



“New Media” usage among youth in South Africa

By Antoinette Basson

Abstract

In partnership with the University of South Africa (Bureau of Market Research (BMR) Youth Research Unit) the Film and Publication Board (FPB) conducted an exploratory research study on new media usage amongst adolescents. The study investigated the diffusion and adoption of different forms of new media such as the Internet and cell phones among adolescents. It found that new media have diffused at a high rate among South African adolescents who are anticipated to continue to adopt new innovative media developments at a faster pace than adults. Increasing access to and enthusiastic usage of new media by adolescents proves that not only are they innovators in this area, but they are also changing their life styles to adapt to the new media and to use them to their own benefit. The importance of new media is beyond contention and will have an increasing impact on the lives of adolescents in South Africa, as well as on the information and communication industry. The most concerning aspect, however, is the adequate protection of children from potential harmful exposure and other risks. The more access adolescents have, the more they will be at risk of receiving and being exposed to inappropriate material. Increased awareness and adequate measures need to be initiated for children to enjoy these new media and to be protected from potentially harmful exposure and experiences.

Key words

new media, child protection

Introduction

What is “new media”? New media is a fairly recent concept which can be regarded as a broad term for different forms of information and communication

technologies of which the internet and cell phones are considered as the major new innovations.

South Africa is one of the top ten countries in Africa with regard to internet access, having around 4.6 million internet users (Internet World Stats 2008). Very little information is available on how many of the current users are adolescents, although they are taking on this form of new media with great enthusiasm. According to the South African Advertising Research Foundation (SAARF 2007) All Media and Products Survey (AMPS), only 10.3% of individuals between the ages of 16 and 24 years have access to the internet in South Africa.

As with internet diffusion, cell phone usage has also shown dramatic growth, especially in Africa. According to SAARF (2007) AMPS figures, just less than 60% of individuals between the ages 16 – 24 years owned or rented a cell phone. These figures provided some indication of the extent of cell phone access amongst the youth in South Africa. The BratTrax® 2007/8 study conducted by Youth Dynamix shows that 64% of South African 7-15 year-olds have access to a cell phone, and 35% own their own cell phone. Although more children in the BratTrax® study had hand-me-down phones than new phones, these hand-me-downs are sophisticated models, capable of many applications.

Internationally, researchers at the London School of Economics and Political Science (Livingston 1998) conducted early research regarding new media, undertaken when cell phones and the internet were not as widely used as they currently are. The most recent international opinion on adolescents and new media is that they are the defining users of the internet. This is particularly evident in the United States where adolescents not only chat and spend more time online than adults do, but also use online technologies, such as instant messaging, more often than adults (Lenhart, Madden & Hillton 2005).

The need for research on new media (especially the internet and cell phones) is imperative. Research information on South African youth Not can both contribute to understanding of the local scene, as well as contribute to global perspectives on the role of new media young people's lives.

Research background

In partnership with the University of South Africa (BMR, Youth Research Unit) the Film and Publication Board (FPB) conducted an exploratory research study on new media usage amongst adolescents. The study was a first step in preparation for a more extensive investigation including focus group discussions and a nationwide survey.

The research study was driven by the need for information on the relationship between the youth and the new media in South Africa. The impact of new media on young people, especially adolescents, is immense and not only changes the way they communicate and interact with other individuals, but also has an overall effect on society and the economy in general. There is no doubt that new media is one of the most important developments of the postmodern world which will have a lasting effect on the lives of every human being.

The main objective of the research study was to investigate the rate of diffusion of new media in the adolescent market and the extent that adolescents have adopted new media innovations. The exploratory research study was conducted amongst adolescents in grades 8 to 12, ranging between the ages of 13 to 18 years. Researchers applied a self-administrated survey approach whereby learners completed the questionnaire themselves during school time and returned it to their educators. A total of 490 learners completed and returned the questionnaires.

Research findings

This article presents and discusses some interesting results of the exploratory research study. It is clear from the research results discussed below that new media diffuse at a rapid rate amongst the youth and play an imperative role in their lives which is sometimes beyond comprehension for significant others, such as parents and caregivers.

Internet

The study explored the nature and extent of internet usage amongst adolescents (13 – 18 years). More than 85% of the participants of the survey reported that they had access to the internet during the past month. This finding corresponds with previous research studies conducted by the FPB exploring internet usage amongst youth. When interpreting the high level of access amongst adolescents, a number of factors need to be considered. Even though socioeconomic status influences access to the internet, the increasing number of access points significantly increases the likelihood of children having access. These include mobile devices, in particular cell phones, schools that provide access to computer labs with internet access, popular public venues such as internet cafe’s and an increasing number of working parents having laptop computers at home and allowing their children access to the internet. The main reason for concern is that the increasing number of access points makes it increasingly difficult to control and monitor the content children are exposed to.

The survey found that the most popular activities on the internet for adolescents are: accessing information (68.7%), downloading content (music, ringtones etc.)

50.2% and obtaining information for school assignments (39.8%). It is noteworthy that using the Internet for communication was also very popular amongst adolescents: chatting (36.1%), receiving and sending emails (34.6%), using Facebook (28.8%) and instant messaging (19.5%). This emphasises the growing popularity of virtual communication and the important role of the internet as a communication tool amongst young people.

The survey explored the use of social networking sites in more detail, due to their popularity and growing prominence within the South African society. Social networking is increasingly becoming popular among adolescents, allowing them to communicate with individuals’ right across the globe. Although children seem to be aware of the possible dangers in communicating with people they do not know this is often not taken seriously and is even misused by children for their own gratification. The survey found that Facebook remains the most popular web-based social network site amongst adolescents who participated in the survey. On average about 25% of the participating adolescents used Facebook for a number of activities. The use of network sites is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Use of web-based social networking sites

| Activities | Facebook | MySpace | YouTube | Other | Total |
|---|----------|---------|---------|-------|-------|
| Upload photos | 29.0 | 12.0 | 7.7 | 7.1 | 55.8 |
| Post opinion | 21.8 | 11.4 | 4.8 | 4.6 | 42.5 |
| Obtain latest social news (fashion, current, etc) | 22.2 | 9.5 | 6.4 | 5.6 | 43.8 |
| Post videos | 16.0 | 10.0 | 13.5 | 5.8 | 45.2 |
| Join groups & chat with group friends | 34.0 | 8.3 | 2.5 | 6.6 | 51.5 |
| Download (ringtones, wallpaper, software, etc) | 10.8 | 11.6 | 12.2 | 12.0 | 46.7 |
| Learn more about people met | 30.7 | 9.1 | 2.7 | 4.6 | 47.1 |
| Exchange general messages | 30.1 | 8.7 | 2.9 | 5.2 | 46.9 |
| Exchange private messages | 28.4 | 9.1 | 1.9 | 6.0 | 45.4 |
| Store photos | 27.4 | 14.5 | 4.4 | 6.8 | 53.1 |

Besides sharing personal photos via social networks, 36.3% of the participating adolescents confirmed that they have met a “cyber friend” with whom they communicate regularly. Nearly half (42.2%) confirmed that they have been approached by somebody for “something upsetting.”

Research conducted by the Film and Publication Board (FPB 2008) found that in most cases upsetting content mostly involves sexual content or nudity and results in great discomfort and distress, especially amongst younger adolescents (12 – 14 years). It has been found that sexual predators are likely to focus on social networking sites, as they are anonymous platforms that allow for adolescents and younger children to be approached and groomed. These results confirm substantial exposure of adolescents to potential dangers through their engagement in social networking sites. The explosion of Facebook in South Africa therefore has the potential for opening up a new access point to South African children for sexual predators.

However, the development of technology and new media types cannot solely be blamed for endangering children’s lives. Increased awareness and adequate measures need to be initiated for children to enjoy social networks and be protected from harmful exposure and experiences.

The FPB strives to protect children from inappropriate exposure to potentially harmful media content, which can also apply to social networking sites. Recently, amendments have been proposed to the Films and Publications Act, which will protect children from abuse on social networking sites and currently the Film and Publication Board is awaiting approval of the proposed amendments by the President of South Africa. If they are approved, an obligation will be placed on operators of social networking sites to report any information of possible offences against children who are participating on their sites.

Cell phones

The survey also explored cell phone exposure and usage amongst adolescents (13 – 18 years). By far the majority of adolescents participating in the survey

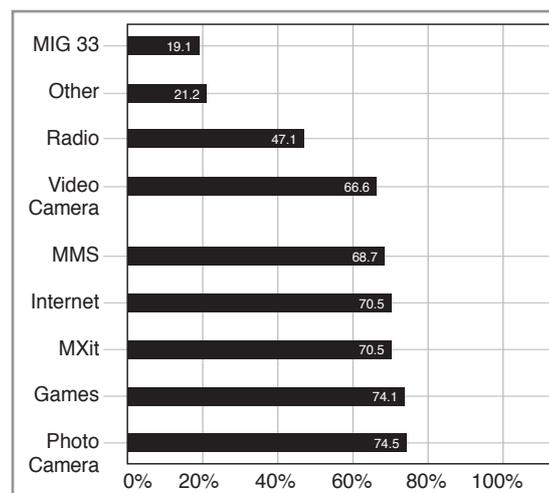
(95.3%) own a private cell phone. They identified Vodacom as the most supported network.

Youth have adopted cell phones with great enthusiasm, often considering them an integral part of their lives. The survey explored the personal benefits of cell phone ownership. In general, adolescents perceive cell phones as useful devices that assist in their planning of activities (mostly with friends) and evoke feelings of safety and acceptance amongst their peers. Approximately a third of the participating adolescents (30%) have had their cell phones for more than four years. 21.3% of participants indicated that they change or upgrade their cell phone at least once in a year.

The exploratory study suggests that technology is the domain of the youth. Generally, adolescents are interested and knowledgeable about cell phones. They use a number of the features available on their cell phones especially the photo camera (74.5%). A worrying trend eagerly adopted by adolescents is “self-generated images” which expose children to yet another new area of exploitation.

Based on the features identified in the survey it is clear that adolescents own cell phones with advanced features and do not only use cell phones as a basic communication tool. The use of the features is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Features used on cellphones



The study further explored cell phone activities amongst adolescents. It found that receiving calls (76.3%) is the most frequent cell phone activity amongst participating adolescents on a daily basis. Not surprisingly, electronic messaging, sending SMS messages (57.7%) and MXit (57.5%) were also identified as frequent everyday activities. It is noteworthy, based on the research results, that buying things over the internet on a daily basis seems to be a frequent activity amongst adolescents. The top ten daily cell phone activities are identified in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Top 10 daily cellphone activities

| Activities | Daily |
|--|-------|
| Receiving calls | 76.3% |
| Making calls | 58.0% |
| Sending SMS | 57.7% |
| MXit | 57.5% |
| Sending a "please call me" | 53.8% |
| Download/listening to music (excluding radio) | 33.7% |
| Using cell phones to take pictures | 32.6% |
| Using cell phone to buy things over the Internet | 32.6% |
| Playing games on the cell phone | 30.5% |
| Listening to the radio via cell phone | 17.2% |

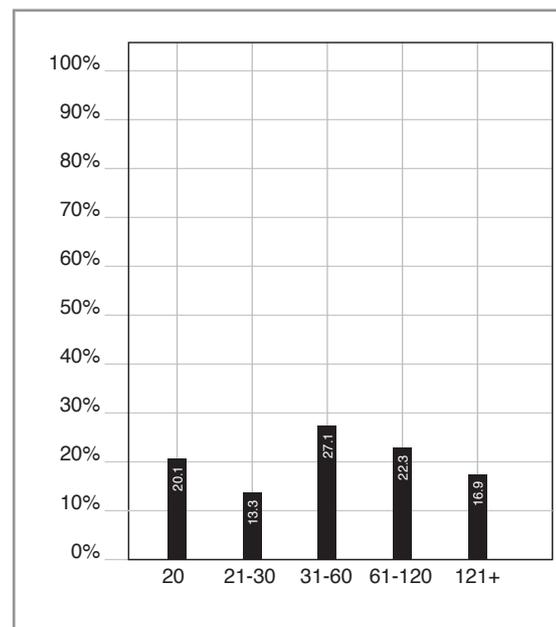
Like web-based social networks on the internet, mobile social networks are extremely popular amongst youth. It can even be said that the South African developed mobile social network MXit is more popular than other web-based social networks such as Facebook, which has already been discussed above. MXit has attracted more than three million users in just under two years and is growing at a rate of between 9000 and 12000 new users per day (SouthAfrica.info). Reliable research information addressing the usage of MXit amongst South African youth is very limited. This, in part, influenced the

design of the exploratory research study to explore the incidence and usage of MXit amongst participating adolescents in an attempt to increase available information.

Not surprisingly, the research study found exceptionally high levels of awareness and usage of MXit amongst participating adolescents: 90.2% confirmed awareness and 81.4% confirmed usage. Although MXit offer different services, adolescents mostly use MXit to communicate through messages. The popularity of this medium is often motivated by the low costs involved.

Participating adolescents' contacted approximately 15 individuals (per user) through MXit on a daily basis and spend on average between 30 minutes to an hour on MXit per day. It is noteworthy that 22.3% reported that they spend between one and two hours per day on MXit and 16.9% more than two hours per day. The research findings confirmed the popularity of this medium amongst adolescents. The average time (minutes) spent on MXit per day is reported in Figure 2.

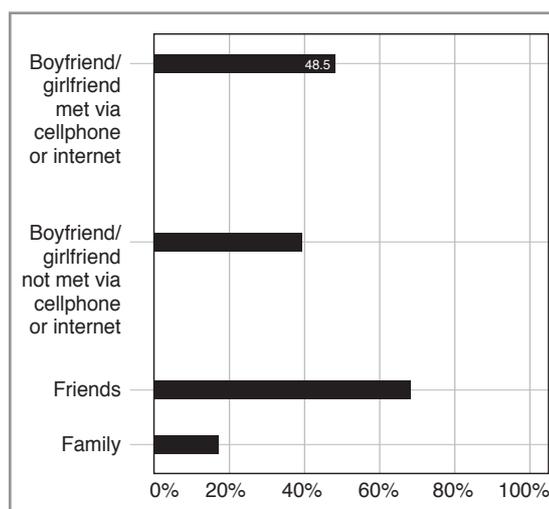
Figure 2. Average daily time spent on MXit (minutes)



Most of the communication time is spent with friends (67.9%) who play a significant role in the lives of most adolescents. Establishing and building relationships with the same and opposite sex is an important developmental part during the adolescent phase. It is noteworthy that almost an hour (49 minutes) per day is spent communicating with a boyfriend or girlfriend met via the cell phone. MXit is not only used for communication; 46.0% participants indicated that they use MXit for making appointments or dates sometimes even with people they have not met personally but communicated with via MXit. These results emphasise that although adolescents are "techno-wise" they are naive and vulnerable. Although they might be aware of the potential dangers, they do not think of the consequences. Media often features reports of children being lured and exploited by people

met through MXit. Constructive ways need to be developed and implemented to protect children from potential exploitation through social mobile networking. Figure 3 highlights the outcome of these research findings.

Figure 3. Average time (in minutes) spent with different individuals



Keep Your Chats Exactly That!"

This campaign by Women'sNet and Girls'Net aims to empower young people in the use of the internet and cell phones. It looks at both strategies of prevention from harassment, bullying and violence, as well as strategies for using ICTs in affirmative ways to advocate for change on issues that concern them. According to Women'sNet, "The Information Age has brought about an increase in the use of technologies. This development has assisted in a quick, easy and in some instances, cheaper ways to share and disseminate information. The development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has assisted us to access and practice our rights, including right to access information, the right to self expression and the right to privacy. However, young people are often confronted with violent encounters in these environments. Therefore, violence becomes a hindrance in the realization of their freedom to self expression, information access and communication."

Source: <http://www.takebackthetech.net/>

A small number of participants indicated that they use other instant messaging services besides MXit on their cell phones, these included: Bing, MIG 33, Twitter, Meep, ETC and Opera Mini.

Game playing is becoming popular amongst adolescents therefore the study explored the extent of game playing on the internet (13.9%) and cell phones (36.7%) amongst adolescents. The study found that games played on the cell phone are more popular than games played on the Internet. This can be ascribed to the fact that mobile devices such as cell phones are readily available and convenient. They also allow a child to play within a "private environment," which again makes control and monitoring by parents more difficult.

Conclusion

The explorative research study results clearly show adolescents in South Africa are consuming new media at ever-increasing rates. It is anticipated that adolescents will continue to adopt new media developments at a faster pace than adults do. The research findings correspond with international findings indicated in this article and contribute to the global understanding of the phenomenon.

The rapid diffusion and adoption of new media creates a great challenge for controlling and monitoring the exposure of children to inappropriate media content. Parents must engage with the latest technology and gather knowledge and experience in order to narrow the generation gap between themselves and their children created through the rapid growth of technology. The significance of self-regulation amongst children is clear and needs to be encouraged by parents by providing children with adequate guidance.

The exploratory research study revealed that new media have emotional dimensions and are not merely communication media. Adolescents feel a need to be connected at all times and often feel lost without technological items in particular cellphones.

Although the exploratory research study is limited in nature it succeeded in providing worthwhile and interesting insights into new media, in the lives of adolescents and laid the basis for a more intensive investigation. These media types will have an escalating impact on the lives of adolescents in South Africa, as well as on the information and communication industry.

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Writers Bio

Antoinette Basson is a registered Research Psychologist. She completed her BA (Psychology & Education), BA Hons (Psychology) and MA (Research Psychology) degrees at the University of Pretoria. Her postgraduate internship was with the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). Basson was previously employed by well-known private research companies in the capacity of Research Manager, where she headed research projects in the telecommunications, financial, media and government sectors. She joined the Film and Publication Board in 2006 focusing on research studies related to the classification of content and protection of children from sexual exploitation in media content. Research projects conducted by the Research Unit under her management have received international recognition and been presented at international conferences. Antoinette is passionate about research and especially enjoys studies relating to children and young people in South Africa. She recently started working on her Ph.D.