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Available at: https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/discoursejournal/vol1/iss1/5
RESEARCH ARTICLES

Connection and Avoidance in Campus Spaces: A Student Cell Phone Uses and Gratifications Study

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Abstract

This study explored student campus cell phone use by asking “What are students on campus doing with their cell phones?” One hundred and ninety-one student volunteers completed a qualitative questionnaire. Viewed through a uses and gratifications lens, results suggest student cell phone use on campus meets several different needs. Respondents reported that cell phones make their lives easier, but their attitudes toward campus cell phone use mix positive and negative valence. They stated that being connected in various campus spaces to friends, immediate family, and university personnel was important to gratifying their needs. Nearly half of the respondents reported faking communication on cell phones helps meet the need for avoidance. The implications for these findings are discussed.

Keywords: cell phone, student, uses and gratifications, college campus, mobile phone

Introduction

By 2004, texting and mobile phone use had already overshadowed traditional voice calls (Ling, 2004; Avidar, Ariel, Malka & Levy, 2013) and the use of cell phones including smart phones has continued to rise, with approximately 46 billion smart phone apps downloaded in 2012 alone (PortioResearch, 2013). On college campuses today, cell phones have “moved beyond being a mere technical device to becoming a key ‘social object’ present in every aspect of a user’s life” (Srivastava, 2005, p. 111). There has been tremendous growth in the number of cell phone users and in the technological advances of cell phone capabilities over the last decade (Bakke, 2010). Cell phones, it can be argued, are now part of the American culture (Engel and Green, 2011), with texting having been found to be a major communication activity of young Americans (Rosen, Chang, Erwin, Carrier and Cheever, 2010). As such, it is important for communication researchers to examine how this rapidly developing technology is being used.

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**Literature Review**

**Uses and Gratifications Perspective**

The uses and gratifications perspective asks the basic question “Why do people become involved in one particular type of mediated communication, and what gratifications do they receive from it?” (Ruggiero, 2000, p. 29). Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1974) emphasized the role of the individual in media use as being critical to the uses and gratifications perspective, examining what people do with media. They suggested that there are four main assumptions of the uses and gratifications perspective: 1) Individual media use is active and goal-directed; 2) Motivated choices are based on previous media experience; 3) Media choices are purposive in order to satisfy felt needs and desires; and 4) Media compete with other sources of individual need satisfaction.

This perspective allows for the discovery of how an individual uses a particular medium (McQuail, 1994). A uses and gratifications analysis can help explain what user desires and needs a given medium is capable of meeting (Anderson & Meyer, 1975) and helps provide a framework for understanding the motivations for a medium’s use in order to gratify user needs, allowing for recognition of both positive and negative consequences of the use of each different form of media (Rubin, 1994).

Media use of increasingly complex telecommunication technology at the turn of the twenty-first century had already revived the application of and interest in the uses and gratifications perspective (Ruggiero, 2000). This perspective is useful for application to dynamic technologies, like smart phones. A dynamic technology is one in which “new products enter the market in rapid succession, and the competitive situation changes almost daily” (Bridges, Yim & Briesch, 1995, p. 61). The uses and gratifications approach to scholarship provides an insight-provoking lens through which to view smart phone use because goal-directed behaviors (behaviors with specific, intended outcomes) are inherent in such media.

The uses and gratifications view gains further utility given the varied potential audiences possible with smart phone technology, which range from interpersonal to mass communication, depending upon whether one is texting, emailing, posting to a social media site or website, blogging, or even writing and submitting a story for the news media. Since current cell phone technology presents users with more choice and potentially more motivation for use/satisfaction from use than any previous technology (PortioResearch, 2013), it provides a ripe area for analysis through the lens of the uses and gratifications paradigm (Avidar et al., 2013).

**Campus Cell Phone Research**

Previous research has explored cell phone use in the classroom (Campbell, 2006; Campbell & Russo, 2003; End et al., 2010; Gilroy, 2004; Hammer et al., 2010; Wei & Leung, 1999). Kelly et al. (2012) discussed uses and rationales for texting on campus, and scholarship has investigated further the influence of texting on writing skill (Rosen, et al., 2010), and on perceptions of safety on campus (Nasar, Hecht & Wener, 2007). Particularly positive uses for on-campus texting such as to aid smoking cessation (Riley,
Obermayer & Jean-Mary, 2008) and to support student transitions to university life (Harley, et al., 2007) have also been explored.

Much campus cell phone research has focused on interpersonal communication. Decades prior to the inception of cell phone usage, seminal interpersonal scholarship by Schutz (1966) stated that inclusion, affection and control were the three basic human needs fulfilled by interpersonal communication, in general. Of those three, affection and inclusion were found to provide major interpersonal motivations for students to call and to text (Jin & Park, 2010). Katz and Aarkus (2002) examined how cell phones actually created the potential for new forms of interpersonal intimacy and distancing, as well as different ways to cooperate and engage in conflict. Romantic college partners’ cell phone use was investigated (Jin & Pena, 2010) with Duran, Kelly and Rotaru (2011) examining their autonomy-connection tension.

Lee, Meszaros, and Colvin, (2009) identified three kinds of cell phone users on campus and their attachment to parents. Walsh and White (2006) reported that students often interrupt face-to-face conversations to answer a call or read a text, but less often to reply to a text message. Turkle (2010) claims current cell phone users would rather text than make a voice call because texting is more efficient and less “risky.”

Rationale and Research Questions

Few studies investigate with whom students are communicating on their cell phones (Lee, Mesaros & Colvin, 2009). Questions about the ease and level of connectivity, different role enactment in various spaces, and the influence of the portability of cell phones (Rosen, 2004; Rule, 2002; Turkle, 2008; Leung & Wei, 2000) all remain to be further explored on campus. Kelly et al. (2012) called for further research on American student cell phone use that focuses on channel choice and uses diverse samples. These authors added that relatively few cell phone studies are published in communication journals (Kelly et al., 2012).

Through a uses and gratifications study of student cell phone use on one American college campus, this research adds to the available knowledge on student cell phone use and addresses some of the gaps and concerns identified above. The overarching question guiding this work is as follows: “What are students on campus doing with their cell phones?” To answer this question, four specific research questions guided the study:

RQ1: How prevalent is student cell phone use on campus?
RQ2: How are individual students using their cell phones to communicate on campus to meet their needs?
RQ3: Who are students communicating with on campus using their cell phones?
RQ4: What are students’ perceptions of how cell phone use on campus is meeting general student needs?
Method

Instrument

A 21-item questionnaire was administered to the study participants. The questionnaire had both open and close ended questions, with questions arranged to establish cell phone use in general, then cell phone use that was campus-specific—open ended questions first to get respondents’ answers without overtly biasing them—and then Likert-type questions that asked for rankings. The last question collected demographic data. Four examples of open-ended questions are given below:

Q7. Who do you communicate with on your cell phone while on campus? Please be specific, but do not provide people’s names (e.g., classmate, librarian, etc.).
Q8. What functions/capabilities do you use on your cell phone while on campus? Please be specific.
Q9. What is the least useful function on your cell phone for campus use? Please explain your answers clearly.
Q19. Overall, do you see student cell phone use on campus as positive, negative, or neutral? Please explain your answer clearly.

This article reports the analysis of qualitative data collected from the open-ended questions.

Sample

The questionnaire was administered as a pen and paper survey to a convenience sample of 191 student volunteers from 27 majors. One-hundred-twenty-six respondents were female, 65 were male. The average age of respondents was 21.26 years with a range of twenty years (17-37). Ninety of the students self-identified as white, 36 as Asian, 16 Bi-racial, 10 Black, 10 Hispanic, 16 Other and 13 did not provide information with regard to their race.

Coding Procedure

Two independent coders (the researcher and a trained undergraduate student) engaged in inductive thematic analysis with the desired outcome of reaching data saturation from the answers to the nine open-ended questions. In other words, each of the coders went through every piece of data to identify categories and group the data by those themes or categories until all data were gone through and no new categories were observed. For example, in response to question seven, students listed many different types of people they communicated with on campus using their cell phones, and the coders independently grouped those data into eighteen categories, differentiating, for instance, immediate family from extended family. Then, in multiple face-to-face coding sessions, the coders compared their results. When coding data with regard to question nineteen (about the valence students placed on campus cell phone use overall) data could be coded into one of three predetermined categories: negative, neutral, or positive. Once coding was completed by each individual, differences in coding themes or categories
were resolved by revisiting the disputed data and the coding instructions to determine optimal answers through discussion.

Results

The trends that were identified for each research question are presented here, and respondent quotations that support reported trends are provided as examples.

RQ1: How prevalent is student cell phone use on campus? Extremely high use of cell phones by students was found, with 189 students using and two not using cell phones on campus. Cell phone use was reported all over campus, for example, between classes, in the classroom, at meals, in dorm rooms, on campus grounds, and waiting for professors or for other meetings.

RQ2: How are individual students using their cell phones to communicate on campus to meet their needs? Students reported sending and receiving texts, making and receiving calls, social networking, web surfing, and emailing. Texting was the function most used by students (87%) as well as the most useful (61%) for campus communication.

Forty-nine percent of students reported pretending to communicate on their cell phones. Four reasons were identified for this pretense: avoidance, safety, face saving, and boredom. Avoidance was the only reason reported with substantial frequency (43%). Respondents used the device to avoid interacting with people they did not want to talk to on campus, like professors, strangers, “strange people,” acquaintances, and homeless people: “If I see someone I don’t want to talk to approaching in the distance, I might pretend to be texting to keep my head down or pretend to be on the phone to look busy,” or “Awkward situations like riding in an elevator with strangers.”

RQ3: Who are students communicating with on campus using their cell phones? There were 18 different categories of people students reported communicating with on campus. Friends, university personnel (professors, tutors, department staff), and immediate family were categories reported by majorities of respondents. Romantic partners, work personnel, coaches, doctors/dentists, roommates, extended family, and teammates were other less frequently reported categories.

RQ4: What are students’ perceptions of how cell phone use on campus is meeting general student needs? The average respondent estimated the number of students on campus they perceived as using cell phones was 94%. Students thought cell phones made their lives easier (61%), with little agreement on the 47 other different ways they perceived cell phones influence students’ campus lives (e.g. convenient, better, faster/more hectic, efficient, fun, more complete, organized and accessible.)

Students perceived multiple uses for the device, with a total of 34 different categories reported. Of those categories, respondents had some agreement that students used cell phones on campus to stay connected (34%), to communicate (31%), and to make their lives easier (30%): “We are the generation of technology and we won’t give up the connections technology offers in class or on campus.” “Our generation has an obsession with staying connected.” “It’s easy to contact others and easy to get a hold of someone quickly with a quick text,” and “They are convenient, it’s so easy and quick—everyone is on their cell phones.”
When asked to place a valence on student campus cell phone use, 51% reported a neutral evaluation, and tended to provide a mix of positive and negative ideas that balanced out to an assigned neutral valence: “Neutral. If students use the phone as a tool it is fine. But when people are walking and talking, and not paying attention to their surroundings, it is annoying.” “Neutral. I see it in many lights. Overall, I think that cell phones are distracting and keep people from experiencing what's around them, I also think they are useful as a means of keeping in touch with family and friends.”

Forty-one percent of respondents perceived campus cell phone use as positive, and frequently mentioned the ease of communication and the idea of connectedness to people in their lives: “Positive. Mobile communication makes life easier, keeps people in contact with each other no matter where they are, makes life safer, and allows for multi-tasking.” “Positive. It co-ordinates social action and allows for more effective time management and balancing of personal relationships.”

Five percent perceived a negative valence to student campus cell phone use, and reported the idea of distraction as the main drawback to cell phones: “Negative. Although there are certainly benefits to cell phone use, cell phones ultimately distract us from our studies,” and “Negative. Because it makes people obsessed with knowing, even impatient and distracting.”

(Three percent of respondents did not place any perceived valence on cell phone use.)

**Discussion**

**Prevalence of Cell Phones**

Using cell phones to meet student communication needs is clearly a campus norm. The data suggested a commonly-held expectation among students that their peers will use cell phones to communicate with friends and family, but also increasingly with university personnel and their workplaces while on campus. The implications for students who do not use cell phones to meet their communication needs on campus are that they will become an increasingly small, easily identifiable out-group, who will not be able to connect easily with peers and others, potentially to their detriment socially and perhaps even academically.

The prevalence of cell phones also poses questions as to how they might be used for academic purposes. Institutions can be certain that all but a few students will have access to cell phones on campus. However, their current common use in the classroom (62%) also poses challenges for instructors as student use of cell phones in the classroom is not always toward learning-related needs, with other gratifications being satisfied that detract from learning.

**Staying Connected**

The cell phone as a means to gratify the need to stay or become socially connected was seen as key to understanding how students used the medium. This finding resonates with the aforementioned findings of Jin and Park (2010) who found that students used cell phones to obtain inclusion and affection, resonant of two of Schutz’s (1966) theory of the three basic human needs fulfilled by interpersonal communication,
in general (inclusion, affection and control). Of those three, affection and inclusion were found to provide major interpersonal motivations for students to call and to text (Jin & Park, 2010). Texting was the most preferred channel for meeting this need for connection. Campus social lives were, in part, maintained by cell phone communication: making plans with friends, keeping in touch with assigned classroom project small groups, getting information from their families, and arranging dates.

Can there be too much connection in student lives? Rosen (2004) suggested “a terrible irony if ‘being connected’ required or encouraged a disconnection from community life…” (p. 45). Is using cell phones to stay connected a negative movement away from “real” interpersonal communication? Perhaps cell phone use affords students fulfillment of the third interpersonal need—control—but to a level higher than optimal. Perhaps the level of choice in whether and when to interact that cell phone use (as opposed to face-to-face encounters) affords, has unintended consequences. The evidence is not clear. This study builds support for the idea that staying connected through cell phones and exploring those implications is hard to valence as there are complex layers to explore.

Cell phones have “the characteristics and possibilities of the technologies of perpetual contact” (Rule, 2002, p. 242). The idea of a device used to make contact easy and constant makes the use of cell phones and their influence on campus communication worth further exploration. As social scientist Sherry Turkle put it: “When technology brings us to the point where we’re used to sharing our thoughts and feelings instantaneously, it can lead to a new dependence, sometimes to the extent that we need others in order to feel our feelings in the first place” (Quoted in Else, 2006, p. 48).

**Cell Phones and Campus Spaces**

Cell phones, used when students are on the move, allow for the need to communicate with multiple people in multiple campus spaces to be met. This study’s finding that portability is important to college students supports Leung and Wei’s (2000) result that mobility and immediate access were two gratifications gained from cell phone use. Students in the current study also reported ease of communication as imperative to them, supporting Rosen’s (2004) finding that convenience is a powerful reason for their cell phone use.

Cell phone use seems benign in some campus spaces, for example waiting outside an office for a meeting. However, is it problematic that more than a third of the respondents report using cell phones during meals? Do students use phones when they eat alone, when they eat with friends, or both? Is it acceptable campus communication behavior to text while eating with friends? Is it a problem that students eating alone “need” technological company? Is it an efficient use of communicative time for students to multi-task? Further investigation of cell phone communication norms developing in different campus spaces to meet various needs and provide different gratifications is important to grasp fully their impact on communication and social interaction.

Cell phones allow people to enact roles in spaces that they would not have enacted before (Turkle, 2008). Respondents implicitly reported that they enact different roles by reporting on the different people they communicate with on their cell phones in different spaces on campus. Cell phones allow students to switch roles, in multiple
places, instantly (e.g. a student working in a small group in the library becomes a roommate when replying to a text from his roommate; a son replies to a text from his mother, before returning his attention to the group discussion and enacting the student role again). Further, what needs are tied to each role(s) a person is playing? And whether or how those needs are gratified in one campus space versus another while on a cell phone? These are questions the answers to which are unfolding as cell phone use grows and technological capabilities develop.

**Valence**

Students clearly articulated their perceptions of how cell phones impact communication on campus. Cell phones might generally be perceived as positive in helping students meet their needs on campus. The data reveal, however, that 56% of students reported that cell phone use overall had either a neutral (51%) or negative (5%) impact on campus life. Students rating cell phone use as neutral came to this conclusion by balancing positive and negative consequences of campus cell phone communication as a result of students meeting their needs in different ways. In other words, there was clear recognition from a majority of respondents that both positive and negative consequences result from some cell phone behaviors on campus, as students use the cell phone to obtain different gratifications. For example, one respondent suggested: “It can be positive (helping students get in touch with each other for studies, catching up with each other), but also distracting (texting in class, preoccupied).” Another respondent wrote: “The effectiveness and benefits wash out the annoyingness and the need to be with a phone as a form of status.”

Is it a positive, negative, or neutral use of a cell phone when a student can call her mother while walking up the stairs on her way to a classroom to take a difficult exam? Some might argue that it is good that she can gain support from her mother; others that it is bad as she should be gaining the need for social support from her classmates who are walking up the stairs beside her. Still others might suggest that it does not matter how she gets the need for support gratified. As Rubin (1994) points out, media uses have positive and negative consequences. It is sometimes difficult to define just how to apply a valence to cell phones being used to stay connected on campus.

Students also often explicitly discussed the disruptive aspect as the primary negative attribute to campus cell phone communication. This is an interesting finding that deserves further exploration as cell phone use on campus continues to show a pattern of increasing. It would seem important to understand more about what gratifications are being met that make cell phone use perceived as negative and to find out if the negative perception of cell phone use was still directly tied to inappropriate needs being met in the classroom environment as found by Campbell (2006), or if this perception is tied directly to cell phone use in other campus environments as well.

**Avoiding Face-to-Face Communication**

Nearly half of the respondents agreed that fake texting or fake calling was a communicative strategy on campus. Forty-three percent of students pretend to be on the phone as a means of gratifying the need to avoid communicating with certain people. As
one respondent put it: “I always pretend I’m texting when I walk by someone I don’t want to talk to, or have small talk with or even acknowledge.”

Does this matter? It could be argued that students have been avoiding each other and their professors for years by avoiding eye contact or turning a corner when they see a person coming they do not want to talk to. Avoidance of interpersonal communication on campus might always have been part of the communicative norm for some students. It can, however, be argued that given the ubiquity of student cell phone use, those who might not have avoided interpersonal communication in the past might now do so because it is easier with a cell phone as a tool to achieve that need for avoidance. This question again raises the issue of Schutz’s (1966) concept of the human need for interpersonal control— is this level of control over interaction, or even the possibility of interaction, serving students well, poorly or both? Some insight can be shed into that question when considering the finding that students did not identify friends or family as those that they avoided by pretending to use their cell phones. Therefore, insofar as students report in this study, faking communication on the phone was not used to avoid interpersonal communication with “significant people” in their lives.

Limitations

Having considered the implications of the results, there are some limitations to the study that need to be recognized, and one limitation is the methodology used. There is a limit to the richness of questionnaire data. Other methodologies, like focus groups, might yield a richer qualitative data set. A second limitation is the gender skew in the sample. With females making up 66% of the sample, there were substantially more women than men surveyed, which may have influenced results. A final limitation is that the data was collected on one campus only; collection of data on multiple campuses in different geographic settings would identify a fuller range of student cell phone use experiences.

Conclusion

Almost all students use cell phones on campus, in many campus spaces, to satisfy felt needs and desires. Texting is the primary communicative function used and considered most useful in meeting students’ needs. Students perceive having an easy method of communicating and the idea of being connected as important in meeting their needs. Some also use cell phones to meet their felt need to avoid communication. Over half of the students in this study recognized a blend of positive and negative contributions cell phones make to their lives in providing gratification of their needs, with the majority agreeing cell phones have a neutral impact on campus communication, overall.

Turkle’s (2010) words are worth considering as communication researchers strive to understand the complex layers of how cell phones are used on the college campus to meet needs and provide gratifications: “…we’re really at the very beginning of learning how to use this technology in ways that are the most nourishing and sustaining. We’re going to slowly find our balance, but I think it is going to take time” (p. 24). This study supports this idea, suggesting complex implications of how students use cell phones to meet their needs. This complexity is worthy of further investigation toward finding
greater balance in using a device to meet interpersonal needs, while avoiding unintended negative consequences.

References


