

# The Impact of Mobile Phones on Teenagers' Socialization and Emancipation

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## INTRODUCTION

The mobile phone has become an indispensable mean of communication, as according to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) in 2013 there were almost as many mobile-cellular subscriptions as people in the world (ITU, 2013). The device constitutes an important tool of communication of individuals with diverse demographic traits but its critical role has been emphasized specifically for teenagers who have adopted mobile phones with a surprising speed (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010; Ling & Bertel, 2013).

Teenagers' proneness to adopt mobile phones is primarily associated with its functions including instrumental (for instance, micro-coordination, accessibility and safety issues) as well as social and expressive uses (Ling, 2004; Castells, Fernandez-Ardevol, Qiu, & Sey, 2007). With respect to the former, perhaps the most fundamental function is micro-coordination that allows teenagers to plan and re-plan their social activities with parents and peers providing both temporal and spatial flexibility (Ling & Yttri, 2002). Similarly, accessibility contributes to a sense of permanent availability; situation that has been described by Licoppe (2004) as "connected presence."

The mobile phone may also act as a safety link in cases of actual emergency; hence security reasons are critically important for both parents and teenagers to have mobile phones (Pain et

al., 2005). For instance, Oksman and Rautiainen (2002, p.29) underline that the device is characterized from parents "as a small investment for the child's safety," whereas others advocate that the mobile phone acts as a "magic helper" that aids parents to monitor teenagers' location in order to guarantee their safety in mobility, especially during the night (Fortunati & Manganelli, 2002, p.19).

Through the instrumental components of mobile phone communication, social and expressive uses are accomplished (O' Brien, 2010; Ling & Bertel, 2013) as the device enhances social interactions and bonding with those in teenagers' intimate sphere. The mobile phone provides a direct communicative channel between users and peer groups, parents and children; hence the device allows teenagers to develop intensive interactions and reinforce their ties with their family and peers (Oksman & Rautiainen, 2002; Ling & Yttri, 2002; Green, 2003; Srivastava, 2005; Matsuda, 2005; Castells et al., 2007; Ling, 2004, 2007, 2009). However, the instrumental and social functions of mobile phones are intertwined with critical impacts on teenagers' parental and peer group interactions. For instance, Pain et al. (2005) underline that:

*Mobiles may reduce the fears of parents and young people by allowing contact which is not spatially or temporally bounded...Mobile phones may expand young people's geographies, allowing them a wider spatial range unsupervised, and*

*thus empower young people in reclaiming public spaces, or contract them as a further means for parents to monitor and control young people's movements (Pain et al., 2005, p. 815)*

In line with these arguments, the mobile phone, on the one hand, acts as a mean of intra-family coordination and as a symbolic 'umbilical cord' that provides a permanent channel of communication between parents and teenagers intensifying parental supervision and control (Green, 2002; Ling 2004; Geser, Késia, & Trench, 2006; Chen & Katz, 2009). On the other hand, teenagers' mobile phone communication creates a greater space for interaction with their peers and enhances freedom from parental surveillance playing a critical role in their socialization and emancipative processes (Oksman & Rautianen, 2003; Ling & Yttri, 2006; Ling 2007, 2009; Clark 2013).

Socialization can be defined as "the process by which we learn the ways of a given society or social group so that we can function within it" (Elkin & Handel, 1989, p. 2). Specifically about adolescent socialization, it is an active and collective process, where parents, peers, educational institutions and media play a pivotal role in the ways that adolescents internalize the values, norms and beliefs of a given society in order to join the adult world. Teenagers' emancipation constitutes the process of becoming independent from familial sphere and establishing own identity as independent social actors with their own beliefs and values, as well as being responsible for their own affairs and actions (Arnett, 1997).

Although mobile phone studies have become increasingly popular over the last decade, the impact of mobile phone communication on teenagers' socialization and emancipative processes is a relatively new area of research. Professor Richard Ling at the IT University of Copenhagen in Denmark is a leading scholar providing the earliest (Ling, 2004; Ling, 2005a; Ling & Yttri, 2006) as well as the most recent work in the specific topic (Ling 2007, 2009; Ling & Haddon, 2008).

The first section of the chapter summarizes the current scientific knowledge in mobile phones' impacts on the dynamics of parental and peer group interactions and bonding during teenagers' socialization and emancipation. The second section provides an empirical example of these impacts presenting the results of a quantitative study among teenagers in a Greek semi-urban area. The last section of the chapter suggests some considerations for future research.

## CURRENT SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE IN MOBILE PHONES' IMPACTS ON SOCIALIZATION AND EMANCIPATION

The word adolescence is Latin in origin, derived from the word *adolescere* meaning to "grow up" or "mature" or "grow into adulthood." Adolescence can be defined as a transitional phase in human development where biological, cognitive, emotional, psychological and social characteristics are changing from what is typically considered child-like to what is considered adult-like (Lerner, Boyd, & Du, 2010). Some of the chief developmental tasks involve the establishment of autonomy or independence, the development of personal identity, the emancipation from one's parents as well as the choice of functional roles in terms of lifestyles and relationships (Coleman & Hendry, 1990). Digital media including among others mobile phones have brought about important changes in the ways that these developmental tasks are performed which divert from older generations (Arnett, 1995). As Ito et al. (2010) underline:

*Today's youth may be engaging in negotiations over developing knowledge and identity, coming of age, and struggling for autonomy as did their predecessors, but they are doing this while the contexts for communication, friendship, play, and self-expression are being reconfigured through their engagement with new media (Ito et al., 2010, p.1)*

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