Media Technologies: Mediated Families

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This paper examines the impacts of consumption in Computer Mediated Environment (CME) on family structure. The ethnographic study uses observation and interactions with 20 families in Ireland to provide emic positions and meanings that are analysed to yield four themes; Empowerment – Disempowerment, Social Aggregation – Social Alienation, Immersion – Disengagement and Experimentation – Deviation. Taking the position that consumption in CME is more a solitary than shared activity, it argues that such individual consumption choices impact by altering the constitutive roles members are assigned or themselves assume in a family.

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary lived experiences, as products of countless possible life-worlds, are ever evolving and thus many may remain outside existing conceptual boundaries (Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1990). Fluidity in means and modes of consumption allows a consumer to use any of the countless permutations and combinations of social, cultural and technological components to create a unique life-world (Bauman 2000). The dynamic nature of contemporary social, cultural and technological orders allows the creation of new ‘social collectivities’ (Holt 1997) around consumption that challenge the structure and dynamics of established social institutions (Kaslow 2001).

It can be argued that the problems and challenges faced by social units such as families are microsystemic representations of the larger contextual dynamism of economic, technological and socio-political orders. Experimentation with newer modes and forms of consumption (such as in cyberspace) creates a ‘phenomenologically-global’ that effectively erodes the control of the ‘geographically-local’ (Gergen 1991). Cyberspace has emerged as a new consumption enabler and, as a consumption space within Computer Mediated Environments (CMEs), acts as a locus of social and cultural existence for individuals and communities of consumption in trans-global social spaces. There are polarised views regarding the social impacts of cyberspatial consumption; resonant themes like consumer empowerment are countered by arguments that cyberspatial social ties negatively affect an individual’s geographically-local social involvement (Kraut et. el. 1998).

Within consumer research, consumption of technology in familial contexts has been an under researched topic, and its impacts have thus not been fully explored. Families choosing to consume in CME are perhaps what Canniford (2005) calls an unconceptualised group. This research is aimed at addressing some of these voids by seeking to understand how individual acts of consumption in CME affect both family structure and dynamics.

In this paper, the possible roles consumption in CME plays in transforming family dynamics are examined through an ethnographic study carried out in Ireland. In the following sections, family consumption in general is contextualized. The methodology is then discussed, followed by some ideographic data. The four major themes that emerged out of data analysis are first presented independently, and are then placed in a family structure context to illustrate the impacts such forms of consumption can have. The paper concludes by discussing the applicability of such micro-level findings on society at large.

Conceptualizing Contemporary Family and Consumption

The traditional notion of a family is hierarchically structured around legally and biologically related individuals, with each individual assigned a certain role (parent, homemaker, breadwinner and child) and associated expected behaviour (Bloom and Bennett 1986, Blossfeld and Huinink 1991). However, newer socio/psychodynamic paradigms are defining the contemporary family; no longer limited to union through heterosexual marriage and biological offspring alone, contemporary families are best defined as groups of individuals living together with social, emotional or legal ties and mutual commitments (Ambry 1992, Kaslow 1995, Barnett and Hyde 2001, Lee and Schninger 2002). Changes in family structure and dynamics alter the consumption context for its members. Where consumption practices of traditional family units are influenced by the presence of young children (Wilkes 1995), non-traditional family structures and composition yield unique family consumption behaviours (Schaninger and Danko 1993), driven more by self-fulfilling individual choices than by collective actions and commitments (Rindfleisch, Burroughs and Denton 1997).

METHODOLOGY

Deviations and re-alignments from social and cultural norms and structures are often exhibited at a geographically local level. Although consumption in a mediated environment, as a purely cyberspatial phenomenon, is not geographically bounded, it has profound impacts at the local level (Escobar 1994). Both Netnography (Kozinets 1998 and 2002) and traditional ethnography (Miller and Slater 2000) have been effectively used to explore many dimensions of consumption in CME. Studying social clusters such as families requires a geographically local approach. I thus chose traditional ethnography to explicate the impacts of consumption of CME technologies on family structure.

The data for this year long study was collected during my residency in a suburban housing scheme in Mullingar, about 60 miles west of Dublin. Twenty households were accessed during the study period (between August 2004 and July 2005). Immediate neighbours were the initial target group, but as happens with any longitudinal study, the target population shrank with time. All subject families with two exceptions boasted a traditional familial structure (married couples with children). The two exceptions were one divorced single mother and one unmarried couple. All subject families were upper-middle-class households possessing at least one computer with an online connection. Nine of these families had more than one computer and a broadband connection as well, and all except one had other immersive interactive consumption platforms like Play-station or Xbox console. Close liaison and contact with the subject families enabled access to all the members as well as some individuals from their extended social circle.

The dataset comprised several short and depth interviews, field notes from several participant observation sessions and notes on frequent front-door chit-chat highlighting the goings-on in daily lives. Many of the interviews and observation sessions were impromptu, informal and un-structured, and most were either transcribed longhand or recorded through field notes later.

Transcripts and field notes were periodically coded and interpreted to detect patterns of behaviour or identify themes. Sometimes when a strong theme or pattern was identified, the emic view was placed against the etic and new lines of enquiry were established. This evolving ethnographic approach using the emic-etic interplay to guide the process of data collection (Kozintes et.al. 2004), made reference and review of literature a permanent part of the study. Periodically, themes were pruned and readjusted and insignificant themes were replaced by newer stronger ones. However, since most data collection was naturalistic in a small sample of population, enquiry and explication along themes of interest was not always possible and thus some themes did remain unsaturated.

DATA SET

This section presents ideographic demographics (Table 1) and observational accounts through family sketches (Exhibit A). The intention behind presenting such an account is only to capture the
ethnography of the ethnographic narrative. A non-analytical approach is used in preparation of this largely observational account and emic view, lived experiences and interrelationships between acts and impacts are presented and discussed later.

DATA ANALYSIS

In keeping with evolving ethnographic study, data collection and analysis in this study were concurrent activities. Although some observed behavioural and interactional phenomena were unique in contextual terms, there were similarities in the way they impacted on different families. Collective patterns emerged where diverse acts and situations enacted and experienced by different actors were observed as having similar impacts on the family as a unit. As themes emerged from this collective analytical process, they became part of a framework. Each time new data were analysed, this analytical framework was refined and updated. This procedure was repeated till saturation was reached for most themes. At the end of this process the thematic framework constituted of the following four themes.

1. **Empowerment–Disempowerment**
2. **Social Aggregation–Social Alienation**
3. **Immersion–Disengagement**
4. **Experimentation–Deviation**

These themes are presented as pairs where the first component highlights the operative condition and the second its possible resultant impact. Empowerment of an individual changes his relative position in the immediate social group which might manifest individual. Social encounters and ties in cyberspace often alter the composition of an individual’s social reference group and may result in social alienation with immediate family members. The phenomenological nature of immersive experiential consumption in cyberspace disengages an individual from his physical world, and finally experimentation in the virtual domain can manifest itself as social and cultural deviation. These themes are discussed in detail in the following.

1. **Empowerment–Disempowerment**

This theme highlights the empowerment accorded to consumers by CME technologies and the relative polar position of disempowerment. The internet has evolved as a social and commercial enabler. It empowers a consumer to work from home, shop from his bed; run errands while keeping children company; conduct research as well as entertain himself from the comfort of his home. Consumers who choose not to, or are unable to navigate cyberspace, are disadvantaged by not being able to enjoy the convenience and benefits online marketplaces offer.

Within a familial context, computer proficiency can be an empowering resource for an individual. Conversely, inadequacy in the new technological realm may increase co-dependence in relationships. This is illustrated by the case of Sheila, wife of Adam. Her computer proficiency altered the status of co-dependence in their relationship.

Yeah, I got this NCT booking done online for my car. I also pay road tax online, I mean now that it is so easy, and can be done from home—I am not dependant on Adam in this way, In fact,

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I do a few things for him…. like recently we were up for insurance renewal, I saw that ad on TV and went online and I found a much cheaper quote—for his car as well…. well yeah, now he says you go do it, may be he has realized that I can do it better. (Sheila)

Where at one level Sheila’s computer proficiency had enhanced her stature in her co-dependant relationship with her husband, at another level this empowerment had given her a feeling of ‘being better’. This somewhat competitive feeling of being better at some tasks often shifts the role and responsibility structures in families. It was observed that a few computer literate women were either delegated to, or themselves took the responsibility for performing online tasks like banking, paying bills and taxes, booking flights, hotel and appointments as well as buying cinema tickets.

Online product search and shopping is another significant area within this theme. Consumers who would normally find it difficult to negotiate the maze of supermarkets’ brand constellations may become easily accustomed to the online format. Although shopping was evidently an interdependent family activity in the core informant group, there were also indications that use of the internet was mediating these interdependencies to some extent. As an illustration, in the early stages of the study, it was observed that because our informant Lisa did not drive, she was dependant on her husband Mike to take her shopping. Mike however, was mostly a passive participant in such shopping trips and depended on Lisa to make all decisions. Towards the end of the study, Lisa had started product searching and shopping online and Mike had now become an active participant in this exercise. When probed, it became evident that technology’s mediation was a significant contributor to this change.

It’s not shopping, choosing what to buy is tricky, stressful really, and I make so many mistakes, but it’s not like your car or machines where there are specifications to compare, yeah, but may be its cathartic to women I suppose (household shopping), they are natural at it, —— online, it’s a man’s ball game—now you have tools to compare them side by side, I guess it’s a good thing these days. (Mike)

But Mike’s use of technology to negotiate the supermarket maze was not unique, as another informant Mark, employed the same means to a different end. Mark and his wife Lorna’s use of online shopping was fairly sophisticated, as they had made shopping baskets of their preferred brands and products which they used in their shopping selection. They had discovered that with each online order their shopping baskets got more precise as the software remembered their usual requirements of weekly consumables, automatically adding them to their order, which they could modify if required. Lorna felt that online grocery shopping had not only reduced ‘oh I forgot to get that’ occurrences resulting in constant revisits to the store, but had also allowed her more time with her kids.

However, not all online shopping activities are so clearly goal directed and produce tangible life effecting results. Our informant John worked as a security supervisor in a Dublin bar and found his job physically and emotionally exhausting. He seldom participated...
in household chores and specially did not like to participate in family shopping. However, as a keen surfer, he found bargain hunting through online auctions and clearance sales a very interesting activity. Although he would still not go shopping himself, he would compare prices on various store sites and provide tips to his partner Jennifer, who on the other hand, found such an exercise futile.

O Come on, I mean you don’t buy things unseen, and you know what John does, he opens up a few sites, Aldi and Lidl and Tesco and Argos and he give me a summary, Oh its much cheaper there, this is new and that’s a bargain, well do we really need it? And who knows about the quality—that’s not how you shop! It’s like his hobby you know, and I am happy for him. (Jennifer)

Here Jennifer is apparently dismissive of John’s well meaning efforts to participate in family shopping decisions through his online search of supermarket sites. Her classification of his contribution as ‘hobby’ suggests that, in their household at least, the impact of online activity on the existing shopping power structure may be quite limited. Her espousal of ‘real-world’ shopping may well have more to do with maintaining this status-quo than with extolling the merits of one specific mode of shopping. On the other hand, because this ‘online window shopping’ was part of John’s larger recreational use of internet, we can also see it as an attempt to buffer his job stresses by making him feel successful in finding bargains and being useful to the family (Barnett and Hyde 2001).

Work-life balance is one of the key quests in contemporary families. CME technologies empower individuals to enhance their work-life balance by working from home. Telecommuting allowed one informant to commit more emotional resources to his family, Mike, who worked partially from home (see exhibit A), felt the simultaneous multi-tasking in physical and cyber space was beneficial to him.

Well I could go five days a week, but why? Saves me driving, and allows me to be home more. I do have the computer on during the day and sort of keep an eye on the mail, you know, so they know I am available ——— I know it’s a lifestyle thing, but I think its all about balance between your work and your family. (Mike)

Telecommuting in his case was empowering both spouses, enabling them to share parental and wage-earner roles. Where it allowed Mike to spend more time at home with their very young children, it empowered his wife to take up part-time employment. What is also important to note here is that working from home through telecommuting may offer a lot more potential than just working, as it has the propensity to become a lifestyle.

A majority of our cohort of informants considered that providing knowledge and information was a home computer’s primary function, and on several occasions parents were observed encouraging children to go to the internet for information first. Some of these parents were also struggling to keep up with their children’s quest for knowledge, occasionally finding them inadequately equipped. Home computers have been around for a few years now, and some teenagers in this study had been using them since early childhood. However, these ‘generation txt’ (Thurlow 2003a) teenagers, like Lorraine, have come to a point now where they would rather go to the ‘net’ than ask their parents.

‘no it’s much easier to find it on the net, isn’t it? and then I mean I doubt the older generation know as much about what’s out there now, I mean what’s cool and what’s passé (Lorraine)

Knowing what’s cool and what is passé have always been at the forefront of social desirability for the youngest adult generation. Where permissive parents in our group acknowledged the existence of these generational gaps and were thus willing to allow their children’s online activities, at the same time they did make a conscious effort to control the content their children accessed.

They are not allowed to go wild on the internet, at least not in this house. I mean kids, they have to be told their limits—now Nathan is good in this way, he knows what he is allowed. Kevin (pause) likes to explore, and so I have made Nathan the internet sheriff—to keep an eye on things when I am not there. (Jackie)

Jackie was not alone, as I found other parents trying to supervise their children’s online activities by employing all possible means. Where Jackie had delegated this responsibility to one of the siblings by according him the status of a third parent, others had installed supervision software. Cyberspace, however, is a social world, and children may soon become entangled in the web and separated from their parent’s reach and knowledge spheres. Internet thus empowers children to widen the generational gap at their discretion, and even disenfranchise parents from being a part of this process. Exploring the web independently, children may also try to evade adult company or supervision during the activity. The dilemmas parents face in trying to keep the situation under control is amply evident from Adam’s response below.

Broadband, internet, it’s funny but I find it very much like this world, you know, there are good things about it, and bad things on it.

And how do you deal with it?

Turn the freaking thing off, I suppose what else? I mean you have doors, right, and then you shut them to keep the evil out…. for your kids. Internet to my mind is that evil that got in through the doors, it’s in your house now, and you have little control. (Adam)

Controlling and mediating the social and cultural encounters is one of the primary parental responsibilities. Parents do so by limiting and controlling the social exposure and children are discouraged from talking to strangers or watching adult television programs. Adam’s feeling of loss of control over internet access represents the common parental fear of subversion of authority in terms of regulation of social exposure. The cyberworld, like a real world in virtual settings, can impact on an individual through social and cultural encounters. Unaware of their children’s online social and cultural encounters, parents are unable to mediate this exposure and channel this learning process. In this study parents who would normally have debriefed children after independent social encounters like school, parties or playground sessions, would often fail to practice such a debriefing after online or video game sessions.

In summing up all the dimensions examined under this theme, it appears that family members can benefit from the products and services available in the CME by removing and overcoming many of their inadequacies and by becoming able to assume additional roles. Since empowerment is a relative position, this role assump-
tion can be complementary and facilitative as well as competitive in the family. It may also appear that in some cases one member’s empowerment is at another’s expense, and the empowered can thus assume stronger roles in the family.

2. Social Aggregation–Social Alienation

This theme contextualizes the social alienation family members sometimes experience when they utilize the aggregation potential of cyberspace to expand their social sphere. Because many members of a family also have biological relationships, their emotional ties to each other are qualitatively different from other types of social associations. Family members have always been considered a strong and closely knit social group because of the interdependencies and sharing in their collective lives. Sharing of values and heritage, space, objects and possessions as well as time makes their experiential repository similar in many ways.

With the advent of new modes of mediated consumption, the phenomenology of a consumption experience has become partly independent of the tangible environment. By dissolving the distinction of place, sense of time and value of objects, a mediated environment may allow an individual to create independent social worlds through networked communications (Schau and Gilly 2003) while still sharing space, objects and possessions with other family members. Social encounters and ties in cyberspace often alter the composition of an individual’s social reference group and may result in social alienation from immediate family members (Kraut et. al. 1998). Distinctiveness and exclusivity is an inherent component of many familial relationships. Cyber-relationships take diverse forms and some cyber-emotional ties can compete for Emotional space within a family. However, some informants believed that because of the ethereal nature of cyberspatial social ties, any emotional investment in this technologically created social order did not impact their familial bonds.

It’s all about choices isn’t it, I mean between my job and travelling, I have limited time for other things, you know what I mean, and and my time on the net is my entertainment–so to say, I don’t think I would be spending more time with Jen or kids if not online, ah but, ah may be watch teevee or something. Can TV do the same for you?

Oooo No sure, no, maybe not, I mean net is alive, tv to me is a dead thing you know, I mean I meet people, see what they are doin, find new things– so it’s a lot more interesting to me? Do so much more than sitting watching tv with the kids. (John)

John’s desire for social encounters in cyberspace is justified through presenting it both as a preferred and as a richer source of social aggregation. For John TV watching en’ famille was apparently a disliked and disputed activity and furnished him with a rationale for opting for online engagement in its place. However, consumption in CME as a solitary immersive activity exhibits itself as ‘being away while at home’. John’s justification for ‘doing more than watching TV with the kids’ perhaps represents the separation in the family through his choice to spend the collective social time in a solitary activity.

In my observation of families, the strains on available resources of time and emotions were visible at many other times when an investment of these was made in cyberspace. Although the use of cyberspace as an alternate social platform varied considerably within our extended group of families, there were consistent indications that such social ties were impacting the family as a whole. The overall perspective of most of my informant families was that they would like to have a balanced approach towards this alternate use of private time, and thus excessive solitary immersive activities (such as chatting sessions or video gaming) by an individual were often overtly disapproved of by other members. Jonathan’s family was a case in point, where his wife Nora continually complained about his overtures on chat forums and considered it a minor form of infidelity.

Familial context is considered to have the greatest influence on consumer socialization and leaves lifelong imprints (Moschis 1985). Levels of family communication are indicative of close familial bonds and affect family members’ independent consumption choices (Carlson, Walsh, Lacziñak and Grossbart 1994). Such communication between family members is also conducive to social learning and patterning, and parents often use it to warn of undesirable external influences. However, digital textuality has altered the mode, form and content of communications of ‘generation txt’, and parents are often unable to communicate with their children because they simply speak a different language (Thurlow 2003b).

This digital lifestyle is apparently irreversible, and young people are increasingly socializing through digital means. It was observed that such socialization trends started as text chatting in children as young as 10 and, by the time they were 14, most were communicating and socializing through the internet on a regular basis. Cyberspatial socialization is not always entirely experiential and virtual, as in Irish chatrooms, it is quite common to be invited by strangers for a rendezvous. Forming new relationships in such a dramatic fashion appeared to fascinate one teenage informant:

Oh yeah, off and on you get this guy who wants to meet up. And have you ever met someone this way?

O gosh no, I have no reason, now I am not saying I might never will, who knows about the future (pause) now my friend met her boyfriend like that, through the net I mean, so I know you can meet some really nice guys like that. (Lorraine)

New relationships in cyberspace can either be manifested as real person to person social or emotional ties or seemingly innocuous cyber-chitchat with online others. Individuals’ social and emotional involvements are relative to each other and each time an investment in new cyber-bond is made, familial bonds may risk deterioration.

3. Immersion–Disengagement

This theme is about separation of the phenomenal world from the physical, and the impact such separation has on both individuals and family. CME, because of its multi-sensory captive immersive ability (Biocca 1997), is a very potent platform for experiential consumption. Consumers have now come to accept simulations in lieu of the real, and multi-sensory immersion has thus become an alternate mode of consumption. The most common immersive applications of CME in my observation were the videogames, and I found our informant Lisa very concerned about the nature and content of this mode of consumption.

It's not all Barney and Barbie stuff out there is it. I mean most games are death and fire and destruction and kill kill, shhhhhhh … you should look at their faces when they are playing it. Lisa

When video-gaming is opted for as an alternative to a physical activity it may affect the way an individual perceives and reacts to his physical world. In a positive constructive manner, simulators using similar technology have long been used in training and practice for many sports and professions. However, recreational
videogames are not primarily aimed at imparting skills in a simulated environment. One of the critical reflections emanating from observations of video gaming sessions in participating households was that the majority of these games were hyperreal glorifications of violence in which gory aggression was presented as a form of sport. Although difficult to critically evaluate and empirically establish on the basis of existing data, one field note suggested that such violent video game players became “disengaged from their immediate physical and social world”.

I found Kevin (13) an extreme video-gamer. At the time of this study he was also learning Karate at the local gym. There were indications that his videogame obsession was disengaging him from real life as well as conditioning his responses. He had become so used-to surprise combatants in his video-games that he had started to live in fear of the next surprise appearance of a deadly foe in his real life. He once had a panic attack during his karate training sessions. It was a wonderful summer that year, but during this phase he seldom ventured out of the house. His mother told me that he was sleeping through the day and was scared of going into unknown buildings like new grocery stores or shopping malls. On occasions that I did see him outdoors, he was constantly looking over his shoulders and changing positions and would involuntarily hit siblings when they approached him.

4. Experimentation–Deviation

Cyberspace has emerged as a playground for experimenting consumers. Because cyberspace allows individuals to pursue their hobbies and fantasies in alternate social dimensions, ever since Rheingold (1993), it has continually been depicted as a domain largely populated by emancipated ‘nerds’ and wayward ‘geeks’ satiating their countercultural urges. However, I was observing and interacting with a very ‘normal’ segment of the society in ‘traditional’ social clusters, and within my cohort I observed diverse ways of experimental cyber-consumption; where cyber-sexual experimentation was a lifestyle for some, online gambling and competition was a source of recreation for others. Our informant Jennifer was an avid online poker fan and her partner John liked online adult content. The following dialogue between John and Jennifer highlights some of the contrasting views consumers may have regarding experimental consumption in cyberspace.

John: she is the gambler
Jennifer: no I am not, poker, it’s called poker and it’s not gambling
John: you bet money, it’s gamble
Jennifer: your eBay gamble too? you bet money there!
John: Yeah but I am sure to get something in the end–it’s not a zero-sum game

Here John’s labelling of Jennifer’s passion as gambling is an attempt to portray it as deviation from his own social and cultural viewpoint, and Jennifer’s attempt to equate bargain hunting with poker is perhaps towards claiming legitimacy for her own actions. Technology has always been at the forefront of gaming and marketers now use it to control the odds and position it in larger segments of population. With the advent of new media technologies gambling as a form of consumption has entered traditional households and I found that Irish women were increasingly experimenting with it.

Sexual experimentation is another form of consumption in cyberspace. Ireland has its share of adult content websites and chat forums which have tens of thousands of members. John was one of these members, and he gave his view about a particular Irish website as follows.

Oh I love them, I mean if you look at the content, it’s far richer than what your TV or videos or magazines would give you, and everything is on-demand and instant, well sort of, but most of it free anyway–yeah I’d say, go try one of them daily tips you have on www.xxxxxxxx (site identity concealed by authors), some are gags really, but there are gooduns as well. (John)

A cursory examination of adult sites reveals that some of them are designed to target teenagers and young adults. Many Irish teenagers access such sites for sexual information. Our informant Lorraine however denied accessing such sites on a regular basis.

Jesus no I don’t, I mean I don’t have the need, ah but I know my friends do …I mean, I mean Jack does, and, and sometimes he would be on the net and IM me to check something out–but then if I am home I can’t risk going to such sites (pause), ah so normally I don’t’ (Lorraine)

Her crafty third person reportage of sexual experimentation in cyberspace indicates the pervasiveness of such form of consumption among teenagers. Concerns that children’s access to such information reduces parental control over sex-education and awareness have been resonating in Irish print media for some time now. It has been argued that teenager visits to such sites affect the role adults play in their sex-education. Asked if such was the case with her, Lorraine commented:

Well Sheila (sister) is very supportive, more like a friend, but I really never had these many questions when I was young, I don’t know but I mean maybe girls are not that crazy about sexual information, they take it as it comes and if they fancy I mean they would go with a guy, and I don’t know–is it not getting very private now? (Lorraine)

Notions of not having questions and not caring about the answers generally indicate an independent path to discovery. Teenagers in the twenty-first century are empowered by their computer prowess to explore and experiment to their heart’s content. However, very few of my informants (only after reaching a certain level of trust and comfort) did reveal such ‘secrets’, adding to my repository of revelatory moments and information, but such revelations were neither guaranteed nor forthcoming in all cases. I still feel that there are certain gaps in my understanding of this mode of consumption and that at least a few of my informants did have lives in the virtual world that I were not privy to.

**DISCUSSION: CONSUMPTION IN CME TRANSFORMS FAMILIAL ROLES**

Viewed from the position that consumption in mediated environments is often not shared but a solitary activity (Kraut et.al. 1998), the four structural components of our thematic framework (Empowerment–Disempowerment, Social Aggregation–Social Alienation, Immersion–Disengagement, Experimentation–Deviation) appear to directly impact the structure of participating families in a variety of ways. In this section I argue that our four themes highlight the impacts families may face as a result of individual acts of consumption in CME by altering the functional roles and emotional spaces in family structure. I argue that in a dormant mode these roles are contested, and in an active mode conflicts may arise due to this contest; empowerment can result in role increment, as well as decrement, or role sharing and enhancement.

From the structural perspective, roles are the culturally defined norms—rights, duties, expectations and standards for behaviour—associated with a given social position. Although some
theorists argue that nature does not enforce gender-differentiated roles (Barnett and Hyde 2001), such roles have historically been a cultural norm in family structure. Family structures, however, have also been historically dynamic in nature; diversity and multiplicity of roles has constantly redefined family structure (Belch and Willis 2001). Such role transformation has been considered healthy for the emotional and physical wellbeing of its members on the basis of the argument that liberation from such an ideological standpoint through mutual acceptance and division of work results in strengthening of the family structure and relationships. Barnett and Hyde (2001) propose that “the extent to which one holds traditional or non-traditional attitudes about the proper social roles of women and men moderates the relationship between multiple roles and a host of outcome variables” (2001, p 789).

As our first theme of empowerment-disempowerment indicates, CME empowers individuals to assume additional roles in the family thus enhancing their sense of wellbeing. Telecommuting allows men to stay home and contribute towards cooking, cleaning and childrearing. Finding it easier to navigate the online environment, both men and women feel empowered to share additional household chores. Working women who break free from the traditional cultural role of a mother and homemaker by adopting a household chores. Working women who break free from the traditional cultural role of a mother and homemaker by adopting a new socially acceptable ‘juggling supermom’ lifestyle (Thompson 1996) are also empowered in CME. Adjusting and adapting to the exigencies of contemporary society expose these juggling Supermoms to stressors of negotiating multiple roles through compromises and concessions to their primary roles. As a working single mother, our informant Jackie found CME empowering as she could perform a few tasks late in the evenings in the company of her children, without compromising her parental role.

Disempowerment, at both real and perceived levels, may also transform an individual’s roles in the family. Our informant Mike’s decision to partially work from home allowed his wife Lisa to work first shift. Although at the surface this may appear empowering to both the spouses, I found him feeling disempowered through assumption of this additional responsibility because of his belief that childcare was a mother’s responsibility.

Multiplicity of roles and social intertwining of contemporary work and family contexts can also become sources of conflict for both working men and women (Major, Klien and Ehrlart 2002). Flexibility and acceptance of gender diffusion and multiplicity of roles are prerequisites in resolving such conflicts. Men in dual earner couples who adhere to traditional gender role beliefs are more vulnerable to psychological distress when their work situations are troubled (James, Barnet and Brennan 1998). Our informant Adam who held traditional gender role beliefs was apparently in a constant state of stress. He believed that certain household responsibilities were solely the man’s domain. However, Sheila’s use of internet enabled her to handle many tasks that remained outstanding because of Adam’s demanding job schedule and habit of procrastination.

Although rigid distinctions in division of labour in child rearing are eroding (Nugent 1991), the father often plays the role of guardian and mentor in terms of introduction to economic, political and technological systems and mother supervises the social and cultural grooming (Coltrane 1988). With changes in the technological order it was apparent that in many situations neither of the parents in this study could assume their proper roles. Some of our informants felt disempowered by being unable to fully assume the roles of guardian and mentor when it came to CME technologies. Because children spent long hours online and were better versed in computer technology than their parents, parents were unable to monitor and mediate their social and cultural online encounters.

Children themselves have a significant role in the traditional family structure. Besides acting as an emotional nucleus for both parents, they are also given the responsibility for many menial household tasks (Gager, Cooney and Call 1999). CME technologies affect the children’s task-performing role in two ways. First, because children and young adults gain proficiency in using internet quicker than their parents, in many households teenagers have assumed the role of a technology supervisor and moderator. Such role enhancement arguably increases a child’s stature in the family structure. Second, many parents think that a child’s time online is being spent in the most useful way. This apparent empowerment either automatically exempts them from performing menial tasks when online or, because of the disengagement children feel while in CME, they may actually decline performing such tasks.

Decision to consume in CME: Why? Viewing consumption as a social phenomenon, we can argue that many alternates exist in social orders simultaneously and an individual’s choice reflects her position in her social world. Because consumption practices within a family often correspond between members, the role an individual is assigned or herself assumes within the family impacts her current and future consumption practices (Gager, Cooney and Call 1999). I found that there is a symbiotic relationship between consumption in CME and family structure. Family dynamics at times initiate the move of a family member to cyberspace; equally, immersion of a family member in cyberspace can affect family dynamics at large. It was an observation that members from close knit family structures with strong social and emotional bonds used CME only as a partial extension of their total social and emotional sphere. On the other hand there were fragmented family units exhibiting multiple computers in the household with highly individualized CME consumption patterns that accelerated the pace of social and emotional isolation among family members.

MACRO-LEVEL IMPLICATIONS OF THE ARGUMENT

Domestication of technologies modifies and reforms societies permanently (Pantzar 1993 and 1997). CME technologies, through their systems and networks are dynamically evolving at a pace incomparable to any other ‘medium’ technology of the past. However, it is the non-technological social-content manipulated within this medium that has created a new social ‘life-form’ (Miller and Slater 2000). CME technologies have reached a level of domestication where consumers can now focus on the content and ignore the technology (BinsBergen 1998). Contemporary shifts in family consumption behaviour towards individualistic values and self-fulfilling aspirations at the expense of a decline in familial and religious values have been labelled as the core of the postmodern libertarian ethos (Gergen 1991). Consumption in CME accelerates this process of liberation by separating physical from the phenomenological, social from the geographically local, thereby altering social structures at both macro and micro level.

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