

# Text Messaging as a Forum for Negative and Antisocial Communication



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## INTRODUCTION

Mobile phone use has become an increasingly important form of communication and social interaction, especially among adolescents and young adults (Lenhart, 2012; Madden et al., 2013). Electronic communication such as messages exchanged via mobile phones may be associated with a variety of positive social and psychological outcomes, and may be particularly useful for individuals who are otherwise anxious or uncomfortable with face-to-face communication (McKenna, Green & Gleason, 2002). Despite these benefits of mobile phone use, there is a growing body of research that suggests that features of communication exchanged via mobile phones may in fact be conducive to discussing antisocial and negative topics (Ehrenreich, Underwood & Ackerman, 2014; Ling, 2005a). Furthermore, these problematic conversation topics may in fact predict increases in antisocial and delinquent behavior during adolescence and young adulthood.

This chapter will review the research of leading scholars in digital communication and antisocial behavior to examine how adolescents may use mobile phone technology to discuss antisocial and negative topics, and how this may relate to their psychosocial adjustment. Given that the majority

of research examining antisocial communication has been conducted on adolescent and young adult samples, the studies discussed in this chapter will focus on this age range. Finally, this chapter will present some important future directions for research to expand our understanding of how mobile phone technology relates to involvement in antisocial activities.

Although examination of the role of mobile telephones in adolescents’ development (and more specifically the development of antisocial behavior) is relatively new, the pioneering scholars in this field include Dr. Fraser Reid at the University of Plymouth (Reid, Ball, Morley & Evans, 1997; Reid & Reid, 2007) and Dr. Susan McKay at the University of Queensland (McKay, 2003; Thurlow & McKay, 2003). These scholars were among the first researchers to explore adolescents’ discussion of negative and antisocial topics via digital communication and mobile telephony. Currently the leading scholars in the field include Dr. Richard Ling at the University of Copenhagen (Ling, 2004a; Ling 2005a), as well as Drs. Patricia Greenfield and Kaveri Subrahmanyam at the University of California-Los Angeles (Subrahmanyam, Smahel & Greenfield, 2006; Tynes, Reynolds & Greenfield, 2004). Additionally, Ms. Amanda Lenhart at the Pew Research

Center (Lenhart, 2012; Madden et al., 2013) and Drs. Samuel Ehrenreich and Marion Underwood at The University of Texas at Dallas (Ehrenreich et al., 2014) are advancing this field by examining adolescents' rapidly changing mobile phone behaviors and using innovative techniques to better understand how mobile phone use relates to psychosocial development.

## **OVERVIEW**

Adolescents are heavy consumers of mobile communication platforms. Amanda Lenhart and her colleagues at the Pew Research Center have conducted several large-scale, nationally representative phone surveys to better understand teenager's mobile phone use behaviors. Her findings suggest that usage of cell phones and smartphones among American youth is extensive, and has been increasing. In a survey conducted in 2012, 77% of youth between the ages of 12 – 17 reported owning cellphones, and sent on average 60 text messages per day (an increase from 50 messages sent per day in 2009; Lenhart, 2012). These findings suggest that text messaging has become the most common method for interacting with friends outside of school, exceeding meeting up to socialize in person. Although teenagers have been using cell phones for the last several years (Lenhart, Ling, Campell & Purcell, 2010; Ling, 2004a; Ling, 2005a) smartphones have more recently begun to increase in popularity.

Over 20% of 12 – 17 year olds report owning smartphone devices, which is approximately one-third of all teenagers who own cellphones (Lenhart, 2012). Although nearly all cell phones allow individuals to send text messages, the role of the mobile phone for interacting with the peer group has been further facilitated by this increasing proliferation of smartphones, allowing teenagers to interact with their peer group through a wide variety of electronic communication forums, including email, text messaging, social media, and instant messaging services. The ability to

communicate with the peer group across such a wide range of platforms creates a digital social environment that is unique from that of previous generations in many important ways. Indeed, adolescents communicate with their peer group throughout the course of the day, selecting the method of communication that best fits the given topic of discussion and individual(s) involved in the conversation. Thus a teenager may email a fellow student regarding classwork and plan a social event with a group of peers via Facebook, while at the same time viewing a peer's pictures on Instagram and discussing those pictures with another peer via text messaging all within the span of a few moments using the same device. Electronic communication allows individuals to manage and interact with their entire social world in a variety of formats, and the smartphone lies at the epicenter all of this communication.

## **CURRENT SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE OF ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOR AND MOBILE TELEPHONY**

### **Features of Mobile Phone Communication Relating to Antisocial Communication**

It is not surprising that youth may view these devices as a means to liberate themselves from their parent's supervision and control given the incredible control over adolescents' social lives that is afforded by mobile phones,. Dr. Richard Ling at the University of Copenhagen has in fact proposed that communication via mobile phones, and text messaging in particular, may be a *life phase phenomenon*, appealing to adolescents because it provides a highly discreet means of communication in which youth are in physical control and that is largely devoid of adult supervision (Ling, 2004b, 2010). Indeed, structured interviews conducted by Dr. Ling and his colleagues suggest that many adolescents' stated reason for adopting mobile phones is to communicate with their peers unen-

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