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Deteriorating Distance: Impact of Mobile Phones on Interpersonal Relationship between Parents and Teenagers

Boyagoda, E.W.M.S.

Senior Lecturer, Department of Languages and Communication Studies,
Trincomalee Campus, Eastern University, Sri Lanka

Senarathna, N.W.W.A.D

Researcher, Department of Languages and Communication Studies,
Trincomalee Campus, Eastern University, Sri Lanka

Abstract:

Mobile phone use among teenagers has increased since the COVID-19 pandemic in Sri Lanka. This research seeks to find out how mobile phones affect the interpersonal relationship between parents and teenagers. Data for the questionnaire was collected randomly from 240 respondents based on three ethnicities in Niwithigala Divisional Secretariat of Ratnapura District, Sri Lanka. Social exchange theory was used as the theoretical framework for the study.

According to the findings of the present study, teenagers are most motivated to use mobile phones for online education in a limited period of four years, from 2020 to 2023, in Sri Lanka. Teenagers consume mobile phones as heavy users to entertain, educate and for gaming. Parents consume 1-2 hours daily, and their main purpose is to communicate with children and others. Male teenagers spend more time on their mobile phones than female teenagers. It is found that both parents and teenagers have different perceptions of the impact of mobile phones on their lives. Teenagers strongly believe that mobile phones are essential devices for their daily activities. Teenagers believe that mobile phones are a better way to socialize, whereas parents do not agree that mobile phones are a socializing tool. On the other hand, in families with limited phone use or no phone use, the interpersonal relationship between parents and teenagers is more intense. The majority of the respondents, both parents and teenagers, faced misunderstanding because of excessive use of mobile phones, and they cleared up the misunderstanding by meeting the person physically. While the majority of both parents and teenagers strongly agreed with the statement that mobile phone consumption creates distance in the family, a few of them think that mobile phones do not cause distance in the family. The main finding of the study is that due to the excessive use of mobile phones by teenagers, the frequency and quality of communication among family members are affected, and so the interpersonal relationships between parents and teenagers become detached.

Keywords: *Interpersonal communication, interpersonal relationship, mobile phone, parent-child interaction, social exchange theory*

1. Background of the Study

Due to the travel restrictions and school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic, school education was provided, especially through the online system in Sri Lanka, and mobile phone consumption increased among school students as an educational tool and a communication tool. The number of mobile connections in Sri Lanka increased by 2.2 million (+7.5%) between January 2019 and 2020 (Digital 2020: Sri Lanka). Amarasinghe (2022) stated that "Before COVID-19, the authority only received complaints related to child abuse, physical assault, etc., but reports of mobile phone addiction are now on the rise. These complaints also include children around the ages of 13 and 14. Children have grown addicted to mobile phones as a result of the two-year Covid-19 period. This situation is also reported in rural areas." (National Child Protection Authority). It is obvious that mobile phone usage addiction among children has drastically increased in Sri Lanka and has adversely affected their lives in various ways.

1.1. Mobile Phone Consumption, Addiction and Interpersonal Relationships

A mobile phone plays a vital role in fulfilling the needs and desires of people, starting from the smallest unit, the family, to large units of society. According to Shavers & Bair (2022), mobile phones "are probably the most commonly used device for communications, such as texting, e-mail, and of course, phone calls." Campbell states that mobile phones have now turned out to be a social asset rather than just a technological device (2005).

According to previous research studies, interpersonal communication between people can be interrupted for different reasons, and one of the major reasons is the high consumption of mobile phones. According to Divecha (2017), "Every generation of teens is shaped by the social, political, and economic events of the day. Today's teenagers are no different- they are the first generation whose lives are saturated by mobile technology and social media." Some researchers have shown that the usage of mobile phones can affect the lives of people positively and negatively.

Interpersonal communication is an intimate conversation between two or more people and "involves the information, ideas, and feelings being exchanged verbally or non-verbally between two or more people" (Terra, 2023). According to Wood (2015), interpersonal communication is the sole method of communication between people to emphasize what is happening between them, regardless of location or existence. These relationships affect a person's overall well-being, emotional development, and sense of identity. Healthy and positive interpersonal relationships contribute to happiness, self-esteem and personal growth, while negative or toxic relationships can lead to stress, anxiety and emotional distress. Predominantly, relationships between parents and children are critical influences on children's identities.

The parent-child relationship basically depends on mobile phones at present. Parents may use phones to require children to maintain contact and even to monitor children who are out of the home (Wood, 2016). Therefore, it is obvious that mobile phones play a major role in the interpersonal relationships between parents and children and this paper endeavours to explore the impact of mobile phones on the interpersonal relationships between parents and teenagers.

2. Theoretical Framework

Social exchange theory, which was developed by George Homans, a sociologist, in 1958, defined social exchange theory as the exchange of activity, tangible or intangible, and more or less rewarding or costly, between at least two parties" (Cook et al., 2013). Social exchange theory is a broad social psychological perspective that attempts to explain how human social relationships are formed, maintained, and terminated. People weigh the potential benefits and risks of their social relationships. When the risks outweigh the rewards, they terminate or abandon the relationship (Tulane University, 2018). The basic premise of this theory is that how people feel about a given interaction or relationship depends fundamentally on the outcomes that they perceive to be associated with it. Since social exchange theory is very general in nature, it can be readily applied to understanding a variety of different social relationships and situations. In addition, these principles can be applied to understanding relationships involving individual people or social groups.

3. Literature Review

The use of a mobile phone is entirely up to the individual user, and there is a significant correlation between age and gender in mobile phone use (Bhattacharjee & Begum, 2022). Some studies have found little or no difference in use based on gender. Other studies have found that boys tend to be more intrigued with the technical aspects of the phone, while girls tend to prefer interpersonal connectivity and spend more time using their phones for voice calls (Henderson, 2002). In fact, while women in one study pointed out that phones resulted in more freedom, male teens found additional connectivity to be a constraining inconvenience (Skog, 2002).

Additionally, there is a noticeable impact of students' mobile phone use on their interpersonal communication. The students use their phones for hours at a time because they consider it an essential thing. The increasing trend of students using mobile phones is having an impact on the standard of interpersonal communication, and they consume mobile phones for a variety of reasons, such as portability, compactness, affordability, user-friendliness, user satisfaction, and many more. According to DeBaillon & Rockwell, 2005, there are a variety of instrumental and ritualistic gratifications for adolescent cell phone use. Odek (2015) states that mobile phones are seen by students as a more convenient mode of communication than face-to-face communication. The students use the mobile phone for communication purposes, entertainment and academic matters to the extent that they have developed a dependency on it to the extent a feeling of distress is experienced when they operate without one may happen when one forgets to carry it along or loses it. Ozcan et al. (2003) stated that status, relaxation, security, and sociability are important motives for cell phone use.

A study done in Malaysia found that the majority of children were regular users. Charlton et al. (2002) found that children use the phone to call parents to inform parents of where they are and make arrangements to be picked up and then to friends to interact and schedule with peers. Young adults rely heavily on cell phones to create and maintain their social image and affect their social penetration (Henderson, 2002; Ling & Yrtti, 2002). At the basic level, the mobile phone allows parents to communicate directly with their children. The device gives them a sense of security when their children go out of home. Children can call their parents for help, such as being picked up after school or doing other activities (Ling, 2004; Ling & Yrtti, 2006).

Chelsey (2005) found that cell phones were linked to distress and a decrease in family satisfaction. According to Chelsey (2005), using a cell phone might cause tension in the home and increase work-family conflict. Mobile phones' constant connectivity and disruptions can generate stress, less family time, and a decline in satisfaction with work-life balance. Using a mobile phone over time is linked to higher levels of discomfort and lower family satisfaction.

Doel and Meenakshi (2021) revealed that "hyper-connectivity" becomes problematic in face-to-face communications as the youth find it difficult to take their eyes off their mobile phones, even during direct interactions with friends, peers and parents. Phone usage is strongly integrated into young people's behaviour, interrupting their day-to-day activities, including parent-child relationships (Krithika & Vasantha, 2013).

Johnson & Hertlein (2017) indicate that many parents experience cognitive dissonance when reconciling smartphone use and parenting practice. Children are affected by parents spending more time with smartphones. Therefore, the use of mobile phones by parents can have negative effects on future generations. Furthermore, another study indicates that the

quality of the parent-child interaction decreases when the parent's smartphone is on. In regard to parenting behaviour, when smartphones are turned off, parents display more affection towards their children (Rothstein, 2018). People are using and relying more on mobile phones due to the constant connection that phones offer and the social pressure to answer calls and messages right away. This raises the possibility that parent-child interactions could be hampered by parents using mobile phones. When parents use their phones during parent-child interactions, they may be less attentive to their children's requests for attention, both verbally and non-verbally, which could result in interactions between parents and children that are of lower quality. Youngsters participate in dangerous attention-seeking behaviors, which could be related to the rise in pediatric injuries.

Storch and Ortiz Juarez-Paz (2019) examined the implications for family communication. These data revealed one paradoxical theme: Family separation and connection. Categories are shared in family relationships through boundaries, reassurances, and distance. Diversion, miscommunication, and unfavorable emotional reactions are manifestations of family disconnection.

In contrast, according to Rachmat et al.(2020), parental interpersonal communication does not significantly affect children's smartphone addiction levels. Then, it directly indicates that interpersonal communication has no impact on children's emotional development. Thus, this finding implies that parents' interpersonal communication skills are not a factor in the high level of children's smartphone addiction and children's emotional development.

Some of the positive traits of mobile phones relate to the youth exploring their identity and maintaining constructive interpersonal relationships with family and friends (Yaman, 2021). Smartphone use and/or distraction impair parent-child relationships, communication, and parenting (Yaman,2021). The way people use mobile phones can be seen as connecting and facilitating them.

Globally, most research has been conducted on the impact of mobile phone use on children and youth and their learning. However, studies on how mobile phone usage affects family distance between parents and teenagers are rare, particularly in the Sri Lankan context.

4. Methodology

This study employed both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to investigate the impact of mobile phones on interpersonal relationships between parents and teenagers. The researchers used a semi-structured questionnaire to collect primary data from the respondents. It consisted of 18 questions for teenagers and 22 questions for parents. A random sampling method was used to collect data from respondents, and the total sample was 120 teenagers and 120 parents from the *Niwithigala* Divisional Secretariat area, Ratnapura District, Sri Lanka. Niwithigala Divisional Secretariat area consists of three ethnic groups: Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim. The data gathered were analyzed using Excel sheets and thematic analysis.

Ethnicity	Sinhala		Tamil		Muslim		Total No. of Respondents
	M	F	M	F	M	F	
Gender							
Teenagers (Age Range 15-18)	20	20	20	20	20	20	120
Parents	20	20	20	20	20	20	120

Table 1: Breakdown of the Respondents

5. Findings and Discussion

According to the data gathered, the majority of teenagers (83.3%) and parents have their own mobile phones (92.9%). However, a few teenagers (16.7%) and parents (7.1%) do not own a mobile phone.



Figure 1: Do You Have a Mobile Phone?

Teenagers stated that they used mobile phones to access educational materials, communicate with peers and teachers, and participate in virtual learning environments during the pandemic. Figure 2 indicates that, at present, the majority of teenagers use mobile phones for entertainment (60%), education (16%) and gaming (14%). A few of them use it to communicate (2%) with others and other (8%) purposes. The majority of parents use mobile phones mainly for communication purposes (86.5%). Other respondents use mobile phones for entertainment (7.4%), education (4%) and other (1.8%) purposes.



Figure 2: Purposes for Usage of Mobile Phones

The majority of teenagers (82%) use mobile phones more than four hours daily, while the majority of parents (65.4%) use mobile phones less than 2 hours daily. According to figure 3, it is interpreted that teenagers are heavy users and parents are light users.

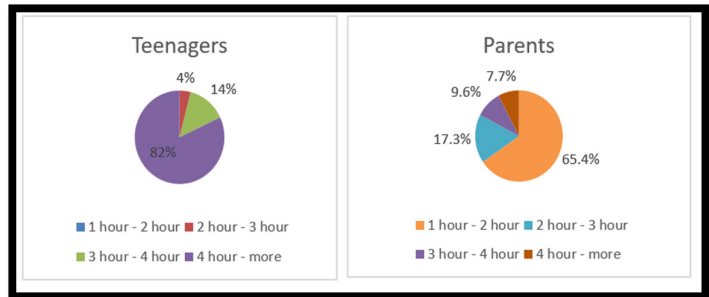


Figure 3: How Many Hours a Day Do You Use the Mobile Phone?

Unlike teenagers, the majority of parents spend more time with family. However, both of them have been using mobile devices during family conversations, which has disturbed the quality of their conversations. The majority of the respondents (61.8%) say that the relationship has changed after using a mobile phone, and fewer respondents (38.2%) answer that the relationship did not change (Figure 4).

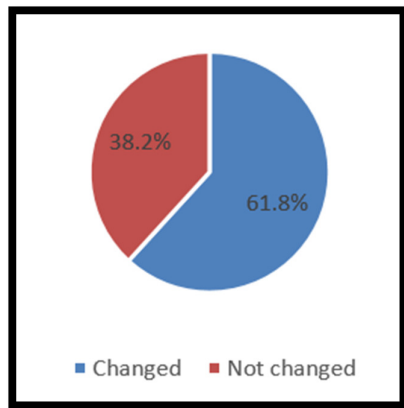


Figure 4: How Was the Connection between You and Your Child After He/She Had a Mobile Phone?

Most of the respondents, including parents and teenagers, faced misunderstandings because of excessive use of mobile phones (72.4%), and they cleared up the misunderstanding by meeting the person physically (55.9%). Others use methods such as calling and chatting to clear up misunderstandings (17%). In addition, a significant number of respondents have not faced any misunderstandings while using their mobile phones (27.1%). The majority of the respondents agree that the use of mobile phones is beneficial for family relationships. However, a few of the respondents answered "No."

While the majority of both parents and teenagers strongly agreed to the statement that mobile phone consumption creates distance in the family, few of them think that mobile phones do not cause distance in the family. The majority of teenagers and parents think that mobile phone leads to other consequences as well. Due to this situation in families, most of the parents prefer face-to-face communication to mobile communication. Meanwhile, the majority of teenagers think that mobile communication is a better way to socialize. However, the majority of parents think that mobile communication is not a better way to socialize.

Finally, the results show that teenagers consume mobile phones as heavy users to entertain, educate and for gaming. Parents consume 1-2 hours daily, and their main purpose is to communicate with children and others. Parents agreed that their children had to use mobile phones during COVID-19 for online education, and they use mobile phones for other purposes as well. Moreover, parents emphasized that the relationship between teenagers and parents has changed due to the excessive use of mobile phones. Thus, overall, the results show that teenagers' excessive use of mobile phones has negatively affected the relationship between parents and teenagers.

6. Conclusion

Findings of the research revealed that the use of mobile phones by teenagers has clearly increased since the COVID-19 pandemic in a limited period of four years from 2020-2023 in Sri Lanka. Teenagers are increasingly using mobile phones for everyday communication, education, and gaming, and they consider mobile phones to be an essential part of their daily lives. Although parents use mobile phones for communication purposes, they do not spend as much time as teenagers. Mobile phones have affected the parent-child relationship both positively and negatively. However, the majority believes that the negative effects are greater than the positive ones. Interpersonal communication between the two groups has weakened because teenagers spend more time communicating with mobile phones. It does not take a different shape on the basis of ethnicity, and differences can be seen only on the basis of gender. On the other hand, in families with limited phone use or no phone use, the interpersonal relationship between parents and teenagers is more intense. According to parents, the mobile phone has helped to create a sense of security for teenagers.

It has been found that misunderstandings among teenage boys have increased due to the use of mobile phones. This problematic condition shows more growth in texting. Except for a few teenagers, most of them engaged in face-to-face communication to solve the problem. Finally, it is obvious that the excessive use of mobile phones is primarily responsible for dismantling the parent-child relationship day by day.

7. Suggestions for Future Research

This study has revealed several possible areas for future research, particularly in the methodology used to undertake a study of this nature. Future research should consider using a mixed-method research design approach, which will most likely yield more in-depth and holistic findings to describe the impact of mobile phones on interpersonal relationships. Both quantitative and qualitative research can be conducted with different respondents.

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