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BUILDING INTER-GENERATIONAL TIES WITH COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

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Terms such as the "television generation" and "digital natives" seem to offer a convenient shorthand for describing media consumers of different eras. Going beyond these catchy labels, the generational approach to understanding media consumers can indeed present productive inroads into offering guidance to families on how to bridge intergenerational communication gaps. In this issue, A/P Lim Sun Sun, a CFPR Research Associate and Associate Professor of the NUS Department of Communications and New Media, as well as the Assistant Dean of Research in FASS shares how the generational approach can inform the building of inter-generational ties with communication technology.

The Value of Generational Analysis

The "media generations" approach posits that different generations can be distinguished by the media they avidly use in their youth, are united by this shared experience, and will consequently sustain a special connection with that medium for the rest of their lives. In other words, media generations have cultural, temporal, and technological dimensions that collectively shape subsequent engagement with media content and contexts.

How does a generational framework aid in our understanding of media consumers? Prior research has amply demonstrated that the generational approach has been used to productively map different generations in terms of their initial introduction to media, media use patterns, exposure to media content, attitudes towards media and technology, and media literacy skills. Hence, the generational approach to understanding the predilections, gratifications, and impediments encountered by media consumers can usefully inform public education, policy planning, and parental mediation. With specific regard to parental mediation, a generational approach can help to chart the extent and nature of divergence between parents and children in their media use. By doing so, recommendations can be made for building intergenerational bridges leading to more effective communication.

Identifying Sustainable Intergenerational Bridges

Research on children, adolescents, and the media is often conducted in the family context, seeking to identify intergenerational communication gaps. These gaps are due in part to intergenerational differences in how communication technologies are used and interpreted. Nevertheless, these asymmetries in parents' and children's expectations, competencies and values surrounding communication technologies can be harnessed as intergenerational bridges for fostering greater dialogue in the family. As researchers, we need to actively track the varied pace at which different generations of the family are adopting new communication technologies and chart the divergences that have to be bridged. At the same time, how can we be more attuned

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to new technologies that are more inclusive and can serve as sustainable intergenerational bridges?

To address this question, I reflected on my past decade of studying communication in family settings and considered how communication technologies have evolved, even as families' needs for interaction and relationship building are a constant. A local study I conducted in 2003, when broadband internet was pervasive and mobile phone penetration was close to

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saturation, focused on older adult parents and their communication with their children. Within the home, the main personally-used and personally-owned devices were basic feature phones and laptops, while shared media devices included the landline telephone, television, and desktop computer. Some of the parents in our study were not especially adept at IT but were making efforts to learn how to use the computer and the internet so as to better connect with their children. When we asked one mother if she had considered asking her adolescent children to teach her, she expressed alarm:

> *I don't want to learn from the children! I don't want them to scold me. When I see how my son scolds his father when he teaches him how to use the computer, I get very scared. You know we old people are a bit forgetful sometimes. I don't want him to scold me like that! I took up computer lessons in the mosque. It's cheap - only $25 - and the people there are very very patient. They repeat over and over again until you understand.* (Lim & Tan, 2004, p. 62)

It did not appear as if her endeavours would translate into concrete long-term benefits, because her use of the shared home computer was simply too infrequent for her to hone her skills. Notably too, since individually-owned and individually-used multimedia devices such as smartphones and tablets were not yet in existence, feature phones were still the most pervasive devices, and functions such as texting were beyond the capabilities of many of our older adult respondents:

> *My children use their mobile phones to play games and what is that – the press and press thing to communicate with friends? [Tries to imitate the action of pressing mobile phone keys to compose SMS messages]* (Lim & Tan, 2004, p. 61)

In contrast, a more recent study we conducted focusing on communication between emerging adults and their ageing parents found that parents in their 60s were actively communicating with their children via Facebook and WhatsApp on their smartphones and tablets. These parents, whose children were not usually homebound, leverage such messaging platforms to maintain intermittent contact with their children throughout the day to compensate for the lack of face-to-face interaction. They continue to parent their children by sending reminders, offering advice, or sharing inspiring stories they come across:

> *We started a family WhatsApp group, it's only the four of us and we call it "The Lee Family" and we posted our whole family's photo there. Besides all the common talk and instructions for the children, sometimes if we want to share useful info with them... Like recently, I came across a touching video of how the young children treat the old folks, meaningful*

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videos, I'll post it. Practically trying to educate them, or remind them.

Unlike computers, these personally-owned mobile devices are more user-friendly, with multi-language capabilities, thus requiring a lower skill threshold. Interestingly, this group of older adults did not have much prior experience in computers or the internet, but had engaged in a form of technological "leapfrogging" by heading straight for smartphones and tablets. Their communication with their children via these mobile devices offers a sustainable intergenerational bridge that is likely to reap them dividends for some time to come. Therefore, with the emergence of more intuitive and customisable communication devices and services with multi-media capabilities, even individuals with minimal prior exposure to technology and limited literacy can benefit from new communicative modes. Communication platforms that aim to promote intergenerational communication must also offer both asynchronous and synchronous features so as to grant individual users flexibility to adapt different functions to their needs and proclivities.

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With such innovations, we can more strategically exploit our increasingly fertile media landscape to discover and cultivate intergenerational bridges that can meaningfully and sustainably connect different generations within each family. However, generational analysis must be undertaken with care so that the complexities of our transient mediascape are meticulously captured in light of the relentless pace of change. We need to be alert to disruptive innovations that can entrench themselves very quickly, with discernible impact on how people communicate. It is also crucial for us to steer clear of blunt generalisations and homogenisation. To do so, we should endeavour to chart salient media trends of different generations, while also casting our net wider and paying special attention to sub-populations that do not accord with the norm. Finally, of course, given the rapid renewal in our media landscape, we need to constantly and assiduously revisit our definitions of prevailing media generations in terms of their temporal demarcations, dominant media practices, and significant technological transitions.

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