

Mobiles in the family: Parents, children and the third person effect

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Considerable research has been amassing recently on the mobile as perceived and utilized by adults as well as by children and youth. However, the role of the mobile *within* the family and specific parent-child relationships as parents and their *own* children perceive them has rather neglected. This paper attempts to fill this void by exploring the seeming generation gap between parents and their children regarding the prevalence of mobiles in childhood and youth culture in Israel. Following focus groups conducted separately with ten families – parents and children together – a random national telephone survey was carried out in October 2004 with 609 parents (mother or father) who had at least one child aged 8-18. Parents of the 205 children who did not own a mobile explained why. Several general questions were put to the 404 parents who reported that their child had his/her own mobile, followed by questions concerning one randomly selected child mobile-owner in the family. At the end of the interview, the parent was asked permission to interview the target child at a later stage; 210 parents agreed and 105 of the children, nearly equally divided by gender and age were interviewed via their mobile within the subsequent two months. This paper focuses on the data of the 105 parent-child pairs.

Quite surprisingly, both parents and their children discussed the mobile mostly in very positive terms, associating it mainly with a need for connectedness and a sense of personal safety, which can easily be understood in the current Israeli context. The mobile was clearly perceived by both parents and children as encouraging independence and personal growth, as it is associated with responsibility and sociability. While mobile technology could also be viewed as potentially restrictive encouraging more parental domination and control, in fact, children seemed to accept and internalize the financial restrictions with very little resistance. There was no expressed concern over intrusive or otherwise undesirable phone calls, nor was there a critical tone over the disruptive potential of the mobile for family and social life in public places. However, at the same time, both the parents and their children tended to distance themselves from negative behaviors associated with the mobile by ascribing them to “other” children. This is much in line with the *third person effect* hypothesis, according to which people believe that the media do not affect *them* (and in this case – their children) but “others.” We believe that this third person effect is an interesting phenomenon and worthy of further exploration.