

The Emergence of Keitai Family:  
Inner Constructions of Today's Family from the Viewpoint of Keitai Use.

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## 1. Introduction

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In Japan, as is now the case in many countries, mobile phones, keitai, are nothing special. According to TCA <sup>(1)</sup>, the number of subscribers to keitai was 85,774,700 as of the end of January 2005. This number is equal to about two thirds of the Japanese population <sup>(2)</sup>. In addition, keitai adoption rate was over 60% in all generations of 13-59 years old <sup>(3)</sup>. Keitai has finished its popularization phase and has become a social infrastructure supporting our everyday life.

On the other hand, families and homes occupy important places in our everyday life. So it's just conceivable that keitai is accepted by family members and plays important roles in the private areas and the close communities. However previous researches on the acceptance of keitai rarely dealt with the ordinary area like families and homes because keitai seemed to be something special used mostly by active business people or teenagers beyond adult's comprehension<sup>1</sup>.

This paper focuses on the problem noted above, and explains not only whether keitai reproduces or destroys old family orders, but how keitai restructures both families as social groups and homes as social spaces with ethnographic methods.

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<sup>1</sup> Teenagers' vigorous use played important role in the popularization of keitai in Japan. At that time mass medias often picked up teenagers' bad habits beyond adult's comprehension. So in many cases keitai was linked with teenagers' problematic artifacts. See "Keitai in Public transportation" (Okabe & Ito, 2005)<sup>(4)</sup>

## 2. Conceptual Framework

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### 2-1. Families as social constructions

This research assumes that families are one of the most important social groups and a social construction affected by many social actors.

According to the definition of sociology, families are social groups based on marriage and relative relationships. (Giddens, 2001)<sup>(5)</sup> The value of families, which we tend to depend on, seems to be so universal that the definitions, forms and functions are stable. However, many historical and ethnographic studies show that the forms and functions fluctuate with social situations such as the economy, industry and law. (Stone, 1977)<sup>(6)</sup> Such variability of families had been politically used in the process of modernization. In order to achieve modernization, the nations and industries created the standards of families for people to obey. Suburbanization, which supported mass production and consumption of working people, is one example of how the industry realized the construction of industrial society. (Harvey, 1985)<sup>(7)</sup> On the other hand, the government realized the modern state through the creation of gender roles in families. (Ueno, 1994)<sup>(8)</sup>

However the maturities and diversification of today's society (Ministry of Finance Japan, 2004)<sup>(9)</sup> is destroying the standards. Local level changes of families urge the government to change the law.

Previous researches have dealt with the families' change caused by outer factors. However, inner and local changes of families may also have much effect on social changes. So first, we must research and illustrate the ordinary practices of people creating local changes and the inner construction of families.

### 2-2. Home spaces customized by social media

In order to understand the inner construction of families, home spaces are essential. Home spaces govern family relationships physically. In other words, people behave in their house according to the structure of their home space. (Meyrowitz, 1985)<sup>(10)</sup> So house and home space structures represent and reproduce the power structure of families. (Spain, 1992)<sup>(11)</sup>

However, it is not only physical structure of houses, but media and technology environment in home spaces that represent the power structure of families. With the

physical structures underneath, family members continue to make the meaning and power structure of the space visible, and alter them strategically through interaction with each other using various technologies. (Dobashi, 2002)<sup>(12)</sup>

Therefore, the structures of home spaces come under the influence of new technologies' adoption. The home alternations brought by the adoption of television (Morley, 1986)<sup>(13)</sup> and telephone (Yoshimi et. al., 1992)<sup>(14)</sup> show good examples.

People domesticate<sup>2</sup> new technologies when they adopt them. (R. Silverstone, 1992)<sup>(15)</sup> Keitai is no exception. This research regards above previous researches as a framework and focuses on both the alternation of home spaces by keitai and the alternation of family relationships relevant to the former.

### 2-3. Two layers of communications via keitai

Another theme in this research is based on the different features, which communications via keitai have. In order to explain the features, Ling and Yttri (2002)<sup>(16)</sup> propounded the concepts, "Hyper-Coordination" and "Micro-Coordination". These concepts were made to explain the communications via keitai among adolescents in Norway. However, as Ito and Okabe (2005)<sup>(17)</sup> have pointed out, these concepts seem to be true in many areas of the world where keitai has become popular.

According to Ling and Yttri (2002)<sup>(16)</sup>, "Micro-Coordination" emphasizes the pragmatic side of keitai use. Adults almost always use keitai to coordinate every action in their business. In this case, keitai is a tool used to accomplish the objective. In contrast, "Hyper-Coordination" emphasizes the expressive side of keitai use. Adolescents continue reconstructing the relationships among them through meta-level context of expressive interactions via keitai.

In a situation where there is more than one person, consciously or not, people must constantly behave and adjust according to the situation, in order to participate. (Goffman, 1967)<sup>(18)</sup> Goffman based this theory on face-to-face communication. However, this idea may be applicable to virtual gatherings as long as the participants are human beings.

This research will explore how people behave strategically in order to adjust and participate in virtual family connections created by keitai.

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<sup>2</sup> R. Silverstone et al. used "domestication" as a the term to explain the process of families' acceptance of media.

### 3. Our research frameworks

This research is based on a set of ethnographic interviews (Amagasa et. al., 2004) Students and their mother were mainly chosen as informants for this primary study, because keitai usage between students and their mother seem to be so active, they grasp the features of keitai use among family members. Here are the details.

- Consultation period:	June, 2004 ~ February, 2005
- Total number of informants:	21 people (9 male, 12 female)
- Main living place of informants:	Yokohama <sup>3</sup> and its surroundings
- Occupation/Status of informants:	Jr. High school student: 1 person (1 male) High school student: 11people (6male, 5female) University student: 3 people (1 male, 2 female) Married with children: 5 people (5 female) Single: 1 person (1 male)

Table1. Details of the Interviews

In these interviews, the interviewer first asked each informant, basic information about their keitai and other media use. Next, after the informants drew a graphic representation of their family relationship, they were asked about each relationship, and how the keitai is used among them. Here is an example of the family relationship diagram.

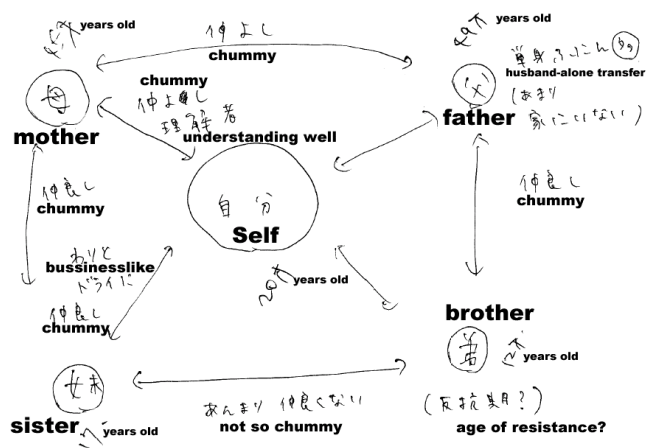


Figure1. Sample of the Family Relationship Diagram

Finally, after having the informants to give a graphic representation of their home spaces, they were asked about the usage of each room, the territory of each family member, and where media such as the keitai is placed. Here is an example of a home

<sup>3</sup> Yokohama is the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest city in Japan, suburbs of Tokyo.

space drawn by one informant.

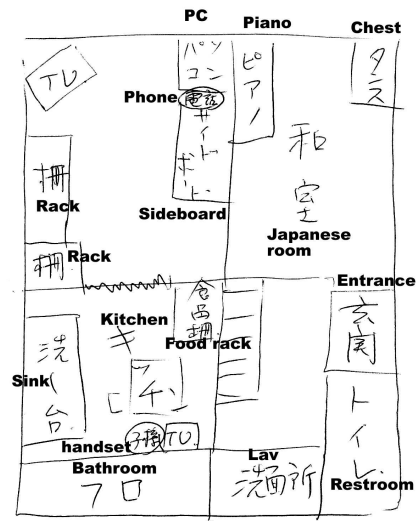


Figure2.  
The sample of the home space drawings

#### 4. Research result and analysis

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##### 4-1. Keitai use among family members as an identity strategy

In this research, a practice common among almost all of the informants was noticed. That is “where-are-you-mail”, by which mothers ask their children where they are and whether they will have dinner at home or not, appeared to be sent at about the same time each day. “Where-are-you-mail” seems to be the optimum solution satisfying the two different requirements of parents and children. Parents want to bind and watch their children everywhere but not to be disliked by them. In contrast, children want to become independent from their family but to keep family connections as assurance for their identities in this mature and diversified society at the same time. With “where-are-you-mail”, people achieve “Hyper-coordination” disguised as “Micro-coordination” using asynchronous media such as SMS. This makes communication acceptable to both parents and children possible, and helps maintain emotional connections of family members anywhere. “Where-are-you-mail” is a strategy for families requiring perpetual conversations and efforts to be maintained. (Matsuda 2005)<sup>(19)</sup>

Such parent-child relationships beyond the places only play a role as assurance for the identities of children, when their identity is thrown into crisis. Here is an example.

(Homemaker female, 54years, Fujisawa<sup>4</sup>):

Interviewee: Mayumi<sup>5</sup> (her daughter, age 17, High school students) took on an after-school job. She was the youngest of the employees, all the others being university students. Whenever she disagreed with them, she was blamed for her rudeness. She would send me mail (SMS) saying, “I feel down”. I would reply, “Are you O.K.? Take it easy.” or “You're being too hard on yourself.”

Amagasa: Would she send you SMS while on duty?

Interviewee: (Yes) In really hard times she would say, “I need to use the restroom” and send me SMS. This worried me.

Beyond the boundaries based on the modern division (Giddens, 1990)<sup>(20)</sup> keitai is creating dependency relationships among family members. That is to say, the more difficult it is to get identities from other communities, the stronger family connections become. Families then begin to appear as a “universal-like” community beyond the modern division.

#### 4-2. Ad hoc boundaries within home spaces constructed by keitai

Generally, home spaces and the meanings have been regarded as the construction under control of physical conditions. Goffman (1963)<sup>(21)</sup> explained about the physical boundary as communication boundaries as follows:

Social arrangements are therefore recognized that restrict such communication to a special part of the boundary, such as doors, and that lead persons inside and outside the region to act as if the barrier had cut off more communication than it does. (pp151-152)

Such physical determinism does not seem to apply in keitai generations. Here is a set of interview data supporting this knowledge.

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<sup>4</sup> Fujisawa is a middle size city near Yokohama.

<sup>5</sup> “Mayumi” is the allonym of the interviewee.

(High school student, Female, Age 17, Fujisawa)

Interviewee: My mother's keitai is often placed here. (Refer to figure3) Here is a shelf. It is located on that with the fixed-line phone.

Amagasa: I see. So what you are saying, is you answer your mother's keitai? When you're in your own room and you hearing it ringing, you get her keitai and answer it?

Interviewee: Yes, my mother never realizes, so I answer it. I always take it from the charger (in her room) and leave it around the table in the living room. It's usually left there.

Amagasa: So, you enter your parents' bedroom to check your mother's keitai without her noticing?

Interviewee: Yes. Her keitai seldom receives mails and calls, but sometimes my sister mails her (SMS), so sometimes I go to check her keitai and keep it in my pocket with mine.

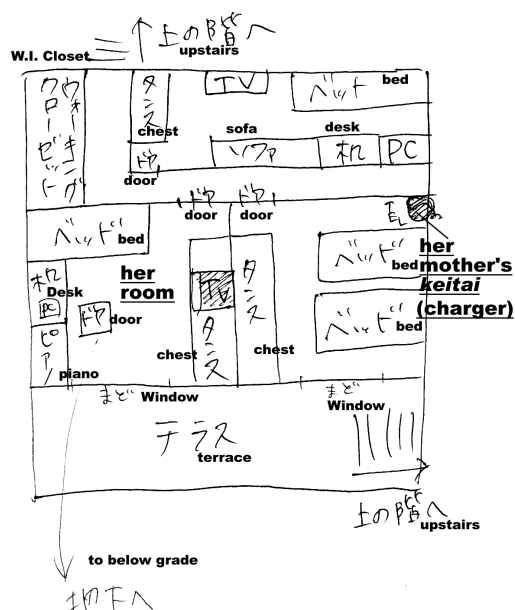


Figure3.  
The home space drew by the interviewee.

The common possession of her mother's keitai enables her to go beyond the physical determining boundary and to enter her parents' private room, which is usually restricted. In this case, the virtual possession relationships redefine the meaning of space and determine the boundary of home spaces beyond physical walls.

(High school student, Female, Age 17, Yokohama)

Amagasa: Who watches TV in the living room most frequently?

Interviewee: Uhhmm... Father? Oh, but that was only true when he could act like

the man of the house. Now he's lost all power, (since his love affair became apparent) so he just stays in his room and never comes out.

Amagasa: I see. So, where does your father keep his keitai?

Interviewee: \*Snip\* On his bed.

Amagasa: Have you ever heard him on his keitai before?

Interviewee: No, but I've read his keitai mail. He received mails from his affair and I hated that. So I never read it now.

The interviewee entered all rooms without being noticed, and also read the contents of her mother and brother's keitai left in such as the living room. She however, protected her keitai by never leaving it in family spaces, setting passwords, and never allowing anyone to enter her room. These interview data illustrates that family members alter the boundaries in their home spaces by social media such as keitai and TVs.

Her father made his power visible through watching the center TV. However when he lost his footing, he engaged in "face-work" (Goffman, 1967)<sup>(18)</sup> and avoided risk situations by placing his keitai and himself in his private room.

In addition, virtual information such as accessibility to keitai content seems to determine whether the physical boundary is violable or inviolable. Now, there are two layers, virtual and physical, interacting with each other, defining home space boundaries.

## 5. Conclusion

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Many people living in the high-risk society, which has become diverse and uncertain, find families existing congenitally, attractive as assurance for the identities and emotional connections. Keitai, available everywhere, may make the emotional connections among family members much stronger. People carrying around, not the symbol of their family such as photos, but their family itself with keitai, suggest the possibility of family-oriented society coming.

In contrast, Keitai makes the division among family members visible. Keitai accelerates both constructions and divisions of family relationships. Where are keitai families, which have conflicting two aspects, going? Further research is required.

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