Like mother, like daughter: Intergenerational media use for kin-keeping and connection

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Abstract
This paper reports on the preliminary findings of a research project being conducted in Western Australia which explores how women are using communication technologies to manage the challenges and transitions the midlife years can present. Whereas previous studies on the role of communication technologies in women’s lives have tended to focus on women’s use of specific technologies such as email or the telephone, this paper argues that a more authentic picture is revealed by recasting the focus to an examination of the practices and strategies women employ to manage one of the most dynamic and intimate of all relationships – that between a mother and her daughter. A large body of research indicates the mother/daughter bond is a unique and enduring element in many women’s lives. While for previous generations this bond was maintained predominantly through face-to-face interactions, today women are able to draw on a range of mediated communication technologies as they strive to sustain this important connection. It is through an examination of the mother/daughter relationship, as expressed through the communicative practices of three of the women interviewed, that the role of multiple mediated communication technologies in sustaining this critical connection is most clearly articulated.

Introduction
The centrality of relationships in women’s lives (Gilligan, 1982, p.48; Miller & Stiver, 1997, p.16), and the extent to which women’s communication supports the emotional development and wellbeing of others (Habgood, 1999, p.128; Helgeson, 1994, p.412; Moyal, 1992, p.59; Rakow, 1992, p.57; Spender, 1995, p.191), have often been unacknowledged and undervalued in the broader community (Leonard,
Over the past 30 years a renewed interest in examining this aspect of women’s lives has highlighted how information and communication technologies (ICTs) are integral in supporting and maintaining women’s “relationship work” (Spender, 1995, p.191). However, many of the previous studies on the role of ICTs in women’s lives have tended to focus on specific technologies such as the Internet (Boneva, Kraut, & Frohlich, 2001; Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2000) or the telephone (Moyal, 1992; Rakow, 1992; Rakow & Navarro, 1993) in isolation from women’s social networks and everyday lives. This paper argues that a more nuanced picture is revealed by recasting the focus to an examination of the practices and strategies women employ to manage one of the most fundamental of all relationships – that between mothers and daughters. Whereas previous generations maintained this bond predominantly through face-to-face communication (Young & Willmott, 1962, p.45), telephone calls (Moyal, 1992, p.57; Rakow, 1992, p.44), and letters (Rakow, 1992, p.63; Wilding, 2006, p.130), today women are able to draw on a diverse range of ICTs such as landline and mobile telephones, email, SMS (short message service), IM (instant messenger), webcams, and more recently Internet telephony (VoIP – voice over Internet Protocol – and Skype) which provide free or low cost telephone calls. Therefore, in order to develop a more inclusive picture of the role that ICTs might play in women’s lives, it is necessary to open up the parameters of research and consider the full range of technologies and strategies used by women as they strive to sustain this intimate connection.

This paper seeks to do this through an analysis of the communicative practices of a group of women interviewed as part of a research project currently being conducted in Western Australia. As one of the broader aims of this research project is to determine the degree to which women in midlife are using the Internet to manage common transitions1 during this period in their lives, the women are aged between 45 and 55. The paper begins with an overview of research on the mother-daughter relationship, and then briefly considers why this relationship might be considered unique in comparison to the mother-son dyad. Following this, a more detailed examination of women’s communication practices is explored through the stories of three women

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1 Among the transitions considered in this research are children’s departure from the family home (the “empty nest”); the aging and death of parents; menopause; and midlife divorce or separation.
interviewed as part of this research project. It is through their voices that the innovative and dynamic use of multiple mediated communication technologies to sustain the unique mother-daughter connection is most clearly articulated.

**The mother-daughter relationship: a review of the literature**

As Fischer notes, the uniqueness of the mother/daughter dyad has been the subject of much discussion in the social sciences:

> sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists have described a special closeness between mothers and daughters over all stages of the life course, from the infancy of the daughters to the old age of the mothers. (1991, p.237)

Analysis of research over the last 50 years\(^2\) has consistently demonstrated that across the life cycle, the mother-daughter relationship is experienced by both parties as stronger than other comparable family relationships, such as the father-daughter dyad (Boyd, 1989, p.299; Fischer, 1991, p.240; Frank, Avery, & Laman, 1988, p.736; Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998, p.927; Lye, 1996, para Gender; Proulx & Helms, 2008, p.238; Rossi & Rossi, 1990, p.278; Young & Willmott, 1962, p.45). Indeed, in Rossi and Rossi’s life-course analysis of families across three generations, mothers and daughters from all cohorts rated the mother-daughter relationship as being the most intimate (Rossi & Rossi, 1990, p.278).

A particular focus in the literature relates to conflict within the mother-daughter dyad (Boyd, 1989, p.298; Chodorow, 1978). Chodorow’s classic psychoanalytic study argues that the tendency in Western societies to practice exclusive mothering during infancy and early childhood generates different “psychological capacities” in males and females, which account for continuing gender role distinctions (1978, p.7).

Chodorow draws on clinical examples to argue that the early relationship between a mother and infant daughter can be constructed as a “semi-symbiotic relationship” (Hammer, cited in Chodorow, 1978, p.109) that has major implications for the construction of a separate sense of identity in adolescent girls. “Because they are the same gender as their daughters and have been girls, mothers of daughters tend not to

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\(^2\) For the most part this research has been conducted among white, middle-class sample groups. Notable exceptions include ethnographic research by Young and Willmott (1962), which focused on working class families in East London in the 1950s, as well as cross-cultural studies by Neisser (cited in Boyd, 1989, p.298).
experience these infant daughters as separate from them in the same way as do mothers of infant sons” (Chodorow, 1978, p.109). More particularly, young adult women may themselves struggle to achieve autonomy and differentiation from their mothers (Chodorow, 1978, p.177; Smith, Mullis, & Hill, 1995, p.495), as “elements of the preoedipal mother-daughter relationship are maintained and prolonged in both maternal and filial psyche” (Chodorow, 1978, p.110). Frank, Avery & Laman cite research which suggests that a “daughter’s unresolved, ambivalent struggle for greater separateness often tinges this relationship with strong emotional conflict” (1988, p.730). Certainly, evidence suggests adolescent girls and young adult women tend to report higher levels of conflict than their mothers (Boyd, 1989, p.298; Smith, Mullis, & Hill, 1995, p. 501). It is important to note, however, that the existence of conflict does not generally detract from daughters’ overall level of satisfaction with their relationship with their mother (Boyd, 1989, p.298), or diminish the closeness of this unique connection (Boyd, 1989, p.299; Frank, Avery, & Laman, 1988, p.736; Smith, Mullis, & Hill, 1995, p.496). As Boyd suggests, “even within good relationships there is mother-daughter conflict” (1989, p.298).

Moreover, successful psychological development and growth should not be seen as mutually exclusive of emotionally rich connections between mothers and daughters (O'Connor, Allen, Bell, & Hauser, 1996, p.40). As longitudinal research suggests, there are long-term psychological and developmental benefits for young people in being able to successfully establish “autonomy while maintaining a close, affectionate relationship with parents” (O'Connor, Allen, Bell, & Hauser, 1996, p.41). Reflecting feminist theory, Gilligan contends that for girls in particular:

optimal social and emotional development is fostered within [italics added] the context of progressive and mutual redefinition of the parent-child relationship, one that maintains a sense of connectedness and emotional bond. (cited in Smith, Mullis, & Hill, 1995, p.495)

Likewise, Cooney reminds us that “adolescence, at least for females, requires balancing of an enhanced need for autonomy and self-expression and continued need for relationship” (Cooney, 2000, p.43). Such feminist revisions of developmental theory have repositioned the transition from adolescence to adulthood from one of
“dependence on the parent to a situation of interdependence between the generations” (Cooney, 2000, p. 46).

An early description of the mother/daughter relationship is discussed in an ethnographic study of family and kinship in working class London in the 1950s. Young and Wilmott’s seminal study highlighted the close intergenerational ties fostered through frequent face-to-face contact, particularly between mothers and adult daughters, and the role this contact played in facilitating the exchange of social support between generations (Young & Willmott, 1962, p.61). The continuous nature of this connection is revealed by one participant’s comment: “Mum’s always popping in here – 12 times a day I should say” (Young & Willmott, 1962, p.47).

More recent studies have made similar observations on the enduring and continuous nature of this unique connection. Both Moyal in Australia (1992, p.55), and Rakow in the United States (1992, p.44), found family social support networks most clearly articulated through ongoing, frequent communication between mothers and adult daughters. Reflecting the strength of the mother-daughter tie, Moyal’s research revealed that “the last call made ... by many women was ‘to my daughter’ or ‘to Mum’” (Moyal, 1992, p.57). The continuously enacted nature of the mother-daughter relationship is further highlighted by Lye’s meta-analysis which found that contact between mothers and daughters occurs more frequently “than fathers and sons or mixed-gender dyads” (Lye, 1996, para Gender). The significance of this continuous connection is reinforced by the observation that frequent communication between mothers and adult children leads to enhanced emotional connections, which in turn encourages greater levels of interaction (Lawton, Silverstein, & Bengtson, 1994, p.65; Rossi & Rossi, 1990, p.366). Lawton, Silverstein and Bengtson draw on George Homans’ (1950) model of Social Exchange to contextualise the dynamics within intergenerational relationships:

Positive sentiment increases the propensity of people to interact, and ... the familiarity gained through interaction increases positive sentiment among them. Those who share common experiences are likely to develop a collective identity and a sense of shared meanings and purposes that build empathy in the relationship; simultaneously, positive sentiments gained from such an association serve as symbolic rewards for maintaining or increasing the ongoing interactions. (1994, p.58)
As Young and Willmott’s research over fifty years ago revealed, familiarity and a sense of shared purpose between mothers and daughters were fostered almost exclusively through frequent face-to-face communication, conducted within an intimately shared social world. Different generations lived in close proximity to each other, often in the same street or even next door to each other (Young & Willmott, 1962, p.41). The subsequent relocation of extended family members to outer urban areas within the same city created significant barriers to maintaining a sense of connectedness (Young & Willmott, 1962, p.134), as often family members had limited access to telephone services or readily available and affordable transport options (Young & Willmott, 1962, p.136). Even for later generations, the cost of long-distance telephone calls inhibited the frequency and length of contact, and thus limited opportunities to build mutual understanding and empathy (Rakow, 1992, p.49; Rossi & Rossi, 1990, p.372; Wilding, 2006, p.130).

The situation is quite different today; the introduction of new modes of communication such as email, VOIP technologies, and SMS transcend geographic barriers which may separate family members, (Boase, Horrigan, Wellman, & Rainie, 2006, p.144; Boneva, Kraut, & Frohlich, 2001; Holloway & Green, 2004; Rakow & Navarro, 1993; Uy-Tioco, 2007, p.256; Wilding, 2006, p.138), and foster “a perception of intimate connectedness” (Wilding, 2006, p.138) within families who are dispersed across the globe. Moreover, the perceived convenience of new channels such as email (Boneva, Kraut, & Frohlich, 2001, p.541; Matzko, 2002, p.63) has been shown to increase both the quantity and quality of interaction (Wilding, 2006, p.138). Wilding’s research into ‘transnational caregiving’ found that even very short email messages could encourage quality interaction through other modes:

> Whereas in the past a telephone call had to be prearranged by letter to ensure that everyone was at the phone at the appropriate moment, email allowed people to respond instantaneously to a question such as ‘are you free for a chat?’ (Wilding, 2006, p.131)

In turn, this increased communication has the potential to enhance relationships (Lawton, Silverstein, & Bengtson, 1994, p.58), and improve health and wellbeing outcomes for family members, not only now but also in terms of future provision of social support (Wilding, 2006, p.138). Thus mediated communication technologies
offer the potential to sustain the critical link between mother and daughter, particularly where they may be separated by distance, by fostering a continuous connection which reinforces familiarity, enhances intimacy, and creates an environment in which emotional support can be enacted for both parties.

Methodology
Qualitative in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 40 women currently living in Western Australia. The women were enlisted using a process of ‘snowball sampling’. As one of the key aims of this research is to investigate the role of communication technologies in helping women manage transitions during their midlife years, the women are aged between 45 and 55 years – the average age through which women pass through menopause in Australia (Smith & Michalka, 2006, p.3). The semi-structured interviews, lasting on average between one and two hours, provided interactional space to address key topics drawn from interview questions, as well as opportunities for participants to discuss in greater depth issues personally relevant to them. The participants presented with a diverse mix of socio-economic backgrounds and life experiences, and exhibited quite different experiences with and attitudes towards communication technologies. While several women are very reluctant Internet users, relying most heavily upon face-to-face and telephone contact, the three women whose interviews feature in this paper proactively draw upon a large range of ICTs to maintain multidimensional lines of communication with their children. All but four of the 40 participants are mothers, albeit at varying stages of parenting. While 17 of the mothers no longer have any children living in the family home, almost a quarter are still engaged in caring for school age children. Of the three women whose interviews feature in this paper, two have adult daughters living overseas at the time of the interviews, while the third has younger dependant daughters who live approximately six hours drive from her home.

Maintaining a maternal presence across time and space – the difference gender makes
While this research has so far focused on the enduring connection between mothers and daughters, the intention is not to diminish the importance of the bond between mothers and sons. Mothers of daughters and sons, both in this research project and in past research, exhibit a strong desire to maintain a close and loving bond with their
adult children. That women continue throughout their lives to extend care and support to their sons is illustrated by a participant in Moyal’s study, who described how she had begun each day for a four-month period with a ‘phone call to her son who, devastated by marital breakdown, needed her call to ‘get him going’. ‘It was the support he needed ... just to speak to someone’. (Moyal, 1992, p.56)

A similar story of support is reflected in the following interview excerpt from this current research project. Dana is a 54 year old divorced mother of two young adults both currently living out of Western Australia. As Dana’s comments indicate, during a recent period when her son was suffering from depression, she increased the frequency of contact – both to extend love and support to her son, but also to reassure herself that he was managing. Given Dana is very comfortable using a large range of ICTs both in her work and at home, the comments also reflect her perception that in times of need the telephone conveys a higher degree of emotional connection, or social presence (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976, p.65), than other mediated technologies such as email:

But I know my kids well enough to know when there’s something wrong. Um, when my eldest son who has been suffering from depression this year... I was making a conscious effort to ring him every week, because I needed to hear in his voice that he was ok. And I had, previous to that point I had phoned him once a fortnight, once every three weeks because I didn’t want to be the overbearing parent, and when I said that to him he said to me, aw, I wouldn’t mind if you rang me every week. And I thought, fine, fine, I will do that then... But he’s ok now, he’s found a lady. So now I’m leaving messages! Which is fine with me. I still ring once a week to catch up.

Another participant, 55 year old Ingrid, draws on a mix of ICTs to maintain contact with her son and his girlfriend. While this young couple have been overseas for several years, Ingrid’s proactive adoption of MSN Messenger, an instant messaging service that facilitates a synchronous chat environment, combined with webcam, enables her to enjoy a very rich and emotionally rewarding relationship with them both:

But the bonus, the biggest boon for me now, is that the kids in the UK, we’ve got webcam. We’ve had a webcam since they left, actually. I got it about six months after they left, and we just
use MSN Messenger, and we sit and talk to each other endlessly. If I go online and they’re online, we have a chat. If I’ve got something else I need to be doing, or I’m busy, we still talk and I’m still doing that, so it’s like they’re there, as much as they would be there if they were living here... And sometimes I’ll come on and they’ll be already talking to someone, and I’ll just say, ‘Keep going, I’ll just leave the machine on, and nudge me when you’re ready.’ And I’ll get this ding a ling, and I’ll hear it and come in from the kitchen or the garden, or wherever I am... And it’s absolutely delightful. The only thing you can’t do is hug them.

However, while acknowledging the strength of the mother-son bond, there is strong evidence to argue that the nature of the bond between a mother and daughter is unique. As discussed previously, not only do both mothers and daughters report a greater degree of intimacy and connection in this bond (Frank, Avery, & Laman, 1988, p.729; Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998, p.927; Proulx & Helms, 2008, p.238; Rossi & Rossi, 1990, p. 278), but they also have more frequent contact (Frank, Avery, & Laman, 1988, p.729; Lawton, Silverstein, & Bengtson, 1994, p.58), and draw on each other for practical and emotional support more often than do mothers and sons (Lye, 1996; Smith, Mullis, & Hill, 1995, p.502). Research also suggests that when adult children live some distance from the family home, relationships between both parents and daughters improve, while conversely the quality of relationships between mothers and sons has been show to decline (Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998, p.935). Kaufman and Uhlenberg speculate this may reflect the fact that “sons, in general, take less initiative in kin relationships” (1998, p.935), while women of both generations are socially conditioned to be ‘kin-keepers’, and therefore make the effort to maintain regular contact. Moreover, not only does research suggest sons are less likely to communicate regularly with parents, but evidence indicates families may expect more frequent contact and greater degrees of relatedness from adult daughters than they do from sons (Proulx & Helms, 2008, p.238). This expectation, or perhaps acceptance of different levels of connection from sons and daughters, is reflected in the following comments by Vicki, a 53 year old participant in this research project:

How often do you think you would email your children?

My daughter in Melbourne, she emails me more than I email her,

3 Throughout this paper, italicised text has been used to identify comments or questions made by the interviewer. Interviewees’ comments are indicated by indented plain text.
but often her emails are a bit of a forward of something, just to stay in touch. I tend to speak to her on the phone. All of them, my kids in particular, I tend to speak on the phone more than I email. I speak to my daughter with the grandchild everyday on the phone. She’ll ring me or I’ll ring her. [Other daughter] in Melbourne... I was actually on the phone to her earlier. But I might only speak to her a couple of times a week, less, depending on what’s going on. If she’s in trouble, she’s on the phone every day, you know, if there’s something going on, I’m the first one she rings. But as a general rule it’s probably once a week, but sometimes more often.

And what about your son?

Don’t tend to have as much contact with him. He’s got a girlfriend, so he’s very involved with her. But I mean that’s [son] – he’s not a communicato. I try and ring him once a week, and do the adult thing, but it’s always me that rings him. He never rings, yer, but that’s [son].

And he probably expects that?

Oh, yer, if I didn’t ring him for three months I don’t think I’d hear from him [laughs].

A similar attitude towards sons’ communicative practices is also expressed by another participant, Lois, in her comments on the benefits of email over SMS while her daughter was recently holidaying overseas:

Whereas the email was more chatty, about where she’d been and who she’d met and, you know, what she’d eaten, and yeah what she was experiencing. How cold it was and all that. Yes, and I’m sure that when my son [goes to] ... Europe [soon], I’m sure that I won’t get ... he won’t go into the internet café, sit down there and do an email to me that takes half an hour to write.

**Sustaining the mother-daughter connection: the role of mediated communication technologies**

Thus while relationships between mothers and sons undoubtedly reflect deep love and attachment, the evidence strongly suggests that the mother-daughter relationship represents a unique and enduring connection across many women’s lives. As the following three stories attest to, for some women this bond is now sustained predominantly through mediated communication technologies. These women’s communication practices highlight not only the importance of this connection in their lives, but also reveal the degree to which multiple ICTs have become critical to
women’s efforts to maintain intimate and meaningful relationships with their daughters.

**Janette’s story**

Janette, a 55 year old teacher, employs a wide range of communication tools and strategies to sustain a close relationship with her daughter living overseas. Having moved to Australia from the United Kingdom as a young woman in the early 1970s, Janette vividly remembers the isolation she experienced at that time:

> I know exactly how I used to feel when I moved here and I didn’t used to get letters from my mum for ages, and I used to think, oh... You know, back in the days when you didn’t phone, you had to book a call, and you used to think, oh, it’d be nice to get a little bit more.

While 30 years ago Janette may have had to wait weeks for a letter from her mother in the UK, which only exacerbated the sense of emotional and physical isolation she experienced, the potential immediacy of online communication channels such as email and instant messaging services now foster a more connected, continuous, and emotionally responsive link between Janette and her daughter:

> How often would you email her [daughter]?

> Oh, virtually every day. She doesn’t always email me back everyday, because we can just get on the computer... I could just sit down in the evening when I go home and one sentence, that’s all it has to be, dreadful day, guess what happened today? I might not get anything back for two days, I might get something back in 30 seconds, you know? What’s going on there, what’s the weather like? That’s what’s wonderful about it, it’s an immediate communication.

In this context email provides a quick and convenient link – one which is particularly appealing to women like Janette, whose time is already stretched thinly between work and other family and social commitments. Indeed, past research examining women’s uses of email has noted one of the key reasons women value email is the convenience of being able to control when, for how long, and to whom they communicate (Boneva, Kraut, & Frohlich, 2001, p.541; Matzko, 2002, p 63). Moreover, it is through quick messages sent at the end of a busy day that Janette shares her life most intimately with her daughter. The exchange of the mundane and routine minutiae of
everyday life underpin the construction of a shared experience and a “common world” (Licoppe, 2004, p.138). Indeed, it is often the everyday, seemingly unimportant things which have the most potential to draw us closer together, but which are most likely overlooked in irregular telephone calls or even more infrequent letters (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2000, p.23). Email is a particularly suitable medium for exchanging these ‘in the moment’ events, especially for those households where the Internet is switched on first thing in the morning, and turned off as the lights go out at night, as is the case with a number of the women interviewed (Haddon, 2004, p.62; Matzko, 2002, p.63). For Janette and her daughter, being able to share the ups and downs of everyday life through a “continuous conversation” (Licoppe, 2004, p.138) reinforces a mutual level of familiarity and sense of connection (Wilding, 2006, p.138).

This ‘continuous conversation’ is also sustained through Janette’s use of MSN Messenger:

She’s [daughter] on MSN quite often with other friends, so when my computer boots up... my husband’s on a different computer, we’ve got two set up in the house... and we hear the ‘beep beep’, and [daughter] has logged in to MSN... not necessarily to talk to us, but as soon as she does we’ll sit down and say ‘hi, how are you going?’

These everyday conversations are supplemented by regular fortnightly telephone calls using Skype, and occasional packages containing gifts, newspaper clippings and “extra bits and pieces” sent through conventional mail. In addition, on special occasions such as Christmas and birthdays Skype is combined with webcams to allow family members to also share the experience visually, and enhance the feeling of emotional connection:

For example, Christmas Day 2006 she [daughter] was at home in London and one of her flatmates was cooking Christmas dinner. We set up Skype to Skype, on her laptop computer in their kitchen and on our desktop in the family room and we could see and talk to them all as they arrived downstairs, came through the kitchen, and all called Happy Christmas. It was almost like having her at home.

Thus, while Janette’s main channel of communication with her daughter remains email, she also employs a number of other communication options to maintain a
presence in her daughter’s life, and sustain a close and continuously connected relationship. As Licoppe suggests, their “relationship is played out across the entire technological landscape in which it is set” (2004, p.139). Significantly, Janette’s communication choices are to a large extent shaped by her daughter’s preferences and circumstances, as well as her own level of satisfaction with the sense of emotional connection fostered through their daily email and MSN ‘conversations’:

*And how often would you call?*

Once a fortnight maybe, mainly because she’s busy, and I can only call her at home... but, you know, you don’t need to call them that often, just... if you’re emailing regularly. It’s only if I think of something that I wanted to ask her, then I’ll give her a call. But mainly communication is by email.

*Finola’s story*

While Janette and her daughter appear satisfied with the level of emotional connection derived through their daily email and MSN conversations, such that their telephone conversations are viewed as a supplementary means of communication, this was not a commonly held view among many of the other women interviewed in this study. For women such as Finola, a 52 year old mother of five, the telephone conveys a sense of closeness and reassurance that can’t be replicated through text-based communication. When asked why she might choose to telephone a daughter who is currently studying overseas in preference to emailing her, Finola explained: “[g]enerally I just want to hear her voice [laughs]. So... I miss her terribly”. Finola’s comment echoes previous research (Moyal, 1992, p.58) which suggests women value the “transparency of the phone, the way it [feels] ... ‘natural’” (Mercier, cited in Haddon, 2004, p.62). For women such as Finola, a “powerful association [exists] between voice and [emotional] connection” (Matzko, 2002, p.64). Indeed, when her daughter went on exchange as a high school student some years previously, the telephone provided a critical link for both Finola and her daughter:

I mean she was [away] ... for six weeks and I think the first three weeks cost us more in phone calls every single night than the whole cost of the [trip]... So each night she was ringing me saying ‘I don’t think I can do this ... Can I talk a bit longer?’ ‘Yes darling, it’s fine.’ Thinking tick, tick, tick. 4 minutes every night for the first three weeks.
The degree to which mothers may be prepared to shape their communication patterns and needs to fit in with their children’s circumstances and wishes is evident in Finola’s ongoing communication patterns with her daughter. When her daughter began postgraduate studies at an overseas university she again suffered acute homesickness. During this ‘settling in’ period, the family communicated almost entirely through weekly letters written by Finola:

You know, that first ... for the first month I wrote every week and she’d get the letter I’d post at the end of the week. And I’d write... literally each night I’d write the date happening because... she [daughter] wanted to settle first without having the contact on emails and Skype, which I understood. So for the first actually two months we didn’t email, we wrote... she felt if she spoke on email or talked to me on the phone she’d get too upset.

Once her daughter overcame her homesickness, communication with her family settled into a ‘continuous conversation’ fostered through multiple mediums. At the time of the first interview with Finola in mid 2007, she was relying upon frequent emails and weekly phone calls to maintain contact with her daughter: “I email them [daughter and son-in-law] every second day and we try and speak once a week”. Echoing Wilding’s research with transnational families (Wilding, 2006, p.131), Finola also explained how they sometimes coordinate mobile phone messages and telephone calls to take advantage of odd spare moments to chat:

You know, [daughter] will text me quickly, ‘are you near [the computer] ... can you talk now?’ And I just whiz over to the computer and click in Skype, and we talk then, you know? ...Yeah, we talked for almost two hours last week.

In the nine months since the initial interview, Finola’s communication options with her daughter have narrowed once again, this time in response to her daughter’s increasingly stressful study commitments. Aware of how tempting it is for telephone conversations with her family to last an hour or more, Finola’s daughter has consciously decided to avoid using the telephone. In addition to restricting telephone calls, her daughter has also placed a limit on how much time she will spend emailing her family in Western Australia. While she’s requested her family continue to ‘keep her in the loop’ of family activities by sending regular emails, Finola’s daughter proactively manages her time by only sending one group email a week. In this
context, the medium of email gives Finola’s daughter control over when and how much time she spends communicating, in contrast to telephone conversations which are often difficult to cut short without appearing impolite (Matzko, 2002, p.63).

Fortunately Finola understands the stresses her daughter is under. In these circumstances her desire to support her daughter is manifested through alternative means, such as conventional letters:

Once a month I write and send... I don’t know, a pamphlet ... things that have arrived for her, or photos... photos we took when we were there.

Such ‘newsy’ letters and packages sustain the close relationship Finola enjoys with her daughter, particularly during times when other communication is limited, and also reinforce the links her daughter has with her family and community back home in Australia.

For both Janette and Finola, their appropriation of multiple communication technologies, combined with reflexive communicative behaviours that ‘fit’ their daughters’ changing needs and circumstances, represent their desire to maintain a close and loving presence within their daughter’s lives, whilst at the same time acknowledging and respecting their daughter's independence and autonomy (Haddon, 2004, p.63). The quality of these ongoing relationships reflects, to a large degree, the intimate bond that has developed between mother and daughter over a long period of time.

**Pippa’s story**

The relationships that have developed between these women and their daughters have been built upon shared understandings and experiences over many years, and for the most part have been fostered through face-to-face communication. More recently, as the girls grew towards maturity and independence, their interaction have been supplemented through mediated communication technologies. The situation is quite different for another of the women interviewed, 52 year old Pippa. Since being involved in a serious car accident seven years ago which has left Pippa with permanent disabilities, her three school-aged children have lived with her ex-husband. Three years ago her ex-husband and children moved to the Eastern States. Since then
Pippa has had to rely almost completely upon mediated communication to maintain contact with her children. As the following comment indicates, access to email has been critical in enabling Pippa to maintain an ongoing relationship with her children:

*Can you tell me a little about the role the Internet played during your rehabilitation?*

The best thing was, when I was in rehabilitation and they provided a computer, and I went to TAFE so I could practice on a computer ... I went to TAFE and got my email address, and sent them [daughters] an email for the first time. You know, ‘this is mum’. Then I got to sending cards and all sorts, and it was such joy, but if that computer hadn’t been accessible, firstly at rehab ... I might have been down the track before I started.

Access to the Internet has also enabled Pippa to actively mother her children, albeit remotely, by sending them school-related material, as well as other information that mothers and adolescent daughters are normally likely to share on an everyday basis:

*So how often would you have kept in contact with the girls by email?*

Well, at least now about twice a week, and the rest are phone calls of course, but having said that, that’s just email. But I forward them downloads and information that’s sent to me that might help them at school. And I also forward them attachments, say, about fashion and shoes and health.

*So that’s in addition to the two emails you send?*

Oh yes, yer. Because I often say to them, did you receive my emails, and they’ll say, oh no, I haven’t read them yet, and then they’ll read them later.

In addition to emailing and pointing out websites of interest, Pippa also talks to her children through MSN Messenger:

I like the chat line too, with my children. I know when they’re online, I have that little pop-up.

*Oh, what is that, MSN?*

Yer. I love that.

*Would you tend to use that more with your children than email?*
Um, no, probably more email. On MSN they like to be in touch with their friends as well, so their mum’s mostly in another chat room, and they’re going backward and forwards, but I do like it.

As with Janette and Finola, Pippa also uses the telephone, both landline and mobile, and SMS to maintain a continuous conversation with her children⁴:

*And how often would you telephone them?*

Um, I had a long conversation last night ... but I telephone at least once a week, or they phone me, and we SMS a lot, so we are still in contact. But they always know what I’m doing. Even when I’m in the bus in the morning, I’ll SMS them and say, ‘hi’, and when I get home I’ll send an email.

In this respect Pippa’s communication to some extent resembles Rakow and Navarro’s concept of “remote mothering” (Rakow & Navarro, 1993, p.144), a dynamic in which, through the mobile telephone, women can continue to perform their mothering role even when they are physically remote from their children. As applied by Rakow and Navarro, ‘remote mothering’ most often refers to women managing caregiving responsibilities when they are not able to be co-present with their dependent children, such as during work hours, or are otherwise engaged in activities that take them out of the home and away from their children temporarily. Thus for the women in Rakow and Navarro’s study, the mediated connection fostered through the mobile phone supports a relationship largely manifested through face-to-face communication. In contrast, Pippa’s use of ICTs to connect with her children represents the primary means through which she sustains their relationship. As such, her appropriation of multiple mediated communication channels more closely resembles the behaviours described in Uy-Tioco’s (2007) research. Reconfiguring Rakow and Navarro’s notion of ‘remote mothering’ within a transnational context, Uy-Tioco’s research documents how Filipina mothers working overseas rely upon the mobile phone and SMS to maintain an active presence in their children’s lives, despite being separated by many thousands of miles. For these women, the mobile phone

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⁴ Since Pippa’s children weren’t interviewed, it’s difficult to determine how they feel about their mother’s attempts to maintain a ‘continuous conversation’. Certainly, previous research indicates some children view their parents’ use of mobile phones as a strategy to monitor and, at least in part, control their activities (Ling, 2007, p. 39). However, Pippa also explained that her children told her about MSN Messenger, which may be viewed as evidence that they welcome the multiple points of communication they have with their mother.
represents a channel through which “real-time and constant communication” can bridge the distance “between mothers and children separated by time and space” (Uy-Tioco, 2007, p.256).

While these Filipina women may be limited in their communication options, Pippa is fortunate in that she is able to connect with her children through multiple ICTs, which include not only the mobile phone, but also SMS, email, instant messages and the landline telephone. For Pippa, mothering is enacted, albeit remotely, through multiple and often continuous conversations carried on throughout the day. It is through these conversations, conveying not only the important or noteworthy events, but also the mundane, trivial and inconsequential matters that make up everyday life, that Pippa sustains an intimate and constant presence in her daughters’ lives.

**Conclusion**

As these three women’s stories demonstrate, many women today proactively draw on a range of communication tools to maintain contact with children who have moved out of home. Whereas previous studies on the role of ICTs in women’s lives have focused on their use of specific technologies such as email or the telephone, this paper argues that a more authentic picture is revealed by turning our attention to an examination of the practices and strategies women employ to manage one of the most dynamic and intimate of all relationships – that between a mother and her daughter. By listening to women discuss the actions they take to maintain meaningful relationships with their daughters – particularly those separated across space and time – a much clearer, nuanced story emerges of the complex role mediated communication technologies perform in maintaining family relationships, and in sustaining the lifelong bond between mother and daughter.

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