

Digital Isolation and Boundary Negotiation: A Study of Cyber-Severing among Chinese Emerging Adults

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Abstract

In contemporary China, young people aged 18 to 25 who study or work away from home are increasingly choosing to practice "Going low contact" (This word corresponds to "Duanqin" in Chinese internet slang, referring to minimizing contact with one's family of origin and maintaining only superficial politeness for the sake of mental health.) with their families of origin. This phenomenon represents not only physical isolation in the traditional sense but also a form of psychological separation mediated by electronic devices. This study conceptualizes this boundary management as "Cyber-Severing," exploring how emerging adults navigate the tension between the viscous kinship bonds of East Asian families and their developmental need for individual identity. Adopting a qualitative phenomenological approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 32 participants selected based on Family Communication Patterns Theory (FCPT). Thematic analysis reveals that youth actively enact structural information segregation and perform low-cost emotional labor to circumvent intense parental surveillance and conformity pressures, transforming social media into a shield for personal privacy. Consequently, their emotional dependence is migrating from ascriptive kinship ties toward algorithmically curated affinity communities, reducing family interactions to instrumental and ritualistic maintenance. Ultimately, Cyber-Severing is not a complete familial rupture, but a covert, rational renegotiation of intergenerational power and boundaries. It signals a profound digital reformation of traditional filial piety into a modern, adaptive contract of intimacy at a distance.

Keywords

going low-contact, digital isolation, digital media, family relationships, emerging adulthood

1. Background

In recent years, the phenomenon of "going low-contact" with kin among contemporary Chinese youth has generated unprecedented discussion on social media, emerging as an unmistakable social symptom of our time. Platform data indicate that content tagged with "family of origin" on Xiaohongshu (RedNote) has accumulated over 9.1 billion views, while the #duanqin(going low-contact) topic has surpassed 60.885 million views; on Weibo, related discussions have similarly exceeded one billion impressions. This social media resonance—with cumulative engagement surpassing tens of billions—vividly reflects the widening rift between contemporary Chinese youth and their traditional family relationships, and signals a generation-wide negotiation for psychological sovereignty in the domain of family communication [1].

2. Literature Review

In its conventional sociological sense, “kin estrangement” refers to the deliberate severing of social interactions with relatives—particularly secondary-degree kin and beyond—across in-person contact, economic exchange, and emotional bonds, whether through an act of individual will or social contract. In the context of traditional patrilineal society or Fei Xiaotong’s “rural China,” such estrangement was historically associated with serious clan rupture or the termination of legal and moral obligations [2]. Crucially, the Western academic concept of “estrangement” typically implies tragedy or passivity—a relationship severed by conflict or circumstance. What this study documents is a more agentive, selective, and digitally mediated practice, better captured by the colloquial register of “going low-contact.”

However, with the deepening penetration of digital life, the estrangement-adjacent practices discussed by contemporary Chinese youth have undergone a significant contextual shift. This study proposes that the behaviors of emerging adults in digital spaces do not constitute the wholesale severing of blood ties in the traditional sense; rather, they represent a historically specific practice of “Cyber-Severing”. Distinguished from physical departure or complete relational rupture, Cyber-Severing refers specifically to young people’s strategic use of digital media affordances to engage in selective boundary management within digital space. In this condition, connectivity persists, but communication has been highly filtered and decontextualized.

This psychological form of separation is, in essence, the joint product of life-cycle transitions and the distinctive properties of digital media [3]. Arnett’s theory of emerging adulthood explains why individuals aged 18 to 25 harbor such intense demands for independence [4]. During this stage, young people urgently seek to construct a sense of self through identity exploration, and this strong drive toward individuation inevitably generates friction with the inertia of family-of-origin ties that seek to maintain established patterns of connection [5].

Yet this tension manifests differently across family contexts, and Family Communication Patterns Theory (FCPT) provides explanatory power at the situational level. Koerner and Fitzpatrick identified four family types—protective, consensual, pluralistic, and laissez-faire—which shape whether offspring respond with defensive resistance or moderate boundary negotiation [6]. In protective families characterized by high conformity pressure and tight power structures, intergenerational conflicts are rarely resolved through face-to-face communication and tend instead to escalate into defensive digital isolation. In such contexts, digital media ceases to function merely as a communication tool and instead becomes a technological outlet for privacy negotiation. Drawing on Petronio’s Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory, we can observe that when parents attempt to transgress established boundaries—or when parent and child hold divergent expectations regarding information control—boundary turbulence erupts within intergenerational interaction [7].

While existing scholarship has engaged deeply with the sociological transformations in intergenerational relations [8], it has tended to underestimate the critical mediating role of digital media in young people’s low-contact practices. Against this backdrop, and situated within the Chinese sociocultural context, this study examines from a micro-level perspective how Chinese youth in emerging adulthood leverage the affordances of digital media to negotiate between the viscous kinship bonds of the family of origin and the independent boundaries required for self-development. Two core research questions guide this inquiry:

RQ1: *How do Chinese youth from different family communication patterns use the affordances of digital media to manage privacy boundaries and respond to conflict and friction in intergenerational interactions?*

RQ2: *In the process of identity exploration through Cyber-Severing, how do Chinese youth redefine the cultural meanings of privacy, intimacy, and intergenerational obligation?*

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research paradigm designed to produce a thick description of Cyber-Severing as a highly subjective and concealed psychological process. Given that the study’s core concern is understanding individuals’ micro-level experiences of interacting with their families of origin through digital media, semi-structured interviews informed by a phenomenological orientation were employed as the primary method of data collection. This approach—guided by the imperative to return to the things themselves—sought

to illuminate respondents' lived worlds through deep exploration, capturing the authentic life experiences embedded in their family communication practices.

3.1 Sampling Strategy and Sample Profile

The study employed purposive sampling to ensure that the sample would adequately address the research questions. Emerging adulthood (ages 18–25) served as the age anchor; recruitment also attended to respondents' gender, geographic location, and educational background. To examine how different family structures shape digital isolation strategies [9], FCPT was integrated into the sampling logic.

Screening procedure: Prior to formal interviews, prospective participants completed the Revised Family Communication Patterns (RFCP) instrument, from which the researchers calculated conversation and conformity orientation scores. Participants were then assigned to one of four family communication types: consensual (frequent communication with emphasis on parental authority), pluralistic (encouraging independence and open expression), protective (infrequent communication with expectations of compliance), and laissez-faire (low emotional involvement and low interaction frequency). A total of 32 participants were ultimately selected, with eight individuals representing each family type. This symmetrical sample profile provided a robust empirical foundation for subsequent comparative analysis of differentiated estrangement strategies across distinct communication contexts.

3.2 Data Analysis

Interview data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework, through which core themes were generated via a six-phase recursive process [10]. In the initial phases, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data by repeatedly reading transcripts, recording preliminary impressions, and conducting systematic initial coding of semantic units such as "grouping," "blocking," and "Moments permission settings." Codes were then aggregated according to their internal logical relationships, and candidate themes—such as "strategic reconstruction of digital boundaries"—were tentatively formulated. During subsequent review phases, the representativeness of themes was assessed against the raw data, and final themes were clearly defined and named. This analytic process was not a linear progression of discrete steps but a recursive cycle of mutual verification among raw data, codes, and theoretical frameworks, ultimately aimed at constructing a set of theoretical dimensions capable of explaining the mechanisms of Cyber-Severing, and at illuminating—through participants' own accounts—how digital media mediates the transformation of intergenerational relationships.

4. Findings

Through deep coding and systematic analysis of transcripts from 32 participants, this study finds that Cyber-Severing constitutes a rational strategy through which youth in emerging adulthood leverage the affordances of digital media to reconstruct and maintain personal boundaries. This process, modulated by different family communication patterns (FCPT), manifests along divergent practical pathways.

4.1 From Information Segregation to Emotional Labor

The study finds that for youth who lack a sense of recognition within their families of origin or who operate under intense power asymmetries—particularly those from protective and consensual families—algorithmic recommendation in digital spaces functions not merely as a content distribution mechanism but as a psychological compensatory mechanism for repairing a damaged sense of self-worth.

(1) Information segregation practices among youth from protective families

In protective families (high conformity, low conversation orientation), effective two-way communication is typically absent, and parents tend to exercise unilateral, absolute authority. Respondents generally perceived intense psychological surveillance; the filterability afforded by media technology accordingly provided them with pathways to evade monitoring. By creating stratified audience groups in WeChat Moments, adjusting privacy settings, or maintaining secondary accounts, respondents artificially constructed information asymmetries and achieved structural information segregation—thereby neutralizing the domestic interference produced by context collapse.

“Given the personalities of my parents, if they actually saw me dancing at a Livehouse, they’d call me in the middle of the night to lecture me about ‘not going down the wrong path.’ So the group they can see is all school news and positive reposts. Setting WeChat Moments to a ‘visible for the last three days only’ restriction and blocking them from certain groups is the only way, given my family background, to keep my personal life from being torn apart by them.” (P5, 19 years old, sophomore, protective family)

(2) Emotional labor among youth from consensual families

In contrast to the hard segregation practiced by youth from protective families, respondents from consensual families—characterized by high interaction frequency but demands for conformity—found themselves entrapped in a different kind of soft predicament. Because emotional bonds within the family are tight, directly severing communication boundaries tends to provoke intense relational turbulence. Accordingly, these respondents tended to convert media interaction into a form of low-cost emotional labor—maintaining an illusion of online presence by dispatching symbols devoid of substantive informational content but serving social maintenance functions (such as thumbs-up emojis, roses, and ritualized greetings). This strategy preserved the frequency of connection while, in effect, stripping away its deeper emotional resonance.

“My mom is the type who really needs ‘feedback.’ If she sends a health tip and you don’t respond, she decides you’ve grown up and no longer want to keep your parents company. But I genuinely have nothing to talk to her about—our worldviews are too different, and any serious conversation turns into a fight. So now I basically just send a ‘thumbs up’ or reply ‘got it.’ But honestly, I feel nothing inside.” (P7, 21 years old, junior, consensual family)

In sum, youth across different family communication patterns demonstrate a strong degree of agency in digital time-space. By precisely calibrating media visibility and interactional depth, they conduct covert negotiations for power between the intergenerational entanglement characteristic of East Asian family cultures and their own exploration of individual identity, using media affordances as a shield for personal privacy. This state of being “connected but not communicating” has become an adaptive strategy through which contemporary youth achieve psychological sovereignty.

4.2 From Ascriptive Kinship to Algorithmic Affinity

The study finds that Cyber-Severing does not imply that youth have descended into social isolation or emotional deprivation; rather, it marks a migration of bonding social capital from the domain of kinship to that of digital affinity communities.

(1) Algorithmic communities as compensation for the family emotional vacuum

For youth who lack recognition within their families of origin—such as those from protective or laissez-faire families—digital space provides necessary psychological compensation. Leveraging algorithmic precision in content distribution, young people are able to quickly embed themselves in highly homogeneous affinity communities. Within these communities, through interactions with “digital companions”, they restore a sense of self-worth that their parents have denied them.

“In that household, I was basically invisible. My parents dismissed every single interest I had—whether it was building models or playing niche games—as ‘fooling around.’ But in my fandom group, the algorithm keeps pushing people who resonate with me on a soul level. The instantaneous high and sense of belonging we feel when we talk about a meme or a technical detail—that’s something I can never feel in that home full of criticism and emotional neglect.” (P14, 20 years old, sophomore, protective family)

(2) The instrumental turn of kinship bonds

As dependence on algorithmic affinity communities deepens, kinship bonds are shifting from an emotional core toward instrumental obligation. For digital natives, intimate relationships are being progressively decoupled from blood ties and reconstituted as non-traditional connections premised on voluntarism, equality, and emotional resonance. Within this framework, family interactions tend to devolve into merely instrumental exchanges aimed at maintaining material subsistence.

“If you scroll through my chat history with my mom, all you’d find is transaction records or ‘okay’ and ‘understood.’ Because I’m not yet financially independent, I have to fulfill this ‘polite reply’ obligation.

But in everyday terms, the connection at home always carries this oppressive sense of ‘I’m your father, so I get to control you.’ My digital companion is the one who gives me the most immediate comfort.” (P18, 22 years old, senior, pluralistic family)

In sum, through Cyber-Severing, youth in emerging adulthood construct a more individualized emotional system—one that navigates between algorithmic recommendation and voluntary choice. This signals the ongoing deconstruction of the traditional patrilineal logic of kinship among digital natives.

4.3 Renegotiation of Intergenerational Obligation

A deeper finding of this study is that Cyber-Severing does not represent young people’s wholesale abandonment of familial responsibility; rather, within the framework of partial disengagement from the family-of-origin system, it involves the construction of a more individually oriented emotional arrangement. Through the affordances of digital media, young people have successfully carved out an autonomous domain within the family’s traditionally totalizing power structure.

(1) Distance as a necessary condition for relational maintenance

The study finds that respondents widely perceived a paradox of intimacy: in digitally mediated existence, information hypervisibility and permanent online presence not only fail to deepen intergenerational understanding but actively intensify the boundary turbulence produced by ideological clashes. Young people thus began to use digital isolation to deliberately engineer information asymmetry.

“I used to feel guilty about not being completely transparent with my parents. But now I’ve realized that total honesty is damaging to both of us. If they could see my real situation—like the fact that I’m still revising papers at three in the morning—all we’d do every day is fight.” (P21, 21 years old, junior, protective family)

(2) From structural compliance to ritualistic maintenance

As individual reflexivity awakens, respondents are actively reinterpreting the cultural content of the traditional concept of filial piety in digital contexts. They no longer regard full disclosure and absolute compliance as the sole standard for fulfilling family obligations; instead, they have developed a pragmatic logic that enables them to complete identity exploration and circumvent collectivist pressure while simultaneously maintaining family relationships through low-cost emotional labor.

“I used to think ‘being filial’ meant being obedient. But now I think not burdening them with needless worry, and being able to take care of yourself well—that’s the greatest filial piety.” (P30, 23 years old, first-year graduate student, consensual family)

In sum, through skilled manipulation of digital media, youth in emerging adulthood have accomplished a renegotiation of intergenerational power. At the cost of sacrificing some degree of emotional authenticity, they have secured the independent sovereignty of psychological space. This form of negotiated intimacy reflects a broader transformation: contemporary youth have not fled the family, but have instead employed media technology to effect a digital reformation of traditional ethics—shifting intergenerational interaction from an ascriptive form of emotional bondage toward a more reflexive boundary equilibrium.

5. Conclusion

By examining Cyber-Severing behavior among contemporary Chinese youth, this study reveals how digital media is reshaping intergenerational relationships. The study finds that going low-contact with family is not a radical rupture but rather a covert negotiation conducted within digitally mediated existence as young people seek to establish their own boundaries.

First, Cyber-Severing demonstrates the agency of youth in digital space, challenging the prevailing stereotype of this generation as psychologically fragile. Young people aged 18 to 25 are at a critical juncture of identity exploration. Confronted with the intense surveillance pressures characteristic of East Asian family cultures, they have not opted for direct confrontation but have instead demonstrated a high degree of digital reflexivity. By skillfully deploying the blocking and audience-segmentation features of social media platforms, they carve out a zone of psychological self-governance within the otherwise airtight web of familial power.

This gentle yet tenacious survival strategy serves as a form of self-protection for the new generation navigating a complex social environment.

Second, digital media plays a dual role in intergenerational interaction: it functions simultaneously as a surveillance instrument and as a means of conflict mitigation. On platforms such as WeChat, parental surveillance routinely transcends physical spatial boundaries, and family members forfeit their original privacy boundaries in shared interactional contexts. Yet young people do not passively accept this persistent surveillance; rather, they actively manage their privacy and interactions through the concealability afforded by digital technology. By performing a kind of “present absence”—remaining technically connected while becoming communicatively unavailable—they reduce direct conflict with their parents. This interactional mode transforms social media tools into effective mediators of conflict within intergenerational relationships, enabling relational connection to be maintained while personal space is protected.

Third, Cyber-Severing reflects a transformation of the traditional East Asian ethics of filial piety in the digital age. In traditional norms, filial piety often signified absolute obedience to elders (Fei, 1992); for contemporary youth, however, this form of blood-based obligation is being progressively decoupled from genuine intimacy, and young people are increasingly seeking a balance between personal independence and family duty. The study finds that young people’s emotional needs have not disappeared but have migrated from ascriptive kinship ties toward algorithmically mediated affinity communities. By fulfilling basic obligations through low-cost emotional labor, they exchange ritual compliance for substantive spiritual independence. This form of intimacy at a distance constitutes the most adaptive intergenerational contract in contemporary China.

Finally, Cyber-Severing embodies the trade-offs that youth navigate between traditional ethics and individual freedom. While maintaining family relationships, they also preserve, through digital media, substantially greater personal space and self-sovereignty. In the present social context, complete physical separation from the family carries prohibitively high moral costs. Digital space offers a safety zone in which young people can enact gentle resistance through technological means—simultaneously preserving the last remaining warmth of kinship bonds and completing a spiritual rite of departure from the nest.

In conclusion, Cyber-Severing represents not merely a transformation of intergenerational relationships but a broader evolution of family structure and cultural values. This phenomenon marks a redefinition of the emotional, obligational, and spatial dimensions of intergenerational life, constituting a profound restructuring of traditional family relationships. Through digital media, contemporary youth have found a new mode of balance between the pressures of traditional culture and the demands of individual freedom. The strategy and rationality underlying this negotiation are a genuine expression of this generation’s response to contemporary pressures and its reconstruction of subjective value.

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