

Negotiating boundaries: caregivers' perspectives on teenage cell phone usage

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study undertaken that examined parents/caregivers (PACG) perspectives on the ways in which family boundaries have been changed by teenagers' possession and use of cell phones to maintain communication within the family. A mixed-method study was undertaken that consisted of a survey of one hundred and fifteen PACGs analysed quantitatively and seven PACG in-depth interviews that were analysed qualitatively. One outcome from this research was a deeper understanding of the way in which boundary negotiations take place in families. It is also important to note that cell phones have changed boundary setting for caregivers and teenagers in quite different ways: caregivers have the perception of greater control and teenagers have the reality of relaxed curfews at the expense of caregivers invading time and space away from home.

Keywords: Social Impact, Cell phones, Family boundaries

1 Introduction

"The new digital environment presented an exceptional array of possibilities for communication, interaction, and information retrieval at the fingertips that was never before available" (Montgomery, 2007, p. 110). It is a general understanding that mobile phones have fastened the society in various aspects through its variety of functionalities. While cell phone expansion is at 'breath-taking speed' (Geser, 2004, p. 4), SMS through cell phones is pervading 'like a wild-fire' (Vaidyanathan & Latu, 2007, p. 4).

With the growing number of gadgets embedded in modern mobile phones (particularly 3G and 4G phones) such as the MP3, Internet, Camera (still and video), TV, and the decrease in the size and the price of such devices, mobile phones have become omnipresent. The mobile phone is an "anytime" and "anywhere" tool, boosting the tendency to do things discreetly as well as openly.

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The internet has removed geographical boundaries, as have mobile phones. These ICT devices have blurred the borders between public and private lives (Caronia & Caron, 2004, p. 122). It is very common to see people talking about personal issues whilst using mobile phones in front of strangers and using the same inaudibly (such as text messaging) in the presence of families and friends. People sometimes lose the capacity to manage the boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate usage with the use of cell phones (Ling, 1997). This means that cell phones have not only blurred the boundaries of lives but have also shifted the borders of usage. Cell phones have influenced teenagers on blurring the boundaries between their public and private lives and how far their usage is accepted by PACG of teenagers.

Parents/caregivers being the direct relation to their children, feel the first-hand impact of their teenagers' mobile phone usage. Hence, the study, from the standpoint of parents/caregivers (PACG) of teenagers, is to understand whether they are happy or unhappy or have a mixed opinion on the overall usage of mobile phones by their teenage children.

The areas underpinning the research problem are first to understand the uses and impact (consequences and concerns) of teenagers' mobile phone usage and, secondly, to know the influence of texting by teenagers via mobile phones and, thirdly, to comprehend the effects on teenagers' psychological and physical safety aspects concerning their mobile phone usage. Thus, the research problem has a multi-dimensional view that comprehends the perceptions of PACG on the overall usage of mobile phones by their teenage children.

The structure of the paper is as follows: firstly, the scope of this research project is described in the introduction section. This is followed by a literature review that reports on the social impacts of cell phone possession by teenagers on family structure. Next, the mixed method adopted for this project is outlined. The way in which both qualitative and quantitative data was gathered is then described. The paper concludes with analysis of the data gathered and interpretation of the analysed data according to a theoretical framework based on the work of Williams and Williams (2005).

2 Literature Review

Cell phones have impacted irrevocably on family relationships. Ling (2004a) suggests that the ability to coordinate activities quickly in a complex society is

probably the most significant contribution of cell phones. Teenagers have adapted to cell phone communication as their own space much more rapidly than PACGs (Livingstone & Bober, 2005). Ling and Yttri (2003) note that tensions exist within families between teenagers and PACGs as teenagers push for autonomy and a sense of own identity as parents/caregivers retain control and guidance. In this adolescent phase, cell phones allow a channel for communication that is free from parental supervision.

At the same time it leads teenagers to engage in orientation and networking with peers (Ling, 2001a).

Williams and Williams (2005) have also discovered that cell phones enable a shift from traditional parental authority such as setting boundaries to teenagers to a more liberal approach such as working on negotiations (Williams & Williams, 2005). Hence, it could be summarised that the relationships especially between parents and teenagers tend to become more informal with boundaries blurred, discussions happening two-way and restrictions such as house rules being more relaxed.

Caronia and Caron (2004) suggest that cell phones blur the boundaries between public and private spaces by providing the opportunity for a 'private meeting place' located inside the family because the conversation takes place exclusively between the owner of the phone and the person on the other side of the conversation. In this situation, although the conversation takes place inside a home, family members are considered as unaddressed or unofficial participants. However, with such freedom and with the increase in communication with their peers, it is suspected and feared that there would be a dilution in the interaction within the family (Vaidyanathan & Latu, 2007). The competing attentions of peers and family, the confusions that crop up in separating public and private spaces, the contradictory household rules that interfere with one's own personality and the imbalance between independence and dependence on the family are some of the areas where majority of cell phone impacts are felt both by teenagers and families (Tutt, 2005). PACGs have more difficulty in dealing with the blurring of space boundaries enabled by cell phones (Livingstone & Bober, 2005; Prensky, 2005). Because of the unrestricted nature of mobile phones access, cell phones have occupied a very intimate and private space of a person. Thus, the family feels the impact. Cell phones have become an integral part of teenagers' lives and the impact of such identity is therefore felt at the family level.

3 Research Method

A concurrent mixed method approach using both qualitative and quantitative research methods was adopted for this study. As can be seen in Table 1 the quantitative survey of one hundred and fifteen PACGs was collected first. This was then followed by seven in-depth interviews. Integration for this study took place at data analysis time after statistical tests were applied to the survey and theme analysis to the qualitative data obtained from interviews.

Table 1 Mixed method design

Implementation	Priority	Integration
Concurrent	Equal	Data collection
Sequential – qual first	Qual	Data analysis
Sequential -quant first	Quant	Data interpretation
		Combination

Source: (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003)

4 Data Gathering

Data was gathered using both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. Explaining the decisions taken for this study (shown in Table 1), quantitative data was collected prior to the qualitative data for the purpose of obtaining leads to the PACGs interested in taking part in interviews, required to gather the qualitative data (with an intention of obtaining unbiased answers from PACGs). The design varied from the standard concurrent triangulation method only in terms of the sequence of collecting quantitative and qualitative data but not data analysis.

4.1 Quantitative Data

Quantitative data was gathered from 115 participants with a survey questionnaire that included eighteen closed and two open-ended questions. Every question contained an option for the participant to answer as well as to skip any question such as 'don't know' and 'can't say'. The questionnaire began with demographic data (ethnicity and gender) and moved to multiple choices that contained a verbal frequency scale and two simple open-ended questions. Questions were asked that included options to answer on the major themes of: communication, emergency, co-ordination and safety and security. Open ended questions provided participants with the opportunity to voice their opinions, particularly on negative effects of cell phone use.

4.2 Qualitative Data

For this study, face-to-face interviews were the chosen method for qualitative data collection. Interview questions were structured to enable participants' free expression within the scope of the question. Particular attention was paid while questioning the seven interview participants to avoid questions that may have been a sensitive issue for participants and where there would have been the likelihood of biased answers. The interviews provided these participants with the opportunity to elaborate further on both negative and positive issues surrounding teenage cell phone use.

5 Analysis

The quantitative data was organised using the software package, "Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for Windows. The qualitative data obtained from the interview questions was organised using spreadsheets and word documents. Descriptive and inferential analytical techniques were applied for the quantitative

data. A non-parametric technique of Chi- Square test for relatedness or independence was applied for inferential analysis.

Thematic analysis suggested by Boyatzis (1998), was the encoding model that was used to analyse the data from interviews as well as the answers for the open-ended questions in the questionnaires.

5.1 Positive Themes

The positive themes thus emerged from both survey and interviews are shown in Tables 2 and 3. Communication was the major theme in both the quantitative and the qualitative results. This is not unexpected as the main reason why PACGs believe teenagers should have a cell phone is so that they can communicate with their teenagers. Making contact in case of an emergency, micro-coordinating logistical family arrangements and keeping in touch with teenagers were also seen as major positive themes that emerged from both sets of data.

Table 2: Positive themes emerging from Survey

Survey	
Major Themes	Sub Themes
Communication	To stay in touch To keep in touch Contact family and friends
Emergency	Emergencies In case of trouble
Micro-coordination	Organise pickups Running late
Safety/Security	To know whereabouts

Table 3: Positive themes emerging from Interviews

Interviews	
Major Themes	Sub Themes
Communication	Contact Communicate
Emergency	Emergencies Life saving device
Micro-coordination	Change of plans Organise pickups

5.2 Negative Themes

The negative themes thus emerged from both survey and interviews are shown in tables 4 and 5.

It is interesting to note that whilst the same positive themes emerged from quantitative and qualitative data, a wider cross-section of negative responses were revealed that differed between the two sets of data. The major theme of the negative impacts of text messaging were in common in both sets of data. PACGs also felt a lack of control as a negative factor. From the survey data responses concerning bullying, and texting while driving were noted as negative themes.

Table 4: Negative themes emerging from Survey

Survey	
Major Themes	Sub Themes
Text messaging	Unnecessary messaging Unnecessary information Nasty information
Bullying	Arguments and fights
Control	Lack of control
Driving	Texting

From the interview data, there was a wider cross-section of responses. These included addiction to text messaging, health issues with fears about radiation and radio wave emissions, group messaging for criminal activities, and a general decline in communication skills.

Table 5: Negative themes emerging from Interviews

Interviews	
Major Themes	Sub Themes
Text messaging	Waste of time Sympathy seeking Interruption Addiction Lack of communication skills
Health	Radiation and radio wave emissions
Macro-coordination	Group messaging Rapes, violence, crime, Misuse
Control	Lack of control

5.3 Individual Interview Responses

It can be seen from Table 6 that all PACGs agreed that family communication was the most important reason for teenagers having a cell phone. Five PACGs believed that cell phones provided extra security for their teenager/s. Five PACGs were reassured that they could contact or be contacted by their teenager/s in case of emergency. Only one PACG saw the benefits of social networking and for the ongoing logistics that is made available with the use of a cell phone.

6 Discussion

The major concerns expressed by PACGs through this study were:

- Interruption of family time, study time and other distractions
- Macro-coordination and bullying
- Loss of control for PACG over the teenager
- Loss of control for teenager over the information.

Table 6 Summary of PACG interview responses on uses of mobile phones

PACG Responses	Family Comms	Security	Emergency	Social Netwkr-ing	Logistics
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					
7					
Survey					

Key: darker to lighter => positive to < positive

These major concerns are centred on text messaging and highlight the very different points of views and social tensions that have arisen with the way in which widespread use of cell phones by teenagers on social communications within families. On the one hand PACGs were concerned about interruptions to family life as cell phone use brought the outside world into the home, and on the other hand they were concerned about the perceived loss of control over teenage activities both through time spent away from home and also loss of control of what information teenagers were receiving.

In order to make sense of this data it is important to remember the following about teenagers and their PACGs.

1. There is a generational gap between PACGs and teenagers, which is both a social and a technological gap.
2. There are dissimilar communication patterns, particularly in the use of cell phones.
3. There are also very different perceptions about cell phone uses.
4. In the main PACGs are digital immigrants and teenagers are digital natives (Prensky, 2001) that, in turn poses a social separation based on technical knowledge and acceptance (Fielden & Malcolm, 2008).

This study provides an insight into parents/caregivers understanding and perceptions about the way in which teenage possession of cell phones has impacted on family life.

In line with Williams and Williams' (2005) discovery that cell phones enable a shift from traditional parental authority in boundary setting, this study also highlights the blurring of boundary setting. Hence, it could be summarised that the relationships especially between parents and teenagers tend to become more informal with boundaries blurred, discussions happening two-way and restrictions such as house rules being more relaxed.

7 Conclusion

This paper has reported on a mixed method study undertaken that examined parents/caregivers (PACG) perspectives on the ways in which family boundaries have been changed by teenagers' possession and use of cell phones to maintain communication within the family. A multi-method study was undertaken that consisted of a survey of one hundred and fifteen PACGs analysed quantitatively and seven PACG in-depth interviews that were analysed qualitatively. One outcome from this research was a deeper understanding of the way in which boundary negotiations take place. It is also important to note that cell phones have changed boundary setting for caregivers and teenagers in quite different ways: caregivers have the perception of greater control and teenagers have the reality of relaxed curfews at the expense of caregivers invading time and space away from home.

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