

The Journal of Behavioral Science (TJBS)

Original Article

Family Strengths in Generation Alpha in the Thai Context

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Article Information

Received: 13.8.20

Revised: 16.9.20

Accepted: 23.9.20

Keywords

Strength-based approach
Generation Alpha
Future research
Meta-aggregation
Qualitative research synthesis

Abstract

The relationships between people of different generations are a core component of family strength. This research aimed to investigate the scenario of family strengths among members of generation alpha in the Thai context. The six steps of Ethnographic Delphi Futures Research technique (EDFR) were applied to exploratory forecasting on future needs and followed by statistical analysis. There were 15 experts purposively selected from different institutions, including policy makers, academic experts, professional practitioners, and parents who received national awards for children and family. Both in-depth interviews and questionnaires were used to analyze the median and interquartile range. The findings consisted of different aspects, including family institutions, educational institutions, media institutions, government institutions, and the community. This research contributes to behavioral science by providing deeper knowledge and understanding of ways to strengthen family relationships among members of generation alpha.

A family is one of oldest and most resilient institutions in the world (Defrain & Asay, 2007). It is also how children are taught to socialize, survive, and thrive. It is hard to deny that family is an important part of human behavior and a source of financial, emotional, and social support (Walsh, 2012). Family can bring a great joy or awful pain depending on family functions (Defrain & Asay, 2007). The family also plays a fundamental role in all societies (Coleman & Lawrence, 2015). As societies change, so do families. Globally, the notion of family and population has dramatically changed. Thailand also finds itself in transition from a young to an ageing population. The number of people aged 60 and older is projected to double from 2015 to 2050 (Prachuabmoh, 2019). The demographic shift in the population structure of Thailand, a transition into an ageing society, with a steady decline in the number of children, and an increase in the number of aging and elderly. These demographic changes in age structure are predicted to decline in terms of both family size and the way that Thai people form families (Office of the National Economic and Social

Development Council, 2019). In future, Thai society will be comprised of populations from many generations whose attitudes, mindsets and behaviors vary significantly. This demographic change in the family structure creates massive transformations in the socialization of individuals, families, and society (Beaujouan & Solaz, 2019).

Family strength is the framework that promotes the positive development of family members, facilitates the abilities of members to share a value system as a group due to harmonious familiar interaction, and contributes to graceful interactions with kinship and social systems (Jin & Ahn, 2019). Many researchers have studied family from a strength-based perspective by examining certain characteristics of family strength, including an expression of appreciation, quality time, commitment, spiritual well-being, and the ability to deal with problems and crises in a positive way (Stinnett, 1996). The perspective of family strengths is a worldview regarding life and families, including positive, optimism, and well-being (McCashen, 2005; Hammond, 2010). This strength-based

perspective does not overlook family problems but emphasizes their proper place in life as vehicles for testing our capacities as families and reaffirming our vital human connections with each other (Green et al., 2004). Different researchers suggested embedding social values and culture through family upbringing by promoting the ideology of happy families with strong family bonds; an encouraging way of living, adhering to morality, ethics, and righteousness, with events and activities aimed to help promote such characteristics; as well as developing parents to become good role models (Dahlsgaard et al., 2005; Defrain & Asay, 2007; Foot & Hopkins, 2010).

Generation alpha is the demographic cohort succeeding Generation Z, many of the individuals in this generation were preschoolers or not yet born, consisting of those born in the early 2010s to the mid-2020s (McCrindle, 2015). Generation alpha are truly the millennial generation, born and fully shaped in the 21st century. The rapid development of technologies and innovation breakthroughs, such as artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things, and drone technology are some of the key factors contributing to the development of generation alpha, who are truly digital natives and are the most technologically literate generation (Nagy & Kölcsey, 2017). However, technology and innovation need to be emphasized to maximize the positive impact and minimize any negative impact generation alpha and their relationship with their family.

Parenting styles have changed across generations, so it stands to reason that the way people within these generations function as adults would also change. Most members of generation alpha are the children of millennials, born between 1980 and 2003, and the children of the baby boomer generation. Millennials have adopted an individualistic identity, express their own ideas with greater freedom, and challenge cultural expectations and their superiors. Millennials have taken a more involved approach to parenting compared to previous generations. Millennials also tend to spend more money and time on their children. Therefore, members of generation alpha look up to their parents and to see their families as financially and emotionally supportive (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Moreover, the younger generation is affected by the growing income gap and a shrinking middle class. This caused stress in the home for some and showed the importance of saving and being financially responsible for the younger generation (Turner,

2015). This set of unique experiences have influenced the characteristics of the younger generation and may impact how they live their lives and take on the perspectives of others (Twenge, 2017). These family and parenting trends have been investigated in western cultures (MacDonald, 2010; Moore & Wood, 2014), but no similar studies have been investigated in the Thai context.

The studies of family strength in Thai context normally related to indicators of family strength (Jinng et al., 2021), the development of lifelong learning process to enhance family strengths (Soratana, 2019), the factors influencing family strengths (Sveinbjarnardottir & Svavarsdottir, 2019). While studies related to generation alpha in Thai context are related to generation gaps (Pasquarelli & Schultz, 2019), learning model for generation alpha (Areekul, 2019) and digital technology (Tripathi, 2019). However, no studies investigate most probable scenario of family strength in generation alpha. Therefore, this research aims investigate the scenario of family strength among generation alpha in the Thai context. This research contributes to behavioral science by providing a better understanding of future scenario to strengthen family relationships among members of generation alpha in the Thai context.

Research Objectives

The objective of this research is to investigate the scenario of family strength among generation alpha in the Thai context.

Literature Review

The literature review highlighted the most probable influences on the behaviors of young family members and their family relationships.

Emotional Security

The younger generation appears to have an emotional connection to strong feelings with other people (Carré et al., 2013). Since video face-to-face chat is so accessible to the younger generation causes them to feel the emotions of others (Carrier et al., 2015). This type of advanced technology can enhance cognitive empathy and help in understanding the feelings of others (Carré et al., 2013). However, being emotionally connected can also be negative, for instance, if a person is emotionally connected to their cell phone. The younger generation can experience negative emotions such as anxiety, disorientation, and panic

when away from their device or experienced feelings of fear if they did not know what everyone else was doing (Vincent, 2006). Emotional discomfort from online communities can exacerbate the emotional damage of negative social interactions. The younger generation appears to be more afraid of social interactions than physical injury, which is the reason for an increase in depression and anxiety. The younger generation are more likely to commit suicide due to emotional fragility (Twenge, 2017).

Technological Advances

The younger generation grew up with the use of technology, which is an advantage as they can get news quickly and communicate worldwide (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). However, this can also be a disadvantage, if technology is used as a replacement for social interaction (Twenge, 2017). The younger generation is known to have a bond with digital media, causing them to become emotionally attached to the internet to avoid their struggles in the real world. Moreover, the internet gives access to unlimited amounts of information, such as negative websites that teach young people about self-harm (Turner, 2015).

Social Media

One aspect of technology that is widely used by the younger generation is social media. Social media has highlighted a phenomenon called fear of missing out (FOMO) as children view their friends spending time together through social media, which could explain why the use of social media generally leads to unhappiness. Social media can create a misperception of reality through highlighting positive moments in life, while excluding the difficult moments and focusing more on the self by creating a positive and unattainable image (Twenge, 2017). Social media algorithms reinforce the idea that most people think like you do instead of providing a balanced perspective, which could damage empathy, because it is more difficult to accept other perspectives when members of the young generation assume all their Facebook friends have the same ideas as their own (Yang et al., 2017).

Theoretical Framework

There is a large body of interdisciplinary theories that draws from psychology, sociology, and social work that explains the importance of family strengths, including the ecological model of human

development; socialization; and the strength-based perspective.

Ecological Model of Human Development

The Ecological Model of Human Development by Bronfenbrenner was adopted from the first paradigm in 1970s to explore a broad range of variables in the social environment of children, from their immediate environment to more distant environments, including the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The microsystem is a pattern of social roles, interpersonal relations, and activities within the immediate environment of children such as family. The mesosystem consists of the connections between two or more settings such as school and community. The exosystem involves the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings that indirectly influenced processes within the immediate setting, such as social media. The macrosystem consisted of the overarching patterns of micro, meso, and exosystems that characterize a given culture or subculture embedded in each of these broader systems such as government institution. The chronosystem included the transitions and shifts in the lifespan, such as generations.

Socialization

Socialization is a social and psychological process of internalizing the cultural norms of society. Socialization embraces both learning and teaching and is thus how social and cultural continuity are attained (Clausen, 1968). Agents of socialization include institutions that can influence social norms on individuals and include family, school, media, community, and government institutions. The family is the primary context for socialization and child development, and parents represent one of the most powerful influences on their children. Parental socialization continues throughout the entire lives of individuals, becoming particularly relevant in moments of change, such as adolescence (Axpe et al., 2019). Moreover, parental use of social networks can impact the development of children (Ibáñez-Cubillas et al., 2017). In the future, Thai society will be comprised of populations from many generations whose attitudes and behaviors may differ. This demographic change in the family structure is creating massive transformations in socialization of individuals, families, communities, and society (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, 2019).

The Strength-based Perspective

The strength-based perspective is derived from work-practice theory in the field of social work field, but is now widely applied in various fields, with a focus on self-determination and the strengths of individuals (McCashen, 2005). This type of perspective builds individuals and their families on their strengths, identifying them as being resourceful and resilient when they experience adverse conditions. The strength-based perspective allowed for conditions for an individual to see themselves at their best and transform that value forward to capitalize on their strengths rather than focusing on negative characteristics (Hammond, 2010). The strength-based perspective not only examines the individual, but on their environment as well (Foot & Hopkins, 2010).

This literature review and interdisciplinary theories associated with the younger generations and their families especially millennials generation have been widely investigated in western cultures. However, no studies have ever investigated family strengths using Ethnographic Delphi Futures Research (EDFR) to forecast the future trends of generation alpha in Thailand.

Methodology

The Ethnographic Delphi Futures Research (EDFR) is an effective research technique and methodology that responds to the basic assumptions of futurism, combining the strengths of both EFR and Delphi. The strengths of both techniques help correct their methodological weaknesses. The procedural steps of EDFR are like those of the Delphi technique. The only major characteristic to differentiate EDFR from Delphi is the use of EFR in the first round of Delphi. This research method is highly flexible, systematic and in line with society under constantly changing circumstances. The EDFR in this research consisted of six steps: (1) to identify the panel experts; (2) to define trends and create research tools; (3) to begin the first trial using the EDFR method by non-directive and open-ended interviews with 15 experts to find the most probable scenario and cumulative summarization technique; (4) to collect and analyze the data obtained from the first EDFR trial; (5) to conduct a second EDFR trial by using a questionnaire and attaching statistical feedback to find a consensus within the same expert group; and (6) to summarize the findings for the future research. The data analysis method uses

median statistics and the interquartile range (Poolpatarachewin, 1986).

Participants

The recruitment of the participants was determined by the exclusion and inclusion criteria and whether they could be considered experts in the field and into four groups. The first group consisted of two policy makers with at least 10 years of experience each in formulating policies for strengthening families at the Division of Family Institution Promotion and the Department of Women's Affairs and Family Development in the Thai Ministry of Social Development and Human Security. The second group consisted of professional practitioners who have specialized in child and family development in the field for 10 years, including three senior social workers from the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, two senior pediatricians from the Ramathibodi Hospital, one child psychiatrist from the National Institute for Child and Family Development, and one family psychologist from the Association for Developing Human Potentials and Giftedness. The third group consisted of three academic experts in the field of children and family. The fourth group consisted of three parents who have children between 6-18 years old and have received national best family awards in 2019. The participants were excluded when they were unable to participate in the first and second round of the research project.

Data Collection

All the participants were contacted in person, by phone or e-mail to explain the project and request their participation, providing them with an in-text informed consent form, and requesting that they return the form by e-mail, with their name typed as a signature. In addition, a set of semi-structured interview guidelines were sent to participants, including the current situation of Thai families, such as how you deal with the family dynamic; how to mitigate potential risks for generation alpha; and how policies and planning can strengthen families. The non-directive, open-ended, face-to-face interviews focused on the most-probable scenario data and cumulative summarization technique were conducted between June 2019 and January 2020. The research protocol was approved by the institutional review board of Srinakharinwirot University (Certificate of approval No. SWUEC/E-014/2563).

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using content analysis (Poolpatarachewin, 1986). The themes uncovered in the interviews also served as constructs and emerging sub-constructs for survey development. The survey consisted of opinions of the experts were used to create a cumulative questionnaire based on a five-point Likert scaling technique for the second round of interviews. The final questionnaire survey obtained of 60 items from 5 dimensions includes 32 items from family institution, 8 items from education institution, 4 items from media institution, 15 items from government institution, and 5 items from community. The results were analyzed using the inter-quartile range (Q3-Q1) less than 1.5 for classifying consensus opinions and the most likely or highest probability trends, or a median value of 3.51 or higher. This process has been cycled through three or more times, until it was determined that there was no new material to be elicited from the process point of saturation. The data was analyzed, and a report was written and drafted for the scenario of family strengths in Generation Alpha.

Results

The findings revealed the scenario of family strengths of Generation alpha in Thailand consisted of different aspects, including personal factors and the surrounding environmental factors, including family institutions, educational institutions, media institutions, government institutions, and community: (1) personal factors including mental immunity, resilience, critical thinking, and media literacy of generation Alpha; (2) family institutions provide quality time, positive communication, emotional self-regulation, and positive disciplines; (3) educational institution provides essential knowledge, life skills and education in formal settings and digital platform; (4) media institutions provide appropriate content and act as a tool to promote the strength of the family; (5) government institutions provide mechanisms to support the work-life balance and to promote strong family institutions; and (6) the community provides childcare centers, learning spaces as well as safe and supportive community environments in Table 1.

Table 1

Theme of the Results from In-depth Interviews

Key Findings
<p>Generation Alpha</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Have the mental immunity to be able to cope with problems and obstacles such as resilience, emotional regulation, morality, stress management, empathy, and human relationships. -Acquire media literacy and digital wisdom to use social media in a positive and useful way. -Assess information with critical thinking, positivity, and looking at the truth and reality. <p>Family Institutions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Role of parents are not only childcare, but to be a role model and to cultivate good attitudes, behaviors, disciplines, knowledge, and life skills. -Build positive relationships within a family that requires love, warmth, trust, and support, and spending quality time together. -Adapt to modern technology and media for learning sources and increasing career opportunities in the future <p>Educational Institutions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Strengthen the knowledge and skills needed for children, such as thinking skills, media literacy, volunteering, relationship skills, positive psychology and financial management. -Adapt the educational system to suit the digital world or produce media that children can learn on their own, such as e-education and virtual classrooms - Build a network of partnerships with families, universities, organizations where children can learn with real practice and experience. <p>Media Institutions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Produce appropriate media and supports the use of information media as a tool for strengthening family institutions.

Table 1 (*Continued*)

Key Findings
Government Institutions
-Establish family online social support center to educate and develop family potential to perform quality functions.
-Create mechanisms to encourage establishments to support and encourage employees to create work-life and family-life balances.
-Raise awareness and encourage organizations across all sectors to participate in surveillance and to promote and develop strong family institutions
Community
-Provide a safe and supportive environment for children and youth
-Establish childcare centers and to create learning spaces in the community

The opinions of the experts were used to create a cumulative questionnaire based on a five-point Likert scaling technique in the second round of interviews. The results were analyzed using

percentage, median, and inter-quartile range (Q3-Q1) for classifying consensus opinions. Then bring the most likely and high-probability trend, or a median value of 3.51 or higher, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

The Possible Probable Family Strengths in Generation Alpha in the Thai Context

Scenario of Family Strengths	Median	Probable	Q3-Q1
Family Institution			
Generation alpha			
1. Resilience	5	Strongly Agree	0
2. Critical thinking	5	Strongly Agree	0
3. Media literacy	5	Strongly Agree	1
4. Tolerance	5	Strongly Agree	0
5. Adaptability	5	Strongly Agree	0
Parents			
1. Quality time	5	Strongly Agree	0.75
2. Positive relationship	5	Strongly Agree	0.75
3. Positive communication	5	Strongly Agree	1
4. Emotional self-regulation	5	Strongly Agree	1
5. Positive discipline	5	Strongly Agree	0.75
Educational Institution			
1. Provide essential knowledge and skills	5	Strongly Agree	1
2. Role-modeling	5	Strongly Agree	1
3. Understanding child development	5	Strongly Agree	1
4. Education in the new digital age	5	Strongly Agree	1
5. Network with family and other institutions	5	Strongly Agree	1
Media Institution			
1. Produce appropriate content	5	Strongly Agree	0.75
2. Awareness of the impact of media	5	Strongly Agree	0.75
3. Media as a tool for strengthening family	5	Strongly Agree	1
4. Develop creative media for children	5	Strongly Agree	0.75
Government Institution			
1. Promote the role and responsibility of family	5	Strongly Agree	1

Table 2 (Continued)

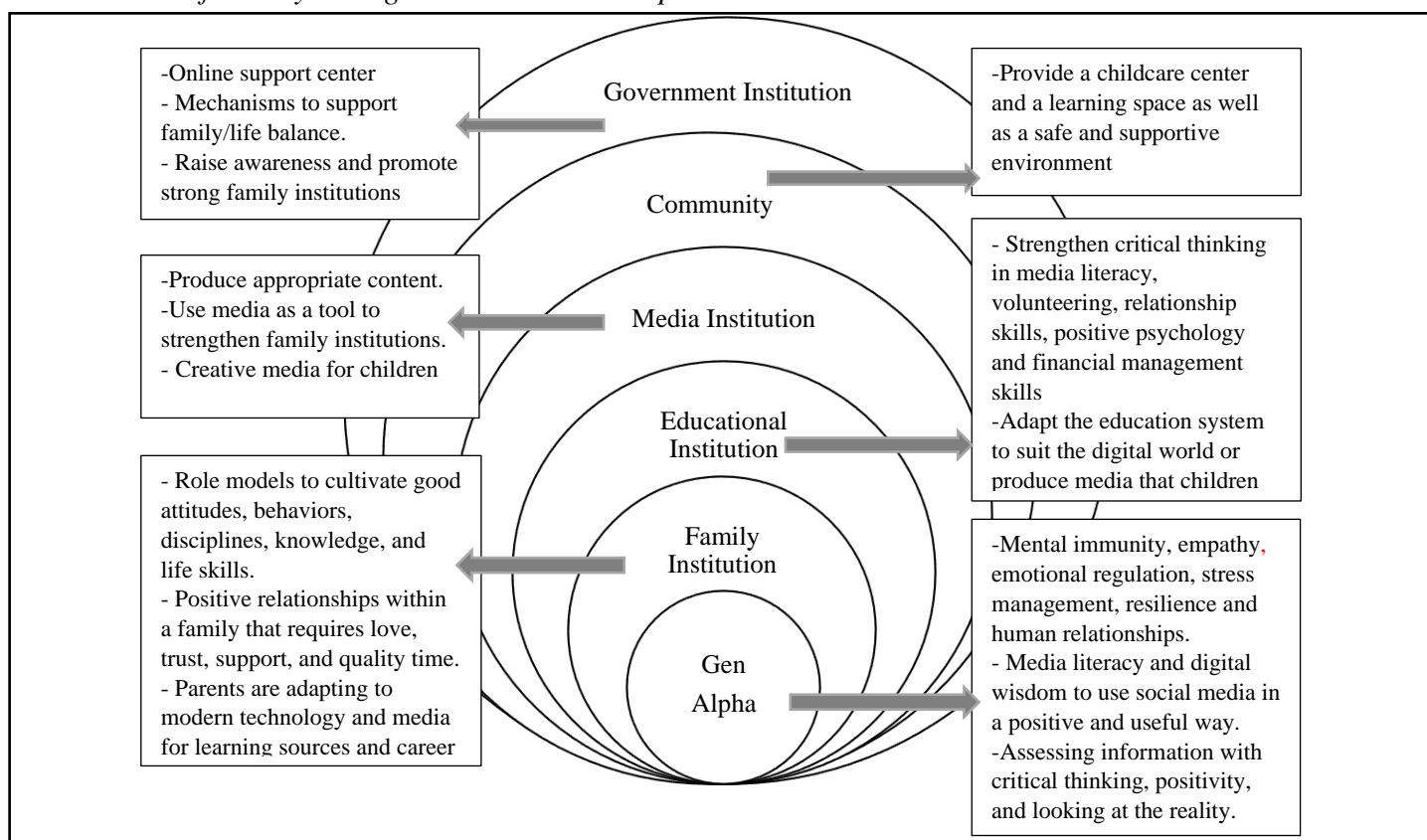
Scenario of Family Strengths	Median	Probable	Q3-Q1
2. Establish online family support	5	Strongly Agree	1
3. Establish social media censorship	5	Strongly Agree	1
4. Support work-life and family life balances.	5	Strongly Agree	1
5. Support vulnerable families	5	Strongly Agree	1
Community			
1. Provide a safe and supportive environment	4.25	Agree	0.75
2. Monitor the behavior of children and youths	4	Agree	1
3. Create learning spaces in the community	4	Agree	0
4. Establishment of childcare centers	4.25	Agree	0.75

The future research on strengthening families for generation alpha is derived from the highest-level trends, or a median of 3.50 or higher, and a consensus is the interquartile range (Q3-Q1) not exceeding 1.5, compiled and concluded as the future of the

strengthening of generation alpha. In terms of family institution, educational institution, media institution, government institution and community. Figure 1 shown the scenario of family strengths in generation alpha in the Thai Context.

Figure 1

The Scenario of Family Strengths in Generation Alpha in the Thai Context



Discussion

The results showed that strengthening families from generation alpha in the Thai social context cannot be explained by a single factor. This is supported by the strength-based Perspective, which

not only examines the individual, but their environment as well (Foot & Hopkins, 2010). This finding also fits nicely with the younger generation, as every child is different and all children have their own unique strengths. Moreover, the Strength-Based

Perspective falls in line with the Ecological Model of Child Development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). As children are learning and developing, their knowledge, skills, and strengths are also developing (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Furthermore, the factors that strengthen the generation alpha family is complex and comprised of personal and environmental factors (Jinnge et al., 2021). These findings were in line with the Ecological Theory of Human Development which focused on both a personal and different level of environmental factors from family institutions, educational institutions, media institutions and larger social structures (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). This is supported by the Ecological and Developmental Contexts of Family Resilience (Walsh, 2012), viewed in the light of multiple, recursive influences of human functioning are seen as resulting from the interactions of individuals and family in dealing with stressful experiences and the social context (Walsh, 2012).

The strength of the generation alpha family emerged from personal factors, such as mental immunity, which is not being able to resist negative thoughts, but the ability to cope with them in a healthy way and not acting on them. This is consistent with the research of Twenge (2017) that found that members of the younger generation are more likely to experience negative emotions such as anxiety, fear, and panic. Emotional discomfort can exacerbate the emotional damage of negative social interactions. generation alpha appears to be more scared of social interactions than physical injuries, which could be the reason for an increase in depression, anxiety, and emotional fragility (Vincent, 2006). Therefore, mental immunity is critical for generation alpha. In addition, generation alpha is associated with digital media, which allows them to become emotionally attached to groups of people on the internet (Vincent, 2006). This can have positive and negative effects, such as accessing news and seeing real-world problems. It can be helpful, but the ubiquity of information without parental control or monitoring the information available on the internet can be harmful to young people (Turner, 2015). Hence, social relationships, positive thinking, and critical thinking skills are important factors in strengthening generation alpha families. This is congruent with Bromwich and Haag (2018), which focused on the positive relationships and the emotional intelligence of the younger generation.

Personal factors are a major contributor to child development, but there are other systems of socialization within ecological system theory. Generation alpha interacts with many features of their environment, all of which contribute to the social development of generation alpha, including family institution, educational institution, media institution, community, and government institution. Environmental factors begin with the institution of the family, which plays an important role and is the first institution in terms of child development and socialization. These findings were consistent with extensive research that supported the importance of the institution of the family and its role in supporting children and youths who are able to function in society (Ceja, 2004; Bryan, 2005). It primarily occurs within the family and where children first learn their own individual identity, acquire language, and develop cognitive skills. Within the family, children are socialized into ways of thinking about morals, cultural values, and social roles. Of course, socialization results from primary socialization and rests heavily upon the social class, ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds, and the attitudes of the family. Furthermore, the results showed that good family institutions should have positive communication, accepting differences and understanding digital media. These findings are in line with research of Twenge (2017) who claimed that technology can be a major tool for parents to communicate with their children. In addition, parents can be friends with their children on social media and receive instant responses through text messages, which also makes it easier for parents to keep track of their children.

Children are born and raised in different family cultures with different behaviors and learning. Therefore, educational institution including schools and agencies involved in education are one of the vital social institution that help families to teach and to socialize children and youth. There was also empirical evidence about members of younger generations who tended to avoid fear and did not create the methods or strategies needed to confront fear (Twenge, 2017). Therefore, it is critical for educational institution to enhance the life skills and emotional skills of generation alpha children. Furthermore, building a network of academic and family collaborations is of paramount importance.

In the twenty-first century, media institutions play an important role in strengthening the family because generation alpha has grown up with information technology which can be either positive or negative. The advantage of technology is that generation alpha receives news quickly and communicates effectively with people around the world (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). However, the use of widespread technology has caused a decrease in one-on-one communication (Turner, 2015). Generation alpha is associated with digital media, which makes them emotionally attached to the internet. (Kramer et al., 2014). Therefore, promoting, supporting, and producing appropriate and constructive media for families and young people is vital. It is important to strengthen generation alpha families (Carré et al., 2013; Seemiller & Grace, 2017). Child and family development occurs at the microsystem and mesosystem levels rather than at the exosystem and macrosystem levels, where structural societal policies were embedded in advanced technology for generation alpha, which also contribute to the level of risk. The government institutions are in a wider contextual setting in which generation alpha did not have any active roles and still affects the development of children. Hence, the importance of investment in strengthening generation alpha families is being recognized increasingly by policymakers around the world.

In conclusion, family orientation involves a crucial shift in emphasis from family dysfunctions to family strengths, with conviction in the potential inherent in family systems for recovery and positive growth out of adversity. The Strength-Based oriented family empowerment as they bring hope, develop competencies, and strengthen family bonds. Moreover, it is important to understand the socialization of generation alpha and its family, because they symbolized the future and provided a prospective of the next decade and beyond. At the moment, generation alpha are currently preschool students, by the end of the 2020s the oldest will be moving into adulthood and if a family wants to not only exist in a decade, but thrive and flourish, so an understanding of the strengths of the family in generation alpha would be beneficial for individual, family, and society.

Limitations

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the researchers could contact the participants through email and phone for the 2nd phase of this study.

Research Implications for Behavioral Science

1. It is important take account of different institutions when designing programs and policies to improve family strength among family members of generation alpha.

2. The multi-stakeholders from different institutions need to work together to build psychosocial mechanisms to support the establishments of family well-being.

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