

Pinterest perfect picture: The relationship between family events and social media

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Abstract

Technology-based leisure is deeply ingrained into modern American family lives. Families use Internet and mobile technology to bond through shared online experiences, remote interactions, planning shared time, and teach children various skills. Use of technology by family members has also introduced multiple challenges. Among those challenges are blurred boundaries between the outside world and family leisure, sexting and bullying, unsafe driving while texting, issues of privacy, and decreased face-to-face communication. While there have been multiple studies on the use of social media by individuals, we know very little about the use of these platforms in the context of family events. Using a Family Process approach, this chapter will present how families use social media in the context of family celebrations, sport participation, and travel experiences. We conclude the chapter by discussing the current gaps in the literature and possible avenues for future research.

Introduction

Technology-based leisure is deeply ingrained into modern American family lives. For example, Americans of any gender, age group, racial or economic background use smartphones. According to the Pew Research Internet Project (2019), 96% of American adults owned a cell phone and 81% owned a smartphone. Similarly, roughly 50% of Americans own a tablet computer. Research has revealed various benefits and challenges associated with using technology by individuals and families. Families use Internet and mobile technology to bond through shared online experiences, for remote interactions and to plan shared time (Sharaievska, 2012). Parents also report buying cell phones for their children to ensure their safety, teach them responsibility and budgeting, as well as to help them develop social skills associated with communication via technology (Harper and Hamill, 2005; Larsen, 2005).

On the other hand, use of mobile technology by family members has introduced multiple challenges, such as the blurred boundaries between the outside world and family leisure, sexting and bullying, unsafe driving while texting, decrease in face-to-face communication and many others (see Lenhart, Ling, Campbell and Purcell, 2010; Radesky, Schumacher and Zuckerman, 2015). Although there has been some research on the individual use(s) of social media, we know very little about how families use these technologies in the context of family events. This chapter is concerned with how families use social media to plan, organise, experience and reflect on family events and travel experiences. More specifically, we focus on such events as holiday celebrations

(Christmas, 4th of July), milestone events (weddings, baby showers, graduations), sport events and family trips as contexts for celebrating special occasions.

In this chapter, a Family Process approach is used to discuss the use of social media during various family events. The first section provides an overview of family identity generation and articulation by means of family rituals and shared leisure. Then a review of the research on the influence of technology use on individual family members and family relationships is provided. The following sections present a review of the previous work on different forms of family gatherings (i.e., celebrations, participation in sports, and family holidays) typically referred to as family events. Lastly, the chapter is concluded by a discussion about the importance of investigating the purpose, benefits, and downsides of using social media in three types of family experiences, namely family events, family sport participation, and family holidays.

Family identity and family leisure

Family Process approach states that a family creates “fundamental and enduring assumptions about the world in which it lives” (Broderick, 1993: 185). These unique family realities are generated when the life of two partners are combined by virtue of marriage in a traditional sense or a long-term committed bond in modern society. Such realities are then passed on from generation to generation. The mechanisms by which a family generates shared family philosophies and meanings are often reflected in family leisure experiences (Broderick, 1993; Shaw, 2008; McCabe, 2015). More specifically, families often cultivate their own unique folklore by constructing family stories, myths and memorabilia, as well as creating their own set of values and recurring rituals. Such shared family experiences, as everyday casual leisure, family traditions, celebrations and family holidays are examples of specific mechanisms used by families to create shared values and a shared reality (Broderick, 1993). These meaning-making experiences do not happen in isolation and are impacted by a variety of external forces, including society, culture, and media (Shaw, 2008; McCabe, 2015) and thus, are constantly changing like any other living system. Moreover, leisure experiences are not only helping families to define their identity *as a family* but also serve as a way to articulate such identity to a larger society through individual behaviours and displays, as well as through a variety of family rituals and practices (Goffman, 1956[1971]; Fletcher, 2020).

Family rituals, as meaningful and often informal patterns of ordinary living – aspiring to a sense of rightness and having an element of rigidity – are developed by the family with acceptance of cultural traditions and acknowledgment of unique family identity(ies) (Broderick, 1993). These rituals represent a symbolic way of communication that gives family members satisfaction from its systematic enactment. Rituals serve as an educational tool to reinforce shared values as a family, regulate the behaviours of family members, and maintain and celebrate a family’s identity. Family rituals can be divided into three categories: family celebrations; family traditions; and patterned family interactions (Wolin and Bennett, 1984). Family celebrations (rites of passage, annual holiday observances) are special events in the life of a family that are influenced by culture,

religion, and national context in which a family is functioning. Family traditions are unique to each family and may be represented through family vacations and birthday celebrations. Lastly, patterned family interactions represent more low-key everyday experiences that families go through, like shared meals or nightly family time (Wolin and Bennett, 1984; Broderick, 1993).

In the contemporary world these experiences and rituals are widely recorded by multiple family members to compile extensive memorabilia of digital photos and videos. These artefacts of the significant points in family life allow families to preserve and recall stories of past experiences, as well as to shape family identity through collective memory of significant events (Broderick, 1993). For example, family experiences, such as getting married, or having children do not become meaningful until pictures are taken and shared with one's extended families and friends. In contemporary families, these artefacts are also shared through social media, that often serve as archive of family experiences, allowing family members to define their family identity and make announcements about significant life events to a much larger public. This practice of presenting one's own identity to the world – a form of 'impression management' - was discussed by Goffman (1956[1971]) in his dramaturgical analogy. According to Goffman, similar to an actor's performance on stage, we consciously decide whether to reveal or hide certain aspects of our 'self' when presenting ourselves to the society. This practice can be observed through representation of the family on social media where happy moments are highlighted, while struggles and disagreements are often intentionally omitted. Although reasons for using social media varies between family members, creation of a certain family image is particularly relevant for this chapter (Sharaievska, 2012).

Family use of social media

The introduction of internet and social media into the everyday life of children, adolescents, and families generated both anxiety and excitement among many family members, paediatricians, family therapists, and larger society. Multiple concerns over the use of social media by children and adolescents have been raised. These include cyberbullying, "Facebook depression," sexting, exposure to inappropriate content, as well as the adverse effects it may have on child development (O'Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson, 2011; Radesky, Schumacher and Zuckerman, 2015). When it comes to the influence of new types of technology on family relationships, the concerns about decreased quantity and quality of communication, diluted boundaries between family members and the outside world, issues of privacy and development of extramarital intimacy have also been discussed (Sharaievska, 2017; Son and Chen, 2018). These concerns may be even more heightened in the times of increased technology use, like during the COVID-19 pandemic, since the majority of family functioning (work, school, leisure, shopping) depends on technology.

Despite these understandable concerns, research has revealed that the use of information communication technology (ICT) by families can lead to both positive and negative outcomes (Sharaievska, 2017). For example, previous research suggested that, by sharing content through

social media, one may strengthen their social network, as well as enrich and complement one's personal relationships (Raymundo, Tentori and Favela, 2012). Williams and Merten (2011) found that social media technology can strengthen family bonds by providing members with more opportunities to communicate and spend time together. According to Williams and Merten, families spent more time interacting with each other by using technology at work, working from home, or using the Internet together. Similarly, in a study by Coyne, Padilla-Walker, Fraser, Fellows and Day (2014), media use had a positive association with family functioning, parental engagement and adolescent disclosure to parents. They argued that media served as a positive force, facilitating interactions, creating family bonding, shared interests and "collective memory".

In addition to providing bonding opportunities/experiences, social media technology offers families opportunities to stay in touch with each other and with extended families, specifically where physical closeness is not possible. For example, Sharaievska and Stodolska (2017) found that social media technology allowed families to stay in touch with each other and extended family, share pictures after a holiday with extended family or plan a shared celebrations, like a birthday or family reunion. Staying connected was particularly important for family members who lived abroad (Sharaievska and Stodolska, 2017) and older adults whose opportunity for physical social interaction with their families was limited due to (im)mobility, illness and other age-related issues (Bell, Fausset, Farmer, Nguyen, Harley and Fain, 2013). Similarly, non-resident fathers in the study by Sharaievska and Hodge (2018) used technology to maintain bonds, show love, and build their identity as involved fathers who do not live with their children on a permanent basis. This need to stay in touch, connect, and bond through technology and social media may be particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic, when in-person interactions may be significantly limited. Along with other changes in family behaviours associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, children, youth, and their parents are known to have increased their screen time (Carroll, Sadowski, Laila, Hruska, Nixon, Ma, and Haines, 2020). Although such behaviour may lead to sedentary lifestyles and be viewed as a hindrance to child development, it may also help to maintain bonds with family members (grandparents, cousins, parents etc.) who live separately during times of physical distancing.

Development of shared interests was cited as another benefit of social media use (Padilla-Walker, Coyne and Fraser, 2012; Coyne et al., 2014). Parents and their adolescent children built shared interests related to technology use (Sharaievska, 2012; Sharaievska and Hodge, 2018), used social media for entertainment, to find information, and to document their experiences (Coyne et al., 2014). For example, one of the fathers in Sharaievska's (2012) study stated that Facebook was the only shared interest he could find with his teenage daughter. Another study (Padilla-Walker, Coyne and Fraser, 2012) revealed that while the use of certain technology (e.g., texting, playing video games) is associated with higher family connection, social media engagement is not. The authors explained that social media interaction can be impersonal and children may perceive family involvement as intrusive.

Besides positive outcomes, ICT has been noted to have several negative effects on family relationships. For example, the participants in Williams and Merten's (2011) study perceived ICT to be at fault for decreased closeness and intimacy in households with multiple devices that allowed family members to use these technologies in isolation. The authors also discussed possible work spillover into family time, and damaging effects of online connections on youths. The participants in Sharaievska and Stodolska's (2017) study stated that the use of social media may decrease the amount of time spent together as a family, lower attention during face-to-face interactions, encourage negative comparisons to other families, and affect development of social skills among adolescent children. Moreover, some participants increased the use of social media during times of family conflict, which may lead to avoidance of negative emotions, associated with mental health issues, such as depression (Kim et al., 2017). The child-parent conflict may also be caused by the rules related to the use of technology established by parents, as well as limitations and supervision enforced by them (Williams and Merten, 2011). As previous research revealed, parents and children often disagree on the definition of monitoring and sensitivity to supervision (Wang, Bianchi and Raley, 2005).

The development of social skills among children and potential harm from outside the family system are among other concerns associated with use of social media (Williams and Merten, 2011). As Mazur (2005) claimed, young people share online a variety of personal topics, including romantic relationships, friendship, relationships with parents, sexuality, substance abuse and mental health. Such level of self-disclosure may be perceived as excessive by parents, which may further exacerbate their worries about cyberbullying, inappropriate communication with strangers, addiction to internet, and other issues associated with lack of parental supervision (Lenhart, 2005). As a result, parents often establish rules about when, where and how social media technology can be used by their children, control who can access their accounts and what information can be shared (Lenhart, 2005; Sharaievska, 2012).

The influence of social media on family relationships is thus, multidimensional and is dependent on a plethora of internal and external factors. Regardless, its presence in the lives of families is undeniable, and our understanding of its impact on family relationships is crucial in our understanding of family relationships, family leisure and family events. Although use of social media and other technology may be viewed as leisure in itself, it may also serve as a tool used during other non-digital types of leisure and family experiences, including family events, family travel and family sport participation. These uses of technology will be explored in the following sections.

Family celebrations and events

Family celebrations and events can be classified into several categories (Broderick, 1993). In this section, we summarise holiday celebrations and milestone events. Holiday celebrations (Hanukkah, Christmas, Mother's Day, Independence Day) - religious and national - symbolise

traditions and solidify the values that families consider to be important. For example, celebrating Independence Day may highlight a family's patriotism and appreciation for sovereignty of their country. Similarly, celebration of Christmas may manifest a family's adherence to principles of Christianity (Thomas, 1997). Another category of events celebrated by families are those which symbolise milestones in the lives of family members (weddings, baby showers, birthdays, graduations, and anniversaries). By celebrating these special occasions families emphasise their transition into a new stage of life, develop new identities, including those of new family members, foster development of children and wellbeing of the entire family, pass on old traditions and create new ones, as well as enhance and maintain family relationships while sharing food and creating memories with loved ones (Broderick, 1993; Hill, 2000; Gardyn, 2001; Kasser and Sheldon 2002; Spagnola and Fiese, 2007; Trussell and Shaw, 2009; Costa, 2013; Fletcher, 2020). The types of celebrations observed by families may depend on factors such as cultural and religious backgrounds, government and policies, the rituals observed during upbringing, access to certain resources and the stage of family life cycle (Fletcher, 2020).

Celebrations and holidays are often viewed as 'special times' that allow families to re-energise and reconnect (Costa, 2013). Despite the benefits associated with these events, there are also opportunities for conflict, stress and dread (Thomas, 1997). Thomas revealed that celebration of holidays may become overwhelming due to focus on consumption, organisational work and competition, rather than on values and enjoyment from the rewarding shared experiences. Concerns about public celebration of only one type of religious values and the impact of such exclusion on those who do not assign to the traditional values of the majority were also discussed as a reason for conflict (Dorell, 2006). Lastly, the unequal distribution of responsibilities related to planning and organising family leisure, with women taking on the overwhelming amount of work, as well as assumption of fathers' responsibility when it comes to recreation and sport has been discussed (Shaw, 2008; Fletcher, 2020). To summarise, holidays may add stress and conflict if the focus is switched from the family bonding and celebration of shared values and traditions to consumption and work associated with celebrations. Along with special events and holiday celebrations, families' experiences with sport are another way families establish and maintain their identities and bonds.

Families and sport

Sport involvement comprises a significant part of family leisure. Couples spectate sports through media or at the venues as a shared activity that provides opportunities for bonding and communication that can further lead to family solidarity (Redekop, 1984). Parents use sports to socialise their children, to help children build such skills as teamwork, loyalty and ingenuity, develop healthy lifestyles and build strong relationships with parents, particularly fathers (Kremer-Sadlik and Kim, 2007; Fletcher, 2020).

Previous research has shown that children adopt values associated with physical activity from their caregivers (Van Der Horst, Paw, Twisk and Van Mechelen, 2007). Moreover, the strongest predictors of children's participation in physical activity, both during childhood and later in life, are parents' engagement in physical activity (Mulhall, Reis and Begum, 2011), as well as their support and encouragement. Parents' support helps children develop physical competence and self-worth, which may lead to long-term engagement in physical activity (Weiss, 2000). Research has also found that sports play an important role in establishing and building relationships between fathers and their children (Fletcher, 2020). A study by Harrington (2006) suggests that some Australian fathers viewed sport and leisure as both physical and social spaces that allowed them to build their identity as an involved or 'generative' (i.e., guiding the next generation) father. The fathers claimed that sport was particularly useful in providing them with an opportunity to pass on values, express their emotions, bond and communicate with their children, which can be explained by the comfort and confidence fathers felt in spaces associated with sport (Harrington, 2009; Fletcher, 2020). Siblings' relationship can also be improved through participation in organised youth sports since it allows them to spend time together and build understanding of core values, such as fairness and equity (Trussell, 2012). In fact, many parents purposefully get their children involved in sports to help them develop confidence and become responsible adults (Mirehie, Gibson, Kang and Bell, 2018).

It is worth noting that despite all the benefits that youth sport can bring about for families, there are disadvantages associated with participation at elite level such as stress on family's temporal and financial resources, intensive labour (e.g., driving, laundry) for parents (Trussell, 2009; Fletcher, 2020) and competition or conflict among siblings in families with multiple children when one child performs better than others (Trussell, 2012). Although sport-related travel is one of the stressors of youth sport engagement, family trips can also bring a lot of benefits. Thus, the following section will discuss family holidays as another type of family event.

Family travel

Family trips comprise a notable part of family leisure and hence have been receiving a lot of attention from leisure and tourism scholars. Research has shown that people have different motives for taking family trips. These may include maintaining or strengthening family relationships, escaping from the routine, creating memories and improving communication, or continuing family traditions (Shaw and Dawson, 2001; Zabriskie and McCormick, 2003; Trussell and Shaw, 2009; (and Lehto, 2009; Durko and Petrick, 2013). For example, Kluin and Lehto (2012) stated that family reunion tourists' motivations and behaviour are distinct from those of other tourists. Since enhancement of family cohesion and communication is the main motive, the group interests are prioritised over personal preferences and aim to satisfy the need for love and belonging (Kluin and Lehto, 2012).

Multiple benefits for families have been associated with family trips, including more positive sense of family and increased family cohesion, enhanced quality of life, and heightened relationship satisfaction (Shaw, Havitz and Delemere, 2008; Dolnicar, Yanamandram and Cliff, 2012; Durko and Petrick, 2013). As Rosenblatt and Russell (1975) stated, family holidays were contexts for positive change and recovery wherein people experience less tension and fewer arguments. Family holidays were viewed as quality time with the family that provide opportunities for reaching consensus and shared experiences that were positively related to improved family communication and cohesion (Lehto, Choi, Lin and MacDermid, 2009). Moreover, according to a study by Durko and Petrick (2013), the frequency of couples' intimacy was eight times higher when they were on vacation than when they were at home. Also, an increase in happiness of children during travelling resulted in enhanced overall wellbeing of the family. For example, in a study by Mikkelsen and Stilling Blichfeldt (2015), the participants described how children were allowed more independence, freedom to explore new environments, and socialise with children of different ages while at camping sites. This free-ranged parenting approach during holidays also allowed parents to relax and enjoy some individual and couple leisure activities.

More recently, Kennedy-Eden and Gretzel (2016) studied the structures and meanings of family holidays. They found that in the modern day, when many families live far away from each other, creating a tradition of annual holidays with extended family has become a way of strengthening family bonds and enhancing family capital. The authors discussed that from a family system viewpoint, these holidays "serve as system maintenance" (p.14) by providing a chance for families to work on their relationships away from everyday hassle and routine. Moreover, they found that families use technology to maintain the involvement of family members who were not able to travel. Similarly, families in Gram, O'Donohoe, Schänzel, Marchant, and Kastarinen's (2019) study reported organising 'grandtravels', or family holidays that involve grandparents. The study showed that grandtravels were related to positive emotions such as joy and hope that strengthened the bond between grandparents and grandchildren, and hence, increased their overall wellbeing.

To avoid presenting an idealised image of family travel, it is important to note that despite multiple benefits, spending time together as a family can cause stress for many (Kennedy-Eden and Gretzel, 2016). Rosenblatt and Russel (1975) attributed such stress to the division of labour and territoriality whereby family members develop certain territories at home and adhere to a certain division of labour which is usually disrupted on holidays. Such disruption of routine heightens the probability of interpersonal conflict on family holidays. Interestingly, traditional gender roles persist even during family holidays, wherein women prioritise their children and husband/partner's needs over their own; managing most of the tasks prior, during, and after the family holiday (Morin, 2012; Mottiar and Quinn, 2012). As a result, mothers and wives are often doing the work to organise leisure and events for other family members, while rarely enjoying these as part of their own downtime.

As evident in the review of the literature above, previous studies provide valuable insights about different types and aspects of family events. However, so far limited attention has been paid to the use of social media during such events. Given the pervasive use of technology in all areas of modern life, it is important to understand how use of social media can impact experiences of family events. The following section provides further discussion on the importance of this topic.

Social media and family events

Up until now, we have argued that ICT affects contemporary family life and travel. Now we suggest that family sport and celebrations are similarly impacted by ICT use. First, the ways families get to know about travel opportunities may be significantly influenced by various social media platforms. Pictures of family holidays and celebrations organised by friends of the family (specific resorts, museums to visit, activities to participate in etc.) may consciously and subconsciously impact the decision-making process (Sharaievska and Stodolska, 2017). In addition, the desire to travel and the choice of a destination may be affected by the promotional activities of travel influencers on social media (Hanifah, 2019). Being promoted by *regular people* instead of travel companies, travel experiences become more appealing and more relatable than ever before since they promote destinations in a more authentic and seemingly unbiased way (Hanifah, 2019; Willment, 2020).

Second, travel and sport experiences, and family events may potentially change as a result of the use of social media. Several studies revealed that our in-person interactions can suffer from the use of ICT and social media. Among some examples discussed in previous research are a parent or a child not paying full attention during interaction with their family, an individual using the phone in a public space to convey their unavailability for a conversation, a family member going to social media for support or avoidance during a conflict, and many others (Radesky, Schumacher and Zuckerman, 2015; Turkle, 2017). Similarly, the interactions of family members may be affected by use of technology and social media when families travel together, participate in sport, or family event. Since family members are often compelled to take pictures to preserve the memories and post them online to share their experiences with extended family and friends, they also take time away from their ability to be completely present in the moment and, as a result, may lower the quality of experience for members of the family. While desire to save the memories through taking pictures is understandable, the damage to the experience might be more significant than assumed. A study by Abeele, Antheunis and Schouten (2016) revealed that the mere presence of a cell phone during a conversation may negatively influence one's perception of the conversation. Moreover, the desire to take the best picture possible to post on social media may lead to shallow travel experiences, over-crowding of popular destinations, and even injuries (Hegy, 2019).

Third, the travel experience and family events could be influenced by the family's use of social media, even after the experience is over. Since reflection on the experience is an important

part of travel (Kim and Chen, 2019), social media can serve as a depository of family leisure memories, chronologically organised and accompanied with comments from extended family and friends. Such memories could be perceived as more meaningful because they provide opportunities for interaction with others which can further deepen the appreciation of the experience. Furthermore, thanks to reminders available on some of the social media platforms, these memories can be easily retrieved and relived with family members, which may encourage a planning of another holiday or family celebration.

Conclusion

Since, to our knowledge, no research has explored this topic previously, we urge future studies to focus on better understanding the relationship between family events (holidays, celebrations and sport) and use of social media. It would be helpful for the travel and event industry to better understand how social media impacts family's decision making, what type of information is shared on social media by families and what social media content is considered the most useful in choosing the best and most suitable experiences. Research should aim to answer questions relating to how ideas to plan certain types of holidays, attend certain sites, and pursue certain experiences are discussed, negotiated, and developed. Who are the main family members serving as a connection between the idea and action? Using netnography and in-depth interviews with all family members may be helpful approaches to explore these patterns. Since human behaviour online may be the most revealing of their actual thoughts and feelings (Stephens-Davidowitz, 2017), it would be important to use a methodology that employs online observations.

It would also be helpful to better understand how the use of social media during family events and holidays may change the experience, enjoyment of experience, and family relationships. Although we know that the presence of the cell phone during a conversation may send a message that the conversation is less important (Abeele, Antheunis and Schouten, 2016), we know little on whether use of cell phone and social media during family events and travel experience has the same effect. It is possible that during travel, family members may see picture taking as a justification of the experience being more valued. Moreover, sharing the pictures through social media may help the family share the experience with grandparents and extended family, as well as reinforce their family identity. Alternatively, use of social media could lead to a more shallow experience and, as a result, the holiday may have less reenergising effect on family relationships. This area of study should be further explored to help families work on potential conflict and to provide them with the event experiences that foster stronger relationships. Observations at popular travel destinations and in-depth interviews with all members of the family would be the most helpful approach to better understand the depth of influence technology has on family events and holidays.

Lastly, it would be important to explore how families use social media to archive, review and re-live the experience of family holidays and events after the experience is over. Do families

look at family pictures the way families used to look through photo albums? Do they share those experiences with extended family during family reunions and family gatherings? How do the functions of social media motivate them to repeat experiences like family holidays and events? Although we know the various functions of social media, we know little about which of those functions are used the most and which of those functions could benefit family relationships. Exploring this information through focus groups, individual interviews, and case studies could be helpful, not only for families themselves, but also for social media companies who try to meet the needs of their customers.

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