his internal needs for closeness by sharing his inner emotion with others.

Intimacy development is indeed an important aspect during the period of adolescence (Dyk & Adams, 1987, as cited in Romig & Bakken, 1992). For a child to gain maturity in this area, society expects family to be the agent responsible for demonstrating affection to the child. This is supported by supported with research finding of a correlation between a child's perceived amount of emotional bonding in the family, as well as levels of intimacy between the child and his friends (Olson, Sprenkle & Russell, 1979, as cited in Romig & Bakken, 1992). Amongst the various relationships a person experiences in his/her lifetime, parent-child relationship is the most enduring (Golish, 2000). With more parents becoming users of Facebook, it will be interesting to investigate the effects of Facebook on the intimacy of parent-child relationship when both parties are users of the site. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to look at how parents and their children, who are both users of Facebook, interact via Facebook. It also investigates how such interactions will affect their feelings of intimacy in parent-child relationship.

1.3 Factors Affecting Intimacy

1.3.1 Nonverbal Communication

The participation of activities together was found to increase the closeness of parent-child relationships (Golish, 2000), though the impact on intimacy was found to differ in the relationship with each parent. Joint activities such as doing sports together affected the intimacy of a father-child relationship more than that of a mother and child. This is seen as a nonverbal method of communicating affection which fosters closeness between father and child. This is consistent with gender studies that have discovered that males are more likely to withhold the expression of their emotions as compared to females (Goldsmith & Dun, 1997, as cited in Golish, 2000). More importantly, results from this study suggests that the internet has a potential in leading to closer parent-child relationships as it assumes the role of being another family activity and a new way for parents to spend time with their children.

1.3.2 Power Struggle

Golish (2000) found that when a child entered adolescence, a power struggle emerged between the child and his parent. This affected the level of closeness between both parties. The concept of a power struggle can be better understood via the components of democracy and equality (Giddens, 1992, as cited in Solomon et al., 2002). As the child grows older, there will be an increasing desire by the child to gain more power in his pursuit for greater independence and

individuality (Golish, 2000). As the child begins to form and strengthen his identity, a parent-child relationship is believed to grow closer if both parent and child are able to adjust their roles and correspondingly treat each other as equal individuals. In such a scenario of equality, there will be a greater measure of democracy as children are given more freedom to make their own choices (Hoffman, 1984). This autonomy would then lead on to a closer parent-child relationship as both parties start to treat each other as equal-leveled friends (Solomon et al., 2002).

This is supported by Peterson (1999) who believes that a continuing close relationship between parent and child is dependent upon readjustment of roles on the basis of equality, as well as Solomon et al. (2002) who found that youths interpret a close parent-child relationship as one that has decreased parental control.

Golish (2000) found that the power struggle affected the intimacy between mother and child more than that between father and child, because mothers were usually the more protective parent and the primary care givers, and these acts of protection were usually met with greater rebellion from the child.

Even though there may exist some negativity due to a power struggle between parent and child, this will be overridden by increased closeness as both grow older (Rossi & Rossi, 1990, as cited in Golish, 2000). This is due to the fact that in general, a parent-child relationship can be expected to become closer with age as the child gains maturity (Troll & Fingerman, 1996, as cited in Golish, 2000). This is similar to the curvilinear relationship that Golish (2000) proposed, whereby a child starts off being close to his parent when he is young, this closeness dips during the teenage years, but this closeness will be seen to eventually rise again as the child approaches adulthood.

As discussed above, these two factors that have been found to influence intimacy in the parent-child relationship, but no study looks at how the use of Facebook influences parent-child relationships.

1.4 The Use of Facebook

The Wall, the Status Update, the News Feed, the Photo function, as well as the Profile Page are core functions that define Facebook. They are the default features that come with every Facebook user's account and therefore it is reasonable to view them as the most frequently used platform of interaction on Facebook.

The public nature of Facebook, coupled with the act of maintaining a personal profile, means that there can potentially be a significant amount of personal information about an individual showcased online. Such display of personal information on Facebook will be facilitated by its features, for example, the uploading of photos and videos from a social outing, the revealing of an individual's state of mind via the Status Update function, or even the specific friends that an individual has been communicating with via the Wall function. The aspect of interactivity on Facebook allows users to respond to whatever information an individual has posted. Moreover, an authorized user of Facebook will be able to obtain information about a person without having to make an explicit effort to communicate it to him/her. In this setting, communication no longer has to be a decided move on the part of one party to intentionally direct it to the other. The different forms communication and information exchange that can take place on Facebook allows more flexibility in parent-child communication.

Facebook as a SNS fundamentally acts as a place for friends to interact and stay connected. When parents enter the world of Facebook, they can assume the role of being the child's "friend". This can potentially break the power imbalance between parent-child

relationships. Also, before parents can be added onto their children's contact list, they have to first obtain permission from their child via the approval of a friend request. It may seem to be a form of empowerment on the part of the child as having more control. In addition, the parent can also maintain an active Facebook profile with just as much information about his/her social life and friends as the child. How will such a situation change the manner which they interact with each other?

Having set the stage for our research, we propose the investigation of the following research questions.

RQ1: How does the use of Facebook influence the ways in which parent and child interact with each other?

RQ2: How does communication via Facebook influence intimacy in parent-child relationships?

2. METHODS

2.1 Participants

Participants consisted of parent-child duos who were both registered users of Facebook. A total of 17 pairs were recruited via the snowballing method. One pair was voided because the child's age was beyond the working definition of youths. The definition, according to the National Youth Council (NYC) of Singapore, is young people between the ages of 15 and 29. The remaining youths interviewed ranged from 19 to 25 years of age, while parents ranged from 46 to 53 years of age. All the youths had been on Facebook for at least 3 months, with the longest time period being 3 years. The duration of Facebook usage for parents ranged from between 2 weeks to 3 years. All the children were users of Facebook before their parents. 10 of the youths were female, and 13 parents were mothers. Almost all of the interviewees were Chinese, with the exception of two pairs who were Indian.

2.2 Materials

In-depth interview was chosen as the research method because it enables the researchers to obtain participants' experience and perspective on the issue (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). An interview guide was constructed and pre-tested with four pairs of interviewees. This initial interview guide consisted of a structured set of questions and was created for a standardized interview (Berg, 2007). However, as the information gathered was not thorough enough, this interview guide was then modified to fit a semi-standardized interview instead, and contained a reduced number of fixed questions to which the interviewer was allowed to reorder and probe further (Berg, 2007). This revised interview guide was then used to gather information from 12 pairs. As the revised interview guide did not differ much from the pre-test in terms of main questions asked, information from the pretest interviews was also used in the analysis.

2.3 Procedure

All parents and children were interviewed separately, but both parent and child from the same pair were interviewed by the same researcher. With the exception of three pairs in which parent and child were interviewed on separate days in a public place, all other interviews were conducted at the interviewees' homes, and parent and child were interviewed consecutively one after the other on the same day. Such a method is similar to that done in the study by Solomon et

al. (2002), where researchers interviewed both parents and children to obtain their perspectives on the same issue.

Arrangements were made to ensure that the other party would not be within hearing range when one person was being interviewed. Participants were promised confidentiality and assured that their answers would not be leaked to the other party. Before the interview started, all participants were made to sign an acknowledgement form informing them about the purpose of the research. All interviews were voice recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researchers. The long-table approach (Krueger & Casey, 2000) was then used to analyze the transcripts.

3. Results

3.1 Communication

Almost all parent interviewees have expressed that “Facebook opens up the conversation” while the children welcome “talk about something that both of us know”. Such increased conversations include what they saw on other people’s Facebook pages. As P6 mentioned, “it didn’t even have to do with her Facebook. It’s actually someone else’s profile wall... and we talked about it”. Another mother also imitated a funny pose of her daughter’s Facebook photos. A2 added that Facebook “has made us more gossipy”, indicating that both parent and child do engage with each other on a closer level, in the offline environment.

Common examples of online communication were leaving comments on photos or writing on each other’s Walls, with some also utilizing the personal message function. An interesting point to note is that communication on Facebook was not confined to the online platform. Rather, it extended into the real world. Both parents and children said that if they saw something interesting on each other’s Facebook page, they were also likely to physically approach the other party and pass their comments face-to-face. This can be attributed to the fact that as with the norm in Singapore, all parent-child pairs that we interviewed stayed together in the same house.

The communication tone adopted by parents on Facebook is an important factor that influences feelings of closeness that could otherwise undermine the potential of Facebook to promote intimacy between the two. “Positive feelings were evoked from youths when their parents communicated with an informal tone on Facebook. “I didn’t know she can be so fun... she doesn’t talk to me like that at home” (A2). A mother’s Status Update, “Welcomes Major Ken home with open arms” (A16), also piqued the curiosity of her child who went home to find out more from her mother. She later found out that her mother was talking about her cake-mixer.

Therefore, parents on Facebook need to move away from traditional communication tones that they are used to and learn to communicate with their children on a peer basis. This achieves the equality that Giddens (1992, as cited in Solomon et al., 2002), as mentioned earlier on in our discussion, believes would result in a closer parent-child relationship.

3.2 Partner Responsiveness

Both parents and children have made use of Facebook to affirm each other. Most children left welcome messages on their parents’ Wall when they first joined Facebook. This was interpreted as a sign of acceptance and inclusion by their parents. In particular, a father responded to his son’s “Welcome to Facebook” (A3) message by writing on his son’s Wall that he is proud of his son’s achievements in school.

“I like your exuberance...I like your enthusiasm,” were comments from a mother (P6) in response to her daughter’s Status Update. She also responded accordingly to her daughter after

she read her daughter's Status Updates. "Just some of those comments tell me what she's going through at that point of time and I think that's quite helpful...you understand why somebody has been behaving the way that person has been."

However, negative responses do have the potential to jeopardize the relationship. Examples include children deleting their parents' comments or untagging family photos tagged by their parents. In one case, a child wrote on his Status Update that he had just cut his hair, to which his mother commented "you look nice with the hairstyle" (P16). The child proceeded to delete this comment off his Facebook page. A few youths also expressed disappointment when they initiated interaction with their parents over Facebook but never received a reply.

3.3 Transparency

Transparency refers to the full, accurate and timely disclosure of information. Majority of parents and children alike were transparent with each other on Facebook. This is evidenced with phrases like, "I have nothing to hide", "For him I don't restrict anything, everything is open", as well as "My mum already looks at my blog anyway, so there's nothing to hide on my Facebook". One of the youths even revealed that her family "gets the highest level of openness".

Many of the youths interviewed regarded their transparency on Facebook as an attempt to let their parents into their world and improve the relationship between them. "I'm also letting her into my private life, like letting her see how I interact with my other friends and all the pictures, so maybe in a way I'm hoping that it might bond us closer as well." (A11)

Correspondingly, many parents interviewed saw the act of their children adding them on Facebook as an indication that the child had nothing to hide from them, which in turn made them feel closer to the child. Specifically, a parent who initially faced difficulties in getting her sons to add her, showed her appreciation on his Wall, "Thanks for the add, I will treasure this." (A12)

Facilitation of transparency refers to Facebook acting as a channel to enable one to more easily reveal to another on what is happening in his life. A child announced his breakup via the change of his relationship status on Facebook. Though his mother kept silent, he was aware that she knew because she had approached another family member for verification. The child revealed that because of Facebook, he ended up taking a shorter time to tell her about the incident than he would normally have. He explained that it was because Facebook had already "pre-empted" (A14) his mother.

In contrast, A16 revealed that she hides her relationship with her boyfriend from her mother. She also consciously makes sure she does not write on her boyfriend's Wall or upload any photos of them together.

My [daughter] told me that she's not going out with this person, but through Facebook, I saw the picture. Of the two of them, the profile pic you know... So actually I think they are still going out together... I don't think I want to question her anymore... (P16)

As previously mentioned by Solomon et al. (2002), the sharing of secrets, disclosure and honesty, as well as episodes in the growing-up life of a child, contributes to a closer relationship between parent and child. In the examples highlighted above, where Facebook enabled parents to know what was really going on in the child's life, parents felt closer to their children. However, in the case where the child refuses to admit the facts, this may make it more salient to the parent that the child is hiding something. This has the potential for the parent to end up feeling more distant from the child.

3.4 Mutual Engagement of Activities

Mutual engagement of activities refers to offline occasions where both parent and child are physically side by side and interacting with each other over Facebook. The most commonly cited example was of parents and children viewing photos and videos on Facebook together. In this case, A16 illustrated the positive effects of such behaviors, “Sometimes when she’s watching it I’ll go and watch it also, so like we just laugh at the video again even though we’ve watched it like 50 times.”

In addition, the dependence on youths as the experts on Facebook also provided ample opportunities for parents and children to get together. “I think is sort of bonding... they teach us all this new technology... so more time with them, closer in a way,” said P5. As the youths guided their parents on the use of Facebook and taught them how to use the functions, parents and children had more contact with each other. This helps to bring them closer to each other.

In line with Mesch’s (2003) proposition on the use of the internet in families, Facebook has become another family activity and a new way for parents and children to engage each other. This leads to increased feelings of intimacy in the relationship.

3.5 Equality

Equality is concerned with the balance between the assertion of parental authority and the increase in a child’s autonomy. With the increasing number of parents using Facebook, children now have to share and negotiate their territory with parents. Examples of assertion of parental authority on Facebook as cited by our child interviewees were: When parents demand to be added onto their children’s contact list, when parents ask their children to delete or untag themselves from pictures the parents disapprove of, when parents ask their child to refrain from certain behaviors on Facebook, such as “don’t say this kind of stupid things”, as well as when reprimanding or disapproving comments are passed, such as the quote, “comment that I was not proper in a sense and then I was so pissed off so I deleted all my photos.” (A4)

Youths who have experienced parental authority extended towards them on Facebook have expressed a certain degree of frustration. This varies from person to person. Some, like A16, have adopted a firm stand and refused to bow down to parental pressure. “She say can you remove that photo, then I was like no!” Others have yielded to their parents’ demands, but not without a dent on the relationship. For instance, A6, a University student, has consciously told her friends to refrain from certain behaviors and comments on her Facebook Wall.

If I see something that they’ve written that my mum might take offence or be upset about then I delete it... I suppose it’s a bit frustrating cos I mean if she wasn’t on Facebook then I wouldn’t have this kind of thing... I don’t mind complying... it’s a bit of an inconvenience sometimes.” (A6)

Facebook has aided in the negotiation of power in parent-child relationships. The use of Facebook facilitates this shift of power by granting youths increased autonomy. An example of increase in autonomy by the youths would be when parents recognize that their children are maturing individuals capable of responsible behavior. They thus allow their children freedom of expression on Facebook. “They’re all adults, they’re above 21 years old” (P8). Such a statement is much appreciated by her daughter, A8, who said that “I’m not very worried about what she think when I do things because of like autonomy stuff... there’s a general level of leave-what-I-do-alone so whatever comes to her she won’t over react about it.” Unlike A6 who blocks her mother from seeing some of her albums, A8 has set the lowest security settings for family, with increasing levels of security towards other people.

With the youths now being the expert in the medium, the increase in empowerment is tangibly felt. This is especially so when parents now approach their children to teach and guide them in their use of Facebook. Youths have even been found to show protective behavior over their parents. They do this by cautioning their parents about the public nature of the Wall feature, and encourage their parents to use the personal message function instead. Parents in turn have expressed that they now depend on their children to “protect” them, as their children are more knowledgeable of the medium. In addition, the empowerment of youths to be able to decide if they want to add or reject their parent’s friend request on Facebook, signals the changing hierarchy of status between the two.

The use of Facebook has also allowed parents to recognize that they need to respect their children’s privacy. This respect has been communicated via the non-intrusive behavior of parents with regards to their children’s Facebook account. Where parents have realized that their children can manipulate privacy settings to restrict access to certain aspects of their sites, parents have accepted that it is only fair that their children would want to keep certain things private, a right of every individual.

Although assertion of parental authority can still be found on Facebook, there are also opportunities for increased autonomy of the youths on the medium. This facilitates a progression towards equality in the relationship, and leads to a closer parent-child relationship as certified in Brannen et al. (1994, as cited in Solomon et al., 2002).

3.6 Existing Relationship between Parent and Child

The existing relationship between parent and child refers to the state of intimacy between the pair before the introduction of Facebook into their relationship. An analysis of the interviews have highlighted that in cases where parent-child relationships are already very intimate, the effects of Facebook in fostering a closer relationship is less pronounced. Such can be seen from P2, on her very dependent daughter, “very open, very close relationship, small little things she will repeat so many times until I will know what is happening the whole day” and A5, “even before we join Facebook, we can talk about anything”. P16 was also able to use Facebook to learn more about the guy who was interested in her daughter only because the relationship with her daughter was close enough for her daughter to tell her so.

In comparison, P1 used Facebook to better understand and find out more about her son beyond their existing relationship. “His nature is very quiet. So I suppose this is one of the better ways to know.” One of the youths revealed that her family “gets the highest level of openness” (A8) in terms of her security settings on Facebook. To her, her mother’s viewing intentions on Facebook were somewhat “wholesome”.

Therefore, the existing relationship between parent and child is an important factor that must be taken into consideration. It affects the potential of Facebook as a tool to further enhance intimacy in the relationship. Children who have a positive relationship with their parents in real life are more likely to embrace their parents on Facebook and extend the relationship into the online environment (Kobayashi, 2007).

4. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this exploratory study was twofold. First, it studies how the use of Facebook influences how parents and children interact with each other. Secondly, it examines how communication via Facebook influences intimacy between parent-child relationships.

With regards to the first research question, this study has found that the use of Facebook allows parent and child to interact with each other in an open-minded and equal manner. Firstly, Facebook deepens mutual trust of children and parents. Youths indicated that through Facebook, they hoped to enable their parents to catch a better glimpse of their life. Many parents viewed the act of being accepted into their child's Facebook contact list as an indication that their child had nothing to hide from them. Facebook therefore acts as a platform of transparency between parent and child. This enables both to interact with each other in a positive manner.

Our findings have also revealed that Facebook acts as a bridge to connect the two generations. This is especially pertinent for the parents, because Facebook allows them to understand the younger generation better by learning about their lingo and culture. The mere act of being on Facebook itself is an indication that the parent has kept up with the times and is now on the same level as the child. By being on the same medium that the child spends a considerable amount of time on, a parent is able to better understand the world of the child and correspondingly relate better to him.

Facebook also facilitates equality between parent and child. It decreases parental authority, as well as increases child autonomy, essentially enabling parent and child to interact with the other party as equal-leveled individuals. This is brought about by various aspects, such as the mere act of parents having to obtain their child's permission before they can be added into their child's contact list. Solomon et al. (2002) found that such equality will result in closer parent-child relationships.

It was also found that youths do not perceive their parents as monitoring them on Facebook. Instead, majority of youths responded positively to their parents being on Facebook. Some even asked their friends to add their parent as a contact. In reality, parents were not intentionally policing their child on Facebook as well. Instead, they genuinely viewed Facebook as a tool which enables them to gain a better knowledge of their child. Such congruency in attitudes strengthens the sense of mutual respect in the relationship. This then allows them to interact with each other in a more positive manner.

With regards to the second research question, it was found Facebook brings positive influence on intimacy of a parent-child relationship. The increase of intimacy occurs due to interaction on Facebook, as well as interaction revolving around the use of Facebook.

Our findings have revealed that Facebook gave rise to a new field of common topics for parent and child to talk about. Facebook is thus a supplementary tool to the relationship because it provides parents and children with an additional range of topics to converse on. This can be recognised as beneficial to the relationship because Warin et al. (1999, as cited in Solomon et al., 2002) and Golish (2000) found that verbal communication plays a significant role in contributing to a close parent-child relationship.

Similarly, Facebook has provided opportunities for parent and child to mutually engage in activities such as viewing photos or videos together. Many interviewees described these episodes as enjoyable ones because it allowed them to laugh at silly antics in the photos or videos together with the other party. This is similar to what Golish (2000) found about participation of activities together leading to a closer parent-child relationship, and supports Mesch's (2003) argument about the internet being another family activity and a new way for the family to spend time together. Furthermore, it also provides evidence for Lee and Chae's (2007) suggestion that spending time on the internet and spending time with family are not mutually exclusive options.

Intimacy was also found to be affected via online disclosure of information on Facebook. Parents felt closer to their child when they were made aware of their children's activities and friends. This is made possible by the various features of Facebook that allows an individual to showcase his life, the two most salient being the photo and video functions. The role of Facebook is significant because parents are now able to view these photos and videos on their own even if the child does not take the initiative in showing it to them. Parents are even able to view photos and videos that the children's friends have uploaded on Facebook. This allows parents to be able to know the children's life even when the child either is not in the habit of taking photos and videos, or has not enough time to upload them.

The availabilities of information and possibilities of responding to each other on Facebook have changed how parents and children perceive reciprocity between them. Early studies proposed that intimacy is dependent on the reciprocation of behaviors between people (Argyle & Dean, 1965, Mutran & Reitzes, 1984, as cited in Levitt et al., 1992; Patterson, 1976, 1982, as cited in Laurenceau et al., 1998; Thompson & Walker, 1984). Later studies suggested that the perception of reciprocity is more important than the actual behavior of reciprocity itself (Antonucci & Israel, 1986, as cited in Levitt et al., 1992). Although parents in the study did not provide as much information of themselves on their Facebook page as compared to their children, this did not create feelings of a lack of reciprocity by their children. This is because the parents' lack of information was compensated by the capabilities of Facebook to allow reciprocation in other ways. This includes actual reciprocity such as commenting on the child's photos, as well as perceived reciprocity such as the transparency of the parent's online disclosure. Facebook hence acts as an additional platform of reciprocity between parent and child. It allows parents and children more opportunities to experience greater reciprocity between them, and as a result, parents and children feel closer to each other.

Lastly, our findings also revealed that Facebook has brought opportunities for parent and child to communicate love, support and encouragement to each other. This is because certain features of Facebook, such as the Status Update function, allows an individual to publicly indicate how he is feeling. This allows a parent or child to be aware of how the other party is feeling, and correspondingly respond to the other party in an appropriate way. The act of responding positively to how an individual is feeling is similar to the concept of partner responsiveness that increases intimacy in relationships (Reis and Shaver, 1988, as cited in Mitchell et al., 2008).

The nature of Facebook helps to facilitate online communication of affection. Firstly, Facebook is a familiar territory to youths and therefore provides parents a new way to communicate to their children on a platform that their children are receptive to. This supports Schwartz's (2004) suggestion that the internet can serve as an alternative tool for parents to communicate in a language and space that their children are more accustomed to. Also, the asynchronous nature of Facebook allows one individual to communicate feelings of affection while being physically away from the other person. This reduces feelings of awkwardness between both parties, and supports McKenna et al.'s (2002) argument that the internet may be beneficial for building relationships because it facilitates a greater ease of mutual self disclosure in online communication. Similarly, it provides evidence for Schwartz's (2004) proposal that the internet can be used to break down interpersonal barriers within families because it takes the intensity out of the eye-to-eye contact.

On the whole, our findings have refuted the argument by Subrahmanyam and Greenfield (2008), who proposed that the internet would reinforce peer communication at the expense of

communication with parents, who may not have sufficient knowledge of their children's online activities. Instead, this paper has found that Facebook creates opportunities for parent and child to communicate because there is an additional category of common topics between them. To add on, Facebook also allows parents to be frequently updated of their child's online and offline activities.

Overall, we have found that Facebook contributes positively to the manner in which parents and children interact with each other, as well as intimacy of a parent-child relationship. As indicated in the earlier sections, past literature has listed various factors that influence intimacy in relationships. Those factors are mostly communication behaviors that occur in face-to-face situations where people receive immediate responses. Findings in this research show that Facebook allows interaction to occur between parents and children without physically being together at the same time. Online disclosure allows an individual to feel closer to the other party by being aware of the other person's lifestyle and friends. This does not require face-to-face interaction with another. The concept of transparency also illustrates this point. By being accepted into their children's contact list, parents believe that their children are not hiding anything from them. This perception of transparency makes them feel closer to their child. Therefore, this new understanding refutes how intimacy has been understood by scholars thus far.

Such a new understanding of intimacy has significant impact with regards to a parent-child relationship. First, this means that Facebook allows parents to feel closer to their child without requiring frequent face-to-face interactions with them. Since today's youths are highly active on Facebook, parents can take advantage of this situation by jumping on the bandwagon to find out more about their children through this medium. Second, with Facebook, parents are now aware and up-to-date with the ongoing in their children's lives without having to constantly ask them about their whereabouts. Doing so may be a source of tension in the relationship, as it may be perceived as an intrusion of privacy by children. In this light, Facebook is therefore a product of the information age which allows parents to marry the conflicting notions of being kept aware of their children's lives, while at the same time giving them their space for privacy and independence.

The cues filtered out approach helps to explain how Facebook facilitates the communication of affection between parent and child. As certain nonverbal cues present in face-to-face interactions are absent in CMC, parents and children are able to communicate affection to each other from a "safety zone" without feeling shy or awkward. This is especially relevant in Asian cultures where people are known to be more reserved with regards to face-to-face displays of affection. The *cues filtered out approach* therefore enables us to understand how Facebook fosters positive relationship development between parent and child. This is achieved through an easier way to communicate affection online.

This approach is also able to explain how Facebook further enhances the relationship by facilitating equality between parent and child. The approach suggests that online communication promotes equality in the relationship because of the lack of social status cues that are present in face-to-face communication (Kim, 2000). This cancels any difference in hierarchical status between the two parties, and they therefore end up communicating to each other as equal-leveled individuals. This effect of the cues filtered out approach on the individuals was termed as *equalization phenomenon* by Dubrovsky, Kiesler and Sethna (1991).

No study has applied the equalization phenomenon to parent-child relationships (Dubrovsky et al., 1991; Herring, 1993, as cited in Lee, Sim, Tan & Detenber, 2006). This paper proposes that it can be extended to a parent-child relationship because a similar equalization

phenomenon occurs between parent and child when they communicate over Facebook. In the absence of social status cues on Facebook, parents are unable to assert their authority over their children on this medium. Without social status cues, children are able to be more empowered as an individual, such as being able to decide if they want to grant parents entry into their world. The nature of the SNS as a platform to interact with friends prompts parents and children to treat each other in the same manner as they treat equal-leveled peers. In the process, parents and children negate the difference in hierarchical status between both parties. An absence of social status cues on Facebook thus brings about equality between parent and child. This study therefore believes that the equalization phenomenon can be applied to a parent-child relationship. The equalization phenomenon is relevant to parents and children because children desire and seek to negotiate for more equality in status during this phase of life. Achievement of equality is believed to be beneficial to the relationship (Solomon et al., 2002), and Facebook facilitates the attainment of this equality via the cues filtered out approach.

4.1 Limitations and Future Research

As this was an exploratory study, the results cannot be generalized to the larger population. Furthermore, our findings might be limited by the fact that all parent-child pairs that we interviewed had a neutral to good existing relationship prior to the parents' entry onto Facebook. Nonetheless, findings from this study are significant because no study has yet to investigate how SNSs affect parent-child relationships (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008).

This study interviewed parent and child separately. As we promised confidentiality to each participant, we were unable to obtain the first party's response on an issue that the second party later brought up. Future researchers may want to consider interviewing both parent and child together at the same time to get both parties' perspectives on the same issues discussed. However, it must be noted that such an arrangement might lead to a reduced degree of honesty in the presence of the other party. Other studies may also want to devise a method to control for the level of competency across all participants. This is because how competent an individual is in being able to use Facebook may influence the effect of the medium on the relationship. In addition, future research can also study the effects of ethnicity as well as gender on parent-child relationships on Facebook.

Future research should consider a longitudinal study, tracking the development of the relationship from the moment a parent starts a Facebook account. This is supported by Subrahmanyam and Greenfield (2008) argue that the best way to investigate the effects of technology on a relationship is to begin the study before the technology is introduced into the relationship.

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