Mobile communication privacy management in romantic relationships: a dialectical approach

Mthobeli Ngcono
Department of Communication Studies
University of Johannesburg
mthobelin@uj.ac.za
Abstract

Communication technologies, such as the mobile phone, often present a double-edged sword in romantic relationships. While the mobile phone can enhance the quality of communication, it can simultaneously become a source of conflict. The dialectic framework of Communication Privacy Management offers a nuanced lens from which to investigate rules for use of the mobile phone in dyadic of romantic relationships. This study investigates mobile phone usage rules that are negotiated by adolescents and young adults in romantic relationships. The study specifically focussed on rules around mobile privacy management. Findings from in-depth interviews indicate that the negotiation of rules is a crucial part of young adult relationships. Enhancing trust and fostering harmony were important factors in the rule development process. Implications, limitations, and future possibilities for research are discussed.

Keywords: Romantic Relationships; Privacy; Mobile Phones; Communication Privacy Management; Surveillance; Dialectics
Introduction

More and more social interaction is being facilitated by means of mobile phones. These devices are altering the interpersonal communication options available to people, enabling those who use them to form new ways of understanding and negotiating social lives (Louw and du Plooy-Cilliers 2003; Caron and Caronia 2007; Berger 2009, 260-269) with both pragmatic advantages and often unforeseen disadvantages to the user (see Ling and Donner 2009). What separates the mobile phone from the traditional landline is that it is portable and kept available to receive calls or messages almost anywhere or anytime. As such the mobile phone uniquely enables people to be ‘always on’ or ‘always available’ to engage in communication in ways that can overcome significant time-space barriers (Mäenpää 2001, 122; Duck 2007; Duck and McMahan 2009, 247). A notable concern that this study focuses on is that the ‘always on’ possibilities of the mobile can result in infringements of private/public boundaries within relationships (Ling and Donnar 2009, 94).

In romantic relationships, mobiles may be used inappropriately to “keep tabs” on partners (Miller-Ott, Durant and Kelly 2012, 18). Andrejevic (2005) coins the term “lateral surveillance” to describe this kind of privacy invasion. This lateral surveillance, or peer-to-peer monitoring, [can be] understood as the use of surveillance tools by individuals, rather than by agents or institutions public or private, to keep track of one another, covers (but is not limited to) three main categories: romantic interests, family, and friends or acquaintances. (Andrejevic 2005, 488).

Yet it is possible that through the use of negotiated rules and strategies for mobile phone use, romantic partners can effectively manage privacy and other conflict laden issues (Miller-Ott et al. 2012). There has been little research on how the tensions that come with surveillance associated with mobile communication in romantic relationships are managed (Miller-Ott et al. 2012), particularly in South Africa (Ngongo 2014). This study addresses this gap.

The investigation is informed by the following questions:
RQ1: How are mobile communication privacy management strategies negotiated by adolescents and young adults in romantic relationships?

RQ2: What privacy management strategies are utilized to specifically deal with monitoring of partner mobile phone usage?

RQ3: What privacy management strategies are negotiated specifically for the content of mobile phone conversations?

Literature

Contemporary concerns about privacy are intimately linked to the dramatic advances in technology. Ironically, these concerns even result in calls for greater use of technology itself in order to protect personal freedom (Garfinkel 2005, 323-324; Lyon 2001). Like other present-day issues, the emergence of privacy concerns manifests, though not solely or exclusively, as both a symptom and a product of the digital age (Cohen 2000; Jorstad 2001; Spencer 2002). Surveillance represents a clash of values with members of society who want to be ‘left alone’ and yet are increasingly being exposed to technologies that are privacy invasive (Samoriski 2002; Woo 2006).

One of the most contentious issues to emerge in the digital age has been that of privacy (Spinello 1995,111). Questions of surveillance and privacy have become more important as so-called information societies—dependent upon electronic technologies—have developed since the 1970s (Lyon 2007, 464). Prior to the recent advancements in information technology (IT), privacy invasive surveillance was conducted on a relatively small scale (Lyon 2001). Despite the lingering controversies, individuals in contemporary society are now of course widely accepted as being subscribers to and participants of the digital age (see Grazian 2005; Ginsburg 2008). In line with the digital age, many commercial organizations for example, have in the past two decades embraced digitization, moving gradually away from analogue technology (Walker, Stanton, Jenkins, Salmon and Rafferty 2010,174).

The nature of digital technology itself allows acts of surveillance to be carried out with the greatest of ease. Digital technology allows signals from different sources to travel over various types of infrastructure by translating voice, data and video signals into the common language of computers: ones and zeros called ‘bits’ (Mead 2004,14). The
term digital can also be used in an evolutionary sense to capture the sense that from the late 1980s, the world of media and communications technologies began to look quite different (Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant and Kelly 2003,10). Indeed, "although as a set of practices it is as old as history itself, systematic surveillance became a routine and inescapable part of everyday life in modern times" and is now, more than ever, reliant on information and communication technologies (ICTs) to drive its practices (Lyon 2007, 449). In light of this backdrop on digital culture, this study will focus on the mobile phone as a symbol of the digital age. This is in harmony with the argument that digital technology has furthered the mobile phone’s potential to be a more dynamic participant in the digitization of media content (Solis 2006,2).

Mobile surveillance in romantic relationships is a recent type of lateral surveillance (see for instance Lauer 2011). This occurs as mobile phones play an increasingly fundamental part in how youth romantic relationships develop and are maintained (cf. Taylor and Harper 2003; Johnson, Haigh, Becker, Craig and Wigley 2008; Stump, Gong and Li 2008). Within romantic relationships, there has been little research on the tensions that come with mobile communication and surveillance (Miller-Ott et al 2012).

Mobile phones make it possible to escape routine and structures associated with space and time so that individuals can engage in and coordinate activities in ways that appear fundamentally less constrained, more spontaneous (Määnpää 2001, 119) as facilitated by the “perpetual contact” possibilities of the mobile phone (Katz and Aakhus 2002). Managing communication interactions where traditional and other boundaries can, through the agency of mobile telephony, seemingly be transgressed more readily and in a new range of ways often results in conflicts among dyadic partners, particularly where norms, interaction strategies and expectations are different (Ling and Donnar 2009, 94). This is to say that such conflict is likely to occur where, partners have different perspectives and expectations of the relationship (Connolly and McIsaac 2011, 191).

The manifestation of competing needs within a relationships can be better articulated through a relational dialectics framework. Relational dialectics are, in sum, the competing psychological tensions that exist in any relationship (Verderber, Verderbe
The theory is one whose purpose is to render intelligible the communication processes of relating (Baxter, 2006). Indeed, dialectical theory attests to the existence of tensions in relationships by asserting that in any relationship there are inherent tensions between impulses, or dialectics regarding integration/separation, stability/change and expression/privacy (Wood 2004, 173). The surveillance-privacy crux dictates that the third type of dialectic would be the most relevant area of focus. This third dialectic concerns the tension between the need to be open and reveal oneself and the need to keep one’s thoughts and feelings to oneself (Louw and du Plooy-Cilliers 2003, 154).

From this point of view, managing the relational tensions that arise from different expectations in the use mobile phone through negotiated rules becomes a prominent feature of emerging adult romantic relationships. Communication Privacy Management (CPM) offers a rule-based system to conceptualize decisions on disclosure and also emphasizes that disclosure is not just about self but it includes other social relationships (Petronio 2002, 3)

According to Miller-Ott et al (2012, 22) communication privacy management:

provides a useful understanding of the role that rules play in creating boundaries and managing private information within personal relationships. In this theory, rules are a way to manage the flow of content of private information.

Because CPM is a dialectical theory, it ultimately argues that people feel forces pushing and pulling them to either reveal private information or to conceal it from others (Petronio 2002; Serewics and Petronio 2007; Petronio 2010). It provides a useful theoretical framework from which to understand the strategies negotiated by adolescents and young adults in their romantic relationships to manage the privacy-openness dialectic in the context of mobile communication.

When using mobile phones, communication privacy management theory suggests that romantic partners must establish and manage rules to manage boundaries by setting parameters on privacy (Petronio 2004; Miller-Ott et al. 2012). It hence offers an understanding of the rules in play when partners conceptualize decisions on disclosure
which emphasize that disclosure is not just about self but it includes others (Petronio 2001; Serewics and Petronio 2007). According to this theory, rules are selected and enacted in the understanding that:

1. private information is the content of disclosures
2. there is a metaphorical privacy boundary
3. individuals desire to have control over private information
4. individuals utilise a rule-based system to manage private information in interactions with others,
5. privacy/disclosure is a dialectical tension in relationships. (Petronio and Caughlin 2006; Petronio and Durham 2008).

People develop rules to regulate when and under what circumstances they will reveal rather than withhold information. CPM suggests that partners develop rules to coordinate boundaries, negotiate what happens when attempts to coordinate boundaries fail and how privacy is to be facilitated and managed through all this (Child, Pearson and Petronio 2009; Afifi 2003,734). I will focus on the coordination of privacy boundaries in romantic relationships based on the negotiation of mobile communication usage rules and the content of private communication. Indeed, “face to face boundary coordination may involve back and forth negotiation and agreement between relational partners” such as those in romantic relationships (Metzger 2007, 338).

I seek also to make a direct contribution to the literature on privacy management theory as it relates to the area of mobile communication. According to Miller-Ott et al. (2012, 23), no previous study has looked specifically into the communication content of privacy management. By conducting in depth interviews, I aim to highlight the content of these negotiated strategies for managing mobile privacy communication content. This may enlighten understanding into the dialectic content of the romantic relationships of young people.
Method

Participants

A purposeful, homogeneous sampling technique (Creswell 1998) was used to locate people who: were in a romantic relationship at the time of the interview and owned a mobile phone. As a result of past research on a similar topic indicating theoretical saturation on the 12th interview, the current study sampled 12 individuals (Durham 2008). The participants were all undergraduate communication students in current romantic relationships. These ranged from a less three months to more than a year. They were recruited through a voluntary signup form that was handed out during their lecture times. The average age of the participants was 21 years. Three of the participants were male while nine were female. Their responses are reported according to the number of the participant proceeded by ‘P’. Where questions are asked by the researcher, they have been coded as ‘Q’.

Data collection

Data was collected through the use of partially structured qualitative interviews. Borrowing from Baxter and Babbie (2004, 325) a qualitative interview broadly is: an interaction between an interviewer and a participant in which the interviewer has a general plan of inquiry but not a specific set of questions that must be asked using a particular set of words. It is essentially a conversation in which the interviewer establishes a general direction for the conversation and pursues specific topics raised by the respondent.

Interviews conducted represented a transitory relationship between an interviewer and interviewee, with the interviewer being guided by a list of questions called the interview guide/schedule (Du Plooy 2002, 175). The extent to which the interview guide was not strictly followed, determined that the type of interview conducted was partially structured (Baxter and Babbie 2004). The partially structured or semi-structured interview used in this allowed for deviation to ask follow up questions and for exploration into unanticipated directions (Du Plooy 2002, 176-178).

The use of partially structured interviews also allowed the researcher to make explicit comparisons between the participants (Baxter and Babbie 2004, 330). A retrospective interviewing technique (Fitzgerald and Surra 1981) was used to collect data on the
participants’ experiences. The interview guide used was divided into three sections, each dealing with one research question. It is important to note that participants referred to their mobiles as cell phones as this is the common term used in South Africa. A tape recorder was used during each of the 12 interviews and the data was transcribed so as to enable easier data analysis.

In line with common ethical practice, when conducting interviews the researcher ensured that participation was voluntary and consent informed (Gravetter 2003, 59, 60; Du Plooy 2002, 90). As such, steps were taken to ensure permission was obtained from participants. They were given voluntary sign-up forms which also functioned to indicate that they have granted informed consent. The signing of voluntary forms did not however deny participants the right to withdraw from the study. Anonymity was ensured by withholding personal characteristics that would make participant identifiable. In particular, the names of participants are known only to the researcher.

Data analysis

Data analysis was carried using thematic content analysis, which consisted of a description of the main ideas the interviews (Du Plooy 2002, 197). The data were analysed using Charmaz’s (1995) three-step analytic technique; however, unlike the true grounded theory analytic technique proposed by Chramaz, CPM concepts were used as sensitizing concepts and drove the stages of data analysis. This qualitative method not only allows for interpretation but specifically for inferences regarding the participants’ intentions as well as impacts that confer meaning on the interactions (Druckman 2005, 258).

The transcribed texts first were analysed line-by-line, resulting in the emergence of micro-themes. These micro-themes were collapsed into larger themes during the second stage of analysis. The emerging themes reflected categories from the theory of CPM (see Cowan 2002). The resultant themes were (a) privacy rule foundation 1: privacy rule development, (b) privacy rule foundation 2: privacy rule attributes and lastly (c) boundary coordination operations (Petronio 2002). Privacy rule development focuses on how individuals come to know or establish a privacy rule. Two dimensions underlie privacy rule attributes; (a) the way in which rules are acquired by individuals as well as (b) the properties of those rules. In order to coordinate privacy boundaries, three management processes are used (Petronio 2007). The first are rules that allow
for linkages that join or convene one boundary type into another, the second are rules that allow for degrees of permeability in order to regulate access to and protection of private information, and the third are rules that stipulate boundary ownership that identify who has responsibility for the information and isolating borders (Petronio 2002, 88) The third and final stage of analysis consisted of writing analytic memos or preliminary drafts of the findings which are reflected in the current themes of this manuscript.

Findings

Privacy Rule Attributes in the Negotiation of Mobile Phone Usage Rules

With regard to the first research question, romantic couples acquire mobile phone rules through a process of compromises and systematic sacrifices on behalf of the other partner for the greater good of the relationship. The process of acquiring rules may be either through socialization of rules that already exist or through the negotiation process as new collective boundaries are formed. Processes of negotiation were more prevalent in the findings. This involved the romantic partners working through several sequences of conversational turns trying to arrive at a reasonable set of rules for protecting or accessing the private information (Petronio 2010).

In instances where the negotiation was not precipitated by an argument over an issue, one partner suggested a mobile phone usage rule. This suggestion was either made out of preference or as a result of seeing that particular rule being utilized in another romantic relationship. In most cases the other partner consented to the rule but soon violated it or stopped implementing the rule altogether. Notably, this repeated violation of the newly negotiated rule was not severely sanctioned by the other partner, but was surprisingly overlooked. When asked why punitive measures were not taken in order to punish the violator, the interviewees responded by stating that it was clear from the violation that the rule was not wanted in the first place. To insist that the partner observe it, would lead to disaffection or potentially to conflict: One respondent captures the essence of this finding by reporting how she juggles conflict avoidance in her relationship in reference to mobile phone usage rules.

Q: Why haven't you raised this up with him?
PR9: Coz I don't think it's a problem. I don't think it's gonna like accelerate but if it bothers me [I will]. But by the time it bothers me that much I will talk but now I'm fine.

Q: But you don't feel like in a way you compromising what you want by not voicing it out?

PR9: No, I mean you know sometimes he knows I'm upset…

Here a compromise from both partners can be seen through the mobile phone usage rule negotiation and implementation process. The one partner accepts the proposed mobile usage rule amidst reservation, simply to make their partner happy and to also try out the new rule. When they fail to live up to the expectations of the new rule, the other partner simply does not enforce strict obedience to the rule. In other cases the receiving partner may put up with the new rule in order to avoid making the other partner unhappy through disobedience or violation of the rule. In this way mobile phone usage rule negotiation and implementation can be said to involve a great amount of compromise from one or both romantic partners. One of the participants captured their heightened sensitivity to the needs of his romantic partner, thus evidencing the dialectic interchange in mobile phone usage negotiation. This agrees with the notion that boundary coordination may involve back and forth negotiation and agreement between relational partners (Metzger 2007, 338).

PR5: because at the end of the day a relationship is about two people right, if she feels something is not right, I didn't wanna be selfish. I didn't wanna impose my views on her. I said it...I implied first but then I saw, she's not really about it, she's not really working on it, so I just decided to lay it off because I didn't wanna impose my views on someone else, so that's why I decided to keep silent because you feel a relationship is about give and take.

PR8: It's not me compromising, you know, myself and the principles and things... I've learnt, you know, because at the end of the day [its] between [two] individuals, you know, we all [have] different [views] and we look at life differently so to a certain extent a compromise must be reached...it's a sacrifice for the relationship, you know, but if something that it really doesn't sit right with
me I don’t think I would compromise that, you know. I would voice it out and then find a way to go back around it.

Ultimately, partners avoid a refusal to implement a new mobile usage rule or imposing sanctions when the new rule is violated because this might bring conflict. Although there was awareness by the interviewees that conflict in romantic relationships was inevitable, this strategy of compromising on seemingly serious issues is an attempt at minimizing the conflict. This contributes to satisfaction with mobile phone usage to an extent but also to relational satisfaction indirectly. Research has indeed shown that if relational arguments can be minimised through a system of compromises, then greater relational satisfaction may be the result (Duran et al. 2011).

This means that there is awareness by the participants that the mobile phone can indeed be a source of conflict (Miller Ott et al. 2012). This conflict occurs when partners have different perspectives and expectations of each other and the relationship (Connolly and Mclsaac 2011, 191). For this reason, the adoption of rules signifies a realisation by participants that it is best to try and avoid relational arguments whenever it is possible.

Privacy Rule Development in the Monitoring of Partner’s Mobile Phone Usage

In addressing the second research question, romantic partners had a greater concern for openness with the greater good of the relationship in mind. Consequently, there are five criteria used to generate privacy rules: (a) culture, (b) gender, (c) motivations, (d) context, and (e) risk-benefit ratio (Serewics and Petronio 2007). The findings indicate that motivational criteria were more salient for romantic partners. Indeed, needs surrounding private disclosure may also predict judgments made by people of when to open or close privacy boundaries (Petronio 2002, 49). To investigate manifestations of acute mobile surveillance, the participants were asked about whether or not they monitored their partner’s call logs and text messages. A majority of the interviewees confirmed that they do engage in this behaviour. When asked as to the reason why they engage in monitoring of partner’s mobile phone usage, a few mentioned that it was out of curiosity. When asked what they meant by curiosity and when probed further about their behaviour, it became apparent that it was linked to suspicion about the partner’s potential infidelity. Three participants’ responses are particularly telling of this point:
PR12: Just to check what she has been up to...probably there could be a guy who’s been sending her sms’s...[I want] to make sure she’s not cheating and stuff.

PR8: I go through the phone because I’m suspicious of something...You know, it hasn’t happened in a while, but I would. I would probably say ‘can I use your phone I need to send a message to someone, my phone is off’ you know...or ‘the pictures we took last weekend can I have them’...and of course they would give the phone and I would go through the phone and stuff and yes sometimes you find pictures that you don’t understand as to whose this, what’s happening?

PR10: Maybe what if he’s busy with girls let me just see what this man is up to, let me see what he’s doing, you know, you just get suspicious cause you hear so many stories...I haven’t had a reason to be suspicious, it’s just that urge to just look through the phone and I do it all the time.

In the instances where the partner’s mobile phone usage was monitored, the overriding desire was to investigate if there were any external threats that needed to be warded off. This finding agrees with what is posited by the literature on this issue. Partners involved in romantic relationships have traditionally exercised surveillance as a relational maintenance strategy in response to threats of extra-dyadic rivals (Guerrero and Afifi 1998). This phenomenon cannot be simply blamed on the ease of access to lateral surveillance that the mobile enables. Rather, the dissemination of surveillance tools and practices has to be read alongside a climate of generalized, redoubled risk in contemporary society (Andrejevic 2005, 493). This may derive from reflexive skepticism that comes with the participatory promise of the market though the injunction not to bestow trust easily to others, but to take matters into one’s own hands (Andrejevic 2005). So strong is this drive that a few the participants reported to have undertaken this surveillance function without the partner’s awareness.

A few felt that privacy was not being violated in any way by monitoring their romantic partner’s mobile phone usage patterns. One respondent even mentioned they simply allow their partner to monitor his mobile phone in order to gain their trust but they do not engage in the same monitoring. So a compromise here is made for the pragmatics of the relationship’s longevity. The two participants below clearly show an orientation toward privacy boundary permeability in their romantic relationships.
Q: Do you think it’s an invasion of privacy?

PR2: (deep breath) um no, I don’t think [so], if you have a common agreement then you’re got nothing to hide, if he knows where I am studying, where my mother is, he knows where friends are, there’s nothing private, there’s nothing private.

PR10: No I think if it’s consensual I don’t think so. If he doesn’t mind I don’t think its violation of privacy. In a relationship I don’t think there should be privacy.

A small number of the participants however did seem to be sensitive to the invasion of privacy that monitoring partner usage brought. Their justification for allowing their privacy boundaries to be pried into was for the health of the romantic relationship. Participants seemed to have an awareness that if they refused access to their mobile phones, their partner could become unhappy at being excluded from partner’s privacy boundary (Petronio 2002). This opening up of one’s personal privacy illustrates the role of being motivated by trust and the health of the relationship.

As argued earlier, in addition to personal boundaries where information about the self is managed; people also have collective boundaries where many different kinds of private information are regulated with others (Petronio 2010). Using the findings from this study on romantic relationships to illustrate this concept, it can be said that the individual partners have their own boundaries but they also share a collective boundary. As evidenced by the interviews, this collective boundary is formed when one partner decides to disclose their mobile usage patterns to the romantic partner. The establishment of collective boundaries does not however signal the demise of personal boundaries, which persist in order to mark private information about the self that has not been revealed yet (Petronio 2002). Two participants in particular help us to see that total privacy boundary is not the ultimate ideal. Maintaining a level of closedness illustrate that openness and closeness are ultimately in a dialectical flux:

PR5: Going into the relationship I thought there should be privacy because there are certain things I wasn’t sure about but then after that as we got to know each better and the relationship grew then I started thinking yah we need to open up more, just so that we can grow and reach full heights.
PR11: I actually do respect privacy because I'm actually a very private person myself. Yes I do share with my boyfriend...uhm we are pretty open with each other but then...Privacy is good for us for our relationship because you do need your own time and just to be on your own. Privacy does have its importance.

The findings illustrate that although privacy is certainly important to participants, the degree to which it is valued differs. The reasons why privacy is valuable also vary accordingly. Tavani (2007) helps us appreciate the intrinsic, social as well as the instrumental value of privacy as evidenced by the participants. As an intrinsic value, privacy is simply desired for its own sake while privacy as instrumental value is desired as a means to further some other ends (Tavani 2007, 35-36). Another value of privacy is privacy as a social value, a value that simply benefits individuals (Tavani 2007, 134).

**Boundary Coordination in the Forbidden Content during Mobile Interactions**

In addressing the third research question, this section breaks away from the previous literature in this area to explore findings that are new and unique to this study, thus developing pioneering work. The aim here was to look into the un-researched area of what mobile communication content is not allowed in mobile interactions between romantic partners. The third research question is addressed through partners agreeing not to speak about certain topics over the mobile in the coordination of privacy boundaries. The proposal that people manage multiple boundaries through privacy coordination is the core aspect of CPM theory (Petronio 2002). In this way, the patterned actions of people in managing different kinds of private information on countless levels can be detected.

All except three of the interviewees reported that there were topics that were avoided over the mobile phone. An agreement not to discuss them over the mobile in future interactions had come as result of a negative experience with bringing up the topic in a previous encounter. Many of the participants reported that they previously tried to resolve arguments over the phone and failed to do so. The participants' cited below underscore that this then prompted the negotiation of the rule not to resolve serious arguments over the mobile phone:
**PR3**: Ahhh I think in a case of resolving issues in your relationship and stuff like. You shouldn’t resolve those using the cellphone, because it’s not exactly…I don’t know, it’s just unusual, yah.

**PR4**: Uhm maybe just bringing up like fighting about something over the phone it’s not really a good idea cause I’d rather talk to you face to face, cause it’s just that the conversation is different on the phone and face to face so just the issues of arguing about stuff.

**PR7**: I can recall that there’s couple of times where we had an argument over the phone.

**Q**: Did you then subsequently agree not to try solve problems over the phone?

**PR7**: Yes

Some participants did however cite specific topics which are not to be discussed over the mobile phone in their romantic relationships. Two common topics of avoidance were what could be considered ‘serious issues’ as well as the family problems of one or other of the romantic partner. When probed as to what constituted serious issues, participants were not really forthcoming, although one of the participants mentioned that finances were a sore point of discussion in mobile interactions with their romantic partner. These issues could therefore be thought of as those that have the potential to bring about dyadic breakdown. The initial discussion of these topics led to conflict, and this conflict then prompted the negotiation of a rule not to speak about the topic.

Thus the overriding catalyst of the mobile phone use negotiation process in romantic relationships is the tension which ensues from different expectations regarding mobile communication. This tension involved between the need to be open and reveal oneself and the need to keep one’s thoughts and feelings to oneself regarding specific topics during mobile interaction (Louw and du Plooy-Cilliers 2003,154). There was a realization in the examples below and indeed in all the interviews that there seems to be more freedom to talk about anything over the mobile phone:

**PR6**: Yah, we don’t talk about things over the phone.

**Q**: Such as?
PR6: Family life like, problems any sort of problems we wouldn’t talk about it over the phone maybe we talk about on BBM after having spoken about it in person.

PR8: I don’t believe in discussing like serious issues over the phone, you know. uhm, if we’ve got challenges lets speak them in person.

PR10: well we usually I would say it’s about his mother. yah, that’s a very sensitive topic I don’t know why but every time we talk about his mother, we start fighting. Sometimes I do regret saying things, but it’s usually that in about his mother.

This freedom when taken to extremes results in a social faux pas, which calls for rules that restrict certain content as subjects of conversation to be negotiated. Many of the interviewees admitted that they felt at liberty to voice out more harshly their dissatisfaction over the mobile phone than through face to face interaction. This reinforces the reason why most of the participants said that solving relational arguments over the mobile phone was a restricted area of mobile interaction:

PR9: its better texting to calling. I think calling is better cause texting most of the times I think I was asking for something and the way it came out got out of proportion and it not easy so.

Q: So what have you done subsequently to make sure these incidents don’t happen again or has there been anything done to make sure it doesn’t happen again?

PR9: We always talk face to face.

The proposition can therefore be made that interlocutors seem not to be entirely satisfied with their mobile phone interactions for relational maintenance. This is because the mobile creates opportunities for the dialectical tensions of privacy/disclosure to manifest is more pervasive ways. Indeed, prior to the recent advancements in communication technologies, opportunities for privacy invasion were relatively minute (Lyon 2001). Questions of surveillance and privacy have become more important as so-called information societies—dependent upon information...
technologies—have developed (Lyon 2007, 464). The participants agreed however that they would prefer face to face encounters with their romantic partners because of a realization of the dichotomy of personas.

**Discussion**

When the interviews are considered in their entirety, we find that the negotiation of rules for the mutual use of the mobile phone in romantic relationships seems to be precipitated by incidences of what one partner has perceived as inappropriate mobile phone privacy use. These perceptions regarding appropriate privacy management in mobile phone usage are of course based on a predisposition to a particular dialectical push or pull. From this point of departure, CPM has enabled the study to focus on the privacy and disclosure dialectic that the findings evidence.

Following the conflict from these incidences, partners then agreed on mobile phone usage rules. The overall aim was not only to reduce conflict but to create an atmosphere of trust in the romantic relationship. This is conversant with CPM’s assertions about the salience of risk benefit criteria for the development of privacy management strategies in relationships. Romantic partners seem to sense that there is a greater benefit for the health of the relationships if privacy management strategies are negotiated for the coordination of privacy boundaries. This ultimately restores the balance within the dialectic flux of openness and closedness as discussed in the literature.

When efforts to co-ordinate access to the boundary failed either through invasion or system breakdown, boundary turbulence occurred. This again brings more evidence to CPM’s assertions regarding rule management processes. Appropriate means were then instituted in order to restore equilibrium in the privacy-disclosure dialectic of the collective boundary formed. This study quite uniquely found that rules are changed and adopted based on the circumstances that necessitate this change or negotiation of new rules. Therefore privacy management rules evolve within the lifespan of the romantic relationship. This is not necessarily accounted for by the CPM theory, but is intimated in the concept of boundary life span. However boundary life span only suggests that privacy boundaries change variably within an individual’s lifespan. The findings seem to suggest that the changes in the privacy boundary manifest within the relationship lifespan.
So pervasive was this desire for trust and harmony that some of the participants were willing to open up their privacy boundaries and agree to mobile phone usage rules that were problematic to their concept of privacy. Trust was so important that participants were even willing to monitor their partner’s mobile phone usage patterns in hopes of warding off any extra dyadic rivals. Here we can note the intersection between the risk benefit criteria as well as the motivational criteria. As indicated by CPM there are five criteria used to generate privacy rules: (a) culture, (b) gender, (c) motivations, (d) context, and (e) risk-benefit ratio. The potential risk to the relationship were seen as greater motivations for engaging in lateral forms of surveillance by romantic partners. The centrality of trust was again seen in the sensitivity that participants who valued privacy showed toward their mobile phones being monitored by their partners. The importance of privacy was seen through the regulation of mobile phone usage rules, which afforded for the negotiation of contact (room to grow) and space (solitude) (Tavani 2007, 133). As argued in this study, privacy can indeed be effectively managed in romantic relationships through mutually agreed rules (cf Miller-Ott et al., 2012). The management of privacy that results from the continued surveillance in romantic relationship does indeed create a dialectic tension. This dialectic tension has not been experienced in altogether negative terms (see, for instance, Kim, 2004). Combining the necessary aspects of surveillance and the inescapable desire for privacy has allowed us to study the existence of this dialectic in more nuanced terms. Subsequently, those who monitored their partner’s mobile phone usage patterns mentioned that they were simply looking out for any extra-dyadic rivals. While a few mentioned that this shows openness and trust, others on the opposite side of the spectrum felt that the act of monitoring partner’s mobile phone usage was an act that showed a lack of trust for one’s partner and did not engage in it. Therefore trust is an important motivating factor in the mobile phone rule negotiation process and implementation which must be accounted for by romantic partners. Thus the negotiated rules did not only focus on privacy-disclosure but on maintaining the health of the relationships as a whole. The invasion of privacy through asymmetrical monitoring of a romantic partner’s phone was however also seen as an important way of maintain relational well-being by warding off any potential extra dyadic threats. This panoptic form of monitoring demonstrates that even lateral
surveillance is itself layered by complex forms of surveillance. This type of surveillance blends together forms of inconspicuous monitoring where a partner is unaware that they are being monitored by their loved one, as well as self-monitoring where the partner who is undertaking the monitoring must make sure they do not get caught.

The avoidance of certain topics for discussion over the mobile phone also pointed to the awareness that there is a significant difference between face to face interaction and mobile interaction. Partners thus prefer face to face interactions when resolving relational arguments. This preference of resolving relational arguments through face to face encounter can be seen as an explicit privacy rule negotiation enactment. However, this also suggests a partial dissatisfaction with aspects of mobile communication.

Therefore, as much as the mobile phone can be intrusive and a source of conflict in the relationship, the negotiation of rules for appropriate mobile phone usage can minimise this conflict. The conflict can only be minimised and not resolved completely because of the dynamic nature of romantic relationships and the equally dynamic nature of the circumstances that influence the relationships themselves. Even more interesting is how the romantic partners seem to have a sense of the ongoing interplay between the unitary opposites of openness and closedness. In this way mobile communication privacy management helps us appreciate the competing psychological tensions that exist in any relationship. How the conflict is negotiated and what rules are negotiated when it arises seems to be the fulcrum on which the future of the relationship management process in a mobile environment pivots.

**Concluding Remarks**

Two limitations that set the tone for future research are worth mentioning before concluding the discussion. Firstly, due to the limitations of time, only cross sectional interviews could be conducted in order to investigate participants’ mobile usage rules at one point in time. A more longitudinal study would allow for more definite results to be obtained regarding participants’ views over a longer period of time. This would allow for investigations into the types of rules that are more likely to become obsolete as the relationship progresses. Secondly, due to the nature of the sampling used, the aim was to find out the perceptions from one person about their romantic relationship.
Conjoint interviews with both romantic partners would enable nuanced interpretation of the apparent misunderstanding in the relationship regarding the appropriate use of the mobile phone. Despite these minor limitations, the study has successfully developed pioneering work within the field of privacy management in the context of mobile communication and romantic relationships in South Africa.

The study has sufficiently argued that mobile communication privacy management strategies are negotiated by adolescents and young adults in romantic relationships through a process of compromises and systematic sacrifices on behalf of the other partner for the greater good of the relationship. Privacy management strategies utilized to specifically deal with monitoring of partner mobile phone usage chiefly consist in the partner simply allowing monitoring to happen in order to foster trust and harmony in the relationship. The greater concern in this regard seems to not be privacy but the greater good of the relationship. Lastly, privacy management strategies are indeed negotiated specifically for the content of mobile phone conversation. To this end, partners agree to meet more often and talk face to face, this suggests a partial dissatisfaction with aspects of mobile communication.
References


Fitzgerald, N. M. and Surra, C. A. 1981. The development of dyadic relationships: Explorations into a retrospective interview technique. Paper presented at the meeting of the National Council on Family Relations, Madison, WI.


Walker, G. H., Stanton, N. A., Jenkins, D. P., Salmon, P. M. and Rafferty, L. 2010. From the 6 Ps of Planning to the 4 Ds of Digitization: Difficulties, Dilemmas, and