Mum. Dad. Do you need some help with that? Empowering older Australians in a digital era.

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Abstract

The change to a digital environment for Australian families is more than simply adopting internet connectivity or a mobile phone. Moving from an analog environment and into a digital sphere for many individuals is confronting: the transition requires digital media literacy, that is an understanding of devices, forms of connectivity, installation of devices and how best to use digital connectivity to connect with other family members. In this Australian study the interviewees revealed that tensions occur between middle and older adults as both generations try to understand the effect of the change to a digital environment on each other and navigate the best path that enables communication and connection between family members. This paper will primarily draw on the interviews held with middle adult John and his mother Vera[1].

Keywords

Older adults; digital media literacy; families

Methodology

The adoption and practice of digital communication technologies of two generations, youth and elderly has been the subject of much international research (Lim and Tan, 2003; Lally, 2002; Ling, 2004; Wong, 2006). However, there is a hidden group of consumers in the 'gap', the middle adults. The middle adults who as individuals and in their roles as parents to some, and children to others have distinctly different needs from the individualized groups of youth and elderly. For this group, digital technology, and their uses for it seem much more mundane but are in fact integral to the family unit as they form the pivot point between generations.

The larger study offers a unique insight into intra-generational digital communication between family members, and specifically middle adults and their older adult parents. A few communication studies are framed using nuclear families with parents and children (Canon and Caronia, 2001; Green, Holloway and Quin, 2004; Lally, 2002; Lim and Tan, 2003), however the majority of studies use parts of a family such as intergenerational generations like grandparents and grandchildren or a single familial generation such as the elderly (Haddon, 2000; Ling, 2007; Wong 2006). Sometimes studies are framed around a particular gender and their adoption of technology (Dare, 2008; Dobashi, 2005; Gray, 1995; Rose 2004). Another common framework is to investigate aspects of family communication as part of a larger investigation on cultural practices such as the Nordic region of Europe (Kaare et al., 2007). This study is unique in that it investigates families from a familial generational position such as youth, middle adult and older adult recognizing that within families there are distinct familial responsibilities and expectations placed on each generation.

The focus of this paper is the tensions that arise between the middle adults (who were the largest respondent group in the study) and their older adult parents in relation to technology adoption and practice. The explosion of multiple internet devices within homes places greater emphasis on the need for individuals to be digitally literate in order to be socially included. In 2010 a study revealed that over 50% of all Melbourne homes use four internet enabled devices (Thom, 2010, para 3). The data for this paper comes from 11 face-to-face interviews with middle and older adults from 8 families. The interviews were in-depth and unstructured with a focus on understanding the broader study question of

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[1] All participant names have been changed and pseudonyms used for reasons of privacy.

how the generations of family 'youth', 'middle' and 'older adult' communicate with each other using digital communication technologies.

Results and Discussion

During their interviews the middle adults offered their reflections of their older adult parents use of digital communication technologies. These can be categorized into disinterest, resistance and lack of conceptual understanding. Older adults expressing a disinterest or resistance to technology is well documented (Haddon, 2000; Palmer, 2011; Wong, 2006; Wyatt, 2003). This paper focuses on the third barrier identified in this study a lack of conceptual understanding. Unlike disinterest or resistance, a lack of conceptual understanding is not tied with the older adults inability to use the device but rather the inability to recall or learn new features because they fail to understand the basic premise on which the communication technology works. For these older adults it causes confusion and they often self-deprecate their abilities with the device and its applications.

In this study older adult and part time worker Vera indicates in her interview that she fails to understand digital technologies and demonstrates a lack of understanding in her everyday practice. While her son John can explain to her about how a particular device works and indeed write instructions when needed, Vera often fails to comprehend how things correlate, even if it may be a similar task that she completes daily. Therefore when something goes wrong, Vera gives up hope as she has a complete lack of understanding about the device and how it works. This can sometime create tension between her and John as he works hard to help her understand technology. John assists his mother with computer software, her entertainment system at home, her personal laptop and the setting up of her wireless connection at home. John demonstrates empathy for Vera and it motivates him to assist. He considers her lack of skill within context,

> "My mum learnt how to write shorthand, which is a lost art these days ... I would contrast me trying to me trying to learn shorthand is like my mum trying to understand computer technology. I don't understand shorthand at all … it's the same that I could be taught a squiggle is an F, but I wouldn't understand why and how she got the squiggle to be an F. It's the same with computers to her".

The tension discussed above between Vera and John is common between the middle adults and their older adult parents in this study. However rather than holding a negative perspective in the main the middle adults in this study supported their older adult parents lack of conceptual understanding through empowerment. Empowering older adults in this study involved providing access as well as supporting education. Different approaches were taken by the participants to teach their parents how to use technology. Some participants provided written instructions and guidelines (John for Vera), while Simon encouraged his father to enroll in short courses. Having themselves taken advantage of peer based learning some of the middle adults (Simon, Andrea and Beth) encouraged their parents to do the same. Peer based learning for older adults is acknowledged as one of the most effective teaching methods (Palmer, 2011).

Conclusion

The tensions that arose between the middle adults and their older adult parents in this study resulted in proactive measures on the part of the middle adults. Keen to get their parents using digital communication technologies it can be argued that they found positive methods of engaging their parents in technology by assisting with adoption and fostering empowerment through peer based learning where possible. Some middle adults also demonstrated empathy with their parents as can be seen in John's statement about Vera's shorthand skills. This empathy also encouraged John to see past his mother's inability to understand technology and to assist where possible with instructions and 'How to' graphics when she asked for help.

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