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Texting home: Examining the mobile phone practices of student newcomers to Toronto.”

Abstract: We investigate the roles that new media play in supporting the relationships of young people in their first-year of university in Toronto. We consider the experiences of domestic and newly emigrated students and their adjustment to life outside their home countries, focusing on the use of social technologies for adjustment.

Résumé : Cette communication examine le rôle des nouveaux médias comme point d'ancrage relationnel des jeunes étudiants universitaires de première année à Toronto. Sont prises en considération les expériences d'étudiants locaux et étrangers ainsi que leur ajustement à la vie à l'extérieur de leur pays d'origine, avec une attention particulière à l'utilisation de technologies sociales comme médiateur de cet ajustement.

This study reports on findings from a 2007-2008 longitudinal study of mobile phone use in the social networks of 46 first-year undergraduates in Toronto, Canada. Specifically we examine the roles that mobile phones play in how international and/or newly emigrated students to Toronto adjust to life outside their home countries. We describe their challenges in maintaining and extending personal relationships during a period of intense life-stage changes, and the implications of mediated communication and information practices in these times of transition. Of significance for our understanding of information practices of students, and how mobile services play a role in their lives, the data collected for the longitudinal study include Canadian-born students. Therefore, the study also explores the similarities and differences in the information practices of international students with those of their Canadian-born cohort members considering media use across a broad spectrum of devices such as mobile phones, Facebook (and other social media), Skype, email, landline telephones, and Instant Messenger.

The backdrop against which this study takes place includes (i) an unprecedented pace of mobile phone technology adoption in Canada, globally, and particularly among young people (i.e. 17-22 year olds). Of the many social technologies available, mobile phones are particularly interesting as they offer communicative access to persons in our social network without regard to physical location so we can — in a manner of speaking — be always present, always “visible,” and always “on,” living in what Katz & Aakhus (2002) call a time of perpetual contact.

While researchers have previously examined the social and academic challenges experienced by first-year students, the present study represents an emerging interest in considering the relationships of students as part of their support network. This extends the discourse to include the role that information and communication technologies, and in particular mobile phones, play in how the transition to university is experienced and managed.

For this study, we are adopting an interdisciplinary angle by mixing an information studies approach (an overview of information practices of international migrants) with social network analysis and methods. The study collected quantitative data from survey responses and qualitative data from in-depth interviews using a multi-wave survey as a primary research instrument focusing on mobile phone use in personal relationships. The aim is to offer a unique

understanding of the complexity of the circumstances and conditions that lead international migrants to adopt and adapt information and media practices to life in a foreign country. We focus on young people during a transition that tests the resilience of their social networks of friends and family and ask whether, how, in what way, and to what extent their mobile phones play a role in keeping these networks intact with the result of enabling students to maintain a sense of identity and belonging.

While the transition from their home countries to university brings excitement and increased perceptions of personal freedom for many young people, there is a growing body of research suggesting that attending university for the first time is also accompanied by increased levels of emotional stress, further compounded by the additional issues that arise from arrival and settlement in a new country. Although some students experience this transition as a challenge to personal growth, others – particularly those who move away from their childhood homes - are overwhelmed by the changes and experience emotional maladjustment and depression. In the face of the opportunities and challenges of university life for newcomer and Canadian-born students, communications media perform important roles. This study explored these roles.

The findings include important insights on loneliness, particularly regarding the affect of where newcomer students live during their first year in Canada relative to university campus locations. We find that relative to Canadian-born cohort members, newcomer students living in campus residences were less likely to rely on mobile phones and other communications media to support the development of new relationships. The data show co-relations between residence locations and adjustment, as well as evidence of patterns of use of various devices and media, and their relationships to one's local and transnational information practices. The study demonstrated the degree to which the mobile phone, as a communications technology of choice, hindered, supported, and reflected personal network changes during their first year in Canada. The findings are significant for various domains including immigration and settlement research, information practices of international migrants, youth media practices, social networks and mobile services.