Impact of ICT on Family Cohesion and Conflicts-A Study on the Youth of Mumbai

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Abstract

Being 'social' in today's world is multidimensional. As social animals, our ability to be communicated will always be an attractive proposition. The power of ICT enhances our sociability by connecting people across time and space. Services that enhance our social interaction are at the same time low cost and easy to use. ICT has affected how people interact with one another and, thus, it has the potential to alter how society is organized. One could ask whether this is an evolution of the human species or is this is a new way of communication that merely underlines our human capability to adapt. Family is a major contributor to a person's development and individual socialization. Establishing interpersonal connections with family members and other members outside the family such as friends, acquaintances are very important developmental tasks in the formative years of youth. A key question that this article is going to address is whether the incorporation of ICT by youth of Mumbai has affected their relations with their family members? And to study whether this influence is bonding or alienating family members?

Keywords: ICT, youth, Mumbai, family cohesion, family conflicts.

Introduction: A continuing debate has been about the loss of community first discussed more than a century ago by Tönnies in 1887. Instead of the former debate about whether industrialization and urbanization had withered community, research has now turned to digital technologies. Hellerstein (1985) also found that heavy users of e-mail and electronic conferencing, in a university setting, were more likely to use the computer to 'initiate new friendships, make new friends, and communicate with others', whereas 'light' users tend to do build relationships in other ways. In one of the psychoanalytical studies of Internet users, Turkle (1995) showed that users were playing roles and building identities on-line. They did create a feeling of community, if ephemeral, and probably brought some solace to people in need of communication and self-expression. According to Griffiths (2010), comparing teenage boys and girls, research has shown females tend to have better social skills and males often have superior spatial ability. If this translates to online behaviour, we would expect to see more girls engaged in social networking and more boys playing video games,

and this appears to be the case. For today's teenagers, television viewing appears to have been displaced by various forms of interactive social media. Today's youth probably spend as much time in front of the screen as previous generation but they have more choice and are more proactive. Mesch (2001) in his article, "*Social relationships and Internet use among adolescents in Israel*", claimed that the introduction of new technologies such as the Internet into the household can potentially change the quality of family relationships. On the other hand, social critics, such as Slouka (1996) have chastised the de-humanization of social relationships brought about by computers, as life on-line appears to be an easy way to escape real life.

Conflicting findings: ICT is increasingly seen as a medium that fosters memberships in multiple communities, providing companionship, social support, information, and a sense of belonging. Although scholars, technologists, and public intellectuals concur that the explosive growth in the use of the Internet is transforming social and civic life, few agree about the nature of this change. Some contend that the ICT world contains the promise of increased knowledge, tightened relations, and "*wired*" communities of coordination and cooperation while others question the potential of the Internet to enrich public life, suggesting that going online erodes psychological well-being, weakens real-world ties, and reduces community involvement. Accordingly, we not only gauge how much individuals use the Internet, we should also consider how they utilize these online practices.

On the one hand, parents believe that their children need Internet access and skills to do well in school and studies have shown that having a home computer is associated with children's higher test scores in mathematics and reading (Attewell & Battle, 1999). On the other hand, greater Internet usage raises concerns about the possible isolating effects on youth (Kraut et al. 1998), its consequences on youth's health problems, and the risks of exposure to pornography, dangerous strangers and other unsuitable materials online.

Given the empirical research, how come researchers end up producing such bewildering amounts of contradictory findings? A number of factors can be identified as possible contributors. Many of these studies were based on cross-sectional surveys that could lead to incorrect conclusions regarding causal relationships (Shklovski et al. 2004). Use of differing measurements may also have contributed to the conflicting results. For example, in measuring ICT use, some researchers recorded the amount of time respondents spent online, while others employed a simple 'user-nonuser' dichotomy, ignoring differences in extent of usage, whereby any effects of Internet use are likely to be concealed or diluted (Nie et al., 2001).

As Kraut et al. (1998) asserts that theories about the social effects of new media must consider more than the attributes of the technology alone because people can use the Internet in a variety of ways and for a range of ends. Thus, the effects of being 'wired'— whether favorable or unfavorable—are likely to be dependent on the gratifications individuals seek from media and their resultant media choices. In advancing our understanding of the relationship between social networking (and other online activities)

and the performance of identity within contemporary cultural norms, structures and frameworks, it is important to bear in mind that social networking uses, activities, changes, updates and account management are not only conscious representations and choices made for access, but simultaneously activities or performances which construct identity and self.

Family Relations and ICT: The strong concern that is being raised here is that the use of technology may be coming at the expense of face -to-face interaction with parents and other family members.

As people's routine have changed, so have the technologies they use to communicate with family, friends, and work peers. Over the last generation, home computers have become domesticated. Youth in the household with higher levels of education, higher income are more likely to use the internet through mobile phones. Many of today's households contain multiple ICTs. There are more technological toys in living rooms than a generation ago, such as digital cable boxes, personal video recorders, and DVD or gaming consoles. Where a twenty-inch screen was normal in the 1970s, forty-two inches or more is the contemporary standard, providing more than 4.5 times the viewing area.

For many families, internet was a fragile medium, experienced as unfamiliar, confusing, easier to get wrong than right, far from taken for granted. A series of surveys conducted by IT security software company McAfee has brought to light a new aspect of the digital divide, highlighting the discrepancy between parental perception and actual reality about online activities of Indian youth. Interestingly, 70 per cent of polled parents completely trust their children to tell them everything they do online whereas 58 per cent youth strongly believe that they know how to hide their online activities from their parents. The survey showed that while 46.5 per cent of polled parents had a conversation with their children about online safety only 27.9 per cent of parents have set up parental controls and befriended their children on SNS. In another survey that was conducted by McAfee in 2012 to uncover the digital division that exists between today's youth and parents in India, it showed that the increasing amount of time Indian youth spend on internet has created a rift between parent-child relationships (India Today, 2011).

The high level of involvement of youth with the digital world has also exposed them to many potential threats like personal information sharing, cyberbullying and online risks. Hence, according to the survey, parental concerns prevail and youth do end up sharing more dangerous information online, contrary to their parents' belief. Thus, it becomes imperative for parents to be more aware that an active cyber identity brings with it a host of dangers ranging from malware attacks to more grave ones such as cyber bullying, cyber stalking and sharing of unnecessary or confidential information with online strangers. This digital divide is attributed to the fact that Indian youth are growing up as 'digital natives', with increasingly active online lives but without parental assistance. Internet has gradually evolved to a platform for self-expression and social interaction, with youth indiscriminately indulging in information exchange leading to an increasing rate of cyber exploits.

Computer activity and family interaction usually occur in the same place at home and online communication may provide as much as or more psychological satisfaction than interaction with parents. Additionally, for youth, family interaction is a lower priority and less attractive than peer interaction. Thus, time spent with parents is more likely to be displaced by online communication than time spent with friends. Given that family time is a crucial resource for children and youth's healthy social development, the finding of displacement of time interacting with parents may support public concerns of youth's media use. Not only youth but sometimes even parents are guilty of spending more time with their gadgets. Parents who constantly fiddle with mobile phones or iPads in front of their children are guilty of "*benign neglect*" and risk driving them to a lifelong dependency on screens. Passive parenting' in the face of the new media environment is a form of benign neglect and not in the best interests of children. Parents must regain control of their own households. Palmer (2007), author of the book, '*Toxic Childhood'*, observes that it is becoming common for mothers delivering babies to text or post updates to their friends from the delivery room.

According to Griffiths (2010), comparing teenage boys and girls, research has shown females tend to have better social skills and males often have superior spatial ability. If this translates to online behaviour, we would expect to see more girls engaged in social networking and more boys playing video games, and this appears to be the case. For today's teenagers, television viewing appears to have been displaced by various forms of interactive social media. Today's youth probably spend as much time in front of the screen as previous generation but they have more choice and are more proactive. Research into teenage use of social networking certainly shows its popularity but says very little about whether its use is potentially problematic. One of the main reasons why behaviour online is very different from offline is because it provides a '*disinhibiting'* experience. One of the main consequences of disinhibition is that on the internet people lower their emotional guard and become much less restricted and inhibited in their actions. The main reason for this is because when people are interacting with others online it is non-face-to-face, is perceived as an anonymous environment, and is nonthreatening. On the positive side, this process can lead youth to develop long-lasting friendships and in some cases, fall in love online.

She states that socially responsible parents still need to play a proactive role in their children's lives and get to know what they are up to online. Mobile phones do not encourage young people to take more risks, however, they do see them as providing more flexibility. Young people often use mobiles as a negotiating tool to stay out late. The fact that the child owns a mobile meant that parents were more likely to be flexible in such arrangements. But what is to be noted here is that there has not been a corresponding increase in the percentage of parents who think the internet has been a bad thing for their children. Instead, more parents are neutral about the internet's impact, saying it has not had an effect on their child one way or the other.

In his first study, Mesch studied 1,000 households in Israel with at least one adolescent in the family (Mesch 2001). The study revealed that there were no differences in the level of

closeness between adolescents and parents in families with and without an Internet connection. The closeness was negatively related to time online, and the more time teens spent online, the less close they were to their parents. Teens' online activities were also relevant, using the Internet for educational reasons - doing homework, downloading software, and learning Internet skills – was positively related to the quality of adolescent – parent relationships, perhaps because parents value such activities. Mesch concluded that a high frequency of Internet use among youth, particularly when it was not used for learning related uses, created intergenerational conflicts. Older the parent, greater the difference between the knowledge of parents and children. Such adolescent expertise reverses traditional family roles, in which parents typically provide guidance and knowledge to their children. What is to be observed here that youth are the digital natives while their parents are the digital immigrants.

An Empirical Study:

Pilot Study: A random sampling of 25 Degree college students of Mumbai was conducted in November 2013. St. Andrews College (Bandra) and Vartak College (Vasai) were chosen as it represented students from across the socio-economic background. About 36 questions were asked concerning various aspects of ICT use in their lives. As the study focuses on the influence of ICT on youth, the results of the pilot study showed that lower-middle class and vernacular medium students could not be considered for the main study as it was observed that they only owned basic gadgets like a utility mobile phone or a desktop to maintain communication with their strong ties (family and friends) and weak ties (acquaintances).They also lacked much technical know-how. Thus, this study shifted its attention to students who were from upper-middle class.

Selected Degree College Students: The universe of this study comprise of the students of Degree colleges in Mumbai. There are about 80 Degree Colleges with greater Ranking & certificate Recognition under Mumbai University (University of Mumbai 2011).According to the surveys conducted by India Today (2013, 2014) on best colleges in Mumbai, it was seen that 90 per cent of the Mumbai's best colleges are situated in the western suburbs and south Mumbai. Hence, keeping the survey in consideration, the universe of the sample was narrowed between Andheri to Downtown Mumbai where 11 degree colleges (of higher ranking) were selected which includes colleges under Mumbai University, an Autonomous College and a Deemed university both for quantitative and qualitative research. A sampling procedure was utilised for this research. It also led the researcher to channelize her main study to a homogenous group of English speaking (not necessary their first language), upper middle class youth studying professional courses (150 respondents) and traditional courses (50 respondents) from affluent colleges of western suburban and south Mumbai colleges. For selection of colleges, purposive sampling was used while students in these colleges were selected on the basis of random sampling.

  Asian Development Bank report (2010) defines the upper middle class in India as those earning between   ($10 - $20) per person per day, measured in international dollars

(adjusted for purchasing power parity).Thus, students whose family income was Rs.4,50,000 and above were selected. It was seen that they not only own latest digital gadgets but also are members of varied social groups; have updated information about gadgets/online websites; had a desire to be in sync with latest trends and used their gadgets for purposes such as searching and generating information, creativity, co-ordination and communication.

The age range of these students was 18-23 years which qualified them to be part of the Millennial Generation. In all, 210 students were chosen for the primary research. 200 students were given the questionnaire while 10 students were selected for focused group discussions. 5 males and 5 females were selected for the discussion. Responses for all the questions which are detailed in the figures of this article are presented in the form of percentage.

Setting- Mumbai:
Mumbai is located on the western coast of India and is the capital city of the state of Maharashtra. With a population of 12 million (2001 census), Mumbai can best be described as a cosmopolitan city. Although the main native language is Marathi, people from different communities speak a variety of Indian languages. Geographically, Mumbai has the main town area typically known as South Mumbai and the suburbs. It also has an international airport and a well-established public transportation system of local trains and buses. It is also classified as a metropolitan city and is also known as the financial capital of India.

In the recent past, since the liberalization of the Indian economy, Mumbai has attracted investments from multinational corporations making it more open to western culture and influences than the rest of India. It is also home to the Hindi film industry popularly known as the Bollywood and the top entertainment TV production houses. Therefore, major cultural and fashion trends originate in Mumbai and percolate down to the rest of India. Mumbai has the maximum number of internet users in India which reaffirms its place as the financial capital of India.

Findings on Family cohesion and family conflict:
Family and its relations is a major contributor to a person's development, individual socialization and creation of self. Given the paucity of research on family processes in ICT-connected families, the goal of this study was to investigate the association of frequency of youth's ICT use on two important dimensions of family life, namely family cohesion and family conflicts.

It is seen that about 65 per cent of the parents of the respondents surveyed work in white collar jobs while 35per cent had parents who are in business. About 78 per cent of the respondents' parents were both working.

Figure 1
ICT Devices possessed by Parents of the respondents

	laptop	smartphones	Tablet	others
M	54	100	10	32
F	18	89	4	10
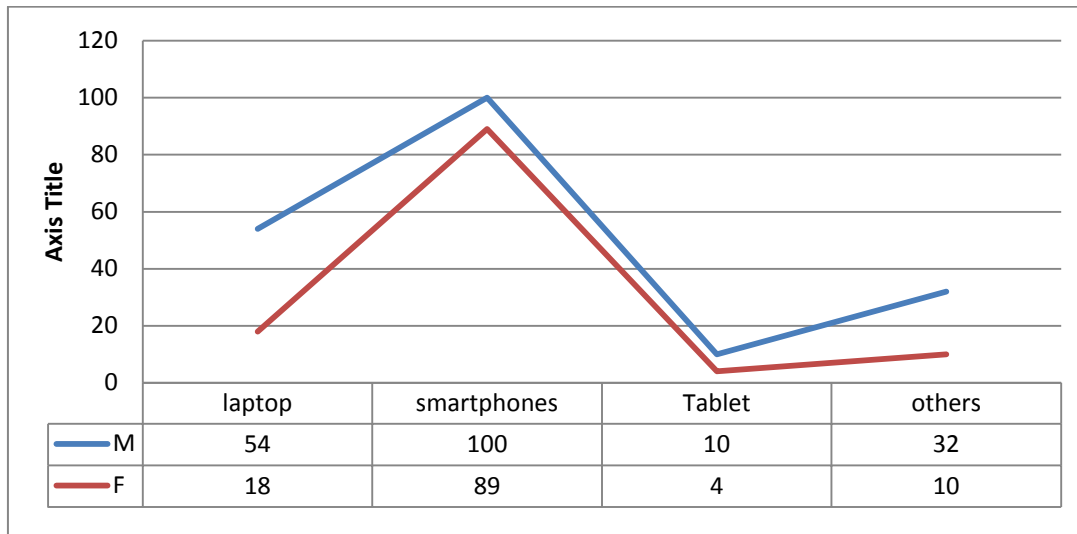
Source: Author's own findings

Figure 1 shows the number of ICT devices possessed by the parents. We see that all the Males i.e., Fathers and about 89 per cent of females i.e., Mothers own smartphones. Only 10 respondents stated that their parents do not own either a laptop or a desktop. It is also seen that fathers are better equipped than mothers. Desktop was not given as an option as desktop is a family gadget used by all the members in a family and thus could not considered as a personal gadget. It was noted 70 per cent of parents of the respondents are both well-educated and are equipped with basic ICT tools. However, the dexterity in which parents handle these digital tools is not nearly as good as their children. Hence, parents depend a lot on their children to learn about these new gadgets.

According to M3,

[i]*"My father consults me with anything and everything related to computers .The first time he bought a laptop, it was I who showed him the functions of the windows 8 computer. At first, he found it very difficult but after three months, he has learned how to mail others, surf the net and use other basic functions in a computer and now is thinking of joining Facebook (laughs)".*

According to F7,

"My mother is the last person in the family to learn anything related to cellphone. She tried to avoid it but as she works in a school, she has to have a cellphone. I first taught my father on how to use a smartphone and then I and my Dad together taught my mom. Even though my Dad uses a smartphone and is way better than my mom in

> *using it, he still misses his old Nokia phone which had very elementary functions but was easy to use (smiles)".*

Thus, it is seen that although parents do possess these ICT tools, they use it more for their professional work and networking unlike the respondents who use these gadgets for almost every aspect of their lives.

Family Cohesion: The introduction of new technologies such as the Internet into the household can potentially change the quality of family relationships. It is important to ponder over the question whether youths' attachment for ICT tools in their lives has any bearing on family relations or are there other factors when coupled with technology that impact family cohesion.

One of the biggest factors that influence family cohesion[ii] is family time. It was seen that due to the cut-throat competition in today's educational system, parents encourage their children to spend maximum time and attention to studies. About 88 per cent of the respondents were of the view that today's educational system in one of the prime reasons that take them away from their families as they hardly get time to spend with their families. Further, they stated that it is ICT tools that helps simplify their academic chore.

Another respondent who stays with her parents says that,

> *"Even if I do not stay away from my parents, I still hardly get time to be with them and my siblings. After college, I have to go for C.A (Chartered Accountancy) classes which start in the afternoon and gets over in the late evening. I come home, have my dinner and go to sleep only to wake up very early the next day for my college. This has been my routine right from my 9th Std, where I shuttle from college to classes. Even on Sundays or public holidays, we have classes to attend"*. (F4)

About 80 per cent of the respondents stated that the only time they get to spent together with their family is on Sundays .But even on most Sundays, each member of the family has their separate schedules for evenings. According to about 78 per cent of the respondents, dinner is the only time when they get to sit together and chat with their parents. About 89 per cent of the respondents stated that they spent less than three hours with their parents and siblings.

About 84 per cent of the students confessed that they dislike doing household chores and 61 per cent stated that they dislike spending time with relatives when they visit their houses. Any day, they prefer to chat with their friends online or spend time on internet.

Changing socialization patterns of the youth coupled with the presence of ICT in the families negatively impacts family cohesion[1].However, when it comes to using online activates for family welfare, it was seen that the youth are more than happy to help their parents, thus bringing about stronger family cohesion. E-shopping was a favourite way for

the family members to come together where the respondents helped their parents to buy household appliances or electronic gadgets.

According to a respondent,

> "*I helped my mother buy a food processor as she was finding it difficult to do her kitchen chores. I showed her the many options available and even YouTube videos of how this food processor works. This was a fun activity and we had spent few days together to select the final product. My mother is extremely happy with the product and thanks me for helping her buy the food processor*" (F1).

It was also seen that as Internet is a treasure house of information, parents find it very useful in terms of providing a lot of insights regarding health issues. About 63 per cent of the respondents have helped share medical information with their parents. Thus, we see that online activities for family welfare or family recreation increases stronger family cohesion. Thus, this finding agrees with the studies conducted by Orthner & Mancini (1991) that the time that a family spends together in activities such as recreation is positively related to family cohesion.

Family Conflicts: A review of Internet infidelity studies confirmed the potential for home computer use to disrupt families (Hertlein & Peircy 2006). Due to the ubiquitous nature of mobile phones, youth tend to always have their mobile phones in their hands as they keep on checking their online updates and messages. One such occasion is when youth tend to ignore their parents' instructions or advices, as they are engrossed in an online communication. It cannot be seen as a deliberate act of defiance but the fact that they are so engrossed in their online world that they tend to ignore or are unaware of their surroundings. Even if they talk to other members in the family they make sure that they do not disrupt the online conversations with their friends. This habit, most of the respondents have admitted causes annoyance to parents and other elderly members in the family. About two third of the respondents admitted that this act of ignoring causes quarrels with parents while about 93 per cent of them agreed that they get scolding most of the time for spending time on ICT tools .

> "*Most of us always have our mobile phones in our hands; sometimes I carry my cellphone even when I go to the washroom. This behaviour of mine irritates my mother the most. It is not that I do not want to obey or listen to her but my friends' messages keep on coming so I feel like responding. It is not that we always talk about trivial things; we also talk about our notes and our class activities. My mother thinks that my chatting is all 'Timepass' .She gets really angry when I delay household work or when I do not listen to what she has to say. One day she nearly threw my cellphone away. Now I am more careful while chatting online before my mom (chuckles)*" (F1).

About 90 per cent of the respondents agree to simultaneously switch between online and offline communication angering the parents. The main contention is that time spent on one

activity cannot be spent on another which is also supported by studies conducted by Nie (2001); Nie et al., (2005). ICT use is a time-consuming activity, thus high frequency is negatively associated with family communication and positively associated with family conflicts. About 38 per cent of them have stated that ICT use have impacted their studies negatively. As their parents keep on admonishing them, they try not to use their mobile phones when they study.

A respondent opined that,

> "My *parents are always behind me to study. So when I use mobile phones during my exams, it really bugs them, so I try not to use my cellphone during the time I study but after I am done with my studies I use them. But its little irritating when they put so many limitations."*(M4)
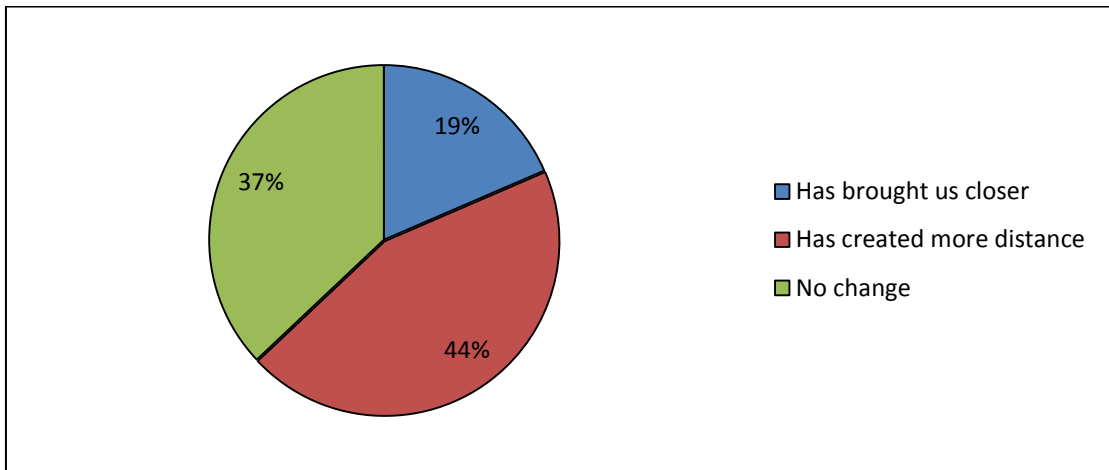
Figure 2
Conflicts with parents due to ICT
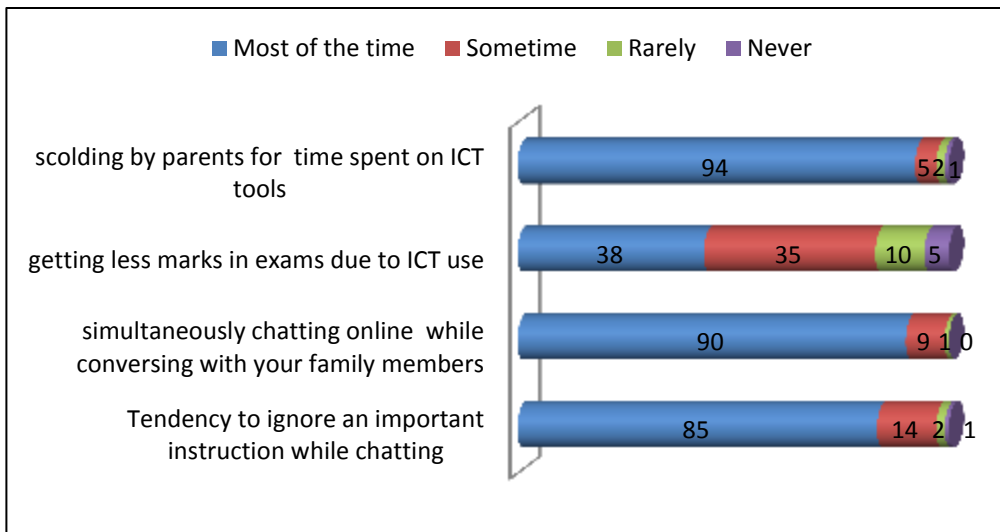
Source: Author's own findings

Thus, this finding tallies with Mesch (2001, 2003) who observed that when youth use the ICT tools for social and entertainment purposes, the frequency of the conflicts between youth and parents increased. Conversely, using the ICT tools for educational purposes, a use that is highly valued by parents and consistent with parental expectations, and decreases the frequency of the conflicts between youth and parents decreases.

Figure 3
**Impact of digital communication on family members**

Source: Author's own findings

As seen in figure 3, about 44 per cent of respondents were of the view that ICT has created more distance between family members specially parents while 37per cent stated that it has not brought much change. About 19per cent of them stated that ICT has brought much more communication than ever before. Studies conducted by Mesch (2001) and Sanders et al. (2000) states that frequency of daily Internet use by youth on the quality of their relationships with parents and friends found that low Internet use was associated with better relationships with parents and friends than was high Internet use. However, the findings of this study shows that ICT has impacted parent-child relations and not peer relations negatively. It is seen that maintenance of one relationship is at the expense of the other i.e., in this case, respondents prefer to maintain their peer relationships at the expense of their relationship with their parents.

Maintenance of Relationships by Digital Tools: As seen in Figure 4, Whatsapp is heavily used to maintain almost all kinds of relationships specially the one with friends, siblings and significant others. The use of mobile phones is mostly used to keep in touch with parents, as parents prefer their children to call them than text them. Along with parents, distant relatives' especially elderly relatives are also communicated with the help of phone calling rather than using instant messengers. However, respondents keep in touch with their cousins and other younger relatives with the help of Whatsapp and Facebook. Facebook, even though it has lost its position as the most used medium to communicate with others, still when it comes to keeping in touch with acquaintances, Facebook is even now widely used. The use of emails as a medium for communication is restricted only to very formal and institutional ties. We see how the youth '*compartmentalises*' ICT tools according to the receiver of the messages. Texting is mostly reserved for friends while talking on phone is mostly used for parents and elderly relatives.

Figure 4
Digital tools used to maintain relations
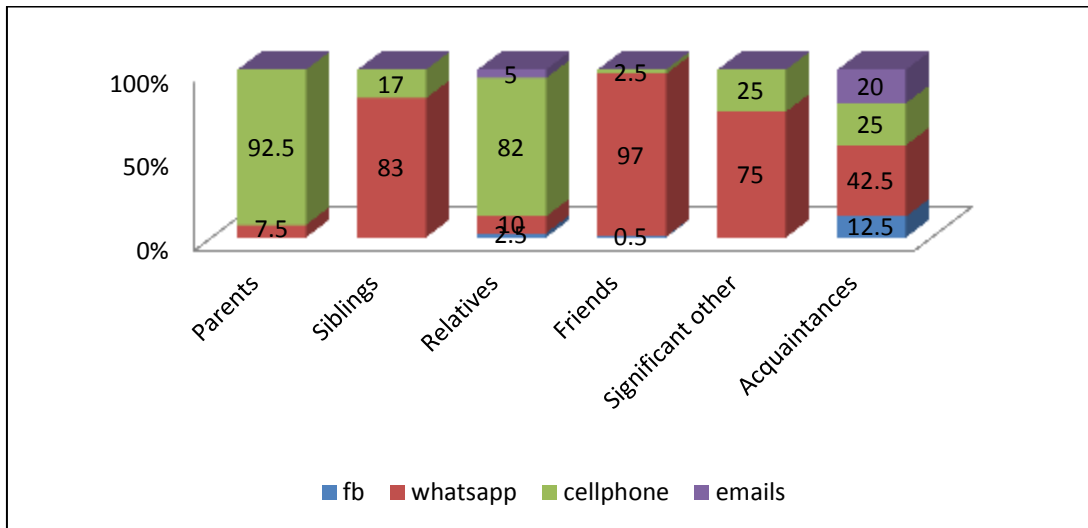
Source: Author's own findings

One respondent sums it up,

> "*Most of us call our parents rather than text them. My father is on Whatsapp, so I do forward messages to him and vice-versa but still the frequency is very less. Nobody chats with their parents .Whatsapp is mostly used for friends. Most of us try to avoid calling each other unless it is absolutely necessary. Thanks to Facebook and Whatsapp, we can be in touch with our cousins and school friends however I avoid chatting with elderly relatives on Whatsapp.*"(M4)

Table No: 1 traces the changes that have been brought by the induction of ICT coupled with a neo-liberal economy in urban Indian families.

Table 1
Changes seen in Family Relations

➢ Working Parents
➢ Going away from parents for higher studies
➢ Making their own decisions on important matters
➢ Spending more time in studies/classes
➢ Avoidance of family functions
➢ Less Religious beliefs
➢ Different time schedules for each family member
➢ Disruption in family communication due to the use of ICT tools
➢ Balancing of both online and offline communication
➢ Larger social circle which includes online friends

> ➤ Spending more time with peers and peer-related activities
> ➤ More pocket money hence access to more recreational activities
> ➤ Parents are taken less into confidence by the youth
> ➤ With the mobility & usability of smartphones, time is spent more in online activities

Source: Author's own findings

Conclusion: Households today have moved away from being a tight leisure groups to becoming networked households. Due to ICT tools, parents and children can now afford to maintain their own social circles with separate agendas but simultaneously being connected to the members of the family with the help of mobile phones, social media and other mobile applications. We also see that youth segregate technological gadgets according to the recipients of the message. Current educational system, more freedom to youth, liberal outlook, hectic lifestyles, bigger and vibrant social circles, individualized perceptions have all impacted today's relationships be it with family, friends or significant other. Thus, the finding of this study show how ICT helps to intertwine both the online and offline world into a web of networked relations.

Notes:

1) The respondents for the focussed group discussion is represented according to their gender and the number that was allotted to all the 10 respondents in the discussion. For eg: Male respondent No 3 is represented as M3 or Female respondent No 4 is represented as F4.
2) Family cohesion means a positive involvement of parents with their children, as reflected in shared activities, supportive behavior, and affection. The beneficial effects of family cohesion on children's behavior and development are strongly attested in social science research (Coleman 1988).

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