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## iPhone family v. traditional family. The impact of technology on personal growth and interaction within the family

### 1. Introduction

The subject “iPhone family versus traditional family” may suggest one of two interpretations neither of which is the author’s intention to support. One is the hypothesis that the iPhone is understood as a symbol of modern technological development and, therefore, it is a symbol of a more advanced individual or society. The other view opposes the first and embraces the nostalgia of “good old days,” when parents were, in addition to the religious community and school, not only significant but also the only important educators in passing values and knowledge on to their children. In this research, we find that both of these interpretations are too narrow and cannot be reduced to

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a black and white approach. Thus, we want to explore the topic from a broader perspective, taking into account the evolutionary process of a macro-culture that influences every segment of its micro-cultures, among which an iPhone family finds its place. Since the iPhone family is a new and increasingly common type of family, we particularly want to examine and deepen some critical aspects of it, keeping in mind a healthy family environment and the personal growth of each family member.

## 2. The context of iPhone families

Over the past 20 years, we have lived in a digital culture and everywhere around us we face remarkable technological change. Smartphones became widespread in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and most of those produced from 2012 onwards have high-speed mobile broadband 4G LTE, motion sensors, and mobile payment features. For example, “by 2016, smartphones held 80% of the U.S. mobile market.”<sup>1</sup> In 2016, there are 16.7 million smartphone users in Poland. By 2018, the estimated number will surpass 20 million.<sup>2</sup> In this era of digital and social media we start to speak about **plugged-in families**. iPhones, other types of smartphones, tablets and laptop computers are known as personal communication technologies (PCT).

On the one hand, because of PCT, life has become so much easier, faster and full of opportunities for improvement and ongoing personal and societal development. Devices seem to understand and converse with us. These devices are always available, capable of saying our name nicely, tracking our movements, programming our daily exercises, guiding us from one destination to another, updating us with weather forecasts, local and global news, finding an explanation for our feelings, even finding friends and advising us what to do next. When we want a specific musical selection, they provide it. The same happens when we want a specific movie or show. If we are looking for a book or a newspaper, they will find it for us; if we prefer that they read the text aloud, that is also possible.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.comscore.com/Insights/Rankings/comScore-Reports-January-2016-US-Smartphone-Subscriber-Market-Share> (03.10.2016).

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/467756/forecast-of-smartphone-users-in-poland/> (03.10.2016).

Due to these devices, we have the impression that we are becoming so much more independent. Since in our communication with them, we are not challenged by meeting real people with their views, needs, feelings and limits, “we don’t need to practice negotiation and adaptation.”<sup>3</sup> We almost don’t have to wait for anything and, therefore, there is no waste of time. We only need to press a button or touch a screen. Done. Instantly. We feel we master our lives. With their assistance, we can shop or bank from our couch, organize a trip, get help with our homework, resolve conflicts and so much more. Their artificial intelligence wins us over with smartness and style. We are inclined to think that these devices can be better than any human connectivity.

On the other hand, we become attached and vulnerable to new devices. Preschool children begin to ask if smartphones (and other devices) are alive. Adolescents, our **digital natives**, are glad to finally have a friend – an iPhone – who accepts them without judgment. Adults question themselves: “What is special about being a person?” Computer terms such as programming and debugging are entering our social life, media, politics and the way we see ourselves. After spending so much **face-to-face time** with different devices and less and less time with people who are *Imago Dei*, we begin to reflect on ourselves in the mirror of the devices. Gradually, through the prism of devices, we create our new identities.

PCT pretend to understand us. However, can a device, a non-human device, really understand us and our quest for meaning and meaningful relationships? As intermediaries, the devices help us to explore a new sense of place and to lead parallel lives in virtual worlds. They make us believe that we can have relationships with each other via mobile connectivity. Since connection to the Internet became mobile and we don’t need to sit next to the desktop surrounded by cables, the network is with us all the time. We are always “on” and we can be with each other all the time. Nevertheless, we presume we control our time.

The newer generations, sons and daughters of a digital age, prefer texting to talking. Dictionaries have a word, **phubbing**, which means pretending to maintain eye contact while texting.<sup>4</sup> People text while driving a car or pushing

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<sup>3</sup> L. S. Clark, *The parent app – understanding families in the digital age*, Oxford 2013, p. 133.

<sup>4</sup> J. A. Roberts, D. Meredith, *My life has become a major distraction from my cell phone: partner phubbing and relationship satisfaction among romantic partners*, “Computers in

a stroller with a baby; people text at meetings, in class or while playing games with others; they text at the table while having a family meal. In church. During a funeral or a wedding. For many people there is no sacred space any more. People text everywhere; no matter what is going on around them, they seem to be absorbed by screens. We give human qualities to objects and treat each other as objects. Talking seems to be intrusive, a demand on our real time. It is easier to turn to, for instance, Facebook, Twitter, MySpace or iPhone apps, worlds in which we play avatars, the apotheosis of our self-image. In these worlds, we can create and represent a person we desire to be, an icon, but not necessarily ourselves.

We play a figure in the game with others who also play a chosen figure. In online spaces, we don't have to be true and authentic; therefore, there is no need to put in effort to work toward authenticity. We are allowed to be an "other" and we end up playing roles, cutting off undesired aspects of our personalities and representing ourselves with some of them or just imaginary ones. We can, virtually speaking, have a new body, a new home, a new age, a new gender, a new family, a new car, a new income, a new relationship, or a new romance. We can die and be reborn. Nevertheless, at least subconsciously, we begin to wonder how real other people, whom we meet via the Internet, are? Do other people use us as we use them, to protect our fragile selves? Do other people really care for us or just enough to keep us in the game? Does anybody really know us? Does anybody in the world love us for who we are? Do we know ourselves and what we desire?

Our new way of acting toward ourselves and others reveals that we are afraid; first of ourselves and then of others. We are hiding ourselves. Our networked world allows and facilitates our doing so. We suffer from a "profound and painful sense of disconnection on different levels: disconnection from God, certainly, but also from ourselves – our bodies and true selves, and from each other."<sup>5</sup> We are lonely and fearful of intimacy. In this context, PCT enter our life with an illusion of companionship without the demands and blessings of real relationships. Gradually, this can become a pattern and a lifestyle.

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Human Behavior" 2016 vol. 54, p. 135, <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0747563215300704> (10.01.2016).

<sup>5</sup> R. Rohr, *The Divine dance, the Trinity and your transformation*, New Kensington 2016.

### 3. Two misconceptions about iPhone families and PCT

For some members of the family, PCT can be viewed as a most welcome guest while for others as an invasive and disturbing element pulling family members apart. Due to the novelty of these devices and people's polarization with regard to how helpful they are for family life, it is difficult to simultaneously see their challenges and opportunities. At this point, I would like to present two of the several common misconceptions about iPhone families regarding children's use of PCT and the Internet's threat to healthy family functioning.

The first misconception is that children's PCT use provokes family conflicts. From the children's perspectives, parents should trust that they are able to use PCT appropriately and make good judgments on the subject of the Internet use. From the parents' perspectives, children should show their parents what sites they visit to demonstrate that there is no harm, abuse or negative impact on their lives from their Internet use.

According to Clark,<sup>6</sup> there are four primary types of parents as regards children's use of smartphones. **Engaged parents** favor active mediation and support either supervision or control of what their children do on their devices. They don't hesitate to limit the Internet access or block certain sites if they find them inappropriate. **Helicopter parents** favor a restrictive approach but remain ambivalent about using parental controls built into the devices. For instance, their restriction can be set in a way that children are allowed to use their devices for only two hours after their homework is done but does not necessarily involve the use of controls embedded in the PCT. **Permissive parents** are open to discussion and negotiation but ultimately let their children do what they want. It is unusual for permissive parents to place any restraint on their children's media use. **Digital immigrants** believe that any involvement in their children's media use is nonsense and therefore parents don't need to be involved. Children are free to use the Internet any time, as long as they want and generally for any reason.

The overview of different types of parents shows that it is primarily because of the parents and their parenting philosophy that predict what kind of PCT use children are allowed. Therefore, conflicts regarding PCT are most often not child-provoked. Children are part of a broader society

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. L. S. Clark, *The parent app...*

and culture which highly support and, in many ways, require PCT for daily life and studies; however, it is up to parents to decide what type of parenting they want to put into practice. As an educator, I take the stand that there are two important criteria for parents respecting their children's PCT use. One is consistency and the other is capacity to learn as parents. The first criterion means that children know what the family view is on PCT and they do not look for discrepancies between parents or are able to get what they want in reaction to parents' moods. The second criterion encourages parents to remain open to new possibilities of educating in new times and to learn from their children as well as from other parents. Due to the complexity of this process, this requires a lot of self-examination, including admitting mistakes and searching for better solutions.

In this context, it is interesting to see a difference between mothers and fathers regarding the use of smartphones. According to Mascheroni,<sup>7</sup> mothers are the ones most likely to place restrictions or conditions on their children's PCT use. Mothers also tend to see cell phones as tools for safety, connectivity and monitoring, whereas fathers tend to view smartphones as tools which provide educational opportunities. In sum, mothers favor communication and fathers see smartphones as productivity tools.

The second misconception is that the Internet seriously threatens healthy family functioning. I claim that PCT use can impact family functioning in both positive and negative ways. Wise families take advantage of PCT by constantly engaging themselves in learning how to make good decisions regarding the use of PCT. In such families, PCT remain a means, not an end; hence, their members are able to show how much they mean to each other with or without PCT. Moreover, with this attitude, when assisted by PCT, their relationships can be enriched. However, family members do not accept that in the long term PCT replace face-to-face conversation with each other.

From this positive perspective, family members can use Facebook to rekindle their relationships over space and time. For instance, families can offer support to their children when they go away to college or find a new job at a distant location. In a similar way, children can show their "presence" to

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<sup>7</sup> G. Mascheroni, *Parenting the mobile internet Italian households: parents' and children's discourses*, "Journal of Children & Media" 2013 No. 8, pp. 440–456, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17482798.2013.830978?src=recsys&journalCode=rchm20> (28.11.2016).

parents, when they, for instance, struggle with loneliness by sharing not only their thoughts but also pictures and videos. They can play games together and, with a camera's assistance, virtually enter into each other's house or room or share scenic views from their trips. Couples can share and keep digital mementos of their experiences via Dropbox and have access to their shared files instantly. On the occasions of birthdays or anniversaries, with the use of the Internet, people can search for, find and purchase very desirable gifts for their family members and show them their care and love.

Some examples that have already been studied on this matter and showed a positive impact of PCT on families are, for example: bloggers<sup>8</sup> who reinforce their identity as mothers by sharing contemporary solutions to parenting issues; grandparents<sup>9</sup> who spend time on grand-parenting websites discussing roles as grandparents; foster parents<sup>10</sup> who discuss their adoption stories with other foster parents and who look for advice in moments of struggle; engaged couples<sup>11</sup> who create wedding websites according to their values and family expectations.

#### 4. iPhone family in struggle

PCT can impact family functioning not only in positive but in negative ways as well, such as adult predators stalking children on the Internet and harassment of children by their peers. Here, we would like to present two of the most frequent negative cases: Internet infidelity as well as the lack of face-to face conversation and real human connections in families because of inappropriate PCT use.

Access to information is one of the most obvious benefits of the Internet. In addition, there is a corresponding increase in access to other people.

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<sup>8</sup> B. D. Lee, L. M. Webb, *The ICC (identity, content, community) theory of blog participation*, in: *Producing theory: the intersection of audiences and production in a digital world*, ed. R. A. Lind, New York 2012, pp. 177–193.

<sup>9</sup> J. Harwood, *Communication media use in the grandparent-grandchild relationship*, "Journal of Communication" 2000 No. 50, pp. 56–78.

<sup>10</sup> E. A. Suter, L. A. Baxter, L. M. Seures, L. J. Thomas, *Discursive constructions of the meaning of family in online narratives of foster adoptive parents*, "Communication Monographs" 2014 No. 81, pp. 59–78.

<sup>11</sup> C. J. Bruess, *Family communication in the age of digital and social media*, New York 2015.

Marital relationships are especially vulnerable to online interactions with non-family members who don't respect family life and previous commitments of its members. It's not just that people communicate with someone online but that there is a sexual or emotional nature to that communication. A typical example is **cyber-affairs** (when one partner shares an emotional connection with a participating cyber-friend on the Internet; this may or may not involve cybersex). In such cases, there is Internet infidelity which is described as an infidelity that consists of taking energy of any sort (thoughts, feelings, and behaviors) outside of the committed relationship in such a way that it damages interactions between the couple and negatively impacts the intimacy in the relationship. This is based on the assumption that anything that is deliberately hidden from a partner can create an emotional distance that could present a serious problem in the relationship.<sup>12</sup>

Research indicates that besides viewing Internet pornography, many married men and women participate in cyber-cheating.<sup>13</sup> Multiple websites help match partners who desire extramarital cyber affairs. Other websites match married users who desire discreet affairs with other married users who don't want to get caught. Since many users meet each other "only" in a virtual world, they don't see such affairs as problematic and, consequently, they don't consider them to be infidelity. Online affairs involve less work and expense; people can "meet" everywhere and anytime, including from their own homes. However, the ability of married people to form romantic relationships over the Internet can lead to marital separation and divorce. It is not surprising that the lowest rate of divorce among married couples are among those who report no incidence of affairs either via Internet or in real life.

According to the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, "this type of Internet infidelity has been greatly underestimated"<sup>14</sup> due to the Internet's current popularity. The anonymity and perceived privacy associated

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<sup>12</sup> J. D. Atwood, *Cyber-affairs*, "Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy: Innovations in Clinical and Educational Interventions" 2005 vol. 4 issue 2-3, pp. 117-134, <http://www.worldpapercat.com/104/Article1104777.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. M. G. Neuman, *Emotional infidelity: how to affair-proof your marriage and 10 other secrets to a great relationship*, New York 2008.

<sup>14</sup> N. Cahn, J. Carbone, *Reality and the family courts*: Book review: J. Murphy, J. Singer, *Divorced from reality: rethinking family dispute resolution*, "American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers" 2015 vol. 28 No. 1, pp. 309-319, [http://www.aaml.org/sites/default/files/MAT102\\_5.pdf](http://www.aaml.org/sites/default/files/MAT102_5.pdf) (28.11.2016).

with Internet communication allow users to feel more open in talking with other users. In addition, the anonymity serves as a defense mechanism making participants immune to fear of rejection or guilt. Marriage counselor M. Neumann stated that when somebody finds a best friend on the Internet, it is a big rejection of the spouse and it is “very hard to heal a relationship because the emotions have left the marriage and gone into the hands of someone else.”<sup>15</sup>

Another common PCT problem among iPhone family members is the use of PCT during family or couple time together. Parents just want to send an email before they start talking with their children. And then just one more ... Children begin to prefer playing with their devices than with each other. Even a coffee break or a family meal is often a time when people keep their heads down, keyboarding. We deprive ourselves of facial expressions, tone of voice, body language – and spontaneous talk. We are afraid of each other. We are afraid to be just with each other and look at one another. We know that human conversations and relationships are rich and messy at the same time. It is much easier to clean or update a PCT than our conversations and, consequently, relationships. We try to clean our relationships with technology. It doesn't work. Relationships demand a real us. A real time. Real conversations. They demand to listen to and be heard. To be patient. To care for each other.

It is different when we deal with PCT. We don't have to forgive our PCT for the times they upset us. Either we find a satisfying way to fix them and make them work as we want or we switch them to a newer version. We reject the old one. We don't need it any more. In the past, that device got lots of our attention; now, it is over. We are excited about the new one which becomes our new best friend to “talk” to. Nevertheless, in real conversations with real people, we can't fix or program each other, but we can grow together. Our relationships are nourished by conversations and quality presence with each other. They are an exchange of giving and receiving forgiveness in the process of developing belonging and communion. This ongoing process can be a steep road sometimes. Being human means that we don't reject others like devices when they are broken or old-fashioned. The danger is that technology and PCT logic make us gradually believe differently at the expense

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<sup>15</sup> M. G. Neuman, *Emotional infidelity...*, p. 32.

of our humanity. Real human conversations and real human connections remain irreplaceable for healthy human development.

## 5. Conclusion

Over the last 15 years, interactive communication technologies have had a dramatic impact on the way family members interact with one another. This has created many new benefits and a number of challenges. One of the most visible and worrying changes that has occurred in a typical iPhone family, compared to a traditional one, is the disappearance or failing of two – for a traditional family – very important pillars: prayer and conversation.

It is one of the basic human needs to be in touch with our inner center – to be with God. In prayer we open ourselves to God and we learn how to patiently wait for an answer. Moreover, solitude in God's presence reinforces a security of self, confidence and compassion; consequently, we prepare ourselves for an authentic conversation with others. In iPhone families, many people are driven by distraction, speed and productivity. We accept that our world is "increasingly complex, yet we have created a communications culture that has decreased the time available for us to sit and think uninterruptedly. As we communicate in ways that ask for almost instantaneous responses, we don't allow sufficient space to consider complicated problems."<sup>16</sup> Since we constantly choose distraction over self-reflection and solitude, we care less for what is meaningful, but want more stimuli to experience pleasure; nevertheless, we don't go as deep. We are filled but not fulfilled.

In iPhone families, we not only easily choose distraction over self-reflection but we also choose distraction over people. We try to avoid face-to-face tension and satisfy ourselves with a blend of on-line and off-line interactions. Studies show that "when children hear less adult talk, they talk less."<sup>17</sup> In addition, in-person conversation leads to the most emotional connection and online messaging leads to the least. We say that we are too busy for a real conversation that requires time and space. Because this

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<sup>16</sup> S. Turkle, *Alone together, why we expect more from technology and less from each other*, New York 2011, p. 39.

<sup>17</sup> S. Turkle, *Reclaiming conversation: the power of talk in a digital age*, New York 2015, p. 31.

attitude has become our second nature, we need to learn anew how to give a full attention to our family members and talk. Face-to-face conversation is deeply human and humanizing. It is a way to improve our self-esteem and experience closeness. Thus, it is important to rediscover and rejoice that we have each other and that every family member is a gift.

To conclude, it is our responsibility to learn how to properly use PCT in our families. Therefore, it is not time to reject technology but to ask ourselves how to use it better and make necessary changes in this regard.

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