

# Portable Social Groups

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## INTRODUCTION

Today's mobile phones, which have penetrated a significant percentage of the US population sport touch screens, customized applications, Wi-Fi internet access, high definition cameras, and many other advanced 'fourth generation' (4G) features – as well as the ability to communicate and make phone calls. The speed at which information can now be shared around the world has removed many communication barriers while overcoming the restriction of distance. Portable social groups are nodes, which are generally made up of individuals or organizations. These nodes are related and specifically interdependent based on characteristics such as values, culture, socio-economic status, friendship, kinship, or disdain. Nodes share similar characteristics and collectively have a sense of unity, but have always been historically bound by geography and proximity. Mobile technology has freed humans from the confines of space and place; allowing individual social groups the ability to become portable. Along with this technology comes the opportunity to strengthen some interpersonal communication bonds while avoiding others. This article looks into the interpersonal gratifications obtained by young adults from mobile phone use. It investigates how a person's willingness to communicate, or avoid communicating, affects their mobile phone usage patterns. Pioneering scholars and theorist in the field of mobile communications includes: Dr. J. Blumler (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974) at the University of Leeds; Dr. E. Katz (Katz & Guravitch, 1974; Katz & Aakhus,

2002) at the University of Pennsylvania; and Dr. D. McQuail (McQuail, Blumler, & Brown, 1972) at the University of Amsterdam. Among today's leading experts in the field of mobile communications includes: Dr. S. Ureta (Ureta, 2008) at the Pontificia Universidad Catolica de Chile; Dr. L. Fortunati (Fortunati, 2002) at the University of Udine, Italy; Dr. S. Campbell (Campbell & Russo, 2003) at the University of Michigan, and Dr. T. Russo (Campbell & Russo, 2003) at the University of Kansas.

## OVERVIEW

Mobile phones, both loved and hated, differ dramatically in their usage from young adults to their parents and older users. Fortunati (2001) describes mobile phones as an alluring technology infusing every part of our lives and giving us the ability to stay connected to friends and family. This type of cyborg augmentation, described by James E. Katz, is giving individuals superhuman abilities, accessing data and providing real-time information virtually anywhere in the world (Filas, 2004).

Additionally, cultural values play a significant role in the innovation and adoption of the mobile phone worldwide. Researchers have analyzed mobile phone use from a number of different theoretical and cultural standpoints, e.g., Chile (Ureta, 2008), China (Ngan & Ma, 2008), Italy (Fortunati, 2002), Israel (Lemish & Cohen, 2005), and the United States (Campbell & Russo, 2003). Although people around the world use their phone for a variety of purposes, research shows that us-

age patterns are partially based on relationships within social groups. Young adults are excited by the prospect of greater accessibility to friends and peer groups the mobile phone provides; however, communication apprehension and anxiety can develop because of this increased exposure to these new communication channels (Burgoon, 1976).

## CURRENT SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE IN 2014

Today, 90% of all American adults have cell phones, of which, 58% of these are smartphones (Mobile Technology, 2014). Texting and photography topped the list of mobile phone use, followed by, internet services which allow access to news, health, and banking information (Pew Research Center, 2014). Those who continue to avoid mobile phone adoption tend to be older, more likely female, and with lower education and household income (Leung and Wei, 1999). Even as mobile phone penetration has increased in the USA, user demographics are ever changing. Men now represent the majority of US mobile phone users with an adoption rate of 93%, with women following at 88% (Mobile Technology, 2014). Time spent using mobile phones appears to also be on the rise, but research has pointed out the disparity between self-report measures of mobile phone use and real-time observance of usage levels (Cohen & Lemish, 2003).

The mean age and income level of mobile phone users has declined over the years (McFarland, 2002; Robbins & Turner, 2002) – contrary to research done earlier in the adoption cycle of the mobile phone and in other cultures (e.g., Leung and Wei, 1999). This may be a change in the trend of the adoption cycle as more recent studies have shown that usage is growing in technologically and economically challenged regions of the world, perhaps in part as a way to bridge previous communication gaps (Kamssu, 2005). The primary reason for use appears to have shifted from business to personal communication (McFarland, 2002; Robbins & Turner, 2002).

Growth and penetration trends seem to lean toward younger potential customers. People most likely to fail to adopt mobile phones now or in the future tend to be much older, have a lower education, and no children (Leung and Wei, 1999; Robbins and Turner, 2002). These trends become more pronounced when looking at potential users of advanced mobile phone technologies – such as internet access, email, geo-locating services, and music streaming – that go beyond the confines of conventional voice communication (Robbins & Turner, 2002).

Prepaid phones or non-contract wireless plans have made it even easier for adolescents and young adults to obtain mobile phone service, increasing the accessibility of mobile phones to this demographic while alleviating the concerns of parents that their children will use excessive amount of minutes resulting in an extremely high bill at the end of the month (Ling & Yrtti, 2002).

## Adolescent and Young Adult Use of Mobile Phones

Research has shown that adolescents and young adults use the mobile phone differently than their parents and other older users. They prefer to consider it their primary phone – in lieu of the traditional landline phone – for its portability. Portability also translates into additional privacy since personal calls can be made away from authority figures (Henderson et al., 2002; Ling & Yrtti, 2002). Use of short messaging services (SMS) provide additional semi-private communication, allowing users to stay secretly connected to social groups. SMS are often saved and even shared in groups much like traditional letters (Kasesniemi & Rautiainen, 2002). SMS topped the list of responses from 106 respondents (n = 106), out of 300 students at the University of Padova Italy, when asked to freely associate the first word that comes to mind when presented with the stimulus device of a mobile phone (Contarello, Fortunati, & Sarrica, 2007).

The one-to-one nature of opt-in advertising, where users agree (usually via traditional web-

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