

Cataclysmic or enchanting: The impact of private spaces on broader social interaction amongst teenagers

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Abstract

Interactive enabled communications technology developments have had a tremendous impact on modern society. Teenagers, in particular, have enthusiastically embraced these technologies and consider them an important element in their lives. This has resulted in the emergence of a new communication culture.

This research paper discusses the impact that cellphones and the internet have had on social interaction amongst teenagers. In particular, the blurring of the boundaries between the private and public spheres of their everyday lives, and the impact of the language used in private spaces on teenagers' interaction in public spaces, are explored.

Introduction

The advent of interactive enabled communications technology has added a new layer of communication and social networking to the interactive arena. More recently, the cellphone in particular is becoming a platform for social and information access that has become ubiquitous in all of the settings of everyday life. However, while this evolving palette of technologies has demonstrated the ability to capture the attention of young people, the social implications are currently elusive.

While social networks provide space for various critical forms of sociality, the underlying architecture of the virtual environment is fundamentally different from the physical architecture that adults grew up with and have become accustomed to. There is a growing recognition that teenagers' passion for these social networks is being ignited more by peer group sociability and play than academic learning. Subsequently there are increasing concerns of communications technology within schools. There are parental and public fears about the implications of this technology and its impact on behaviour. For example, recent public debates over the value of Mxit (an instant messaging application available for free download to GPRS or 3G enabled cellphones), highlighted fears concerning its addictiveness, use during school hours and sharing of explicit information amongst other aspects. It signals the current struggle between parents, children and the wider community about the meaning and changes brought about through the pervasiveness of communications technology within their children's lives.

Furthermore, the increasing presence of school violence in urban schools has sparked concerns as to whether children are finding it difficult to engage and communicate amongst each other, more so in resolving conflict, without resorting to violence – the possible result of increasing time spent on superficial digital interactive 'drive-by' relationships at the expense of deeper face-to-face discussion and companionship with friends.

Subsequently, there is an impending development gap incipient as teenagers are increasingly involved and developing in this 'informal learning and development' environment, which has yet to coalesce into a defined set of frameworks. This gap between in-school and out-of-school experience represents a gap in teenagers' engagement in learning and development, a gap in the research front and a missed opportunity to reenergise marketers' focus and resonance with their respective teenage market(s).

This research study seeks to address this gap in understanding one specific emergent mode of informal learning that teenagers are practising using communications technology – communication. In this context communication pertains to the manner in which communications technology is changing the scale, scope and dynamics of teenagers' social environment, especially their behaviour. Hence, communication is a form of social interaction where one or more individuals share a common set of signs, language and behavioural norms.

Research focus and hypothesis

The capacity for interaction, participation and permanence of communications technology represents a disjuncture from teenagers' previous engagements in public and private spaces, creating dilemmas over schools' and parents' own ability to understand and prepare their children for adulthood. This in turn impacts upon the manner in which teenagers physically interact in public spaces, including the corporate environment.

The primary objective of this study was to understand the impact of communications technology on the behaviour of teenagers in public spaces.

The aim of this study was also to address the following key areas:

- How are teenagers incorporating communications technology into their daily lives? In particular, focusing on the following methods of communication:
 - text messaging (SMS and e-mail)
 - blogging
 - websites (including chat-rooms)
- What is the impact of virtual social networks on the development of collaborative and communication skills amongst teenagers? Do these social skills affect their behaviour or participation in public spaces or their social development?
- How do teenagers interact from a linguistic perspective in maintaining conversational coherence in virtual social networks?
- What is the impact of language used in virtual social networks on teenagers' interaction in public spaces?

It is hypothesised that teenagers are finding it difficult to clearly express themselves in public spaces, often finding freedom of expression behind a gadget in the virtual environment. Hence, the researcher is of the notion that teenagers are participating in online social environments where they can freely exchange ideas enabling new kinds of identity formation, affiliation, community and reputation.

Subsequently, for an increasing number of teenagers these identities and social environments are likely to be nearly as influential and identity-shaping as those mediated by traditional home and school frameworks.

Methodology

As the purpose of this study was to explore and understand the manner in which communications technology is changing the scope and dynamics of teenagers' social environment, a qualitative framework was adopted. The analysis draws on two qualitative research methods, ethnography and in-depth interviews. Ethnography in the form of participant-observation was used to openly explore the manner in which teenagers communicate in social networks. According to Agar (1996), participant-observation enables the collection of data on a wide range of behaviours, to capture a great variety of interactions. Participant-observation was furthermore conducted on two kinds of sites that are often frequented by teenagers – physical places and virtual spaces.

The physical places included areas popular amongst teenagers where they are typically engaged in social networks using communications technology, such as after-school 'meeting points'. Short thematic interviews were conducted in these areas in order to minimise the possible influence of authority, to get teenagers to discuss openly and to retain their attention. Similarly, the virtual spaces included online communities with a huge teenage composition. In this instance, content analysis of narratives was conducted on a continuous basis in order to gain a better understanding from teenagers' point of view. In both instances the focus was on teenagers aged 13 – 19 as this comprises a major user segment of interactive communications technology. However, throughout the study the researcher recognised that it is harder to create an age-based boundary in online communities as participation is not generally limited by age.

The second qualitative research method used included in-depth interviews amongst teenagers and key informants including industry experts and academics. In-depth interviews were conducted as they enable elicitation of rich, detailed material that could be used in analysis. A semi-structured discussion guide was followed to ensure that all relevant items were covered while retaining the flexibility and exploratory nature of qualitative research. The data was analysed by means of a process of thematic content analysis, which aims to delineate recurring themes emerging after numerous reading of the texts (Patton, 2001).

As the research study involved teenagers, ethical guidelines were followed in order to ensure they expressed their views freely without duress. Furthermore, this was to comply with market research industry standards. Hence, a consent form specifically designed for adolescents by the Centre for Social Science Research (CSSR) was utilised (see Appendix 1).

The following is the profile of industry experts and academics who participated in the study:

Industry experts	Academics
Managing Director/online behaviour expert – Netucation	Senior Lecturer: Family Sociology – University of Pretoria
Managing Director – World Wide Worx	Lecturer: Sociology – University of Johannesburg
Director – TNS Research Surveys	Project Leader: MobilED - Meraka Institute
CEO – Amorphous	Senior Lecturer: Psychology – North West University
Director – Childline SA	
Psychologist - Film and Publication Board	

Table 1: Profile of in-depth interview respondents

Literature review

“We strive to connect”

The manner in which individuals interact in public spaces has long been a topical issue. This has been attributed to observations as to the differences in the manner in which individuals are able to get along with each other, or more precisely, manage their interpersonal experiences.

The above fascination led to the identification of two kinds of ‘intelligence’, namely social intelligence and emotional intelligence. According to Albrecht (2005), “We all know a person with a ‘toxic’ personality, who after interacting with leaves you feeling inadequate, angry, frustrated or guilty. Similarly, there are those individuals with ‘magnetic’ personalities, people who make you feel good and want to go back for more.” This translates into the fact that when individuals interact in public spaces there is a form of transference of emotional cues while interacting. Individuals with social intelligence are easily able to enrich relationships and can easily get along with other individuals. Hence, social intelligence means being smart in relationships by being able to sense what others are feeling and their intentions, and in turn having the social skills to act on that information. As a result, instead of just saying what one thinks, social intelligence is that aspect that enables individuals to stop and listen to the other person, and fine-tune their response to them.

Emotional intelligence on the other hand pertains to the manner in which individuals are able to perceive emotions and manage them in a manner that benefits all parties in a given situation. According to Mayer, et al (1999), emotional intelligence comprises of a four branch model, namely perceiving emotion, facilitating thought, understanding emotions and managing emotions.

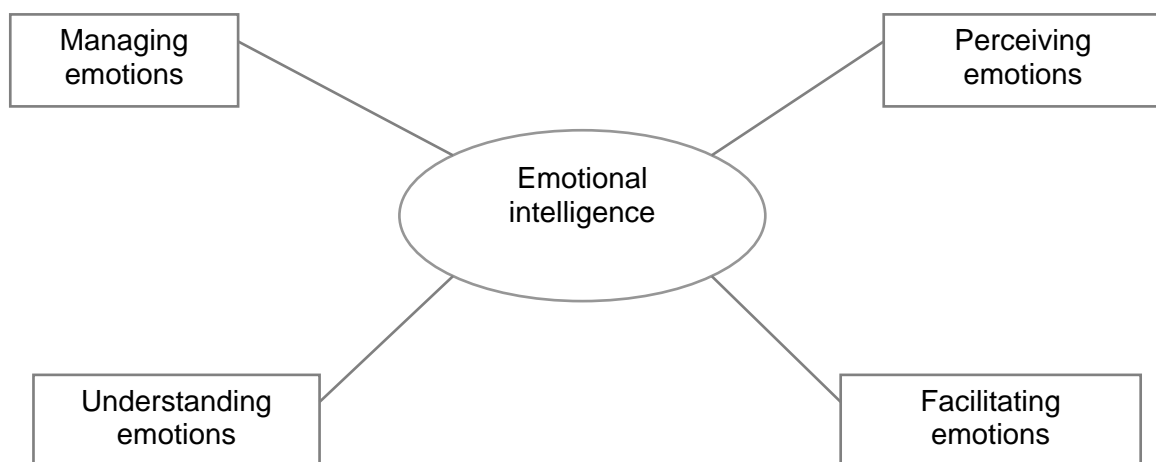


Figure 1: The four branches of emotional intelligence

- Perceiving emotion: This relates to the non-verbal reception and expression of emotion. Hence, facial expressions such as happiness, sadness, anger and fear relate to the manner in which individuals express emotions.
- Facilitating thought: This is the capacity of the emotions to enter into and guide the cognitive system and promote thinking. Therefore, something an individual responds to emotionally, is something that grabs their attention.
- Understanding emotions: Emotions convey information. As a result, each emotion conveys a specific pattern of possible messages, and actions associated with these messages.
- Managing emotions: Lastly, emotions can be managed. As a result individuals are able to learn how to regulate and manage one's own and others' emotions in seeking to fulfil personal and social goals.

Hence, through embracing both social and emotional intelligence an individual is easily able to navigate the social world in an effective manner, accomplishing his or her goals as needed.

As with any cognitive skill, both social and emotional intelligence are acquired aptitudes that are learnt and developed from childhood through to adulthood, with adolescence an essential development stage. To support the above, according to Walsh (2004), "The brain circuits that are under construction during the teen years have to do with impulse control, management of aggression, emotional regulation and self regulation."

At this point, it is essential to provide an overview of the period of adolescence that teenagers are going through at this stage in their lives as this has implications for the research findings.

Adolescence: "Who am I and where do I belong?"

"Adolescence is first and foremost an economic and institutional construction, invariably marked less by chronological age and biological stage as it is by the conditions and realities established by formal education, the law and employment in the marketplace" (Thurlow, 2005).

Turning now to the issue of adolescents and the transition from childhood to adulthood, this is undoubtedly a profound and complex period. Adolescence is perhaps the period where there is the least stability. Very little of the foundation that will form the edifice of an individual's life are in place during adolescence. While parents comprise the major sphere of influence during childhood, adolescence often entails breaking the shackles of ones parents and transcending into a more independent and emancipated period of life.

According to Rubin (2007), "This is perhaps the only time in our lives when friends come fully to centre stage, transcending all other relationships in immediate importance as they engage us on a daily basis around every aspect of living".

Adolescence is, in many respects, an alternative and competing focus to the family. During this life stage, friendships often take on a more active and vital dimension in the life of a teenager. As a result there is often an element of generational conflict in that while parents may not consider their work of parenthood to be completed, the teenager is active in their development of an identity separate from the family. It is during this period in life that an individual becomes skilled at interacting with others, learns how to negotiate within different situations, is exposed to the expectations of the working world and develops personal values and identity. This equips them with the knowledge that they will use when tackling everyday situations, in addition to preparing them for the issues that they will face as adults.

During adolescence, relationships with friends become a significant aspect of one's life. This is because friendships are social institutions that enable individuals to develop their own identity. Friends typically provide an individual with a sense of self-esteem, belonging, emotional support, advice and information. They make one sensitive to the needs of others, vulnerable among equals and generally, perhaps for the first time allow one to obtain insight into social interaction outside the family. The group one belongs to is often defined by a repertoire of traits including language, clothing, music and nicknames. These sub-cultural traits and other social devices, including the cellphone, are used to mark the boundary between the groups. This highlights the interactive nature experienced during adolescence as teenagers are actively involved in defining their identity and values, in comparison to childhood.

According to Huebner (2000), one of the psychosocial issues that teenagers deal with during their adolescent years is the establishment of an identity through the integration of opinions of influential others, including parents and friends. Hence, while interacting socially, teenagers become increasingly aware of and react to the feedback that they receive from others in the environment. They adjust their body posture, facial expressions and their general appearance. Subsequently, friendships provide the first setting in which teenagers can practice their social skills with those who are their equals. It is with friends that teenagers learn how to begin, maintain and terminate relationships, practice social skills and become open, caring and trusting.

Teen sociality in social networks

"Today's youth are different from any generation before them. They are exposed to communications technology in virtually all facets of their day-to-day existence...a communications revolution is shaping a generation and its world" (Tapscott, 1998).

While today's teenagers are undoubtedly recognised to be developing in unparalleled environments from any generation before them, one of the most important implications of communications technology within households is that it could be changing teenagers' social interaction with their closest ties. Social interaction is a negotiation of identities between individuals in a given environment (Johnson, 2003). As individuals engage socially, they project aspects of their internal identity into a social identity for others to perceive. Subsequently, in order to assess what is appropriate, people draw from situational and interpersonal contextual cues.

As such, social networks provide teenagers with a space to engage in cultural identity development. By engaging in social networks, teenagers learn the cultural signals that surround them and incorporate these cultural elements into their life.

However, in a constantly evolving environment, an increasing amount of teenagers have different access to the types of social environments which most of their parents grew up in. A case in point regarding these increasingly differing environments are social networks such as MXit, which are emerging to provide South African teenagers with a seemingly necessary forum for peer engagement. In October 2006 MXit had more than 1,8 million South African users (Business Day). Astonishingly, at the time of writing this report (April 2007) MXit had more than three million users, most of whom are under the age of twenty-five.

“You just don’t understand!”

Undoubtedly, the adolescent period is a distinctive period in a teenager’s life. It is a period in which friends are essential. Furthermore, communication amongst friends is important. This is because interpersonal communication is an important resource with which teenagers develop a sense of self, a sense of other and a sense of the social world in which they live. In addition, the social interaction encountered during this life stage shapes their linguistic, social, emotional and cognitive development skills and is the primary means by which teenagers arrive at a new understanding. Consequently, the identity of the teenager as well as the manner in which friendships and other relationships are maintained relies, to a huge degree on ones ability to communicate.

Focus on the role of communication in structuring and facilitating the lives of teenagers has been gaining momentum over the years, albeit at an international level. This has been attributed to several elements including the more transactional value of communication as an obvious identificational and relational resource (Thurlow, 2006). As previously mentioned, during adolescence teenagers are at a life stage whereby they are in the process of exploring and sustaining their relationships with friends, parents and siblings, and must necessarily learn to understand others feelings, goals, social rules and minds. Arguably, a significant amount of this learning is dependent upon their being proficient and self-aware communicators.

As friendships provide the first setting in which teenagers can practice their social skills with those who are their equals, and hence enabling the creation of their identity, communication is of paramount importance. It is for this reason that teenagers have long been recognised to create their own language and other stylistic practices within their groups. As such, language is arguably a resource with which teenagers construct their social meaning within society. According to Rickford and Eckert (1988), style creates ‘in’ groups, differentiating them from outcasts or the ‘not cool’ groups. Style is what defines and marks one group as distinct from another. However, the language used often goes beyond group labels, as it also constructs identity as much as clothing, music, jewellery (be it that worn by teenage females and males) and so forth. Hence, these elements are often used by teenagers to indicate a set of stances, beliefs, attitudes and values, a form of a lifestyle that in turn indicates the group they belong to.

As a versatile means of maintaining group boundaries, slang has long been utilised by teenagers. This has been attributed to teenagers wanting to create distance from adults and other groups in seeking to fulfil their needs to feel empowered, create identity and obtain a sense of belonging. Subsequently, slang is ever-changing and innovative, the result of teenagers wanting to maintain their distance from adults and other groups, who often learn and use the language or ‘code’ in seeking to associate and interact with teenagers.

Unfortunately, the above developments in teenagers' use of language, have resulted in concerns for the representation of their communication. Research conducted by Drury (1999) indicated how adults in authority typically perceive teenagers' communication as unskilled and unmotivated compared to that of adults. Consequently, there is an inherent power imbalance in these relationships, further straining relationships between adults and teenagers.

Findings

So why are virtual communities attractive to teenagers?

- **Identity creation – “I’ve got the power!”**

The manner in which the virtual environment enables teenagers to hide their identity through the use of pseudo names facilitates the experimentation of their identities. Hence, while in the real environment teenagers often have to accept the names given by their parents, the boundless nature of the virtual environment permits the creation of their own identities. As a result one often encounters eccentric pseudo names in the virtual environment, as illustrated below.

Elektra	Lithium	Creasy	Go2Go
SuperChica	Naughty	Pastel	Magic-lips
Kaytee	Radiogaga	Dragonfly	Rishka
MissSEXY	Enigma	Gotcha_gurl	Kitty cat

Table 2: Sample pseudo names

In the past, the group one belongs to has often been defined by a repertoire of traits including language, clothing, music and nicknames in public spaces. Often teenagers felt that they did not fit in groups and were isolated from others. However, in the virtual environment the element of invisibility enables teenagers the courage to interact in a manner that they previously would not have done in the past. Teenagers often do not have to worry about what they are wearing or how they sound. Also, they do not have to worry about how others will react as in public spaces whereby seeing a frown, shaking a head, a bored expression and similar subtle signs of disapproval often limits what teenagers are willing to express. Not only do virtual environments enable teenagers to belong to groups based on their underlying needs and interests without discriminating through their clothing for example, by engaging with others in the virtual environment one would expect this to provide them with the confidence to interact in public spaces.

- **“Show me the money...well, not really”**

There was constant mention of costs playing an influential role in the widespread use of communications development technologies amongst teenagers. Industry experts and academics acknowledged that there has been a drastic reduction in the costs, especially text messaging, while teenagers were naturally more receptive towards this aspect. Reference was made to the manner in which certain instant messaging application programs enable teenagers to keep connected anytime and anywhere as a result of the negligible costs.

“The best part of MXit is that it is insanely cheap, which means that you can chat for hours and only end up using up about a rand a time! This for us ‘always broke’ people is like heaven.” (Elektra: teenager)

However, while the relatively low costs were considered to be one of the elements contributing towards popularity and positive reception towards the interactive technologies, amongst teenagers who used the normal cellphone packages, costs were considered to be their major downfall. Subsequently, several mentioned preferring prepaid cellphone packages as they considered them to be easier to control costs.

"The disadvantage of having a cellphone (for me) is that I loose track of how much I use it and often my bill at the end of the month is hair-raising." (Go2Go: teenager)

"You shouldn't use a contract SIM card. If you have prepaid then you can keep track of how much you're spending!" (Naughty: teenager)

- **"We live in a boundless society"**

Constant mention arose as to communications technology developments having enabled the creation of larger social networks, as it is easier to establish contacts and forge relationships than in the past. Reference was made to the increasing popularity in blogging which is encouraging interaction in public spaces, as public meetings are set-up amongst members of the respective virtual communities. In addition, not only are relationships within ones physical surroundings, but they are now able to extend to global communities.

Accessibility to larger social networks enables teenagers to broaden their relationships through interacting with individuals from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. Exposure and knowledge of diverse cultures facilitates appreciation and tolerance of other individuals in public spaces. Hence, through greater social interaction in public spaces teenagers will become more appreciative of each others diverse socio-cultural backgrounds.

While teenagers are exposed to diverse cultures in private spaces, clearly present is the existence of niche communities or groups. A case in point includes identities in the virtual environment having previously probed on each others age, sex and language (a/s/l) in introducing and getting to know one another. However, what has now emerged is that teenagers not only seek to find out other's age, sex and language, but also race is now included (a/s/l/r). Unfortunately, the subsequent result may be the re-emergence of racial boundaries as communication in public spaces will be amongst niche communities of similar racial background as they organise to meet in physical spaces.

The ability of the cellphone to directly contact a person has enabled teenagers to be more flexible and spontaneous than in the past. It allows them quick access to information on the group's whereabouts and thus facilitates swift mobilisation. As a result teenagers are thought to be able to arrange and rearrange their social functions and activities quickly which is leading to a more fluid culture. Constant reference was made to the ease with which teenagers are now able to arrange parties on the spur of the moment through text messaging. Hence, cellphones and email have enabled greater connectivity amongst teenagers.

While cellphones and emails facilitate swift mobilisation which is leading to a more fluid culture amongst teenagers, pre-planning activities conducted amongst past generations are consequently facing eradication in the future. This could lead to inferior long-term planning skills as focus will likely be on short-term objectives and activities. Subsequently, a culture whereby contingency planning does not exist may evolve, which may have huge implications when direct human interaction is required as a result of the unexpected collapse of technological paraphernalia. However, the fluidity established through swift mobilisation may also contribute towards productive utilisation of time in instances whereby last-minute changes are made, as these individuals will grow up becoming accustomed to such. Furthermore, teenagers are likely to be able to come up with immediate short-term alternatives.

Virtual communities are not only exclusive to peers, they can also extend to other family members. Therefore communications technology developments can enable teenagers to interact with their parents in increasingly single parent households. Hence, the cellphones and email allow teenagers to communicate and coordinate with their non-resident parent without needing to go through the filtering of the resident parent. It may therefore be contended that the aforementioned situation is to an extent contributing towards teenagers being raised by both parents, albeit a 'diluted' relationship with the one. In turn, communication with both parents enables teenagers to be nurtured in a 'balanced' environment with access to the supportive elements found in the respective parents.

So what's actually happening in teenage cyberspace?

Teenage websites and blogs, which resemble online diaries, are increasingly popular spaces for teenagers as they provide them with a platform to share music, videos and photos as well as write about their experiences, thoughts and feelings about their everyday lives. Websites and blogs popular amongst teenagers included international sites such as Myspace and Facebook, and local sites such as 24.com and SATeenz. However, due to the limited time available to undertake this research study, focus was on the local sites. Furthermore, identification of South African teenagers on the global websites and blogs would be a cumbersome task, considering the limited time period of the research study.

Analysis of the blogs highlighted the large amount of individuals who form these communities, with growth increasing exponentially. At the time of writing this report SATeenz (www.sateenz.co.za) for example had a total of 8 575 registered members, excluding guests who often visit and interact on the website. As such, the social connections established on these virtual networks enhance teenagers' social connections, helping them to meet new people and maintain existing relationships.

"I have been on SATeenz long enough to have noticed something very important that most of us rarely think about. SATeenz helps us to meet new people everyday and enables us to make good friends. I have met so many people on this site that I never thought I'd meet. The site allows us to share our feelings and emotions with one another, and many people on this site have helped me with a lot in my life. I would like to thank SATeenz for that." (Kelly: teenager)

Further analysis of teenage websites and blogs revealed that teenagers tend to discuss themes that impact on their everyday lives, such as intimate relationships, career choices, family relationships, music, entertainment, politics and current affairs. This resonates with the previously mentioned adolescent development literature that suggests teenagers are beginning to construct cohesive narratives of their lives in order to prepare for adulthood. Hence, websites and blogs provide a platform on which teenagers are able to develop and establish their beliefs and interaction skills through interacting with others, albeit in private spaces, which they can in turn transfer to public spaces. In addition, as blogs in particular provide profiles of the creator, they present teenagers with the opportunity to figure out who they are, an essential aspect of adolescence.

Exploration of the virtual communities reveals that they tend to have social characteristics. Many of the blogs provide links to other blogs, enabling the formation of both small and large communities. Hence, virtual communities provide teenagers with the opportunity to interact with individuals with similar and different views and opinions, which typically translates into the opportunity to appreciate and obtain insight into other individuals' opinions. Similarly, as websites and blogs provide readers with the opportunity to interact with authors, in terms of comments and feedback, teenagers are able to increase their social networks and connectivity.

The potential to build communities or interact with others through the virtual environment also represents a potentially positive outcome in terms of teenagers' social development. As adolescence is a period when teenagers are seeking support from their friends, the virtual environment is an ideal platform for this. However, not only are websites and blogs providing a platform for teenagers to share their experiences and opinions, several websites also provide teenagers with advice on everyday issues. A case in point is SATeenz which provides a section where teenagers can find links and telephone numbers for associations and organisations that are devoted to helping them in total confidentiality. Several of the links include the following:

PRASA (The Planned Parenthood Association of South Africa) which has reproductive health services that offer youth-friendly services that include, counselling, pregnancy testing and treating sexually transmitted diseases.

DrugWise which strives to provide an accessible community-based, multidisciplinary service for drug-related problems.

Childline offers a 24-hour toll-free helpline with trained counsellors to assist abused children, young people and their families.

Hence, the virtual environment is providing teenagers with havens whereby they are able to discuss, confidentially, issues that they feel are bad, frightening or confusing – adolescent issues.

“One girl supported another girl through the night because she wanted to commit suicide when she found out she was pregnant...it gave them the opportunity to support one another” (Project Leader: National Research Centre - industry)

The above may be contributing towards less interaction in public spaces, primarily within the household, as teenagers prefer, if not find it easier, to interact in private spaces. In turn, this may be contributing towards the continued struggle in the parent-teenager relationship.

An examination of relationships established on blogs highlighted a segment of blog authors who used the space to discuss their homosexuality. This would suggest that the invisibility element of the virtual environment is enabling teenagers to be more candid about their identity, while at the same time providing them with the opportunity to experiment with their identities.

What has emerged is the manner in which teenagers are now posting their school assignment problems on websites as they seek to obtain assistance from others. A case in point is a question posted on how to factor as illustrated below.

Question: *"I'm writing maths tomorrow and need help! How do you factor: $(x^4-y^2)(x^8+y^4)(x^4+y^2)$ "*

Answer: *" x^4 is a common factor for x and y^2 is a common factor for y so you take them out, simplify and work from there..."*

While this highlights the information sourcing benefits of the internet, what may be ensuing is less brainstorming amongst teenagers with regard to discussing and solving their assignments. Unfortunately less interaction translates into less opportunity, let alone appreciation for others' viewpoints, in addition to a reduction in the development of their social skills due to lack of discussion on how to solve and answer their school assignments.

However, as blogs resemble online diaries where teenagers write about their everyday lives, they have the potential to foster and improve teenagers' communication and writing skills, the latter which shall be expanded upon in the following section.

"U rilly dnt undstnd – its gr8 2b free¹"

Focusing on the language used amongst teenagers in private spaces this was a particularly contentious issue amongst academics and industry experts. Constant interaction in the virtual environment and the creation of blogs was considered to be enabling teenagers to be proficient in typing and creativity. As a result, teenagers are able to develop their identity and sense of self-esteem in these private spaces.

The emergence of a common language using text messaging was thought to be a natural development as teenagers want to create distance from adults and other groups in seeking to fulfil their need to feel empowered, create identity and obtain a sense of belonging. However, the actual language used was constantly considered to be an issue of concern. While acknowledged to be a form of slang created and developed amongst teenagers, several academics were of the opinion that text messaging is a different form of slang. This was mostly attributed to the limited number of characters (160) each SMS allows, which is considered to have necessitated the creation and use of fewer letters or abbreviations in seeking to clearly convey a message.

¹ You really don't understand – it's great to be free

The following are some of the common abbreviations and symbols often used to convey a message when text messaging:

LOL - Laugh out loud	U - You	☹ - Sad	Lil – Little
GR8 - Great	Evry1 - Everyone	KWL - Cool	B4 – Before
L8 - Later	;) - Winking (joke)	Hols - Holidays	Nxt - Next
CU - See you	☺ - Smile/happy	Wot - What	4 - For

Table 3: The language of text (including emoticons)

“But, for my own part, it was Greek to me¹”

Academics were particularly sceptical about the impact of the language used in virtual social networks on teenagers’ interaction in public spaces. It was thought that text messaging was becoming a major obsession amongst teenagers as they are constantly seen engaged on their cellphones. The reductionism of text messaging was considered to be harmful particularly to teenagers’ grammar and spelling as they find it difficult adapting to the real environment. Academics mentioned often encountering worsening grammar and spelling mistakes in assignments handed in by teenagers, as they find it difficult clearly expressing themselves. Hence, there is concern that the cryptic nature of text messaging is likely to result in teenagers being misunderstood, hampering their communication skills.

The following are several examples obtained from the SATeens website illustrating the language used by teenagers when text-messaging.

“KWL GR8 Stuff I am glad 4 you” (Cool, great stuff, I am glad for you)

“Yea 2 of my x bfs are from ballito” (Yes, two of my ex-boyfriends are from Ballito)

“So wot u in the mood for steers, spur, mcdee’s? it up to u” (So what are you in the mood for, Steers, Spur or McDonalds? It’s up to you)

“M doing fyn. Dat wld b gr8 if u passed by. Was actly thnkin abt textin u nw” (I am doing fine. That would be great if you passed by. I was actually thinking about texting you now)

Industry experts were slightly more upbeat about text messaging as they considered it to have enabled teenagers to develop a language themselves. Hence, text messaging was considered to be an enhancement of communication as teenagers have learnt to convey messages using fewer characters.

However, there was acknowledgement of the negative impact text messaging has had on teenagers’ grammatical skills. Subsequently, several suggested the need for the academic fraternity to somehow find a place for the language that has developed and make it appropriate even though it is different.

¹ Meaning it was unintelligible to me - Shakespeare's Julius Caesar

Analysis of the messages posted by teenagers on websites and blogs did indicate deficient grammatical and spelling skills as indicated below.

“That’s true, but tahst good in some ways, for them to make mor money SA needs to improve so it’s in there best interests”

“I think gotcha nos what hotties are”

“Your dad quite hectic, but everyone dad is”

Furthermore, teenage respondents who were asked regarding satisfaction with their linguistic skills did admit to having concerns.

“I have to re-read my varsity projects carefully before I hand them in because spelling has become a real problem for me” (Cindy, teenager)

While teenagers are acknowledged to be using emoticons, icons resembling how they feel at that particular moment, in seeking to clearly convey their message, this is not considered to be effective enough in conveying non-verbal cues. Although emoticons are commonly used it is argued that they do not minimise the occurrence of misinterpretation of the intended message. This is attributed to the fact that the lack of face-to-face cues often creates ambiguity. Without hearing a person’s voice or seeing body language and facial expressions, this increases the likelihood of misinterpretation.

Living in parallel worlds – The struggle continues

The identity creation and experimentation virtual social networks enable is resulting in teenagers living in two different worlds. Hence, while teenagers may be well respected within their virtual social networks, their roles are often reversed in the real world where parents are often the authoritative figures. In this context it may be argued that the above is contributing towards teenagers facing difficulties in reality, as they seek to align themselves simultaneously in both the real and virtual environments. Hence, through living in what may be termed ‘parallel’ environments teenagers may be finding it frustrating in the real environment where boundaries or rules often exist, in comparison to the boundless virtual environment. This could explain the diminishing respect teenagers have for elders and parents as they seek to shift their virtual identities into the real world – contributing towards the loss in social etiquette that is emerging.

On the positive side though, the ability to experiment with one’s identity in the virtual environment may enable teenagers to understand and explore themselves, to work through problems and find better ways of relating to others in public spaces.

The socio-emotional impact of virtual communities

There is a general observation that many people now choose to text rather than talk on their cellphone. This is thought to have led to a loss of integrity as individuals do not take responsibility in dealing with issues directly, with the use of text messaging in cancelling or postponing meetings at the last minute a common reference point. It could be argued that the manner in which text messaging is enabling individuals to interact indirectly, lacking the human touch, is resulting in a less committed society, with tentative meetings becoming the norm.

The nature with which individuals interact through text messaging or email has resulted in less pressure on the individual to respond immediately and more time to think about the response. This, in comparison to communication on the phone where there is expectation and hence pressure for constant conversation.

Psychological studies conducted by Argyle (1988), concluded that more than 65% of the information exchanged during a face-to-face interaction is through non-verbal means. For this reason, non-verbal communication is justifiably an important aspect of real life face-to-face interaction and one of the most efficient ways to convey emotions. This is attributed to the fact that body postures and movements give substance to face-to-face interaction between individuals. They complement spoken messages by helping people express their feelings or thoughts through the use of body language, facial expressions and tone of voice. Subsequently, while the lack of human interaction may lead to a higher likelihood of misinterpretation of messages in the virtual environment, of greater significance is the manner in which teenagers will likely find it difficult to engage in public spaces as a result of deficient social skills.

“In terms of human sexual development, how do you do that without that engagement, without body language? What the body is saying is much more powerful than what the lips are saying” (Director, Counselling service - industry)

Furthermore, as teenagers find it challenging to interact in public spaces this will impact on the nature of their intimate relationships. Not only will they encounter difficulties in expressing their feelings and emotions in face-to-face encounters, as virtual spaces do not allow for utilisation of non-verbal communication, handling personal conflict encounters will be problematic. Consequently, a double-edged sword may be looming. On the one hand teenagers may shy away from establishing intimate relationships in public spaces, preferring to establish relationships in the virtual environment. On the other hand they may find it difficult managing and maintaining their relationships in public spaces, having become accustomed to ‘drive-by’ relationships in private spaces. Subsequently, a situation may arise amongst teenagers whereby intimacy between them develops too rapidly, which may result in regret, anxiety, and a hasty termination of relationships as they find it challenging to resolve disagreements amicably. This may lead to a higher incidence of single households and/or divorce rates in the future.

Related to the above is the manner in which private spaces due to their anonymity and identity experimentation are enabling teenagers to be ‘socially promiscuous’. While in public spaces the nature of relationships is more intimate and individuals often find it difficult to engage in multiple intimate relationships spontaneously, in virtual environments this is often easier to occur. In essence, what may be arising is a less relationship-committed society further increasing the likelihood of single households.

Traditionally, social relationships unfold in alternating phases of interactions and latency where the separated partners simply memorise their past interactions, imagine what they may be currently doing and thinking, and prepare themselves for future encounters. It may be argued that such interruptions may be essential when time for reflection or cooling down emotionally is needed, in order to ensure that over-spontaneous reactions can be avoided. However, by being constantly connected, teenagers do not experience such interruptions and this could be contributing towards them finding it difficult to articulate their emotions in public spaces, as they are accustomed to immediate responses. As a result, cellphones and emails are seemingly diminishing such emotional oscillations which in the past have contributed towards structuring relations through reflections of possible adventures, reducing uniformity of activities and contributing towards development of solid intimate relationships.

Similarly, as virtual environments do not require one to respond immediately to what the other has said, teenagers typically have the time to think, evaluate and compose a reply. While face-to-face conversations typically require one to continuously assess how best to respond in a discussion without harming the other party, virtual environments do not enable such engagement. Unfortunately, should teenagers receive a message in public spaces that stirs them up emotionally, they are likely to find it difficult to control their emotions within these public spaces, often resulting in instant response as a defence mechanism – a knee-jerk reaction. It may be argued that the above situation could be contributing towards the increasing presence of violence in urban schools, as teenagers are finding it difficult to communicate and engage amongst each other when resolving conflict, without resorting to violence.

Unfortunately, as teenagers are not in direct contact with one another in the virtual environment they tend to interact without establishing the emotions behind the typed words of the other person, albeit probably unconsciously. As a result, profanities, inappropriate sexual remarks and other words of abuse are much easier to shoot off. Being able to hide behind their online anonymity makes the abuse even easier to inflict. Hence, without being given the opportunity to continuously assess how best to respond in a face-to-face discussion without hurting the other person, teenagers are not able to constructively develop their social and emotional intelligence.

Communications technology developments are considered to be resulting in teenagers reading less than in the past, as they are constantly engaged in their virtual social networks. As a result, there are thought to be less stimulating discussions and debates occurring as they find it demanding substantiating their beliefs, which in turn may result in deterioration of their social skills. Besides the impact this will have on teenagers' current interactions in public spaces, it may be contended that the development of future leaders is a matter of concern as they may not be able to persuasively debate their stance, motivate interest groups and politely delegate tasks amongst other leadership roles. While implications of the last point are imperative and definitely attention-grabbing, it shall not be expanded upon as it goes beyond the scope of this paper.

Overall, while admitting to an increase in spontaneous and widespread social interaction as a result of developments in communications technology, the general sentiment is that there has been a decline in the quality of face-to-face social interaction. However, be that as it may, while mention was made of developments in communications technology as having been positive and negative in the same breadth, the majority of respondents were of the opinion that the benefits outweighed the negatives. It is the manner in which communications technology developments are managed that will continue to be pivotal on the impact they have on individuals' everyday lives.

Undoubtedly, as in any new development it is at or immediately subsequent to its introduction, that suitable steps need to be taken to ensure that it contributes optimistically for the benefit of society. Hence, managing the manner in which the above mentioned communications technology developments are utilised within the respective institutions, namely adolescence, education and the work place, comprises the most fundamental aspect in ensuring their harmonious integration. Hence, parents for example can have some control of what their children are getting up to in the virtual environment if they get involved and show interest in what their children are getting up to.

The above viewpoint can be substantiated by the fact that all three segments, industry experts, academics and teenagers, acknowledged that while communications technology developments had evolved at an unprecedented rate, management of these developments is central in ensuring that they are not abused in a manner that will negatively impact on teenagers' cognitive and physical development.

"It is amusing to watch how society uses scapegoats to blame for things. Look at this situation, instead of saying that kids need to get off their arses and actually apply themselves at school, they blame it on these instant messaging programs! Honestly now, that is just illogical. Yes a lot of kids use these instant messaging programs, yes it's a new lil piece of techno that has come into SA – but if kids honestly wanted to study they would!" (Gotcha_gurl: teenager)

Communications technology developments: Cataclysmic or enchanting?

As discussed in the literature review, adolescence is a time of transcending the family boundaries and generating more extensive social networks. Subsequently, teenagers are pursuing ongoing interpersonal interaction, with communications technology developments having enabled them to coordinate their social lives to a far greater extent than past generations. The cellphone and email in particular have extended the ability to interact, enabling coordination free from the constraints of physical proximity. In this regard, communications technology has facilitated easier communication between teenagers.

There was general sentiment amongst industry experts and academics that communications technology developments have had a very significant impact on everyday life. The increasingly indispensable nature of communications technology was attributed to its enablement to access vast amounts of information which in turn is empowering and liberating teenagers.

Several mentions arose as to communications technology developments having enabled school-going children to have access to learning facilities. Specific reference was made to 'Doctor Mathematics', a Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) pilot initiative set up in Centurion which offers guidance on mathematics using the Mxit facility. Through the availability of tutors on cellphones children are able to SMS a question in order to obtain advice on how to tackle the question. This was thought to assist children in doing their homework, especially amongst those who are shy in class to ask questions in fear of being ridiculed by others.

Furthermore, developments in communications technology have enabled teenagers to interact with one another on a constant basis, anytime and anywhere. This in turn has enabled far better coordination of activities amongst friends and family, for example reducing the likelihood of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, as well as enabling quicker organisation of gatherings.

"Thanks to Mxit I've managed to keep in contact with friends who I stopped talking to ages ago and family that I hardly ever see" (Elektra: teenager)

"If it weren't for this instant messaging application program I would never have met -M- and PB and then I would never have told them about this site and then what kind of a dull place would this be hmmm? Lolz" (Hairyknees: teenager)

However, along with the above positive impacts on social development, there are negative aspects of teenagers' social development emerging from communications technology developments. Undeniably, there is consensus amongst both industry experts and academics that the lack of face-to-face human interaction in private spaces is a major drawback as it will result in teenagers not having greater opportunity to directly engage with other individuals, denying them the opportunity to develop their social interaction skills and value systems. As a result, teenagers will find it difficult to engage and interact in public spaces, which may lead to them experiencing frustrations as they seek to be heard in public.

Furthermore, the lack in non-verbal communication nuances facilitated through body language and facial expression was thought to be increasing the likelihood in misinterpretation of messages as non-verbal communication is none existent. Hence, if teenagers engage in limited forms of community engagement they are likely to encounter difficulties in understanding other peoples' situations resulting in loss of the essential value of empathy.

The pervasiveness of communications technology in everyday life was thought to be resulting in the distinction or separation of public and private spaces within communities becoming less pronounced. Hence, mentions arose as to the disruptive nature of cellphones in public gatherings as people are constantly on their cellphones. As a result, the cellphone in particular is thought to have resulted in the integration of physical place and a virtual space of conversational interaction. This in turn has led to the intrusion of cellphone conversations in public spaces reducing the amount of face-to-face interaction in today's everyday life – what can be termed 'uncontrolled intrusion of privacies'.

While mention was made of communications technology enabling teenagers to think before responding through the delayed response, conflicting thoughts arose as to the manner in which communication has become instantaneous particularly through SMS which has led to the expectation of an immediate response.

"It can be a chain around your neck as some of the people expect others to always have their cellphones on" (Managing director, Telecommunications research firm - industry)

This has resulted in the need for instant gratification which in turn has led to a huge amount of individuals finding themselves prisoners of their cellphones and emails. This self-inflicted social ill is considered to be exacerbating the intrusion of public spaces into individuals' private spaces. Furthermore, huge dependency on communications technology is resulting in the lack of foresight or planning as everything is expected to be conducted immediately.

"Most of us almost feel undressed if we leave home without our mobile phones, it almost gives us an anxiety attack" (Project Leader, National Research Centre - industry)

A major downfall that was highlighted was the addictive nature of these interactive technologies. The addictiveness was considered to be not only isolating teenagers from public spaces, but in addition creating a dependency syndrome, with concerns regarding the likely occurrence of withdrawal symptoms should these technologies be taken away from teenagers.

The above sentiments were confirmed by teenagers who acknowledged that one of the downfalls of these interactive technologies was their addictiveness.

"The problem with MXit is it's addictive: twisted: Whenever I'm bored I log on, sometimes for hours...resulting in some very hilarious situations...like the time I got needles and pins in my hands and lost al the feeling in them for at least 15 minutes...me eating my supper that night was not a pretty sight" (Elektra, teenager)

"It's (MXit) so freakin addictive I'm on constantly...it's the solution to a noisy class. I mean at skewl chat on MXit to evry1 therefor avoiding making noise and gttng into trouble" (Rishka, teenager)

"In the dec hols I was on for about 6 hours a nite talking to Matt and my wrists and thumbs got so sore!" (Tam, teenager)

"My phone is my life and without it I feel hopelessly lost. I once left it at my aunt's house for a day and nearly went crazy; I felt as if my world came crashing down – like I was cut off from social activities" (Cindy, teenager)

Apprehension arose as to what teenagers are going to do when they enter into the working environment. This is attributed to several elements including the private spaces teenagers are becoming accustomed to, the condensed nature of text messaging, in addition to their having ready access to the internet when undertaking their school assignments. Also as teenagers will be expected to write comprehensive reports, concerns arose as to their finding them extremely difficult to complete. The result of the above shortfalls will be the need for teenagers to learn and adapt to the corporate environment, translating into the need for organisations to spend more on training and development of new employees than in the past.

While organisations will need to commit more expenditure to training and development of these individuals, frustrations are likely to occur amongst both parties as the initial report submitted are likely to be unsatisfactory to the respective managers. Early frustration amongst the employees with their jobs may result in higher employee turnover, considering the manner in which they have grown up being accustomed to instant gratification. Subsequently, higher staff turnover will in turn result in the need for organisations to recruit and train new employees, creating a vicious circle.

Implications for marketers and researchers

“The role of communication has been radically altered in our society. The ability to manage or adapt to diverse communicative situations has become essential and the ability to interact with people with whom one has no personal acquaintance is crucial to acquiring even a small measure of personal and social control” (Gumperz and Gumperz, 1982)

Clearly evident is the manner in which the cellphone is providing teenagers with mobility in addition to a sense of independence, giving them a sense of control over their lives and independence from their families. This has several implications for marketers and researchers to consider in future.

In the past, marketers focus has traditionally been on asking consumers to watch, to listen, to play and to passively consume their products and services. However, there will be an increasing need for marketers to get consumers, present teenagers to create, produce and participate with their respective brands. This is mainly due to the creative urges that are present within teenagers as they create their websites and blogs and continuously interact in their relatively larger social networks than previous generations.

Opportunity will exist in the future for marketers to provide consumers with the means to create and distribute content, primarily through the internet. Furthermore, marketers will have to acknowledge the deep human needs for control that teenagers are currently experiencing. By getting these customers involved in designing products and services, including personalising these offerings, this will ensure that teenagers’ needs are satisfied.

The creation of larger social networks amongst teenagers presents marketers and researchers with unprecedented opportunity. The manner in which teenagers are exposed to enormous amounts of information in the media-saturated environment is resulting in them discarding messages that are not attention-grabbing, let alone relevant, at a faster rate than in the past. Hence, while it has long been propounded in the past that 50% of advertising goes to waste, the challenge has long been identifying which 50%. However, an additional spanner-in-the-works may be looming as the inefficient portion may in actual fact be increasing within the teenage market. As a result, marketers need to transform their marketing campaigns should they intend to speak and be heard by this market. There is a need for marketers to interact and engage more with teenagers considering the manner in which teenagers are constantly ‘hooked up’ and interacting with one another. For this reason marketers need to interact and empower teenagers in order to build affinity to their brands, which in turn would be immensely beneficial considering the viral marketing that would ensue through the large social networks.

Furthermore, opportunity exists for marketers to utilise more multimedia marketing campaigns that complement one another. A hypothetical example includes a CD release advert in a music magazine with a bar code at the bottom that allows the reader to scan it with their cellphone and instantly connect onto the artist's website. The website in turn would provide samples of the songs, information on future concerts, promotional material on sale and even the option of pre-ordering on future CDs to be released. The instantaneous and interactive nature of such marketing campaigns would resonate with teenagers' considering the instant gratification culture that has already developed. However, recognising the limited budgets available to marketers, there may be a need to reallocate their marketing spend.

In seeking to engage with teenagers, marketers may also set up blogs prior to the launch of a marketing campaign so as to enable teenagers to express their thoughts and opinions, on an advertisement for example, through the blog. Through interacting with teenage consumers in this manner, marketers have the opportunity to greatly improve and deepen their relationships, which could be extremely effective in creating loyalty at a young age. Apart from enabling teenagers to provide feedback on the advertisements, opportunity exists to empower them to decide on for example which charities should benefit from donations raised through buying the products. The above will resonate with teenagers as they seek to be empowered and independent from their parents.

However, marketers will need to be cautious should they seek to interact with teenage customers in the above manner. This is attributed to the fact that text messaging in particular is such a personal form of communication that if abused, would spark strong feelings that may lead to teenagers loathing the brand. Hence, recipients of intrusive and irrelevant marketing communications are unlikely to hold back in lashing out at marketers who invade their cherished private spaces.

As with any other marketing medium, marketers would need to comply with rules in the use of interactive communications technologies. Responsible SMS marketing must involve a two-way relationship between the marketer and customer, ensuring that recipients have opted in to receive messages, in addition to allowing them to opt out at any time.

The next decade will see the transformation of the economic landscape facilitated by communications technology developments. The fluid culture that is emerging and the manner in which traditional institutions are failing to keep up with these developments will result in teenagers becoming more entrepreneurial than previous generations. The manner in which these individuals are growing extremely networked both technologically and personally will contribute towards their autonomy from large organisations and pursuance of entrepreneurship. Hence, these individuals are likely to be highly entrepreneurial and willing to run their own businesses, albeit minimising face-to-face human interactions. Opportunity exists for marketers to sponsor web portals aimed at encouraging these individuals to network and share their ideas, while tacitly recognising the sponsorship brands. As mentioned previously, in future it may be more beneficial for marketers to spend less of their marketing budgets on traditional advertising and more on 'unconventional' or interactive channels, including web portals and download sites amongst others.

As this generation will be accustomed to accessing boundless amounts of information on the internet, not only will they do research seeking to continuously improve their businesses, but in so doing will network with others in their field to identify solutions without necessarily organising brainstorming in physical spaces. Subsequently, online education programmes customised to their entrepreneurial needs are likely to become increasingly popular necessitating the need for the evolution of the traditional tertiary business and entrepreneurial programmes.

Similarly, as with marketing and communications campaigns, researchers will need to transform the manner in which they seek to recruit and engage with teenagers. The extent in which teenagers are constantly engaged in private spaces necessitates the need to lure them and participate in research studies. As cellphones are nearly always with their users, enabling them to receive their messages immediately, opportunity exists to interact with teenagers through their cellphones. In seeking to recruit teenagers a viral recruitment methodology could be used in the virtual environment whereby text messages are sent out providing them with the option to participate in the study. A beneficial aspect of this methodology would be the shorter time period required to recruit teenagers of similar profiles resulting in shorter turnaround times, considering that groups typically comprise of individuals with similar interests.

The actual group discussions would not necessarily need to be conducted behind a one way mirror, but in an environment teenagers are comfortable in. This would include researchers interacting with them using blogs or online discussions considering their increasingly confined lifestyles, brought about by concerns regarding crime and related misfortunes. Furthermore, researchers could encourage their clients to provide concepts that teenagers are able to provide their feedback on and recreate, considering the manner in which this segment yearns to be in control.

Future research

While only touching the tip of the iceberg, the wealth of information presented in this paper provides a good baseline understanding of the impact of communications technology developments on the behaviour of teenagers in public spaces. With this knowledge in hand, it makes logical sense to move the research agenda forward.

To mitigate concerns about the indicative nature of qualitative research, future research will definitely need to be undertaken involving a larger sample. Invariably, confirmations of these results in larger settings would strengthen the confidence in these findings and increase knowledge of the implications explored in this study. The large sample size will also enable a wider set of statistical techniques to be employed that would in turn increase confidence in the research results.

A critical aspect that needs to be explored in further detail is the impact communications development technologies are having on school discipline. Students have been observed in classrooms defiantly text messaging under their desks during a lecture. Furthermore, newspaper reports have highlighted the pornographic use of cellphones in public toilets in schools. This has led to schools banning cellphone use during lectures as well as imposing fines if caught. Hence, a study on the factors that are encouraging such inappropriate activities in schools would be beneficial in seeking to minimise the negative elements associated with cellphone usage.

What was observed throughout this research study was the age at which teenagers, if not children are adopting the cellphone into their everyday lives. Hence, a research study focusing on the stage(s) at which children are now 'needing' and adopting a cellphone would be suggested. The above is attributed to the need to identify the impact the cellphone and other communications technologies are having on teenagers' development, and the subsequent influence on their future social development.

A further research topic worth pursuing is the effect of interactive communications technologies on cultural and political identity, which are elements of collective identity that cannot be overlooked. Considering the manner in which teenagers are dependent on interactive communications technologies a situation may arise in future whereby political affiliations are created and revolve around private communities, an off-spring of the current groups that exist in the virtual environment.

This study was undertaken over a relatively limited period of time. Ideally, a longitudinal study would be recommended in future, not only to verify the above findings, but in addition, to observe as these young people grow whether their habits change or remain the same. Certainly, teenagers' use of interactive communications technology provides telling clues as to the shape and form information society will take in the future.

Conclusions

Public spaces are being reshaped by the developments and inclusion of communications technologies. It is clear that we have not had sufficient time, as a society, to adapt to recent communications technology developments, with their pervasive nature. However, what is clearly apparent from this study is the fact that the adoption of communications technologies is having both a positive and negative impact on teenagers' interaction in public spaces.

The pervasiveness of interactive communications technologies in teenagers' everyday lives is resulting in the emergence of a community that is increasingly reliant on the cellphone and internet for socialising. Teenagers are using interactive communications technologies to increase and enhance their social networks, liberate and empower themselves. Furthermore, as teenagers are able to arrange and rearrange their social functions and activities quickly through the use of communications technologies, a more fluid culture is emerging. This is resulting in teenagers taking on more adult responsibilities than past generations.

Unfortunately, the unforeseen growth of interactive communications technology developments amongst teenagers has been accompanied by multiplying instances of their unsolicited effects. As with any technological development what is essential is the manner in which these elements are managed in the various institutions, including home, work and school. Hence, in order to minimise the negative impact of communications technology developments on the broader social interaction amongst teenagers, it is imperative to ensure that correct habits are adopted early.

Indeed, as in any new development it is at or immediately subsequent to its introduction, that suitable steps need to be taken to ensure the establishment of interactive communications technologies within society – the essence of effectively managing technological developments.

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Appendix 1:

CONSENT FORM

I, _____ do hereby acknowledge and understand that:

- I agree to participate in the group discussion for this project. I understand that I am not being forced to do this, and that I can leave at any time if I don't want to continue. I know I will not be punished for this.
- I understand that I won't get anything for myself if I do the interview or join the group discussion.
- I understand that the researchers will not tell anyone about personal things that we talk about in the group.
- I hereby indemnify and hold harmless the researchers in respect of any claim, loss or damage resulting from my participation herein.

SIGNED: **DATED:**
