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NEW VIEWPOINTS ON CO-VIEWING



Lessons from our living rooms: illuminating lockdowns with technology domestication insights

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With at least half of humanity under lockdown to arrest the spread of COVID-19 (Sandford, 2020), adults have been working from home and children engaging in home schooling for months on end. Competing for scarce resources such as digital devices, bandwidth, as well as physical and personal space, families have had to contend with rising tensions around the quality of digital engagement, children's learning abilities, parent-child relationships and overall familial wellbeing.

This fraught situation shone the spotlight on the household context of technology use but also enabled us to marshal academic insights to advance advocacy and public education. The pandemic also forced us to confront the limitations of our research approach and adapt our methods to evolving uncertainties. We share our experiences here so that the lessons we learnt may be of help to fellow CAM scholars.

Societal engagement and CAM research

In the wake of domestic issues emerging from the lockdown, families in Singapore struggled to make sense of this new reality. As a technology domestication scholar, author Lim received multiple media interview requests for expert guidance on how families could juggle conflicting technological needs in the home. To provide more comprehensive advice, she published opinion-editorials in popular media outlets (see Lim, 2020a; Yee & Lim, 2020) that reached a wide audience in Singapore and beyond. These were vital opportunities to demonstrate the relevance of CAM research and the technology domestication approach.

Webinars were another critical way to engage directly with the audience in a dynamic, dialogical manner while under lockdown. Author Lim was invited by public agencies and non-profit organisations to offer guidance through platforms such as Zoom or Facebook Live. Questions posed by webinar attendees revealed considerable distress around managing children's healthy device use, moderating over-reliance on technology, and resolving family tensions. Audience members were often reassured when told that their situations were neither unique nor unusual, and welcomed suggestions for effective management

strategies. This opportunity to speak directly to families and answer parents' burning questions allowed academic research to come into its own, offering authoritative and timely support to critical audiences. Even in lockdown therefore, all scholars can still mobilise academic research findings to offer useful lessons by beaming live from our living rooms.

Whereas technology use in the homes of families with children is often understood through the media effects or parental mediation paradigms (Livingstone, 2002), the extraordinary nature of these lockdowns brought to the fore the value of technology domestication research. Rather than focusing specifically on particular devices, content or parental mediation activities, technology domestication research assumes a contextual approach to understanding how technology is incorporated into familial rhythms and enmeshed in family relationships with their attendant power dynamics (Lim, 2016). It emphasizes the dynamic reciprocal relationship between the user and the technology (Morley & Silverstone, 1990; Silverstone, Hirsch, & Morley, 1992), drawing our attention to how use practices are embedded in and shaped by the domestic environment, as well as how values, norms and tensions can emerge around technology use.

The domestication perspective allows CAM research to steer away from more technologically deterministic models to actively foreground the symbolic meanings and social relationships that emerge from the use of household technologies. In the current pandemic situation, this contextual perspective can help CAM scholars identify potential gains and pitfalls in families' technology use and inform the development of appropriate strategies to better navigate escalated work-life blending.

Relatedly, we could also leverage our technology domestication insights to make a significant policy intervention on the digital divides that emerged from the lockdown. In a speech to Parliament in her capacity as Nominated Member of Parliament, author Lim highlighted the need to extend greater device and online access support to digitally excluded families given domestic tensions around household resource constraints (Lim, 2020b). This was another instance in which the utility of CAM research was clearly highlighted.

Conducting CAM research during a pandemic

Turning the lenses onto our own living rooms, we realised that as academics, our research approach also had to adapt to the changing circumstances. Unable to visit families in China to extend our research on transcendent parenting (Lim, 2020c) trends, we quickly pivoted to online methods. Transitioning from face-to-face fieldwork before the COVID-19 outbreak to online methods during the lockdown, our qualitative study offered a valuable inroad for comparing face-to-face and virtual methods for CAM research. For our study, we had planned to investigate digital parenting experiences in the two Chinese metropolises of Hangzhou and Beijing.

In mid-2019, we had travelled to Hangzhou and completed face-to-face interviews with 40 parents. Although the trip to Beijing was cancelled due to pandemic restrictions, we managed to complete the research as scheduled by switching to online interviews. Without the benefit of face-to-face communication however, we needed to consider how to leverage online means to capture domestic settings, household dynamics and socioemotional issues arising from families' technology use. Author Wang also arranged

follow-up interviews with 20 Hangzhou parents to gain comparative insights into digital parenting experiences before and during lockdown. The interviews took the form of video or audio calls via the instant messaging platform WeChat, supplemented with photograph or screenshot taking by the participants.

Compared to face-to-face interactions, online methods pose considerable challenges due to the loss of contextual details, while offering unique advantages owing to their flexibility and convenience. With online interviews, we found it more challenging to build rapport with participants. As a result, the Beijing parents we interviewed online tended to only accept voice calls so their facial expressions and gestures could not be captured. It also became difficult to obtain direct and real-time access to the mobile apps and contents in the participants' devices, requiring us to rely exclusively on participants' self-reporting.

Despite these limitations, online interviews also presented significant advantages for CAM studies. They could on occasion provide valuable and unexpected insights into the domestic settings of ICT use, typically inaccessible during face-to-face interviews conducted outside the home. Specifically, as most participants fielded the online interviews at home, they could easily show us the digital devices they used and the physical settings surrounding technology use. The interviews were invariably interspersed with participants' daily activities, such as supervising children's online classes, sending work-related messages, preparing meals etc. This allowed us to glean insights into their parenting and working practices. Participants also found online interviews preferable as they could take the interview anytime and anywhere without significant disruptions to their schedules. Notably, some participants also reported feeling more at ease during online interviews because they could choose to remain visually anonymous.

Suggestions for future CAM research

From our societal engagement and research experiences since the COVID-19 outbreak, we propose some longer-term suggestions for CAM research even beyond the pandemic. First, the aggressive encroachment of technology into homes means that CAM research has assumed intensified salience and relevance. By direct engagement via public forums such as interviews and commentaries in popular media, webinars for the public and interfacing with policy makers, we can ensure that CAM research can benefit our key stakeholders and influence public policy for the better. Second, in light of pandemic restrictions, we suggest adopting a wider range of online methods for CAM studies, including but not limited to virtual observation over webcams, participant-administered media diaries, and media use tracking apps. In addition, given the multifarious advantages of online methods, a strategic combination of face-to-face and online methods is likely to become the default paradigm of CAM research even post-COVID-19.

We hope our reflections have served to capture some helpful experiences on the invaluable role that CAM research has played during the pandemic, and to offer some pointers on conducting research in the midst of lockdowns and disease containment restrictions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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