

# Poor parents in South America must cross digital divide

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Credit: University of Kansas

A new study shows poor people in South America use some ingenious strategies to keep in digital touch with their children throughout the day.

Alcides Velasquez, University of Kansas assistant professor of communication studies, lays out the scenario in an article recently published in the journal *New Media & Society*.

Before he joined the KU faculty in 2017, Velasquez taught at Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogota, Colombia. There, he said, with half the population classified in a recent study as holding low to very low socio-economic status and just 4 percent high or mid-high, the digital divide and "the issue of access is more salient" than in the United States.

Velasquez states in the paper that this is one of the first studies of "parent-child mobile maintenance in emerging economies." He cites previous studies establishing that virtually everyone in Bogota owns a mobile phone, but only about one-third of them are so-called smartphones with internet access. And even then, Velasquez said, those with smartphones generally do not have unlimited access to the internet. Rather, most [poor people](#), if they have a smartphone, use it on a pay-as-you-go basis, discouraging all but essential usage.

In the first part of his study, Velasquez interviewed 20 parents of Colombian teenagers about the purposes of, barriers to and methods by which they use [mobile technology](#) to communicate with their children. Because it's not only mobile phones (which is a misnomer, after all, for the miniature computing and communication devices) that are involved. Velasquez found that some families used that turn-of-the-century innovation, the internet café, to communicate with each other while on the go. These modern Colombian cybercafes offer public, pay-as-you-go access to a mobile (sic) phone booth, a computer with email function and more.

Other barriers, too, revealed themselves in Velasquez's interviews, including one he said he hadn't considered: the threat of robbery. More than one of his respondents said they either did not obtain a mobile in the first place or did not openly use it on the street for fear of robbery. One in four street robberies in 2016 in Bogota – amounting to hundreds of thousands—involved a [mobile phone](#), the study notes.

Then there were the people who faced psychological barriers, feeling unable to learn the new technology of mobile apps, touchscreens and the like.

Altogether, Velasquez said, these barriers "affect how people use devices, the nature of the information they communicate and how they interact with others."

Velasquez said he was impressed with the ingenious methods those facile with technology but constrained in resources employed to meet their communication goals. Among those who lacked mobiles, some parents reported calling or texting their children's connected friends to leave messages, while, for those with phones, a coded system of rings and hangups was used to avoid charges.

In the second part of his study, Velasquez surveyed nearly 300 parents of Colombian teens about their usage of mobiles.

That data bore out most of the anecdotal evidence collected in the first half of the study, with the exception that the fear of robbery was not found to be a significant factor limiting mobile use. Participants' belief in their ability to learn and use mobile technology, which Velasquez calls efficacy, was a far more significant factor, the data showed.

**More information:** Alcides Velasquez. Parents' mobile relational maintenance in resource-constrained contexts: Barriers and facilitating access conditions, *New Media & Society* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/1461444818774256](https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818774256)

Provided by University of Kansas

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