

# Connecting 'Round the Clock: Mobile Phones and Adolescents' Experiences of Intimacy

**P****Emily Weinstein***Harvard University, USA***Katie Davis***University of Washington, USA*

## INTRODUCTION

Monikers for contemporary youth – “digital natives” (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008), “wired youth” (Mesch & Talmud, 2010) and “the app generation” (Gardner & Davis, 2013) – emphasize technological immersion. Indeed a 2013 survey of 802 U.S.-based adolescents aged 12 to 17, conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, found that fully 78% of youth owns a mobile phone, more than a third of teens has a smartphone, and one in four accesses the Internet predominantly through their cellphone (Madden et al., 2012).

The current chapter focuses on mobile phones and adolescents' experiences of intimacy. *Adolescence* encompasses the period between middle school life (approximately age 13) and emerging adulthood (approximately age 18) (Arnett, 2004; Erikson, 1968). *Intimacy* refers to close interpersonal relationships, especially those characterized by mutuality, self-disclosure and validation (Sullivan, 1953). *Mobile phones* act as potent portals for connection: adolescents can use their mobile phones to communicate with others through text messaging or one of myriad apps for instant messaging, blogging, tweeting, or social networking.

## OVERVIEW

Over the last decade, adolescents' ownership and use of mobile phones has risen dramatically, and

the functionality of mobile phones has expanded considerably. Empirical research on youth's digital lives points to a complex and changing landscape of adolescents' intimate relationships with friends, romantic partners and family members. The current chapter focuses on current research at the nexus of adolescence, intimacy and digital communications. The chapter begins with a brief contextual overview, drawing on the early work of psychologists Erik Erikson and Harry Stack Sullivan on adolescence. The subsequent sections highlight first how mobile phones support intimacy, and then how complications arise as adolescents communicate through their digital devices. These sections draw heavily on the work of several influential scholars in adolescence and digital media, including Katie Davis and Howard Gardner, Patti Valkenburg and her colleague Jochen Peter, danah boyd, Sherry Turkle, Kaveri Subrahmanyam, and Mizuko Ito.

## CURRENT SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE IN ADOLESCENCE, INTIMACY AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

### Adolescence, Intimacy and Mobile Phones: The Context

The extent to which adolescents' lives are saturated with technology is new, but the desire for connection is not. Adolescence is a decisive time for iden-

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tity development, and intimate relationships with peers play an integral role in supporting identity achievement (Erikson, 1968). Through intimate self-disclosure with peers, adolescents explore, express and solidify their own identities (Sullivan, 1953). Adolescents' close relationships provide social support and the experience of acceptance and belonging, which in turn facilitate favorable self-definition (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011). The consistent relationship between intimacy and adjustment and competence – documented during adolescence, though not in the preadolescent years – further underscores the benefits of close social ties for adolescents (Buhrmester, 1990).

Connecting with others is by no means the only function of mobile phones: adolescents' cellphones are often well equipped with options for entertainment, productivity, and distraction. Yet, the pervasiveness of mobile technology in adolescents' communications with close others is both practically recognized and empirically documented. Based on their surveys of U.S.-based adolescents, Lenhart (2012) and Reich, Subrahmanyam and Espinoza (2012) found that adolescents use text messaging and social networking sites primarily in the service of connection with their offline friends.

### **Strong Ties Become Stronger**

To be sure, mediated communication with offline friends can support and extend adolescents' relationships. Refuting early concerns about the displacement hypothesis, Valkenburg and Peter (2007) instead found evidence for the stimulation hypothesis. That is, rather than displacing time to cultivate offline friendships, Valkenburg and Peter found that online communication tools and messaging services supported adolescents' friendships and, in turn, individual well-being. Valkenburg and Peter (2009) subsequently proposed the "Internet-enhanced self-disclosure hypothesis." The hypothesis posits that the ease of self-disclosure in online interactions, as compared to offline exchanges, facilitates the quality relationships that support well-being.

In her investigation of Bermudian adolescents' online communications, Davis (2012a) brought empirical evidence to bear on the relationship between digitally mediated communication and adolescents' friendship experiences. Davis interviewed 32 Bermudian adolescents between the ages of 13 and 18. Bermudian youth offer a particularly revealing sample because their digital media practices are similar to those of U.S.-based youth, but their rates of cell phone ownership and social media use are slightly higher (Davis, 2012a).

Davis asked participants about the nature of their online communications, including motivations, discussion topics and partners, most used platforms, and perceptions of online versus offline communications. Adolescents indicated that the ability to connect with friends was a primary motivation for their technology use, and all of the participants described their digitally mediated interactions in positive terms. Davis found that adolescents described using digital media for both casual exchanges and more intimate self-disclosure. In line with Valkenburg and Peter's (2009) Internet-enhanced self-disclosure hypothesis, the participants in Davis' study also described the ease of online self-disclosure and suggested that digital media fostered close friendships.

Davis' interviews also highlighted the value of text messaging with friends for preventing feelings of isolation. This finding corroborates Nakajima, Himeno and Yoshii's (1999) earlier assertion that mobile phones provide adolescents with "a full-time intimate community." Habuchi (2005) refers to the related idea of "tele-cocooning," or the ability to share experiences in the absence of shared physical space. No longer are adolescents reliant on their parents' willingness to drive them to the mall or to a friend's house for social connection; mobile phones allow them to transcend logistical barriers to socialize with their peers and cultivate intimate relationships.

In a larger study of 2,079 Bermudian youth, Davis (2013) explored the nature of adolescents' online communication and developmentally beneficial outcomes. She found a positive relationship between online peer communication

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