

Looking for the Guilty in the Family Disconnect: The Case of Istanbul

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Abstract

As Horkheimer claimed, by the spread and development of mass communication devices, the family has been turned into a tool that serves to adapt to the capitalist system. Since media technologies have entered the private sphere of the home, the capitalist ideology of individualization has transformed the concept of family. In the age we live in, use of media in family leisure times prevents family members from communicating and spending quality time together. The important point is, up to this day, most of the research has been made on youth, blaming them for addictive media usage and recommending to parents several ways of keeping their children away from media at home. However, there is the ignored fact that today, parents are also intense media users, and this is one of the very important reasons why their children are pushed towards media addiction. This study aims to demonstrate that in Turkish houses also covered with media technologies, communication within the Turkish family is decreasing, and parents play a significant role. . Through focus group interviews with ten families living in Istanbul, it is pointed out that parents mostly think of 'leisure time' as a time they spend by themselves, and with media usage. Moreover, young children mostly blame their parents for addictive media usage at home, and for not spending time with them. Therefore, for better family relationships and hence better lives, adults' media usage habits need to be researched.

Keywords: Turkish family, individualization, media, leisure time.

Introduction

As media technologies get cheaper, more mobile and personal, they fill a big part of individuals' times today. In the age we live in, almost every house on the planet is full of media. Increasing use of media at home threatens the communication among family members, and prevents them from spending quality times together. Even if family members are physically present altogether in the living room, they are mentally far from each other.

Horkheimer (1998) claimed, since modernity has set the stage for the development of the mass communication devices, family has been turned into a tool to serve the system, and it has been produced by the entertainment industry. As most of the educative roles of parents have also been given to schools and other social groups, relationships between parents and their children have changed, and the institution of family has become defenseless against the ideology of the media technologies at home.

Media really have a significant role in understanding today's families. Media technologies are useful for keeping family members who live far from each other, connected. However, when they are used in in-house family leisure times, they push families towards being disconnected. Television still has its importance in houses, but more importantly, the internet is the primary technology that pushes family members to get individualized (Mesch, 2006). New media technologies (that include internet) like smartphones, which provide access to multiple functions through their applications, make it especially possible for family members to stay together physically, but apart from each other mentally. Ley, Ogonowski, Hess, Reichling, Wan and Wulf (2014) call this as "viewing together with different interests".

After modernity, both children and parents have become very busy with school and work outside of home, so that family members can hardly come together. 'Home' is the most significant place where family members meet and interact. Young people (children, according to parents) interact with their parents mostly at home (Offer, 2013). For that reason, in-house family leisure time activities ("Core Family Leisure Time Activities", in Zabriskie and McCormick's definition, 2001) are quite important for a well-functioning family.

Communication is the key component of the functioning of a family. "Family Systems Theory" by Zabriskie and McCormick (2001) suggests spending time together and having a shared reality can improve communication of the family. In this context, some theorists (Padilla-Walker, Coyne, Fraser, 2012; Boudreau and Consalvo, 2014) argue that consuming media with other family members (like chatting about a TV program, or playing video games together) in family leisure times can produce contents for family communication. However, doing solitary leisure time activities seem to be more attractive for family members, and this threatens the family institution. For most of the theorists, media technologies do not aim to strengthen the family, but they aim to free the individual (Turrow, 2001). To be able to define this role of media in family life, Turkle (2010) suggests that people become "post familial families" when they go home in the evening, whereas Flichy (1995) calls this same situation as "living together separately". In this context, in the age we live in, 'home' becomes an area of individual activities, like a 'hotel', in Kumar's (1995) words.

Although almost all of the studies (Roberts, 2000; Campbell, 2005; Lee & Chae, 2007; Lin, Lin, Wu, 2009; Correa, Hinsley, Zuniga, 2010; Liu, Fang, Deng, Zhang, 2012; Babey, Hastert, Wolstein, 2013; Panek, 2014) took it for granted up to this day that youth are addictive media users in a way that negatively affects their face-to-face relationships (beside many other dangers), therefore their media use must be limited; this study claims that parents might give youth a reason for media addiction. Today, parents seem to get busy with mobile technologies, rather than their children, and it is not only for work. Parents consume a lot of media during in-house leisure times, and that causes their children to get lonely. Those children who feel lonely in their house, try to fill the void of their parents' absence and feelings that only the institution of 'family' can give, through communication technologies. As Turkle demonstrated from her research, there are many children that feel lonely. Some of

them feel lonely because both of their parents work and when they come home, they spend time with media rather than with their children, or some of them feel lonely because their parents got separated. In this context, media technologies fulfill those children's need of belonging (Turkle, 2010). Cakir (2014) explains this by suggesting that people desperately look for the need of 'belonging' in cyber communities.

A report released in Europe by Family Platform (2010) demonstrates that children tend to use media as much as their parents do. According to Rudi, Dworkin, Walker and Doty (2014), couples with children tend to use more media at home and they are more positive about it. The irony is that parents spend a lot of time with media, but on the other hand, they try to prevent their children from addictive media usage. It is mostly ignored that actions and behavior of parents serve as an important example for their children and their lack of attention pushes children towards excessive media usage (Liu et al., 2012).

This is a global situation, and it is not different in Turkish families. The most recent extensive research is Turkish Family Structure Research (*Türk Aile Yapısı Araştırması*, 2013) done by the Ministry of Family, and it demonstrates that they also tend to spend their in-house family leisure times with a high percentage of media (both television and internet) use. Therefore, through ten focus group interviews conducted with Turkish families, this study aims to demonstrate an in-depth picture of parents' role in the disconnection within the family.

Method

This research has been done through the qualitative method of focus group interviews because using qualitative methods to search for social phenomena provides more detailed and expressive results. In focus group interviews, interaction among group members has a significant role in stimulating the appearance of different perspectives, and determining their natural expressions about the subject (Çokluk, Yılmaz, Oğuz, 2011, pp. 97-105).

Three open-ended questions were asked to ten focus groups of families, and in this way, participants discovered their unnoticed habits or behavior. To be able to obtain validity and reliability, "Maximum Diversity Sampling" has been used (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). In this respect, families have been chosen from those (consisting of 29 individuals - both parents and children of a certain age) living in Istanbul, which have different structures in terms of family members, and diverse socio-economic and demographic backgrounds (e.g. families that have children, families that do not have children, newly married couples, young parents-older parents, nuclear family, single parent family and a family living with a member from the older generation, working class family, middle class families and an upper class family).

A common feature of all these families is that they all use media and new media technologies actively in their family leisure times. To be able to make the research in its natural context, interviews took place in the families' homes. The interviews were done with couples and their children (if there are any) who can express their thoughts.

Before the interviews, participants have been informed about the research in detail, and their consent was taken. All of these in-depth interviews (each of which lasted around 60 minutes) were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each transcribed interview was read thoroughly and a thematic content analysis was done.

Results

Perception of the New Turkish Family

First of all, participants were asked to compare today's Turkish family structure with the old-traditional Turkish family. Most of the participants think that compared to the older crowded and sharing structure of a Turkish family, today's nuclear family is more preferable although its members are disconnected from each other, because it lets individuals to be more free:

- Tuba (A10, 29, university degree, working): When I was a child, our family was more crowded and different from today's family, but now we do not have that intimacy.

Today, when we are in the same house altogether, no one speaks to each other, but everyone has their mobile phones in their hands. My grandfather used to tell us stories when we were children, but now he does not, because no one listens to him, because everyone is busy with their smartphones. But still, I think today's nuclear family is better.

- Ahmet (A10, 32, university degree, working): There was more sharing in the traditional Turkish family...
- Nilay (A5, 28, university, not-working): I think today families spend less time together, because parents and children socialize separately. We meet with our parents only in the evening, but rarely talk to each other.
- Aslı (A8, 42, doctor): Everyone has their own personal space now, but in the past, one did not have that chance, everybody in the house had to stay together.
- Mehmet (A8, 44, doctor, professor): Now we lessen sharing with family and leave time for ourselves... It is selfish and individualized.

Perception of Leisure Time

Similarly, the concept of "leisure time" reminds most of the participants solitary media usage at home, rather than cohesive and sharing family leisure time activities:

- Merve (A3, 21, university student): Leisure time for me is to sleep or watch a movie to get my mind away from things.
- Nazlı (43, physiotherapist, working): I already spend my whole time with my family, so I leave in-house leisure times to myself. I read a book or watch a movie.
- Fahri (A6, 37, physiotherapist, lecturer): After finishing all my work, I watch television with a cup of coffee, or play online bridge with my friends in my computer. This is leisure time for me.
- Miraç (A9, 18, student): When I have time left from studying, I spend my in-house leisure times by watching television or playing video games. After the university exam, the first and only thing that I want to do is to play video games until mornings.

Media at Home and Communication Within the Family

As it is seen in participants' perception of leisure time, almost all of the family members spend their times in the house with some kind of screen media:

- Tekin (A9, 51, university degree, retired): We watch television together, but being a family does not mean liking the same things. Sometimes, we can disagree with my wife. I want to watch football or a political program, she likes to watch competitions or documentaries. In such cases, we respect each other and one of us goes and does something else like surfing on the internet.

However, family members live under the illusion of doing a family leisure time activity when they physically sit in the same room together:

- Zehra (A2, 31, university degree, housewife): Even if we have our mobile phones in our hands, we are together.
- Fethi (A2, 32, university degree, businessman): We make everything attached to each other... Of course we do, I sit here for example, Mina sits there and Zehra sits there...
- Zehra (A2, 31, university, housewife): We look at our Ipad, but we are next to each other (laughs).
- Fethi (A2, 32, university, businessman): I mean if you take our photograph from there, it looks like a happy family portrait (laughs).

The problem here is that physical proximity is not enough for a family to function well; there needs to be communication. The interviews reveal that in these family portraits where everyone is focused on their screens, there is 'no' conversation at all:

- Merve (A3, 21, university student): *In our living room, television is on, but my father looks at his smartphone. My sister and I have our smartphones in our hands...*
- Reyyan (A3, 20, university student): My mother absolutely has her smartphone in her hand...
- Interviewer: Do you have any conversations in that situation?
- Hayriye (A3, 71, primary school degree, housewife): No.

As the interviews proceed, parents start to get aware of the role of their media usage in the disconnection of their family. While defining how they spend time at home, participants confess that they realize each other only when the electricity is off. This is when they feel the need to spend some real family time:

- Fahri (A6, 37, physiotherapist, lecturer): Actually, we realize each other when the electricity is off... This means that television is the tool that keeps us disconnected from each other at home. When the television is off, we make plans to spend quality family time.
- Fethi (A2, 32, university degree, businessman): Television is always on in our house, like an always-playing background music. That's why we start to know each other only when the electricity is off (laughs).

But of course, the electricity is mostly about the television. There are those parents who still prefer to hold on to the remaining battery and the internet package (3G) of their smartphones:

- Zehra (A2, 31, university degree, housewife): But if 3G is active, then there is no problem (laughs).

The Family Disconnect

When it comes to the discussion about the disconnection in the family, all participants seem to blame each other for causing that:

- Oğuz (A5, 61, high school degree, retired): Unfortunately, our daughter is a media addict for long years now.
- Nilay (A5, 28, university degree, not-working): My parents' television viewing habit is also addiction. They do not even go out when their favorite program is on. This is addiction.

- Oğuz (A5, 61, high school degree, retired): Of course it is addiction. But television series make you curious, what can we do? You feel like it is your last chance to see the new episode, and you postpone the meeting with your friends, because you feel like they can wait.
- Zeynep (A8, 11, student): Actually, I have a smartphone for two years, but it has only been one year that my mother got herself one, and even I do not spend that much time with my phone as my mother does.
- Mehmet (A8, 44, doctor, professor): You do not even look at us when you watch television.

Parents blame children, children blame their parents, but more importantly mothers and fathers give themselves up and blame each other for causing the disconnection:

- Aslı (A8, 42, doctor): My husband's eyes are on his smartphone or Ipad all the time. I feel bad about that. Checking it from time to time is acceptable, but always looking at it when you are in a conversation is very different. It disturbs me.
- Zehra (A2, 31, university degree, housewife): My husband over-spends his time with his smartphone... For example, when we are talking about something, I realize that he is not listening to me, so that I have to repeat the same sentence three times... He communicates with his friends on his phone at that moment, and of course this is disturbing for me. I try to make him feel that I am disturbed, but he does not care.
- Birgül (A3, 50, housewife): How can someone watch series without doing anything else for three months and 7/24? It's him... This made us very upset, so much that we had fights about it. Him sitting there silently and watching drove us crazy... He says "what do you want from me? I do not argue, I do not ask anything from you, I sit here silently"... But we sometimes miss him arguing, because we are a family and we want to communicate.

Mothers seem to keep ignoring their intense media usage. They cover themselves by complaining about their husbands. On the other hand, fathers make confessions and denials about their relationship with media at home:

- Nusret (A3, 56, elementary school degree, retired): I am even disturbed from my own usage...
- Mehmet (A8, 44, doctor, professor): Okay okay we have our hands on technology, I admit my fault, do not be hard on us. But, we still care for each other, we are not disconnected...

However, in spite of all denials or confessions, parents eventually see that media technologies have a big role in their disconnection. For a moment, they happen to wish a family life without media, because they understand that using media technologies at home keeps them apart from each other:

- Hayriye (A3, 71, primary school degree, housewife): I tell them that they are here, but I do not see their faces. There is no conversation. Even arguing is good. What am I

going to talk by myself? And they do not even give a reply to what I ask. I have to repeat what I say ten times until they get their head up and give a response, because they are so in to their media. I am not at all happy about this... I wish the electricity is gone all the time! It is so much better! We are so happy when the electricity is gone!

- Mehmet (A8, 44, doctor, professor): We would be definitely better off without them... They take more than they bring.
- Aslı (A8, 42, doctor): They lessen sharing and make us lonely.

Here, it is important to see that parents want some other force to take these technologies away from them as if they cannot give the decision of shutting them down. Surprisingly, children also seem to have the same awareness. But, different from their parents, they do not ask for help; they make evaluations, and they send messages to their parents:

- Zeynep (A8, 11, student): Because of social media, people do not connect with each other. Once you look at it, the connection is cut off, you do not see or hear anyone else, you just focus on the screen.
- Miraç (A9, 18, student): I think each family should leave some time to spend without media technologies. Family conversations are a must.
- Merve (A3, 21, university student): If we were to sit in the same living room without technology, we would feel the need to communicate...

Lonely Children Turn to Media at Home

Up to this point, it is demonstrated that there is a disconnection among Turkish family members because of media usage in family leisure times. As the interviews go further, it is seen that children turn to media at home when their parents neglect them. They look for the company of those who are on the screens:

- Fahri (A6, 37, physiotherapist, lecturer): When I come home, first thing I do is to turn the television on, even before changing my clothes. Television is my life.

The Interviews further reveal that parents' devotion to television and other media, and so lack of attention are significant factors that push their children into media consumption:

- Zeynep (A8, 11, student): My mom spends time with her smartphone more than I do. She is even in the social media... I need television more, because no one does anything with me... It is so boring when I have breakfast by myself. And in the evenings, my parents come home tired, they cannot do something with me, and I am an only child. What can I do?

On the other hand, some children are even pushed by their own parents towards using media at home deliberately because they should be silent when their parents' need to rest in front of their screens:

- Fethi (A2, 32, university degree, businessman): We give her an iPad when we want to rest (laughs). There are some times that we use media as tools to keep her silent,

especially when she is very naughty. She looks upon us. If we play with her, she does not think of technology, but she wants to play for 24 hours and we do not have that energy (laughs). That is the problem, otherwise it is easy to keep her away from media.

As an addition to our families with children, two families/couples who do not have children yet seem to have more awareness about why their born-to-be children will turn to media usage at home. Some of those young couples' awareness seems to be high:

- Nigar (A4, 32, psychologist, working): Our behavior about media usage will serve as an example for our children to be born, so we need to make radical changes about our habits... If their parents are in front of the computer, then they will also be like that.
- Emrah (A4, 26, university student, working): Today's parents, especially those who live in a big, exhausting and stressful city like Istanbul, try to refresh themselves through individual media use at home. In a family portrait like this, it is inevitable for their children to grow up in front of the computer and become asocial.

However, like those who are already mothers and fathers, the prospective parents interviewed also show indulgence and make pre-confessions about the inevitability of raising their children with media technologies at home. Some blame the city life for that:

- Tuba (A10, 29, university degree, working): I would never let my children to go out by themselves. But, since we will be at work during the day, only the evenings are left to spend time with children, and since we cannot go out in the evenings, we are left with only the weekends. That means they will grow up in the house.
- Interviewer: So, how will they spend time at home do you think?
(a pause, laughing)
- Ahmet (A10, 32, university degree, working): With Ipads and smartphones (laughs).
- Tuba (A10, 29, university degree, working): It is inevitable, because as we talked before, we played in the streets in the past, but if children do not go out, they do not have any chance but to play with media...

Discussion and Conclusion

In line with Horkheimer's claims, media technologies allow individualization to enter houses by providing solitary leisure time activities, and according to many thinkers (Turrow, 2001; Livingstone, 2005; Turkle, 2010; Çakır, 2014), communication among family members is being transformed, mostly in a disconnecting way.

In the age we live in, as Sherry Turkle (2010) has pointed out in her book *Alone Together*, people choose the company of robots and machines, rather than actually communicating with the ones that are closest to them. Today, starting with the family institution, this fact is valid for almost all kinds of relationships.

It is clearly seen in this study that, especially with the help of new media technologies, communication among the members of Turkish families is quite low. Spending family leisure times with such intense media usage at home pushes individuals towards a disconnection within their family and serves to the individualizing commands of the capitalist system. This way, the family institution loses its socializing and educative value for the individual, and becomes just a part of the system.

Almost every study up to this day has blamed the youth for addictive media usage, and made recommendations to parents about keeping their children away from media.

However, there is the ignored fact that today's children feel lonely because their parents do not spend quality time with them, and that is why today's youth head towards addictive media usage that dissipates their loneliness and provides them company with entertainment. This points to the fact that children are not the only guilty ones in the family disconnect, and parents should be aware of that for better lives.

Family is almost the most important institution of a society because the psychological and social well-being of the individual starts at home. And also since home is the primary place that family members can come together in the age we live in, family leisure time activities that will facilitate “sharing” with or without media has high significance.

In this study, parents clearly give themselves up about their intense media usage at home, and children are actually pushed towards media usage because they are alone at home by their parents. Parents are usually given the authority to ban and limit their children's media usage. However, if parents increase their face-to-face communications, conversations and sharing activities (like playing games) with their children, they will not need those limitations.

Today, parents need to leave neglecting their children through passive parenting, and they should regain control of their households and the development of their children. Namely, they need to make significant efforts to make cohesive family leisure time activities at home, besides regulating their own media usage behavior, and so being good examples for their children.

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