

Impact of Mobile Phone Use on School Students' Interpersonal Communication

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Abstract

Mobile phone has become the primary platform of communication for today's youth starting with school students. The use of mobile phone gives youth the power to be in a 'perpetual contact'. With this ability to be contacted at any given moment, mobile phones allow youth to withdraw from the physical world to engage with the virtual world which has implications for interpersonal interaction. Most studies indicate that indiscriminate use of mobile phone by the youth affects interpersonal communication with unanticipated consequences specially contributing to reduced face-to-face interactions. At the same time, some others show that mobile phone through its diverse applications provides substantial opportunities for the youth to establish better and closer relationships among friends and family. This paper investigates existing literature and secondary data on impact of mobile phones on interpersonal communication among youths particularly teenage school students. The paper argues that excessive or problematic use of mobile phone among youth may negatively influence face-to-face communication as the youth continue to use their device oblivious to those in their presence. The extent of mobile phone overuse and its long-term impacts on the youths' cognitive behavior as well as interpersonal interactions, however, will need to be firmly established through longitudinal studies so far lacking in smartphone related research. The paper concludes that the communication culture fostered by the ubiquitous use of mobile phone necessitates coexistence and blending of face-to-face communication of the youth with the technology-mediated communication enabled through mobile phone.

Keywords: *Students, Interpersonal Communication, Mobile, School*

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Introduction

Mobile phone has become the primary platform of communication for today's youth starting with school adolescents. The reduced cost of smartphones as well as internet data packages and increasing functionalities and applications have prompted swift adoption and use of mobile phone. Cellular phones have become very popular among the youth within a short span of time (Hakoama & Hakoyama, 2011).

Several studies establish that the youth consider mobile phone as an instrument of personal identity and status. Staying connected is part of this identity formation more so as mobile phones have now become a multifunctional digital technology- much beyond instruments used for making and receiving calls which has changed the whole paradigm of interpersonal communication. Ling & Horst (2011) observe that mobile phone use challenges "pre-existing structures in society and pre-existing notions of how interaction should take place." With a rapid surge of mobile-connected populations, Castells (2007) refined his original definition of network society to "mobile network society" which he notes is an enhancement of the social structure conceptualized as network society by new wireless technology.

Just to understand the scale of mobile adoption through the example of a large country like India, we find that India has seen a sharp rise in mobile phone subscribers in recent years reaching 1.16 billion mobile users by end-January 2021 in a total population of about 1.30 billion (TRAI, 2021). Of these, 734.9 million users had internet access on their mobile phones. A study by Nokia concluded that smartphones have become a primary source of entertainment and an average Indian spends five hours online daily (Nokia, 2020). Internet data packages in India are among the lowest in the world enhancing access to internet, social networking sites and various mobile phone apps. The popularity of the device is widespread across all age groups even more so among the youth many of whom consider mobile phone as an essential part of their everyday life.

There is a growing interest among researchers on how school going adolescents adopt and use mobile phone. As the majority youth are hooked to the device, the general discourse in national contexts is dominated by negative connotations of mobile phone use. Parents and teachers mostly have critical attitude towards use of mobile phone by school-going kids blaming its excessive use for causing behavioral issues, disrupting face-to-face communication or a barrier to meaningful conversation, and adversely impacting academic performance. Schools generally do not permit students to bring mobile phone to classroom. Parents also feel a lack of control over their kids because of the anytime, anywhere connectivity enabled by mobile phone.

On the other hand, youth consider mobile phone as a reflection of their identity and style (Ling, 2004). This is manifested in youth forging connection with people both known and unknown through various mobile phone applications. Mobile phone gives youngsters a sense of empowerment with 'perpetual contact'- a state which could have implications for interpersonal interaction as they could withdraw from the physical world to engage with the virtual world.

This paper examines existing literature and secondary data from studies in global and Indian context to explore the impact of school students' use of mobile phone in their day-to-day interactions and how the technology-mediated communication impacts on their interpersonal communication particularly face-to-face communication.

Most existing research on mobile phone use by school students explores its problematic dimension or addictive use with attendant behavioral issues and negative impact on interpersonal communication. These studies indicate that mobile phone impacts interpersonal communication specially contributing to reduced face-to-face interactions. Some other studies explore the wider dimensions of mobile phone use and its impact on youth communication culture. These studies bring out the positive traits of mobile phone and find that the device through its diverse applications provides significant opportunities for establishing better and closer relationships among friends and family and can even enhance face-to-face communication.

This paper endeavors to explore some of these emerging themes in existing research on the technology-mediated interactions of the youth and seeks to explore gaps in research on the impact of mobile interactions on interpersonal and face-to-face communication.

Objective

Through review of existing literature, this paper has the following objectives:

- i) To explore the impact of mobile phone use on interpersonal communication.
- ii) To investigate the impact of mobile phone use on face-to-face communication.

Research Methodology

The paper is an exploratory study based on examination of existing literature and secondary data sources on mobile phone usage by school-going adolescents. The shortlisted literature included studies on mobile phone usage that examine dimensions of impact on interpersonal and face-to-face communication and literature on its problematic use.

Literature review:

Researchers are drawn to study the phenomenon of rising popularity of mobile phone across the world. Mobile communication studies have explored mobile phone adoption, usage and impacts of use; analysis of youth mobile cultures; relationships between mobile phone and users; while some studies have explored other dimensions such as digital divide or inequalities of adoption and usage and its role in development communication.

Several studies find that the youth consider mobile phones an integral part of their identity and even survival in their everyday communication practices. For youth, mobile phone is among their most prized possessions (Abdullah, 2004) so much so that they would be loath to give up their cell phone (University of Michigan, 2006).

Vorderer et. al. (2018) found that youth are hooked to mobile phone in a manner that defines their everyday life with a permanent connection to Internet and to other online users. Such hyper-connectivity manifests in youngsters constantly, calling, texting, listening to music,

and playing games. The cellular phone connectivity promotes new meanings to personal and social identity so much so that mobile devices now qualify as “one of those machines that become us.” (Katz, 2003).

This deep relationship with the mobile phone and the ‘perpetual contact’ it enables has implications for interpersonal interaction as brought out by many studies. With constant connectivity to the device, the youth may be prompted to withdraw from the physical world to engage with the virtual world.

For the purpose of this paper’s investigation, studies exploring impact of mobile phone usage on interpersonal communication of adolescents were examined from the perspective of three broad themes: i) interpersonal communication with parents, teachers and friends; ii) impact on face-to-face communication and, iii) the problematic usage of mobile phone.

i) Interpersonal communication with parents, friends and teachers

Most studies establish that school students use mobile phone to stay in touch with parents, friends, peers and to some extent with teachers. Therefore, the major impact of mobile connectivity of the youth is seen in their interpersonal interactions with these groups.

In parent-child interactions, studies find a mixed trend of the mobile phone acting both as a facilitator of communication as well as a disrupter.

Some of the positive traits of mobile phone relate to the youth getting to explore their personal identity and maintain constructive interpersonal relationships with family and friends (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011).

At the basic level, mobile phone allows parents to communicate directly with their children (Srivastava, 2005). The device gives them a sense of security when their children go out of home. Children can call their parents for help such as being picked up after school or other activities (Ling, 2004; Ling & Yttri, 2006). Some researchers find parents to be ‘mobile parenting’ of their teenagers (Kopomaa, 2000; Ling, 2004; Oksman & Rautiainen, 2002; Rakow & Navarro, 1993). This manifests in parents feeling some degree of control on their children as they can routinely call them to know their whereabouts.

At the same time, several studies reveal that youngsters use mobile phones to feel liberated from parental authority (Ling, 2004), and they often find a way to dodge parental scrutiny citing network problem or battery outage etc.

In a study of school students’ use of mobile phone in Japan, Ishii (2006) concluded that mobile phone provides youth with a sense of freedom from their family and enables them to escape the demands of existing social structure and parental surveillance.

However, there is certainly some evidence of mobile phone usage negatively influencing interpersonal communication between parents and children. In a survey to explore impact of mobile phone usage on interpersonal relationships among school students, Ranjan et. al. (2020) found the device affecting the relationship and bonding between the students and their family members, as they are more connected with the virtual world through their mobile phones rather than the real world.

Krithika and Vasantha (2013) studied the behavior pattern of cell phones among teens and young adults in Chennai and found phone usage strongly integrated into young people's behavior which was interrupting their day-to-day activities including parent-children relationship.

School administrators and teachers generally have strong views on students' mobile phone use within or outside school and consider it a distraction which impacts their academic performance. Several studies have explored the impact of cellphone use on academics and reached similar conclusion. Dhir et. al. (2015) studied compulsive internet usage among adolescents (12-19 years) in private school students across four cities in India and found that higher internet usage lowered academic performance. Another study on adolescents in selected schools in Himachal Pradesh found that 63% of school respondents admitted smartphone use had impacted their academic grades. (Paul & Dharni, 2019).

The mobile phone interaction of the youth with teachers is generally formal. However, more scope of informal communication through smartphone is emerging. Some educators and counselors use smartphone-based communication (i.e., WhatsApp and Facebook) to reach out to adolescents in need and to offer them emotional support (Ophir et al., 2016). Interestingly, most of the adolescents appreciate and value their educators' smartphone-based efforts. Further, the use of mobile phone for education purposes and for online classes particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic will certainly change some of the existing negative perceptions of the device among educators.

Among peers and friends, youngsters use mobile phone to maintain friendships and make plans as well as explore romantic relationships (Guinee, 2015). The mobile phone comes handy for the youth as they call up their friends making or changing plans for group activities in real time through mobile communication (Ling & Haddon, 2008). Apparently, the youth find mobile phone as the most effective device to coordinate and sustain their social groups including peer groups and friends (Campbell, 2005).

Youngsters are increasingly using social networking sites such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram etc. to expand or maintain existing relationships. A study on mobile phone usage among youth in India's Pune city found that the desire to get connected is the most important factor in mobile phone usage and reflected in preference for social networking sites by the youth. (Vaidya et. al., 2016).

ii) Mobile phone vs. face-to-face communication

It is generally presumed that mobile communication negatively impacts face-to-face communication. Researchers are divided on the issue. Some say that mobile communication may reinforce face-to-face communication and vice-versa while others find excessive mobile phone usage as problematic for face-to-face communication.

Some researchers argue that mobile phone reinforces face-to-face communication between youths. Castells et. al. (2007) argue that mobile communication may enhance the chances, opportunities, and reach of interpersonal sociability. They argue that young people build their own networks of relationships on the basis of their face-to-face experience, interests, and projects, which are reinforced by using wireless communication.

Ishii (2006) finds that friends with frequent face-to-face contact were more likely to use mobile phone for communication with each other and that the mobile phone helps in maintaining existing bonds than creating new ones. Also, he found the mobile useful for youngsters who avoid direct communication.

Other researchers point to decreasing face-to-face communication as a result of increased mobile phone use highlighting that constant mobile phone usage among adolescents promotes mediated contact at the expense of traditional face-to-face contact (Licoppe, 2003; Ling, 2005; Ling & Yttri, 2002).

Vaidya et. al. (2016) in their study found that increasing mobile use among youth had reduced face-to-face communication, Often, youth are talking in person while sending messages on their phone to others at the same time.

However, the impact on face-to-face communication is attributed to excessive use compared to normal use. Casey (2012) argues that face-to-face communication between people was the most serious problem due to excessive smartphone usage. This is manifested in people caring little about who they are with in person while indulging themselves in their mobile phones. Casey terms this phenomenon as 'present absence', wherein people engage in face-to-face conversation while simultaneously sending out text messages or starting a conversation on a mobile phone. However, he argues that normal mobile functions such as texting and calling which are direct way of interpersonal communication could actually enhance face-to-face communication.

The constant use of mobile phone by youth in the presence of others is problematic for elders or people in vicinity who may think of this behavior as invasive, impolite and disruptive Rosen (2004).

iii) Problematic mobile phone usage and its impact on interpersonal communication

As the popularity of mobile phone among youths grows and reflects on their behavioral patterns and day-to-day interactions, there is growing body of research that examine "problematic use" or "mobile phone addiction". Several studies conclude that excessive smartphone use may result in behavioral addiction, cognitive impairment, and emotional distress which has implications for interpersonal communication.

Krithika & Vasantha (2013) in their study on mobile phone usage among teens and young adults found that cell phone usage is so strongly integrated into young people's behavior that it was showing symptoms of behavioral addiction.

Such behavioral addiction was found to impact or 'damage' their interpersonal skills as Davey & Davey (2014) found in an analysis of studies related to smartphone addiction in India. They found that the smartphone addiction beside damaging interpersonal skills, could lead to significant negative health risks and harmful psychological effects on Indian adolescents. There are several studies that point to smartphone-related health risks including eye strain, headache, psychological issues etc.

A study on high school students in Italy concluded that problematic mobile phone use in adolescence should become a public health issues, and it could be a cause of health problems

and social costs. (Martinotti & Thienne, 2011). Babu & Javalkar (2018) in their study on school students' mobile dependency found that over 67% of adolescents were mobile dependent. They concluded that mobile phone dependency is a new emerging public health concern among the youth.

In another study on mobile phone usage in Japan, Kamibeppu & Sugiura (2005) explored how eighth graders discovered that mobile phone use can impact children's mental states. Almost half the eighth graders in the study reported feeling insecure or anxious when friends did not respond immediately to their text messages. Such anxiety, borne by the excessive use of mobile, is variously termed by researchers as FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) and NOMOPHOBIA (No mobile phobia) that translates into difficulty in concentrating or functioning and feelings of anxiety (King, et. al.,2013).

Billieux et. al. (2011) found in their study that male adolescents with high smartphone usage tended toward escapism or avoidance. Adolescents who experience social rejection (such as deliberate exclusion from groups or interactions) are at risk of developing depressive symptoms (Bierman,2004). Some others argue that adolescents' incessant downloading of multimedia content results in escapism from reality and unsupervised exposure to forbidden material (Ling et. al. 2005).

Some scholars have argued that the adoption of mobile phone technology promotes cultural disembodiment among adolescents (Campbell, 2007). However, Yoon, K. (2003) in a study suggests that there is no clear-cut evidence that young people have become disembedded from local sociality; rather, they are reimagining the local through global imagination technology.

Researchers are divided on personal traits of individual youths reflecting on the problematic smartphone use. Casey (2012) found correlation between shy and lonely individuals and higher mobile phone use. However, Wei & Lo (2006) had earlier found that shyness was negatively associated with excessive mobile phone use.

Findings and Conclusion:

The investigation of existing literature reveals that constant connectivity enabled through mobile phone has certain implications for interpersonal communications of school-going adolescents.

The phone-enabled "hyper-connectivity" allows parents and their children to remain in touch while at the same time gives the youth a sense of liberation from parents. Various functionalities and smartphone apps. have provided adolescents with easy access to games, texting and social networks. This "hyper-connectivity" becomes problematic in face-to-face communications as the youth find it difficult to take their eyes off their mobile phones even during direct interactions with friends, peers and parents. Existing research recognizes the positive effects of smartphone use in enabling constructive interpersonal relationships with family and friends. However, the growing research on problematic use of mobile phone usage reflects societal concerns on adolescents' psycho-social development including loneliness, withdrawal, depression and related health issues.

While many studies point to the adverse impact of mobile phone usage on behavioral pattern of youth, some others argue the device usage might stimulate and enhance face-to-face communication as youths have more topics to discuss with their families and friends.

Researchers point to a subtle difference between regular mobile usage and its excessive use to study the impact on interpersonal and face-to-face communication. They claim that it is only in the case of problematic or excessive use of mobile phone that face-to-face communications may be negatively impacted as compared to regular smartphone use. Interpersonal communications are impacted most when youths are hooked to fun activities such as watching videos or playing games as they become oblivious to the presence of family, friends or peers. This 'present absence' is perhaps the most significant phenomenon of mobile phone usage by school adolescents which presents a new communication paradigm in interpersonal communication encompassing co-existence of personal with technology-mediated communication.

Conclusion

The evidence from existing research is mixed regarding positive or negative impacts of mobile phone usage on interpersonal communication. The most conspicuous concern highlighted by emerging research on mobile phone usage among youth relates to the problematic or excessive use that may negatively impact face-to-face communication. The existing literature lacks longitudinal studies to firmly establish some of the findings related to cognitive impact, behavioral and interpersonal communication issues highlighted by existing studies on problematic use of mobile phone. Long-term research could determine the degree or extent of overuse or problematic use of mobile phone to firmly establish the linkage to negative impact on interpersonal communication including reduced face-to-face communication.

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