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# Teenage Girls and Cellular Phones

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*The presence of cell phones among teenagers has become rampant. Initially viewed by parents as a luxury item, they have since become recognized as a way to help parents secure their children's safety. Yet as Campbell reveals, parents' and teens' goals in using cellular phones may conflict. For children these represent a means of freeing themselves from their parents' control and circulating more freely and effectively in their peer group. Parents see these as a means to keep track of and stay in touch with their children. How teens negotiate these conflicting waters makes for very interesting reading. Thinking back, around what age (if any) would you say that cell phones became more commonplace among your high school friends than not? Do you agree with Campbell that parents and teens sometimes have opposing goals connected to their visions of cell phone use? Who do you think gains the most from cell phones, parents or teens? Do you agree that teenage boys and girls have a societal double standard with regard to cell phone use? How has this technology changed the lives of teens? How has it changed their relationships with their parents?*

The cellular phone is a technology that has been rapidly taken up by youth. By 2001, 94 percent of the oldest teens in Norway had cellular phones. A Canadian study indicated that nearly half (48 percent) of teens (aged 15–19) owned cellular phones in 2003, significantly up from 30 percent in 2001. For these young users, however, the cellular phone is a technology of contradiction,

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both used in the development of a sense of autonomy and identity while simultaneously being a potential tool of social control.

During the past few years cellular phones, as used by teens, have come under the academic gaze as a technology of freedom, of connectivity, and of safety. In marketing research and the media, cellular phone use by teens has been explained as an outcome of the opportunity the technology creates for "personal empowerment" (Solutions Research Group 2003) and as a way for busy parents (mothers) to maintain contact with their children while encouraging them to develop responsibility. Both marketing and academic studies, however, have paid little attention to the experiences of individual users of the technology and how their experiences reflect/contradict the ideals set up in the media. There has also been limited attention to the take-up of the cellular phone within North America, where its use has lagged behind Western Europe and Japan, and by young women, who have taken up the cellular phone in almost equal numbers to their male counterparts. These trends are notable because they contradict "normal" distribution trends, which predict the spread of media and technology from North America to the rest of the world, and expectations for uptake, which predict males as primary users of new technologies....

## METHODS

Two methods were used to explore the discourses surrounding teenage girls' use of the cellular phone: face-to-face interviews and a deep reading of advertising images. Together these methods reflect my attempt to recognize the potential for individual agency and subjective experience, while attending to the constraints of social structures. The combination also enabled me to examine how technology, gender and youth are given meaning through a number of contexts (marketing and use) and voices (the girls' and my own)....

Overall the participants in this study identified that the cellular phone is desirable because it is cool and exciting, yet convenient and practical. This emphasis on style, mixed with usability, has also been found in European research into mobile phone use. Results of a Norwegian survey of youth users, for example, lead the study's author to conclude that the mobile phone

> seems to be used as a personal style concept among teenagers.... With the mobile phone teenagers can position themselves in relation to a number of time-typical trends: being easily accessible, flexible, communicative, informed and up to date. Furthermore, they can simultaneously have an overview of and control different types of arenas: school, home and leisure time. Thus, the mobile phone symbolizes a lifestyle and a dynamic youth ideal in modernity. (Skog 2002, p. 270)

The trends and images that made the cellular phone desirable, however, were often contradictory to the young women's experiences of using cell phones.

## PARENTAL "REALITY": FEAR AND SAFETY

Despite the idealization of independence, for the young women interviewed being in the urban world without constraints was not a reality. Their access to the public world was limited, largely due to parental concerns about their vulnerability to the influences of peers and the threats of strangers. Due to these threats the cellular phone was often discussed as a "tool of security," a theme that has been reflected in past research. Ling and Yttri (2002, p. 156), for example, found that cell phones enable parents (mothers) to give their teenage children the space to go out and be independent, while ensuring they can always be reached. Nafus and Tracey similarly reported that the mobile works as a "'digital leash' ... [for parents to] enable their children to establish public personhoods" (2002, p. 212). Tracking systems, functioning through mobile phones equipped with global positioning systems, exemplify the extent to which telecommunications firms are adapting technology to meet parents' desires to monitor their teen's location.

Concerns about security out of the home are, according to popular perception, particularly salient for parents of young women. This is reflected in Lobet-Maris' (2003) findings on the acquisition patterns of first mobile phones for teen males and females. For females "the mobile phone apparently is first acquired with parental approval, as an additional security measure to guarantee the sort of protected autonomy parents desire for their daughter" (Lobet-Maris 2003, p. 88). In contrast, for young males getting a cellular phone was a choice guided by the desire to own either a masculine tool or an identity signifier. The teenage participants I interviewed also reported that they had their cell phone because their parents had purchased it for them as a safety precaution, in contrast to the boys they knew whom they believed had bought cellular phones for themselves. The sense that girls had requirements placed upon them that their male counterparts did not was further illustrated when the girls were asked what they thought might be different in their lives if they were male rather than female. The most frequent answer, particularly among the younger participants and those who could not drive, was that they would be able to "go out more." This difference, while something that the girls wished did not exist, was in large part accepted because their parents' worry was read as proof that their parents cared for them. The cellular phone, as a tool of security, therefore enabled the girls to enter the public world, a world that is constructed as unsafe by "family, peers, normative regulations, fear, violence and sexuality" (Van Roosmalen 1993, p. 28).

From the participants it became clear that the safety that was the primary motivation for their parents to buy cell phones for them was a safety that required detailed knowledge of their activities. An extreme example of this was reflected by Katherine (age 17):

> And when I'm out, I have to call my mom every like 45 minutes, every half an hour, past a certain time, like past nine. I have to call her every half an hour to tell her where I am.... When I'm out she doesn't always know where we're at, like whose house we're at or what we're doing

> so I always have to call. 'Cause I told her like, I don't always want you to call me, so I'm just gonna call you every half an hour, so she said it was okay so I gotta call.

At another point in our conversation she states:

> I think now that we have a [cellular] phone my mom knows more of what I do, cause when we didn't have it I would only call, like one call per night just to tell her like, I'll be home around ten or eleven. And I never really told her what I'd be doing. Now like every half an hour she asks me what I'm doing, so she knows like detailed information about what I'm doing each night, you know? So she knows more.

How much knowledge the parents were actually gaining or even felt they were gaining is unknown, and to some extent unimportant. What is important is that Katherine believes her parents are able to have detailed knowledge, for this belief will lead her to become aware of her behavior and begin to self-monitor. This does not mean that she will necessarily do exactly what her parents would want—but she is reminded every half an hour of their desires through the need to report back....

## LIVED EXPERIENCES: "MIS"USE AND RESPONSIBILITY

Advertising images targeting teens present owning a cellular phone as fun and important to creating one's individual style. Parents, as the girls understand it, see the cellular phone as a tool of safety. The girls, however, describe their use of the cellular phone in very pragmatic ways. The most frequently reported uses of the cellular phone (or anticipated uses for non-owners) were convenience and making plans with friends.

> ... I'm never home so I'm always like if anybody calls I have the cell phone. It's not like sitting there and chatting on the phone the whole time, it's just more like to plan where we're going to meet or to see where you are, who I want to go out with and stuff. (Vivian, age 17)

According to these girls their main uses of the cellular phone were no different from those of their male counterparts.

> ...—the girls—the parents buy them for the girls for the safety, but the girls use them just to like keep in touch and I think that's the same as why the guys have them is like to call each other to say like, "Yo, we're at this party, come" type thing. (Kirsten, age 17)

As Kirsten's statement reflects, the rationale behind the phone may be "safety," but the actual use was primarily for socializing. This "mis"use, particularly the "wasting" of their parents' minutes by making calls to friends, could be seen as

a simple form of resistance, except that this financial cost, according to the girls, was one that their parents accepted. And by accepting these minor transgressions the parents ensured that the end they desired was met—that the girl carried the cell phone with her.

The girls' resistance, however, often went beyond "wasting minutes" to strategies for avoiding their parents being able to reach them or find out their location. A number of the girls, for example, would refuse to answer the phone when she knew that the caller was her parent:

> If I didn't want her to call me I'd just turn it off and be like "oh it died" or "oh, I forgot to turn it on" [laughs]. (Shawna, age 16)
>
> *Do people like that their parents can reach them?*
>
> No, that's why like some people have like special rings, so they know that it's their parents so they don't answer it. Stuff like that. (Laura, age 14)

One of the girls, Kirsten, had developed a number of strategies to deal with her mother's calls, including pretending the phone was off and giving misleading (or incorrect) information about her location or activity.

> And sometimes if I'm going to a party or something like that I don't always say "I'm going to a party" I just say that I'm going to so and so's house.
>
> *So if you're at a party and she calls?*
>
> I usually don't answer it, I just see that it's her calling and then I'll go and call her back. I'll just go to like a quiet room and be like "sorry, it was ringing in the kitchen I didn't get to it on time." I'll just call her back to let her know that I'm all right. (Kirsten, age 17)

Kirsten's tactics can be seen as tactics of resistance—tricks that require "making do with the resources available [and] involves [*sic*] an understanding of the rules, of the strategy of the powerful" (Finke 1989, p. 38). Kirsten, who always carried the phone with her and acknowledged her mother's worry, created a space for her own independence by reframing her mother's need to contact her, such that the "truth" of her statements and her mother's motive for calling (her well-being) were disconnected. While Kristin is motivated to "confess" through this technology, she is also in a position of knowing herself, and what is in her best interest.

As the teen girls carry their surrogate parent with them on every night out, as they call home every hour, every half-hour, they are constantly reminded of their parents' preferences and wishes. At any moment the phone may ring with mom or dad on the other end asking where you are, what you're doing, who you're with. If the location or crowd is not to the parents' liking, they have the power to demand that you come home, or to ground you from going out again. With the cellular phone, the demands of safety and the domestic sphere that have consistently been found by social researchers to constrain girls within the home are

expanded into girls' time outside of the home. Yet with the cell phone the "truth" of the girls' statements relies upon the girl's willingness to disclose; to confess....

The extent to which the girls accepted their parents' rules and values was exemplified in their statements regarding these rules (such as requirements to call home and curfews). None of the girls declared the rules they lived with unfair or incomprehensible. Although a few noted that their parents could be inconsistent and sometimes a little strict, their statements were overall in support of the constraints placed upon them.

> They'd like me to be home at like 12 or 12:30, and yeah they want me to call if I'm going to be late or something like that.
>
> *How do you feel about their rules?*
>
> I don't know, like I don't really do anything where I need to be out until like 2 in the morning so I'm okay with it. Sometimes it's annoying but—like sometimes my sister stays out until like 6 in the morning and they get like really upset and I like just don't want to have to deal with that so I don't stay out late, cause I know that they stay up until we get home. (Kayla, age 17)

As mentioned previously, the girls were also very aware of the impact that their gender had upon what they were allowed to do. Simultaneously, however, they accepted that as females their behavior needed to be restricted.

> There's different things, like they don't want me walking around the streets alone at night, but if I was a guy I don't think they'd be strict about it, because they just assume like no one's going to go after a guy or whatever. Well not no one, but like there's more chance of going after a girl. So I think that would be kind of different. (Victoria, age 15)
>
> They don't really let me stay out really late 'cause they're strict. And they want to know who I'm with—like it has to be certain people I'm with, like they have to know them. And I have to call every hour to tell them that I'm okay....
>
> *How do you feel about this?*
>
> I think its good 'cause I see some other friends and their parents don't really care where they are or who they're with or how late they're staying out. So it's good that my parents are doing that, so I like it. I used to get mad about it, 'cause I used to be like "oh, my parents are too strict," but now I realize what they're trying to do for me and it's better. Yeah, I like it, 'cause I know that they care about me. (Stephanie, age 17)

Stephanie's statement that she is happy with her parents' rules, because they show that she is cared about, illustrates the extent to which the discourse of safety has

been naturalized. Her parents' desire to know her activities has been reframed as a signifier of love, and therefore should not be questioned. Any need for parental force is removed, for "the use of force is unnecessary to the extent that individuals identify with and internalize the gaze of authority and nicely comport themselves exactly as their leaders and oppressors would want" (MacCannell & MacCannell 1993, p. 211). In this way Stephanie becomes the "perfect" daughter.

Kirsten, who earlier is quoted describing her numerous tactics to avoid the calls of her mother, also stated that what she liked most about having a cellular phone was that it made her feel "safer":

> Um, it just—it makes me feel safer a lot of times, like when I'm driving home at night or something like that. I know that if anything ever happened I'd have my phone with me and I could call my parents or call for help. And I just—it just gives me a way to keep in contact with people which makes me feel good, it makes me feel safer. Generally, it makes me feel safer about everything.

Kirsten's statements throughout our conversation reflected a tension between wanting independence, wanting to resist her parents' desires to know about and control her actions, and an internalized fear that all of the things that they warn her about are true. For the teens involved in this study the tension between self-definition and parental power seems to be keenly felt.... Her desire for the responsibility of adulthood and the opportunity to self-determine can, it appears, only be met through an acceptance of the rules of her parents. Yet this is more than a forced acceptance of rules, it is an internalization of her parents' (society's) constructions of the responsibilities of adulthood and the vulnerability of womanhood.

## CONCLUSION

Clearly the girls interviewed do desire, and attempt to create, independence from the parental gaze. But this is not the teen "resistance" frequently discussed in social science research ... rather it is a (mis)use that modifies the expected rebellion of youth and the idealized goals of freedom to fit within the norms of femininity. These are not dramatic acts, but the "subtle movements of escape and evasion" that interested de Certeau (Buchanan 2000, p. 100). Pretending to be in another location and deceiving one's parents about one's activities, while seemingly far from putting a pin through one's nose and moving to a commune, are assertions of independence. As Ganetz (1995) points out, girls' cultures may participate in the market to a much greater extent than subcultures, but this does not mean they are "conformist, passive and unaware" (p. 85). Rather girls take up consumer items and use them to assert themselves and their individuality in ways that are possible within the expected mold of femininity.

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