

## Generation Net and the Cell Phone: The blurring of interpersonal and mass communication

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*The cell phone can simultaneously represent freedom from and connectivity to the family. It is not uncommon for one generation to take a technological innovation and give it particular meaning. A recent empirical study of middle school 13-to-14-year old teens in a small Texas town highlighted the conflict between the teens' desire for independence and the reality of parental control through cell phone ownership and use. The way teens talk about their parents in relation to the cell phone illustrates that for most of them, digital freedom on a micro level does not exist. Whether this is an American teen phenomenon needs to be reviewed in light of similar global research.*

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“There is no issue more important to parents, teachers, policymakers, marketers, business leaders, and social activists than what this younger generation intends to do with its digital expertise.” ([Tapscott 2](#))

Generation Net refers to those born in the early 1980s to 1990s. These young people have been referred to as Generation Y or Generation M, but Net Generation describes what is in fact a very large part of their lives – media and communication technologies. These young people have grown up surrounded by technology at home and at school. Generation Net represents the “digital natives” who find new technologies an integral part of life, whereas adults are “digital immigrants”, having to adapt to and learn about new technologies as these technologies penetrate all aspects of adult life. ([Prensky 1-2](#)). These technologies catch the imagination and interest of young people who have come to expect ongoing trends and developments. The cell phone has become a significant digital technology for teens. This paper will:

- Examine these dynamics within an historical context in reference to past technologies.
- Discuss the role family relationships play in a teen’s ability to have use of a cell phone.
- Summarize some of the research findings from studies in the UK, Norway and Japan about teens and cell phones and compare and contrast them with a recent empirical study of a small group of middle school students in Texas.

This paper should be seen as a springboard for full research into both teen identity and how aspects of communication theory can help our understanding of the uses and meanings Generation Net has for the cell phone.

### **The difference between technology and media**

The cell phone has become the most recent digital technology for teens to negotiate. According to a [2005 Pew/Internet and American Life Project](#), nearly half of American teens have a cell phone. About a third of middle school teens own a cell phone. Cell phones are the most [widely owned devices](#) among parents and the second most widely owned device among teens. The cell phone is more than just a collection of technologies. It is a medium for communication and to understand Generation Net’s rapid adoption and use of the cell phone is to understand cell phones as media rather than as technology. ([Buckingham viii](#)) The cell phone was developed within a social and cultural context and is being used within a social and cultural context. Much of the available literature discussing the innovation of the cell phone attempts to trace its roots to a moment in technological history. This is problematic because 1) media are not divorced from the society in which they are developed, and 2) technology is always evolving as people try to find solutions to problems or to cater to consumers and current market forces.

Agar suggests that “Pocket watches provide the closest historical parallel” ([5](#)) to the penetration of cell phones in modern society. Initially pocket watches were rare, expensive, for the elite, a symbol of power, and represented independence from the town crier or the town clock. By the twentieth century they were commonplace. One can also see that the idea that having something small, portable, and held close to the body is not new. It suggests a social precondition to the idea of carrying a cell phone and it also places the fashion trends associated with cell phone accessories within an historical context.

The innovation of the telephone in the nineteenth century was initially socially controlled. (Marvin 106) Eventually the phone companies saw that making telephones more available to the masses was not only desirable, but also lucrative. The telephone crossed social boundaries and brought diverse groups together. It transcended space and consolidated time; the basically asynchronous communication flow of the post and the telegraph was superseded by this new instant two-way flow of communication. Information was exchanged. Business was conducted. People learned to initiate, maintain or curtail relationships over the telephone. It was a social instrument. The invasion of private spaces into public did not arrive with the cell phone.

The members of Generation Net are really first-generation mobile phone users, existing in an environment where both parents and teens have no *a priori* rules governing or regulating the ownership and use of cell phones. What age signifies the *need* for a cell phone as opposed to *wanting* a cell phone? The speed at which technological advances modify or add cell phone features sharpens the dichotomy and fuels the argument.

“ICTs [Information and communication technologies] can have associated with them varying degrees of symbolic meaning that go far beyond their functionality, especially when they are seen as ‘the cutting edge’ or ‘the future’.” (Haddon 136)

While some of the features of today’s cell phone are regarded as new or cutting edge, most of the ideas spring from former technological innovations and social structures. Rogers poses a relevant question in suggesting the kinds of further research needed, “To what extent are technological innovations developed by users, rather than R & D?” (Rogers158) For example, SMS text messaging specifications were added to the standard 2G cell phone as an afterthought because the capacity was there technologically; there was no direct intent for its use. It has been the imaginations of the consumers since the first message was sent in 1993 (Agar 105) that have made text messaging a way of life, complete with its own vocabulary and spelling.

### **The blurring of interpersonal and mass communication**

The plethora of features packed into modern cell phones make it a simultaneously a communication center, an information center, a record keeper, an historical archive, an organizer and an entertainment center. Teens can choose all, some or none of the phone features to help coordinate and give meaning to their daily lives. “Teenagerdom” does not describe a homogenous group and the ways teens use the cell phone, the frequency of use and the importance they ascribe to the cell phone is diverse as well. (Harper 2005) It allows them to connect with a large number of people or no one at all.

The fact that increasingly today people can be physically present and yet socially, emotionally or mentally absent because they are using the cell phone in some capacity is not a new phenomenon. This has been termed “absent presence”. (Gergen 227). Gergen points to the historical development of such an idea, beginning with the impact of print and the ability for a reader to be transported elsewhere through the pages. Both radio and television at one time were gathering points for a family to listen to or watch a program, raising the potential for family conversation and interaction. Nowadays most homes have multiple radios, television sets, and music devices that allow family members to be absent present at home. Gergen believes the cell phone increases the potential for the individual to become isolated from the physical present and

to become immersed into a presence connected by technology. For teens, this can mean spending physical time at home hanging out on the cell phone with their friends, creating physical and emotional space from the family. But it can also mean increased contact with the family that is often not together at home, but seeks to stay connected.

“It should be emphasized that the demand for mobile communications has long existed, as family members always want to stay in touch and adjust their activities to ensure the functioning of the family unit.” ([Castells et al 87](#))

The understanding of the balance between dependence and freedom has shifted over the years. “Teenagerdom” is the transition from childhood to adulthood. It can be a challenging time for all concerned. Parents gauge the success of this transition by looking for ways in which their teen is showing more responsibility. ([Harper 102-103](#)) At least some of the teen angst adults perceive and teens experience is related to parent-constructed definitions and expectations of maturity. Distinctions are blurred inside and outside of the home. Family relationships and the cell phone can be complex and it is here that the blurring of interpersonal and mass communication becomes clearer. It is possible to play games, listen to music, take pictures, shoot video, change ringtones, text, check calendars and, for those with 3G phones, to go online, surf the Web, check email and turn on GPS.

“Notably, recent decades have witnessed a growing contradiction in western notions of childhood and maturity; put simply, in cultural and psychological domains, children seem to be growing up faster; in the economic and educational domains, children attain adult status ever later than before.” ([Livingston 172](#))

### **Some global perspectives**

A study in Norway identified three ideas that may help explain the relationship between parents, teens and cell phones. ([Ling 2004](#)) First, he compared parents’ attempts to be in constant contact with youth to an umbilical cord. The cell phone can in fact give the teen more control over his or her environment and activities because he can “sever” the cord and operate freely, knowing that it’s possible to “check in” by cell phone. The responsibility is placed on the teen.

Second, the cell phone is sometimes seen as a safety device. Some teens receive their first cell phone because a parent wanted them to have one for an emergency. Other teens present that same argument to their parents as a way of negotiating a cell phone. In the USA tragedies such as Columbine or September 11, 2001, may have contributed to the youth receiving their first cell phone. There are any number of USA phone companies, online [security](#) companies offering security and tracking measures for the cell phone that enable parents to monitor the location and use of their teen’s cell phone.

Third, the cell phone is a symbol of youth culture, and an emotional connection with family and peers. Teens are masters at multi-tasking. Young teens can “hang out” on the phone while other activities are going on, such as cleaning the bedroom or using the Internet. Movement does not restrict conversation or text messaging; there is never a reason not to be in “perpetual contact”. ([Katz and Aakus 307](#))

Some of the concerns expressed in the USA about young people and the use of cell phones have already been debated in Japan; for example, the use of *ketai* in public places as a social problem was first discussed in relation to business men and women. The word *ketai* is colloquial for cellular phone and has become the everyday reference for the cell phone. It demonstrates the extent to which this media/technology has become embedded in Japanese society. ([Matsuda 20](#))

([Miyaki 279](#)) indicates that parents may allow a teen to have *ketai* because it helps coordinate life and offer safety and security. In common with the USA, many Japanese youngsters spend time alone while parents are working, and like the USA, many are two-income families with fewer children. Youngsters are out after school and in many communities, either walking or using public transport. Teens want *ketai* so that they can keep in touch with friends. Miyaki notes that traditional phone etiquette once related to the landline, for example, not talking for a long time with friends at night, seemed obsolete to youngsters, while adults considered youth to be using *ketai* inappropriately with non-essential phone conversations. Young people also enjoy exploring cell phone functionality; Internet *ketai* has already reached saturation.

A Danish study of teens to 24-year-olds suggests a difference between parental and teen perceptions of the purpose of cell phones. Parents see it as a tool for communication, whereas "...young people's identity is influenced by their use of media, in particular personal communication media such as the mobile phone." ([Stald 143](#))

Some parents are alarmed at the amount of time their teens spend on the cell phone. Ling points out that research is divided as to whether co-present interaction with others is being eroded because more and more relationships are conducted via the cell phone or whether the text messages, sharing of photos, jokes, etc, is strengthening some of those relationships. Ling remains positive. "Although the co-present is still the locus of social ritual, it is being extended and modified by mediated interaction". ([Ling 6](#))

A 2007 UK study examined the diversity of attitudes towards and use of the cell phone. Not all youth expressed the same frequency of need to use a cell phone. Some were conscious of the cost, either because they paid for their own phone and/or part of the bill. Others were constrained by the environment; cell phones being banned at school. Some obeyed the rules while others found creative ways to break them.

Not all youth preferred using the same functions. There was a wide range of frequency of sending and receiving text messages although the majority seemed to be texting among their contemporaries. Some older youth preferred to use Instant Message or other social networks on their computers rather than text because it didn't cost them as much, or because the screen was bigger or because they were used to it prior to owning a cell phone. Not everyone found texting a positive experience and mentioned examples of cyber-bullying and other negative communications.

Stored content was routinely shared. Music was very important and many talked about the need for better sound quality. Some had phones with MP3 players while others preferred to have a separate device such as the iPod because they wanted superior sound. Games appeared to

be less important and were one feature of the cell phone that didn't necessarily involve interaction or socialization with others. "Or to frame the point slightly differently, the game example enabled us to follow up a variety in ways which young people mundanely used technology without necessarily embracing it enthusiastically." ([Haddon 9](#)) There was a wide range of knowledge, understanding and experience of the use of Internet and TV cell phone features among the members of the focus groups. Some saw such features as analogous to games in passing time. The cost and speed of accessing the Internet and the size of the TV screen seemed to be the chief topics of discussion.

There is a diverse range of features available on cell phones and so there is a diverse range of interest and importance that young people place upon specific features. There is also a diverse range in the quality of cell phones that impacts the interest and frequency with which young people use the features and functions on them. Not all young people showed the same level of skill or knowledge about using the features and functions of their cell phones, nor was everyone interested in the same features and functions. It is important to refrain from generalizing too broadly about teens or to regard them as a homogenous group.

### **Some general observations from an empirical study**

As a background to my research, it is important to see why cell phone adoption among American teens was initially slow and why it now seems so important to so many young people. Cellular phone technology was originally developed in America, ([Agar 40](#)) but diffused slowly due to the popularity of the car phone. As technology developed ways of making lighter and more streamlined batteries and with the introduction of microprocessors, smaller, portable phone possibilities combined with the saturation of the car phone market, resulted in the cellular phone.

Slow diffusion can also be related to [FCC regulations](#), the prevention of a uniform system, and the method of license allocation. The numerous network providers and associated roaming charges combined with FCC regulations meant that consumer loyalty was often to a network provider rather than to a cell phone brand.

In the USA, the PDA became more popular and adults initially limited cell phone use for making wireless telephone calls. They did not model their European and Asia Pacific contemporaries. Portable TV/VCRs were used to entertain children on long car journeys and then Gameboys and portable DVD players replaced them. The first mobile phones did not offer SMS text messaging. Young people used email and Instant Messaging because most households and public libraries had computers. Cell phones needed to appeal to specific areas of a young person's life if there was going to be a youth market. One of the unforeseen technological results of Columbine, and especially 9/11 was the number of parents who bought cell phones for their children so that the family could stay connected. Consequently, the market and young people themselves began to see particular uses for the cell phone that catered specifically for them.

Acquiring a cell phone in the USA can be seen as a rite of passage. There is no fixed age, which can be a point of contention within the family, especially if a teen has same-age friends who already have cell phones. For some teens, obtaining a drivers' license has meant increased cell phone privileges. Some phone companies offer tips to parents and teen drivers, suggesting a [driving covenant](#) that promises not to drive and use the cell phone.

The study was part of a 2007 pilot project with 13-14 year-old students to help finalize research questions for PhD fieldwork about American youths' use of the cell phone; how they give meaning to its functions and what kind of cultural and social patterns are being fashioned as they use the cell phone for communication and for pleasure. The pilot project consisted of pairs of single sex students engaged in one of three activities planned to stimulate discussion about the use of the cell phone and to allow the researcher to be a participant observer. Pairs met weekly for 30 minutes over a six-week period. The three activities were 1) looking at brochures of new cell phones and choosing a favorite, 2) comparing phone plans from the major companies, and 3) producing individual one-minute videos entitled "My Cell Phone". The students knew the purpose of the sessions and that they were allowed to talk freely across a range of topics throughout the activities. The activities took place either in the middle school library or in the commons area outside the school office. The study revealed four broad topics of conversation; communication, independence/responsibility, cell phone features and social relationships

First, parents and teens appeared to value the cell phone for different reasons and attached different purposes to its use, also reflected in the global studies above.

- Parents can contact their teens and in doing so can coordinate daily life.
- Teens have an emergency communication device.
- Texting is preferred for peer-to-peer communication while phone calls are mainly reserved for family.
- The public use of cell phones (by others) is a nuisance.
- Teens perceive that they have greater digital expertise than their parents

If parents are "technologically remedial" as one student expressed, and can't adapt, then the dynamics of staying in touch with parents will change. It was also interesting that the distinction between what constitutes "public" and "private" were very relative. This is obviously a topic that needs to be explored further due to the contextual understanding of the definitions.

Second, having a cell phone signified teen independence and responsibility, also an important symbol of *ketai*.

- Parents used the cell phone as a bargaining tool.
- Teen independence was negotiable only in parents' terms.
- Only one teen owned his own cell phone.
- Having a cell phone increased the need to show responsibility.
- There was a diverse range of financial responsibilities.
- Acknowledging and obeying school cell phone regulations varied.
- The importance of independence varied, like their UK contemporaries.

One of the issues specific to American life is the difficulty for anyone under the age of 18 to own a cell phone without having a credit card. [Virgin Mobile](#) was one of the first providers to offer a pay as you go plan that appealed to teens and in theory set them free from parental control.

There is an obvious difference between perceived definitions of what "my cell phone" means to a teen and the reality. One girl in the study was without a cell phone. Not having a cell phone symbolized all the things she couldn't do and it made her feel inferior to her peers. She had also lost the landline that was in her bedroom saying, "I didn't do a project for history so my mom took it away." There are issues of power and control.

Third, there was diversity in the preference of cell phone features. The cell phone models differed. There were also gender differences.

- Texting was the favorite feature.
- Girls preferred to change ringtones whereas boys preferred to play games.
- With features such as cameras, there were gender differences. Girls liked to take photos of what was going on and share them. But boys liked to take random photos

There was not the same culture of sharing cell phone content as indicated in the UK study. While some of these preferences are similar to both the UK and Japan, it should be noted that a 3G network was not available in our Texas town. At the time of this project, only one student had a 3G phone, six students had camera phones, two of those also having video capabilities and one student had an pay as you go phone that was only a phone. There did not seem much interest at the time in 3G phones capabilities to access the Internet, TV or video. There was general discussion about how much 3G would cost. Teens were used to being online via a large computer screen where they could access TV and videos and email or Instant message for free. GPS was regarded as a necessity for the family vehicle. They couldn't see why they would ever need GPS on their cell phones when there was no public transportation and few sidewalks in our town.

Fourth, the cell phone was seen as a way to strengthen and maintain social relationships.

- It was available in case a friend needed them.
- It could be used to collectively do homework or study over the phone.
- The phone provided a means to maintain social relationships. It provided someone to talk to; it was less boring than being alone and made the teens feel part of a group.

The teens talked about how different their lives would be without the cell phone and especially how much they would feel cut off from their friends. The greatest similarity seemed to be the need to communicate with their peers at all times, to be in "constant contact".

On the whole, the teens in the pilot project were doing very mundane things with their cell phones. Teens were not being innovative with their phones. They did not seem to be creating their own cell phone subculture that seems to exist in Japan. It did not create a sense of moral panic in this researcher. As indicated in the UK study and the pilot project, there was diversity among the teens in their use of the cell phone functions. The greatest similarity seemed to be in the need to communicate with peers at all times, to be in "constant contact". Although the groups shared this and other similarities, it is obvious that Generation Net is not a homogenous group.

## **Conclusions**

This paper has introduced three topics that contribute toward a better understanding of the Generation Net and the cell phone; its historical context, its place within the family and its importance among teens from various countries.

A brief historical review has revealed that while some of the uses the cell phone are regarded as new or cutting edge, most of the ideas spring from former technological innovations



and social structures. The slow adoption rate of the cell phone by teens in America was not due to their lack of interest or imagination.

Unlike their parents, Generation Net is in the unique position of never knowing life without the cell phone. They have grown up surrounded by the technology at home and at school. There is little fear in using technology and often youth know more than their parents. The role of the cell phone in a teen's life has been both praised and criticized with regard to family ties and interpersonal relationships.

Most parents see the cell phone as a convenience, a portable landline that offers the possibility of maintaining communication. Teens see it as a way of being independent from parents yet simultaneously being able to contact parents if necessary. It becomes clear when listening to teens that there is frustration as well as pleasure in having a cell phone. The discourse between parents and teens becomes significant.

A recent Annenberg project tentatively concludes that a kind of global cell phone youth culture may be emerging:

“Mobile-equipped young people in different societies thus face the same central question: How to manage the new opportunity for autonomy under the existing structural conditions imposed upon them, most importantly within the family and at school.” ([Castells 168](#))

Research into the role the cell phone plays in constructing teen identity will further assist in understanding Generation Net. The social significance of the cell phone cannot be overstated. Staying connected with peers and feeling a sense of belonging is a priority.

Much of the current theory being applied to the cell phone and teens has developed from Internet studies in relation to why there is such a massive adoption and use of this technology, what is taking place as teens use the technology and what will be the results, and although there does seem to be some global similarities among both teens and their parents about the importance of cell phones, there is a need for an interdisciplinary approach that includes technology, media and communication studies as well as social and cultural studies if we are to do justice to this generation and its relationship with the cell phone.

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