

Young Latinos Use of Mobile Phones: A Cross-Cultural Study

El uso de los teléfonos móviles por jóvenes latinos: Un Estudio Pluri-Cultural

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ABSTRACT : This study is based on a large-scale project examining mobile phone use among young Latinos in six different countries: Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, the United States, and Uruguay. Following the uses and gratifications tradition as a theoretical framework, researchers used a two-stage research design involving both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies to analyze how young adult Latinos use their mobile phones, and the perceived gratifications obtained from their use and comparisons to other forms of technology. A total of 1,320 subjects were surveyed across the six countries, yielding a rich data set that is only partially examined in this particular paper. The results indicate similarities and differences among the six countries and offers both theoretical and practical findings, as well as suggestions for future research and investigation.

Key Words: mobile phones, uses, gratifications, and latinos

RESUMEN: El presente estudio está basado en un proyecto a larga escala que examina el uso de los teléfonos móviles por jóvenes de seis distintos países: Argentina, Chile, Colombia, México, los Estados Unidos, y Uruguay. Siguiendo la tradición de usos y beneficios como marco teórico, los investigadores usaron un diseño de investigación de dos pasos que incluye tanto metodologías de investigación cualitativas y cuantitativas a fin de analizar el modo en que los jóvenes latinos utilizan sus teléfonos móviles, los beneficios percibidos obtenidos de su uso y comparaciones con otras formas de tecnología. Un total de 1,320 sujetos fueron encuestados a lo largo de los seis países, proporcionando información muy valiosa que se examina sólo de manera parcial en este artículo. Los resultados indican similitudes y diferencias entre los seis países y ofrecen tanto hallazgos teóricos como prácticos, a la vez que aportan sugerencias para futuras investigaciones.

Palabras Clave: teléfonos móviles, usos, beneficios y latinos

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There is no doubt that the use of mobile phones has proliferated, not only in the United States but around the globe. In many countries the number of mobile phones now outnumbers wireline or “fixed” telephones by an ever-growing margin. With the advent of the iPhone, the Blackberry, and other “smart phones,” the mobile phone is now much more than just a telephone. With the implementation of a faster 3G network infrastructure in many countries, mobile phones are now used to download and play music, games, and video material, as well as a host of other applications.

This study was designed to analyze how young people, operationalized in this study as people of Latino descent between the ages of 18-25, are using their mobile phone for various applications and what particular gratifications they derive from using the phone. But this study takes on a much larger dimension, because it involves a cross-cultural strategy. Research partners were recruited in five Latin American countries: Mexico, Colombia, Argentina, Chile and Uruguay, in order to collect data and compare it to other countries and to what is happening in the United States.

Readers of this journal may question why the United States is included with

these Latin American nations. The reason is quite simple. According to the most recent government data, there are over 42 million legal citizens who speak Spanish as their primary language in the United States. In addition, there are probably another 10-15 million undocumented Spanish-speaking people in the U. S. This makes America the second largest Spanish-speaking nation in the world behind Mexico, ahead of Colombia, Spain, and Argentina. Therefore, the United States is a logical country to examine when trying to understand the various characteristics of Latinos and their use of technology.

This study embraced the uses and gratifications tradition as the theoretical foundation driving this research. Uses and gratifications encompass a long history in the study of mediated communication, beginning in the 1940s and continuing through the 21st century. It is one of the most widely used theoretical approaches used in the study of communication.

Uses and gratifications theory posits that the audience (or consumer) is active in selecting information, entertainment, and technologies that satisfy basic wants or needs, also known as gratifications. Research has tended to focus on either gratifications sought or gratifications obtained. Gratifications sought is built on the idea of expectancy or meeting specific needs, while gratifications obtained

refers to post-analysis and whether or not needs were met. Uses and gratifications offers a great deal of utility to researchers, as it allows scholars to assess not only how people use a medium or a technology (as in the case of mobile phones), but to understand the specific motivations underlying their actions, and their feelings towards specific mediums or technologies. The next section of the paper reviews key studies on mobile phone use, drawing where possible from previous research utilizing the uses and gratifications approach.

Literature Review

There is a relatively small literature base available on mobile phones, their uses, and the gratifications derived from their use. The study of mobile phones flowed naturally from earlier studies of the “wired” telephone and their networks and uses and gratifications (see Dimmick & Patterson, 1996).

In general, studies regarding mobile phones indicate increased usage as the technology develops. Phones today allow internet access, instant messaging, social networking and much more. These new technologies provide more uses and gratifications for its users. Considering the rapid evolution of the mobile phone, social studies have increased in recent years.

Aoki and Downes’ (2003) concluded that respondents to a study on mobile

phones fit into one of two groups: “safety” users and “sophisticated” users. Safety users kept their mobile phones for emergencies, while “sophisticated” users were more in touch with the features of the device and more socially active. This study also recognized the rapidly advancing technology and predicted the mobile phone would lead to new social as well as cultural phenomena.

Leonardi (2003) examined the impact of media among US Latinos. All participants identified cell phones as the only media that that promoted cultural values. Computers and Internet were viewed as hindering these values. The author explained that Latinos value close, consistent, close interpersonal contact and mobile phones help nourish relationships both near and far (Leonardi, 2003). Mobile phones were also perceived to help overcome long distances and to provide immediate contact in times of distress or emergencies.

The differences in mobile phone usage across generations were analyzed by Lee (2006). This study concluded that younger generations had more social motivation to use the more advanced features provided by technology. The younger generation forms a subculture built around this media usage in their everyday life. This subculture in a younger generation could easily describe the texting phenomenon that has emerged in the past several years. The

division between generations and their familiarity with technology is described as a cohort effect. This effect continues as new technologies become main stream for the next generation of media users.

Studies into the use of mobile email found that Japanese youth preferred mobile mail to keep in touch with their local friends (Ishii, 2006). The study concluded that Japanese youth used mobile mail to help overcome shyness in communications. A strong correlation was found between weak social skills and a stronger dependence on mobile email.

Research in the Seoul metropolitan area studied the differences between male and female adoption of mobile phone features (Sohn & Lee, 2007). While there were specific differences in the habits between males and females, there was no proof that woman were slower to adopt new features than men. The authors concluded more gender specific research was necessary to understand woman's media usage in a larger social context.

Auter (2007) conducted a study of college students' uses of mobile phones and found that on average, the sample claimed to use their phones for 10.5 hours a week. The author concluded that cell phone activity was highly related to interpersonal communication, and correlated with cell phone gratifications.

Wei (2008) concluded that even with 3G technologies, mobile phones are still seen primarily as a calling device. While younger users are much more likely to take full advantage of other features, entertainment and news are still secondary uses to making phone calls. The author recommends phone companies market the next generation of phones as convenient hybrid medium for on-the-go users.

Ramirez, Dimmick, Feaster and Lin (2008) analyzed the gratification niches between traditional landline telephones, instant messaging, mobile phones and email. The findings indicate strong preference for mobile phone use, primarily because of its diverse functions and mobility. Respondents also indicated a strong affinity for instant messaging. Respondents also revealed that the popularity of traditional landline phones has slipped in recent years as newer technology reached higher adoptions levels.

Campbell (2007) compared cell phone use using a student sample consisting of students from Hawaii and the U. S. mainland, Taiwan, Sweden and Japan. The author observed similarities and differences in regards to the various cultures represented in the study.

In terms of industry-related studies, Nielsen (2008a) published an extensive report on mobile Internet usage. The report lists the US, UK and Italy as leaders in mobile Internet penetration.

However, the only Latin American country measured in this research was Brazil. The active users of the mobile Internet in the US grew from 22.4 million in July of 2006 to 40.4 million in May of 2008. This incredible rise in use shows the technological effects of cell phone usage. The study also cites unlimited data plans being a key reason for the increased use of mobile internet. These plans drive the adoption and usage, and strengthen the market as it continues to develop.

Another study by the Nielsen group (2008b) found that the average number of text messages had surpassed the average number of phone calls. This study found that while cell phone calls remained consistent in recent years, the number of text messages had risen 450% in the past two years. Text messages are the most prevalent example of the versatility of mobile phones. Once seen as a secondary function, it has now overtaken traditional phone calls as the most popular form of communicating with a mobile device.

Scarborough Research, a division of Nielsen, released a report in the spring of 2009 detailing online and mobile telephone habits of U. S. Hispanic consumers (Scarborough Research, 2009). While the data in the Scarborough report focuses on all adults, the results are relevant to this study and help to understand how Hispanics are using their mobile phones.

The study found that Hispanics use of their mobile phones is higher or on average with the entire population of mobile phone users in regards to several categories of data. Hispanics are more likely to send text messages than all mobile phone users (53% versus 48%); take pictures with their cell phone camera (53% compared to 46%); download ringtones for their phone (39% to 29%); exchange pictures with their phones (28% to 21%); utilize instant messaging (22% compared to 17%); download video games (15% to 11%); check email (15% to 13%), and use the Internet (13% to 11%).

The study summarizes that “Hispanics [in the United States] use their cell phones for an array of Internet functions, and it is clear that the mobile device is an important point of Internet entry for Hispanics” (Scarborough Research, 2009, p. 12). Clearly, Hispanics are heavy mobile phone users, and are especially likely to utilize the many features available on their phones and are more technologically savvy compared to regular phone users.

These studies, taken as a group, illustrate the versatility and importance of the mobile phone for both interpersonal communication and as a growing tool with many other features and applications. Given the lack of research on mobile phone usage among young Latinos, more research is needed to compare trends and

patterns across nations. Hence, this study was undertaken from a cross-cultural perspective to examine mobile phone use and gratifications among young Latinos.

Research Questions

The research team was organized in the fall of 2008. Partnering in the research were institutions in Latin America that the Center for Spanish Language Media at the University of North Texas developed prior external relationships with, some in the form of signed agreements, others with more informal arrangements. The Center provided funding to each institution to help defray the cost of hiring research assistants to handle data collection and coding.

Two broad research questions were guiding this study from the beginning:

RQ1: What applications are young Latinos using with their mobile phones?

RQ2: How do young Latinos rank their mobile phones in comparison to other types of technologies?

The leaders of the research team in the Latin American countries were Dr. Maria Elena Gutierrez (Universidad Panamericana, Mexico); Professor German Arango (La Sabana Universidad, Colombia); Professor Aldo Van Weezel (Universidad de los Andes, Chile); Professor Laura Vaillard (Catholic Universidad, Argentina), Dr.

Eileen Hudson (Universidad Montevideo, Uruguay), and Project Director Dr. Alan Albarran (USA).

Methodology

The research team decided on a two-stage approach in gathering the data. First, each country was to conduct a minimum of two focus groups to gather detailed qualitative information on the use of mobile phones by young Latinos, and to discuss their responses to the following list of questions:

Describe the various applications you regularly use on your mobile phone aside from the basic “telephone” or talk function.

About how much time during a typical day do you use your mobile phone? What percentage of that time is used for talking versus other applications?

Do you surf the Internet with your mobile phone? If so, tell me about the types of web sites you usually visit.

Do you listen to music on your mobile phone? Have you ever downloaded music directly to your phone?

Do you use your mobile phone to access music more than the radio? Why or why not?

Do you use your mobile phone to

watch video? If so, please tell me about the content you watch and what sites you use to obtain the content.

Why do you watch video on your phone instead of using a television or computer?

Do you use your mobile phone to access video entertainment and information more regularly than the television? Why or why not?

What applications would you like to see added to your mobile phone?

Is there anything else you would like to tell me about using your mobile phone and its applications?

Some countries held as many as four focus groups. In addition to conducting the focus groups, each country was asked to content analyze their findings and to share the results with one another for comparison purposes. Across the six countries, approximately 150 subjects participated in the focus groups, yielding in itself a rich amount of data.

To participate in the focus groups, subjects had to be between 18-25 years of age, and they had to regularly use a mobile phone. Each research team did their best to balance the gender representation in each of the focus groups to ensure that one sex did not dominate the other.

While there were a number of expected differences in the focus group data, there was far more congruence in terms of use of applications, using the phone to surf the Internet, listening to music, and accessing video. This was evident across all of the six countries participating in the study. Of course, the research team noted variability in regards to the types of mobile phones found in each country, the features available to the users, and the specific costs of the phones and monthly charges. The focus groups were all designed to be completed in one hour, although some of the focus groups in some of the countries took longer than sixty minutes due to their size and the detailed information expressed by the participants.

Based on the information provided from the focus groups, each of the research countries participating in the study were asked to summarize and content analyze the material in to a set of themes responding to the primary questions identified earlier. This resulted in six different sets of responses grouped along similar themes, and provided to the project director where the U. S. team looked for similarities across countries, and developed a framework for the second phase of the study, a survey questionnaire.

The project director assembled all of the focus group data, and formulated a draft of a survey questionnaire to be

used in the second stage of the data collection. The questionnaire was shared and revised as needed by the research team until we had a final, master version. That version was pre-tested to eliminate any ambiguities, and then forwarded to the research team in Latin America for their use and data collection.

The questionnaire was translated in to Spanish to use across Latin America, while the U. S. version was prepared in English. The questionnaire consisted of a section on which of 11 applications (e.g., text messaging, Mp3 player, camera, email, etc.) were available on their mobile phones; questions regarding the amount of time each day spent talking and texting; a set of 15 gratification items assessing feelings towards their phone and its applications; a set of items used to rank their mobile phone in relation to other technologies regarding items like watching movies, listening to music, etc.; and a minimum number of demographic items to enable gender and age comparisons.

Each research team was asked to collect data from at least 200 subjects; some partners collected more than the minimum number requested. All requirements to the treatment of human subjects were conducted following established protocols. In terms of obtaining a sample, the following criteria were used:

- Subjects must be between the ages of 18-25

- Subjects had to own a mobile phone
- An effort was made to balance the sample in terms of gender

Because research conditions varied in each country, the team decided to use a purposive sample approach, with survey questionnaires completed in front of trained research assistants who could answer any questions or address any concerns. Subjects were not limited to students on respective campuses; in fact, it was encouraged to collect some data from the local student population as well as some data within the community, provided the afore mentioned criteria was met. Most of the research partners began data collection in December, and all were completed in January except for the US portion of the data, which was completed by mid-February 2009.

Results

A total of 1,320 surveys were completed by the research team broken down as follows: Colombia (250), Mexico (249), United States (218), Argentina (203) with Chile and Uruguay each at 200. Of all respondents, the average age was 21, and in terms of gender females (51.1%) slightly outnumbered males (48.9%). The amount of time young Latinos spent talking and texting on their phones were roughly the same at slightly more than two hours a day for each activity.

A listing of mobile phone applications is presented in Table 1. Text messaging

was the most used application, followed by using the phone as a clock/alarm and playing games. Email access was the second lowest at 39.8%, followed by GPS at 17%.

Table 2 lists the results for the 15 gratification items used in the study. The gratification items were coded from 1 = “very helpful” to 4 = “not very helpful.”

Table 1. Percentage of Applications Used on Mobile Phone

| | |
|-----------------|------|
| Texting | 99.4 |
| Internet Access | 68.8 |
| MP3 Player | 59.6 |
| Photo Camera | 71.3 |
| Video Camera | 60.2 |
| Calendar | 94 |
| Clock/Alarm | 98.5 |
| Games | 89.8 |
| Email Access | 39.8 |
| Note/Memo pad | 75 |
| GPS | 17 |
| (N = 1,320) | |

Table 2: Mobile Phone Gratifications among Young Latinos

| | |
|-----------------------|------|
| Keeping in touch | 1.14 |
| Passing time | 2.36 |
| Sharing photos | 2.53 |
| Sharing videos | 2.57 |
| Listening to music | 2.66 |
| Accessing Internet | 2.87 |
| E-mailing | 3.06 |
| Networking sites | 2.41 |
| Privacy | 2.78 |
| Watching videos | 2.62 |
| Security and safety | 2.75 |
| Status level | 3.01 |
| Access news/info | 3.20 |
| Watch TV shows/movies | 2.91 |
| Plan day | 1.24 |

As seen in Table 2, the highest ranking gratification items for the sample were “keeping in touch” and “helping to plan your day.” The lowest ranking items were accessing news and information (3.20) and reading email (3.06).

In terms of perceptions of the utility of mobile phones, respondents were asked to complete a series of nine forced-choice items such as “To listen to your favorite music” in which one of the responses included their mobile phone. Each question consisted of three possible choices. There were a number of differences identified across countries in regard to these items, and the findings reveal cultural differences as well as difference in the availability of various features and applications.

Across all six countries, the mobile phone was only found to be the preferred technology among one of the forced choice items, and that only applied to the U. S. sample—the item “to share social information with friends.” While respondents in the US ranked the mobile phone first, the five Latin American country samples all ranked “face to face” as first among the three choices provided.

Gender differences were also observed among the six different countries in terms of gratifications using the cell phones. These are reported on a country by country basis for clarity, and only those items are reported that showed significant differences among gender groups.

In Argentina, the females felt their phones were more helpful for social networking than males. Females in Argentina also reported that higher use of their phones to watch videos from YouTube or other sources.

In Chile, male respondents reported they were more likely to use their phones to access the Internet, but also appreciated the mobile phone for feelings of safety and security. The sample from Colombia only identified one gender difference. There, females rated using their phones to maintain contact with family and friends higher than males. In Mexico, no significant differences were noted on any of the items in comparing males to females.

In the U. S. sample, females indicated they were more likely to use their mobile phones to pass time, while males used their phones to listen to music, utilizing the Mp3 capabilities of their devices. Finally, male respondents from Uruguay indicated they used their mobile phones more to listen to music compared to females. Males also reported their mobile phones provided a sense of status.

Some differences were also observed among mobile phone brands in looking at the different countries. For example, in the United States, respondents owning Apple iPhones and Blackberrys indicated they used their phones more to pass time than other brands. In terms of listening to music, the Sony and iPhone brands were preferred as an

Mp3 player, while the iPhone was clearly preferred for accessing the Internet, using email, and visiting social networking sites. It should be noted that the iPhone had very limited distribution in Latin America at the time of the study, with the highest penetration in the study found in the United States.

Regarding other countries, the Argentina respondents felt the Apple, Blackberry and Sharp brands were best for listening to music, with all three of these brands and Movistar the best for accessing the Internet. Respondents in Chile rated the Apple and Blackberry phones higher in terms of listening to music, accessing the Internet, and checking email.

In Colombia, owners of a Sony were more likely to use their phones to listen to music, while Nokia and Motorola users were more likely to use their mobile phones to share social information with their friends. Mexican respondents listed the top brands as Nokia, Sony Ericson, and Motorola. However, Mexican respondents indicated that Apple and Blackberry were preferred in listening to music, checking email, and accessing the Internet. Finally, the respondents in Uruguay identified the Apple and Alcatel brands as the best phones to help pass time, while the Apple, Nokia and Samsung brands were best for email access.

Discussion

This study is one of the first of its kind to investigate mobile phone usage

across six different countries, and is further differentiated by the sample consisting entirely of young Latinos, identified in this research as between the ages of 18-25. In terms of the findings presented here, we will discuss the theoretical and practical contributions made by this study.

From a theoretical level, the data illustrates that even though many of the countries represented in this study share a common language as a base, culturally every country is unique in terms of how young people are using their mobile phones and the gratifications derived from its use. It is clear that we cannot lump “Latinos” in to one huge group and expect them to behave similarly in terms of uses of technology. A logical next step in the analysis of the data is to look more analytically at the gratification typologies which underlie this descriptive analysis, on an entire sample basis as well as through a country-by-country comparison. One other important theoretical contribution in this study lies with the decision to employ a uses and gratifications framework to guide this research. While the research uncovered distinct differences from country to country, this study illustrates the value of the uses and gratifications tradition as a logical and practical tool for engaging in research across countries. “Uses” and “gratifications” are concepts that all cultures understand, enabling for a broad application of this tradition.

On a practical level, each country is different in terms of its technology infrastructure (whether 2G is present or 3G is present or emerging) and the diffusion of smart phones. Branding is also unique in each of these countries in terms of expectations towards mobile phones and the gratifications derived from their use. The information in this study should be of interest to marketers and advertisers who desire to expand or enter the young Latino market, and to look for potential competitive advantages and ways to generate market share.

Clearly, there is a great deal of potential for the mobile phone industry throughout Latin America, especially in regards to new “smart phones” capable of offering many types of applications. Apple has demonstrated that users love downloading applications for their iPhones, with over 1 billion applications covering games, utilities, reference information, media, and other types of content downloaded by April 2009 (Farrell, 2009). Blackberry is rushing to develop its own applications as a response to Apple’s success.

Readers may be surprised that the mobile phone was ranked low in many countries compared to laptops and other technologies, but the lower evaluations probably have more to do with an emerging infrastructure across Latin America, as well as the lack of smart phones. On the other hand, we

see greater utility for mobile phones expressed in the U. S. sample, no doubt due to greater diffusion of the smart phone technology, especially with the iPhone and the various Research in Motion (RIM) models of the Blackberry phone, commonly used by U. S. businesspeople. Continuing research is needed on mobile phone users, and should also be expanded to cover other age groups than the young adults examined in this study.

There are of course limitations to this research. First is the reliance on self-report data; an inherent problem in any survey research project. Second, we did use a purposive sample across the countries included in the study as time and financial resources prevented gathering data using random sample techniques. Therefore, it is hard to generalize the findings to the larger population. Lastly, there was a problem with the data sets from both Argentina and Mexico in that one of the gratification items was left out of the survey questionnaire for these two countries. Still, the benefits of the study far outweigh the limitations we identify here.

In terms of future research, the Latino market is burgeoning and growing not only in the United States, but globally as well, creating new opportunities for expanding research collaboration that will be of interest to both the academy and industry. More studies using a cross-cultural perspective are needed, and researchers should not hesitate to

make contact, and to reach out to partner with other countries to share research objectives and resources. While this study focused on mobile phones, there are many other areas that deserve exploration, including the phenomenon on social networking, and the continuing impact of these new media on traditional media. We can expect mobile phone use to only grow and expand across Latin

America and the rest of the developed world, as the personal phone is rapidly emerging as the first path many users will have to be connected to the Internet as well as other users. Latinos are among the most active and heavy users of mobile phone technology, so this ethnic group will require ongoing research and investigation to understand trends and shifts in consumer tastes and preferences.

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