INTRODUCTION

Population aging has become a salient issue in contemporary Chinese society (Lee, 2004). An important concern for any aging society is to maintain the health and well-being of older adults (Xie, 2008d, 2009). Studies have shown that family relationships play a critical role in maintaining individuals’ psychological well-being and life satisfaction (Litwin and Shiovitz-Ezra, 2010; Lou, 2010; George, 2010; Phillips, Siu, Yeh and Cheng, 2008). Older adults have a strong desire to communicate more frequently with their children (Lindley, Harper and Sellen, 2009). However, evidence shows that Chinese adults receive relatively poor support from their adult children (Ng, 2002: 135). Many of these intergenerational communication challenges are due to geographical distances (Ng, 2002: 135), time zone differences (Cao et al., 2010), and the busy schedules of the adult children (Tee, Brush and Inkpen, 2009).

In China, the family has always been, and is still, the predominant mode of support for aging parents (Tu and associates 1989). However, with the projected increase in the absolute number and proportion of older adults in China, the family-based support system is increasingly under strain. In addition, the traditional family structure has been undergoing rapid transformation as young adults migrate to other regions seeking better employment opportunities (Silverstein, Cong and Li, 2006; Glei et al 2005). Empirical evidence suggests that in contemporary Chinese society, filial piety may be eroding and the family may no longer be the primary
source of support for older Chinese parents (Joseph and Philips, 1999; Ng, Philips and Lee, 2002). Ongoing societal changes resulting from industrialization, capitalization, and globalization challenge the conventional family-based patterns that feature the co-location of the aging parents and adult children (Bian, 2002; Ikels, 1996; Perry and Selden, 2003; Price and Fang, 2002).

The recent popularity of online social networking games among older adults in China suggests the potential of online game playing as influential in older adults’ daily lives. Anecdotal data suggest that social networking games have become an activity for family members of different generations to do together. These new practices raise an interesting question: how might social network game playing affect intergenerational family relationships? In this study, we explore how aging parents and their adult children play QQ Farm, one of the most popular online social networking games in China, and how such game playing may affect their relationships.

RELATED WORK

Family relationships play a critical role in supporting older adults’ psychological well-being, morale, and life satisfaction (Litwin and Shiovitz-Ezra, 2010; Lou, 2010; George, 2010; Phillips, Siu, Yeh and Cheng, 2008). Family relationships are especially important for older Chinese adults, since family support is more effective than support from friends in preventing psychological distress (e.g., depression) (Chi and Chou, 2001). Older Chinese parents living in three-generation households or with grandchildren in skipped-generation households had better psychological well-being than those living in single-generation households (Silverstein, Cong and Li, 2006).

Despite their desire for more family communication (Lindley, Harper and Sellen, 2008; Lindley, Harper and Sellen, 2009), older Chinese adults receive limited informal support from their adult children (Ng et al., 2002). Geographic proximity is an important determinant of the amount and types of support older adults receive from their adult children: the shorter the geographical distance, the more support older adults receive. In contrast, family members who live in different time zones face difficulties in finding a convenient time to communicate (Cao, 2008). The busy schedules adult children have and the lack of technology use among older people make it challenging for family members to communicate (Tee, Brush and Inkpen, 2009).

Digital devices have the potential to alleviate these intergenerational communication challenges (Romero et al., 2007; Tee, Brush and Inkpen, 2009), particularly for family members who live far away. For example, the ‘HomeNote’ device was designed to promote remote, situated messaging within the family (Sellen et al., 2006). The results highlight the role of digital messaging in enabling subtle ways of requesting action, expressing affection, and marking identity in the family (Sellen et al., 2006).

Video- or camera-based technologies may be the best technology for connecting family members, since the use of video-mediated communication can foster closeness between the communicators (Kirk, Sellen and Cao 2010). One study (Ames et al., 2010) found that video chat could be used to reinforce family identity and values. Digital Family Portrait displays iconic projections of older adults’ daily activities to family members living far away (Rowan and Mynatt, 2005). Family Window (Judge and Neustaedter, 2010) uses an always-on video camera to connect family members residing in two households. These devices allow family members to see each other’s daily activities. Similarly, devices such as SPARCS (Brush et al., 2008) and Wayve (Lindley, Harper and Sellen, 2010) also encourage information and photo sharing among family members. Although these image-based systems present new opportunities for facilitating family communication, sharing daily activities with
family members also raises privacy concerns (Judge and Neustaedter, 2010).

Recently, various game-based technologies have been used to support the health and well-being of older adults. One aspect of this approach is to encourage physical activity. For example, Age Invaders (Khoo et al., 2008), an interactive intergenerational social-physical game, allows older adults to play with children in the physical world. Unlike standard computer games, Age Invaders brings the game playing to a physical platform and requires physical movements instead of constraining the user being in front of a computer for hours. Similarly, Voida, Carpendale and Greenberg (2010) examined intergenerational gaming practices of four generations of console gamers and the roles gamers of different generations take when playing together in groups. Their analysis revealed a more flexible combination of roles in the computer-mediated interactions than the roles found in the physical world.

Intergenerational game playing can also take place across distance (Davis et al., 2008), indicating the potential role of games in mediating geographically distant family relationships. Interestingly, the majority of the current games still require family members to have available time to play together. In this sense, although the game might bridge the physical distance between remotely located family members, possible time constraints among family members can still exist.

QQ FARM: AN ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKING GAME

We studied family game play on QQ Farm. QQ Farm is one of the most popular social networking games on Qzone, a major social networking site in mainland China. Both QQ Farm and QZone were developed and built by Tencent Inc. in 2009. On March 31, 2010, it was reported that there were 568.6 million active user accounts on all QQ service platforms. QQ Farm is designed to encourage Interact users from all age groups to play social games with friends in their social networks. Surprisingly, the popularity of QQ Farm has spread to many older adults who previously were not playing online games. Anecdotal cases of older adults engaged in or even addicted to playing QQ Farm have been reported as an interesting social phenomenon. Unlike many other games that are played mainly among friends of similar ages, it is not unusual for QQ Farm to be played among older parents and their adult children on a daily basis. This study intends to examine the impact of playing QQ Farm on intergenerational family interactions to shed light on the role of social networking gaming in mediating family communication and relationships.

QQ Farm offers relatively simple and intuitive game features that can be easily adopted by various types of players. In the game, players act as farm owners and manage their own farms, cultivating, irrigating, and harvesting crops in one’s own farm. In addition, players can also visit farms owned by their friends, where players can perform limited actions – some helpful, others mischievous. Helpful actions include weeding and irrigating, whereas mischievous actions include stealing the other players’ mature crops. Beyond game playing itself, each player has access to a personal message board associated with his or her farm. The personal message board shows log information about one’s farm, including both helpful and mischievous actions by other players. A player can see who visited his or her farm and when, and the actions of the other players. Players can also personalize their QQ Farm space by naming and decorating their own farms. These game features allow players to visit, help and connect with each other during the process of game playing.

METHODS

We conducted a nine-month ethnographic study from March to November 2010 to
examine the potential influence of social network gaming on the communications and relationships between parents and their adult children. We studied sixteen pairs of parent–adult child \((N = 32)\), each containing one older parent and one adult child. Participants were recruited through snowball techniques. The first two adult children were recruited from the university where the first and second authors are affiliated, and the rest of the participants were referred by people we studied earlier. Snowball sampling appears to be an appropriate method to study players in a social networking game since it allows us to reach QQ game players through people’s social networks. Because the goal of the study was to examine intergenerational game play among adult children and their older parents, we did not include children under 18 in this study.

Among the sixteen pairs of participants, seven pairs lived in the same household, or in nearby neighborhoods where they could maintain face-to-face interactions frequently. The remaining nine pairs of participants lived in different regions, with all the parents living in China and their adult children living in the United States, Japan, Australia, or Denmark. In this paper we refer to them as the ‘local’ or ‘remote’ families, respectively. Studying the communication behaviors in both types of families allowed us to compare the impact of game playing on family members who do not have face-to-face interactions frequently to those who do.

The parents being studied were aged from 47 to 66 years old, with an average age of 58. (While this age group may not be perceived as ‘old’ in countries like the United States, it is nonetheless commonly perceived as ‘old’ in countries like China; for instance, the Chinese Seniors Rights Protection Law defines seniors as individuals age 60 or older; however, in some cases the mandatory retirement age can be as young as 50 or even below;\(^4\) for a more detailed discussion on cultural differences in the perception of ‘old’ in Chinese and American cultures, see Xie, 2006, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c.) Six out of the sixteen parents were over 60 years old, and eleven were retired by the time this study was conducted. The sixteen adult children aged from 18 to 42, with an average age of 28. At the time of the study, almost all adult children (15 out of 16) were working or attending college/graduate schools. All participants had more than six months of gaming experience and reached at least the 15th level according to the ranks designed in QQ Farm (0 is the lowest and 50 is the highest level in the current game system).

The sixteen pairs of participants fall into three conditions: the parent and the child both are current players (9 pairs); either the parent or the child is a player (4 pairs); neither the parent nor the child are players (3 pairs). The non-playing or partial-playing participants served as comparisons for us to examine the intergenerational communication patterns between the ‘dual-play’ pairs and those having one or more non-playing participants. It is worth noting that among the nine dual-play pairs, four pairs were local and the other five were remote families. The participants’ basic characteristics are summarized in Table 23.1.

**DATA COLLECTION**

To better understand how game playing influences family communication, we first observed the online game behaviors of six dual-play family members. Semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted with all sixteen pairs of participants based on the insights drawn from the online observations. Using observations and interviews ensured that both the actual game play patterns and user attitudes were included in our data set. Human subject study approval was obtained prior to data collection. All participant names reported in this paper are pseudonyms.

Online observations were conducted at the beginning of the study to understand the basic gaming behaviors among the ‘dual-play’ pairs. Specifically, one researcher joined each participant’s QQ Farm friend list and examined their game behaviors by
observing their game activities, which are publicly viewable to all friends in QQ Farm.

In the study, we first observed the game behaviors of six pairs of dual-play families daily, including four remote pairs and two local pairs over a period of two weeks. We observed the general game behaviors of participants, particularly their interactions with family members in the game space. Brief questions were probed through the instant messaging (IM) system associated with QQ Farm during the online observation sessions. In addition, we collected the game logs from the personal message board of each participant twice a day, once in the morning and once at night. These logs record participants’ interactions with their online players in the game space. Log analysis helped us to understand how and when participants visit or play with their family members. Next, we weekly followed the six pairs’ gaming behaviors for three months. In this phase, our goal was to understand whether family members continued to play QQ Farm, and whether family communication was sustained between the older parent and the adult child over an extended period of time. This observation helped us to discern the potential long-term impact of game-mediated communication on intergenerational relationships.

We developed a semi-structured, open-ended interview guide based on the family play behaviors observed online. Specifically, observation data were discussed among authors to identify questions and issues to be addressed in the interviews. Family communication emerged as one important factor in family game play that
deserved further investigation. In addition to the six pairs of dual-play participants reported above, the interview study was extended to three additional pairs of dual-play participants, as well as seven single-play or non-playing pairs to provide comparisons. The interview questions centered on the following three topics:

- How participants played the QQ Farm game in general;
- How participants communicated with their family members in general; and
- How participants played the game with their family members.

At the participants’ convenience, interviews were conducted by telephone or in-person. When telephone or in-person interviews were impossible, we interviewed participants using the IM associated with QQ Farm. Of the thirty-two participants, twenty-three of them were interviewed via the telephone, five were interviewed in person, and the remaining four were interviewed through IM. Each interview lasted from 30 to 60 minutes in length and was audio-recorded.

Interview and observational data were first transcribed into Chinese, and then translated into English for further analysis.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

Data analysis for this study was guided by grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998) that emphasizes the co-evolution of data and theory by conducting data collection and analysis simultaneously. Following the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) after the online observations, the immediate first step was to write a short descriptive summary to record general impressions about the family interaction in the game space. After each individual interview was conducted, audio data were transcribed into text as promptly as possible.

Four pairs of interview transcripts were randomly selected from the sixteen pairs of interviewees for the initial round of data analysis. Sample data were analyzed using the techniques of microanalysis or ‘detailed line-by-line analysis’ (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 57) by three researchers independently. First, open coding was conducted by each researcher to identify salient concepts and their properties (i.e., characteristics) and dimensions (i.e., ‘the range along which general properties of a category varies, giving specification to a category and variation to the theory’) (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 101). Gaming as a communication medium to mediate intergenerational family communication quickly emerged from this initial round of analysis. Once this core category was identified, axial coding was then conducted to systematically explore the properties and dimensions of this core category. This led to the formation of the subcategories (i.e., the three themes of game-based communications). The themes produced by each researcher were compared, discussed and revised through a series of iterations until agreements were reached among all researchers. Results of the microanalysis of the sample interviews were used to guide the next stage of coding, during which one researcher coded the remaining data using the developed coding scheme. This second stage of the analysis generated similar concepts and themes to those identified in the initial coding stage, demonstrating dependability of the findings.

Meanwhile, quantitative data (i.e., log data about participants’ use of the game) were entered into SPSS for descriptive statistical analyses. For each sample of the six pairs’ log data, we summed all log messages, and then calculated the frequency and percentage of the interactive messages belonging to parents and his/her children by taking their virtual names in QQ Farm as the input variable.

**KEY FINDINGS**

Through comparing the dual-play, single-play, and non-play pairs, we find that QQ Farm has become a main channel for dual-play family members to stay connected. Our observations
of the ‘dual-play’ pairs suggest these participants constantly interact with their family members in the game space (Figure 23.1).

Analysis of the QQ Farm log data shows that eight percent of all the overall game interactions (319 out of 4132 messages) occurred between the pairs of study participants (i.e., a parent and an adult child). Overall, each pair of family members contacted each other an average of 53 times during the two-week period. Table 23.2 shows the game rank, logins and playing time of the six observed dual-play pairs.

Interestingly, for many of the dual-play families, communication through the game space is more preferable than other forms of communication, such as the telephone and face-to-face interactions. Family members prefer to have some daily interaction, but do not need to have daily verbal conversations. Xu, a retired high school teacher, explained why the QQ game became a better way for him to stay connected with his adult daughter.

R2-father: It is almost impossible to have daily communications with my daughter, since she lives very far away from me. Now I have to [communicate with her] through QQ Farm. In the game, we don’t really need to ‘talk’, but I know what she’s doing... this provides a very good way to connect us. Sometimes it is even better than phone conversations, because we don’t always have new things to talk about on the phone, especially when we already talked [lately]. Then it’s actually better to meet on the Internet [in QQ Farm], leave a message, send an emotion icon and ‘steal’ in the farm. These stealing and harvesting are a way to relax.
In comparison, the non-play or single-play pairs often experience a sense of disconnection when talking about their relationships with their family members. Maintaining effective intergenerational communication is not an easy task, even when family members live in the same household or can meet regularly. Zhao, a mother living in the city of Wuhan, complained about how difficult it was to stay connected with her son who worked abroad.

Zhao feels finding ‘common time’ is a major challenge for her to communicate with her son. Also, the lack of common conversational topics hinders intergenerational communication. Chen, a father with a college age son who studies in the same city and goes back home every weekend, still thinks of intergenerational communication as a difficult task.

This suggests that there is no time for this father to talk to his son, even when they spend every weekend together at home. Living in the same household doesn’t guarantee communication time between the son and the father. The 18-year-old son spends most of his time in front of the computer. Both the ‘computer time’ that occupies the younger person and the lack of the older person’s computer skills limit the opportunities for them to communicate.

### GAME-BASED COMMUNICATION: THREE KEY FUNCTIONS

In this section, we detail how QQ game was used as a new communication medium to connect intergenerational family members. Specifically, the game appeared to have three key functions: (1) as an ‘I am safe and well’ message board; (2) helping family members to express care and stay connected; and (3) providing relaxing conversation topics for intergenerational family members.

A key purpose for communication among family members, especially those who live far away, is to know whether one is safe and well. As our participants Lee and Jean expressed in their interviews, they may not need to talk to their family members regularly, but they want to know whether their family members are safe. For most dual-play families, QQ Farm has turned into an ‘I’m safe and well’ message board for them to stay connected. In the shared game space, family members get to know each other’s online activities without having to talk or write directly to each other. This is especially useful for older generations, since they often desire to know their adult children’s situations, while their children may be busy with their own life activities and don’t have much time to communicate with their parents.

Lee, a father who lives in Wuhan, China, told us how through game playing, he is able to keep track of whether or not his daughter is safe in the United States.

R1-father: If my daughter didn’t call or chat online with us for a week, we would worry whether she ran into any difficulties in her life. But I don’t actually need my daughter to leave any message to me [on Internet]. As long as I see she keeps stealing crops (in QQ Farm), I would feel very relieved because I know she is safe.
Similarly, QQ Farm also serves as a platform for parents to know whether remote family members are safe during natural disasters. For geographically distributed families, verbal communication is sometimes not easy due to both distance and time difference. For these families, seeing each other’s online activities would suggest they were not affected by a natural disaster.

R9-father: When some disasters happened in the United States, like a flood, fire or earthquake, if I saw him [his son] played in the QQ Farm, I’d know his was safe.

Many parents feel that playing QQ game is a sign indicating their family members are safe and well, particularly when other forms of communication do not frequently occur. As one father explained to us:

R1-father: Since my daughter is playing QQ game frequently, that means she is in a very good mood now. I think she should be happy over there [in the United States].

During family game playing, even if no word is exchanged, the behaviors in the game can still indicate the safe status of a loved one. The game activities thus help family members to not worry, even when they don’t have more direct daily communication, such as on the phone or in face-to-face conversations.

Similarly, playing QQ Farm also offered adult children a way of knowing their parents’ situation. As mentioned above, often times, adult children’s busy work and life obligations leave them little time for their parents, and sometimes they worry whether their parents will feel lonely. To these adult children, playing a game is a good way to engage their parents in some fun and healthy activities.

R7-daughter: My mom is retired and stays at home now. She has lots of free time. But we are too busy at work to be with her. When she plays this game, I know she is safe and happy.

In this case, R7-daughter works at a local bank and lives in the same city, but not the same household as her mother. Due to her busy work schedule, she is only able to visit her parents on the weekends. Knowing her mother is playing the game during the day assures her that her mother is not lonely. Further, the lightweight QQ Farm game is regarded as healthy by many participants, and thus they don’t mind their loved ones playing it.

Participants of our study perceive their virtual activities in QQ Farm as a way to show care and love to their parents/adult children. As a result, playing together is often associated with the feelings of ‘happy,’ ‘not lonely,’ and ‘comforting.’ Peng, a mother, talked about how ‘stealing crops’, an originally mischievous action, would cheer her up during her busy days or when she was traveling alone.

R6-mother: When I saw my children stealing crops from my farm, I even felt happy... It makes me very happy when they took care of my farm. It feels like I am not alone; I feel energetic there and it ties our family together. No matter wherever I travel, I feel my children are always with me.

In QQ Farm, when mature crops are stolen by others, the owner no longer gains experience points from growing it. However, different from common gaming competitors, the mother in our study does not care much about her game playing scores. Instead, she deems the ‘stealing’ action as a way to connect with her children who live abroad. Adult children also seem to play the game with their parents with the sense of being with them when they are not around.

R9-son: I can’t live with my parents since I am studying abroad now. I think this game has some effects [on the family relationship]. There aren’t that many games for you to play with your parents. Playing games online makes me feel like I am with them at home. It makes my parents feel happy and also gives me a sense of comforting.

Beyond playing together, the helpful activities designed in QQ Farm, such as weeding and irrigating are even more appreciated by
parents. Many parents are proud that their children are helping them in the game space (by doing, for instance, weeding for them). For instance, Zhang, a mother of four, checks her QQ farm daily to see who had helped her.

R5-mother: I check the messages in my farm everyday. I know they [her adult children] helped me to take care of my farm; they cultivated grass and removed weeds for me... Through these little things I know how much they care about us, which made me very happy… it’s just fun to play with my family, no matter daughter, son or daughter in law, we all play together.

These quotes suggest that, although care is not explicitly expressed through verbal or written communication, care and love are exchanged through game playing. Without calling each other and saying how much they love each other, care is represented through actions in the game. Thus, game playing is fun for parents because they can entertain themselves during their free time, and also because it is a platform for them to be with their adult children and observe what their children do for them everyday.

Interestingly, the ability of game playing in transiting care among family members also encouraged many parents to learn and use technologies. As one participant told us:

R8-mother: I am really happy when I play this game… You know, when they [her two daughters] left for work, only their father and I are at home, and we have to wait till dinner time to see them. After that they will be busy mentoring their own kids’ coursework. So there left only us again. But when I am on the computer, I can play and communicate with them more.

Many parents are fully aware of how busy their adult children might be, and they have learned computer game playing as a way to connect with their children, since their adult children are often in front of computers everyday. In this way, the desire for getting care from adult children has fostered technology adoption among these older adults.

GAME PLAYING PROMOTES MORE RELAXED FAMILY COMMUNICATIONS

Game playing is perceived as a ‘fun and relaxing’ conversational topic that encourages common interests between the aging parents and the adult children. The lack of common interests between the two generations often hinders effective family communication. As showed in Chen’s case earlier, even when family members are co-residing in the same household, communication can be lacking. At home, his son spends most of his time in front of the computer. For Chen, not engaging much in computer activity prevents him from talking to his son, both through the computer and beyond; on the one hand, Chen was not able to spend much time with his son since his son was mostly in front of the computer; and on the other hand, this also suggests that there is an interest gap between the two generations. This lack of common interests leads to topic deprivation and affects face-to-face communication as well. In comparison, in the ‘dual-play’ families, game playing enhanced their daily interactions, strengthened family ties, and enriched the mutual shaping of online and offline communications by creating relaxed family communication topics and fostering shared common interests between the two generations.

The difficulties adult children have in communicating with their aging parents are bounded by traditional Chinese culture and values, whereas parents tend to talk about ‘serious’ or ‘heavy’ topics. Yang, a son who lives close to his parents’ home and maintains routine face-to-face communications with his parents, found online game playing beneficial to their already frequent family communication.

R16-son: Sometimes I watch how they [parents] play at home, like how they harvest crops. We talk and laugh together in doing so. I also told them some tips on how to play this game better. Sharing game playing experiences just improved our family communication and it’s very enjoyable for us. In general, Chinese parents are always concerned
with their children’s lives, such as their jobs, their relationships, how they get alone with their wives or girl friends, etc. That’s what our parents always talk to us about when we were growing up. QQ Farm brought in fun and easy topics for us. The issues they talked to us previously were all about lecturing us about how to live better. Adult children sometimes may feel they are over-controlled and thus not interested in those topics.

The easiness and relaxation brought by game playing are also applauded by the older generation, since talking about games provides them with new opportunities to interact with their children.

R1-father: Sometimes we only discuss very serious issues. This [the game] transformed our conversations into more relaxed ones, such as whether you go online today, whether you plan to steal my vegetables, etc. These are very easy and fun topics for us.

Conventionally, the topics that the older generation prefers to talk about with their children tend to be serious ones (e.g., those related to work, marriage). In contrast, playing and discussing games helps to convert the previously ‘serious’ family conversations into ‘fun’ and ‘relaxing’ ones. Interestingly, the game is rarely a separate conversation, but often facilitates other family talks.

R4-daughter: Ever since we played this game together, we have more common conversational topics. We sometimes discuss the skills, and tips in playing the games. But I would never call them just to talk about the game.

The conversations about the game may not replace other serious conversations. Instead, it supplements other family conversations, and may provide a sense of fun during serious talks.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest that QQ Farm game playing provides an important new communication channel through which family members can stay connected, enriching existing family communication. While parents still expect to hear from or see their adult children regularly, and to discuss serious family matters face-to-face or over the phone, game playing adds onto existing family communication a sense of continuous updates, fun and relaxing topics that other communication channels may not be able to provide as easily.

In this section, we discuss three unique aspects of game-based communication that are crucial for mediating intergenerational family interactions: communication topics, communication roles and communication styles.

Communication roles

For families who live far away or co-reside, the basic communication goal is to know each other’s daily routines. For the older generation who might have retired and have more free time on a daily basis, getting to know their adult children’s daily routines is one important part of their daily lives. Nevertheless, family communication is often limited by time and distance barriers. With a busy life and work activities, adult children may not be able to find time to report their daily activities or have frequent visits with their parents. Consequently, parents often feel a sense of disconnectedness and loneliness.

Different from phone calls, Instant Messaging or face-to-face contacts that occur once or twice a week, updates from the online game space can be constant and continuous. The updates that parents receive in the game space are generated naturally through game playing, and serve as a message board for them to connect with their children. This continuous updating and awareness raising changes the dynamics associated with the previous reporting-and-receiving style of family communication. Family activities are no longer reported to each other at the same time, but rather are observed and checked in at the shared space in a non-time sensitive way. This new communication medium overcomes time and distance barriers that parents and their adult children
often experience. In this way, adult children are no longer expected to report their daily activities to their parents everyday and the parents do not need to wait to hear what is going on in their children’s lives. Activities are documented and stored online as it occurs and can be reviewed whenever the parents have time.

This change from ‘reporting and receiving’ to ‘documenting and reviewing’ in the participants’ family communication process is preferred and has become part of their new daily communication routine. For intergenerational family members who have distinct life styles, updating whether they are safe and well every single day may seem tedious and finding the common time to do so may also be challenging. In the game space, no one intentionally sends ‘safe and well’ messages, but such information is documented in the shared family space, and is checked either synchronously or asynchronously. While this documenting and reviewing mechanism may not be suitable for communicating urgent or other complicated family matters, it may be ideal to enhance awareness of each other’s daily activities.

**Communication styles**

Compared with other types of communications, game-mediated communication is more implicit and less intrusive (e.g., it keeps the balance of delivering the ‘safe and well’ messages without revealing every detail of daily activities). As described in the Key Findings section, game activities are considered reflections of their family members’ real life activities by the participants and thus could help parents to infer what their adult children are doing in real life. Parents often use the game space as a ‘monitoring’ or ‘tracking’ device to help them to stay aware of their children’s activities. In their mind, playing a game could imply that their children are safe and happy. Monitoring game activities provides continuous connection between parents and adult children and sheds away the possible worries that parents may have. Nevertheless, game activities can only represent minimal activities that occur in real life. They cannot reveal details of adult children’s daily routines. Communication content mediated through games is less intrusive. It helps to keep the balance of showing ‘I’m safe and well’ messages on the one hand, while not revealing every detail of daily activities on the other. In this sense, social network game playing may be a good way to take advantage of the benefits associated with the technology while avoiding potential concerns for privacy that have been reported in prior research (e.g., Judge and Neustaedter, 2010).

In addition to being less intrusive, the ‘caring and loving’ messages expressed through game playing provide family members with a new way to implicitly communicate with each other. In Chinese culture, critical emotional ties that connect family members, such as love and care, are rarely expressed explicitly in daily communication (Chen and Silverstein, 2000). This emotional expression may become even more challenging when adult children and their parents live in different households, since the traditional ways of showing love and care, such as cleaning the house, buying gifts and having dinner together (Schwarz et al., 2010), cannot be as easily carried out on a daily basis. QQ Farm serves as a lightweight communication medium, which could implicitly deliver love and care to family members while avoiding the potential awkwardness of saying ‘I care about you’ directly.

**Communication topics**

The lack of common conversational topics is a major challenge for effective intergenerational communication. Parents interviewed in the study repeatedly expressed their frustrations in not being able to communicate with their adult children, even when the two generations co-reside in the same household. Being too ‘serious’ is often used by the younger generation to describe
the conversations occurring between them and their parents. As it is shown in our study, discussing serious topics often leads to a sense of being over-controlled among the younger generation and adds stress to their lives. As a result, adult children often avoid engaging in ‘serious’ conversations with their parents.

In line with prior research showing the use of computers creating a new ‘common language’ between parents and their child (Xie, 2006), in the present study, game playing also helps parents to better understand what their adult children are doing on the computer. This common online gaming experience is then transformed into shared interests that stimulate conversations in the physical world, e.g., during family gatherings and interactions. Different from the ‘serious’ or ‘heavy’ topics that Chinese parents tend to talk about with their adult children, game playing is considered a more ‘relaxed and fun’ topic to talk about with their parents. Thus, the game playing experience transcends the online space and enhances family communication in the offline world. Consequently, family members may communicate via the computer and share game playing tips with each other or discuss what happened in the game space in person or over the phone. These game playing-related topics enrich the more ‘serious’ conversations and may eventually make adult children less resistant to communicate with their parents. This finding on the mutual shaping of online and offline relationships is in line with that reported in the prior research of older Chinese internet users (Xie, 2007, 2008a).

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has some limitations. Although most of the parents who participated in this study qualify as older adults according to the Chinese standards, a few of them were only in their early 50s or late 40s, making it challenging to compare the findings with Western studies of older parent–adult child relationships. Also, this study only investigated current game play behaviors between family members. More insights could be obtained in studying the process of transitioning from non-play to game-play. Studying such a transition could help us better understand how game play may influence the frequency and content of existing family communication behaviors.

CONCLUSION

Maintaining intergenerational communication is not an easy task. Various factors such as time and distance between adult children and their parents, a lack of common conversational topics and differing values all hinder effective communication. In our study, the online game serves as a new medium to mediate and foster intergenerational family communication, both online and offline. Different from other forms of communication that often require simultaneous engagement, game-based communication can be performed asynchronously and less intrusively; messages can be conveyed in a more implicit manner, and do not require much time commitment by family members. While game-based communication may not replace other forms of family communication, it nonetheless enriches other forms of family communication through continuous game updates and interactions. For older parents, getting in touch with their adult children, and receiving caring and loving messages are crucial for their health and well-being.

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NOTES


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