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Looking for diversity: children and mobile phones

Book section

Looking for Diversity: Children and Mobile Phones',

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It is striking that many of the first wave of national studies of the use of mobile phones by children, teenagers in particular, reported somewhat similar experiences. This included negotiation between parents and children over mobile use (Nafus and Tracy, 2002; Ling, 2004) parents' attempts to monitor children by the mobile and sometimes teenagers' resistance to this (Green, 2002; Oksman and Rautianinen 2003; Ling 2006) the emergence of norms about texting between peers (Taylor and Harper, 2005; Laursen, 2005), changes in the organisation of meeting between peers through the use of the mobile (Ling and Yttri, 2002) and so on. In fact, many publications and papers on the mobile phone at some point list citations of studies from around the world just like the one above, as a standard academic practice. In other words, although differences between children, such as the particular circumstances of teenagers and also some national specificities are occasionally mentioned, we get a sense that there is much that is experienced in common.

Back in the 1970s, in the UK at least, the development of youth cultural industries and stylistic trends amongst youth were the factors provoking the question of whether a 'youth culture' was developing. In fact, this was a standard O-level[1] sociology question by the late 1970s. The standard answer was to consider diversity in terms of class, ethnicity, the literature of subcultures, gender but also other distinct ways in which different youth led their lives. As an O-level and A-Level teacher at that time, when I see the extent to which similar modes of interactions among youth are reported across so many studies of the mobile phone, it becomes very tempting to ask about where diversity might lie, which was the origin of this paper.

However, on further reflection, this provokes a further question: if we look for and find diversity, how important is it? And within what framework, or in relation to what research question, does one make that judgement. In a sense, this is on on-going question that I have struggled with for years. For example, when looking at early interactive games-playing in the 1980s in the UK, contemporary statistics showed that boys played more then girls[2] and separate statistics showed that men played more than women. But the actual order of who played the most was boys, girls, then men, then women (replicated within families as sons, daughters, fathers, mothers) and there was a large gap between the children and the adults, arguably reflecting leisure time constraints and options. Because the playing by girls was less publicly visible, contemporary popular discourses as reflected in the media at the time, discussed games-playing as solely male interest. In relation to that perception or discourse it became important to argue that this was not the case, and that the child adult gap was more significant. On the other hand, it became clear there were clearly social

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[1] This was the exam people normally took at 16 years old.
[2] Crudely summarising all sources at the time, this was in the order of 2:1

processes related to gender at work, such that these was a culture of gaming amongst boys which did not exist in the same way for girls. Hence the wider experience was different, a point lost if you just focused on the playing statistics (Haddon, 1992).

To take more recent example, but still relating gender, of how to evaluate differences, we have a five-country study from the mid-90s of, mostly, basic telephone use (Claisse, 2000). This found differences[3] existed between boys and girls but what was more striking is that they were slight compared to the far more substantial differences later in life, especially after the birth of first child. From this point in the life course men's and women's use diverged and we have the familiar pattern from previous studies of women using the phone to maintain the family's social networks. The point is that the change in circumstances made a large difference. In fact, this study was particular useful in showing the ways in which male and female patterns not only changed at a variety of different life stages, the male ones changing again with retirement. In other words, if the interest is in gender differences within youth, then it existed, and it could be related to wider and long standing discussions of male and female communication styles and patterns that extend beyond the telephone. On the other hand, I was struck by the fact that the gap was not as substantial as I might have expected it to be, in the light of the literature on gender. Does this lead us to say that in certain respects there is a more common youth experience, just as one might argue that the more significant aspect of early texting, at least, is its prevalence among youth, male and female.

As an aside, looking across studies of different ICTs as in the above examples can also highlight potential puzzles. A number of studies of the mobile phone have observed more 'intense' use by girls. For example, German and Belgian studies have noted more calls by girls and more SMS communications (Döring et al. 2005; Henin and Lobet-Maris 2003). However, before speculating whether this somehow reflects differences in boys' and girls' networking or communications styles, one would have to ask why such striking gender differences exist in relation to the mobile phone, when the earlier research showed only 'slight' differences existed in relation to the fixed line. This could be a product of the methods and measurement, the time between the studies or something about the nature of the mobile phone as opposed to the fixed line: but at least the juxtaposition of research on different technologies prompts us to ask extra research questions. Hence a subsidiary aim of this paper involves considering the mobile literature in comparison to that of other ICTs such as TV, games, home computers, the telephone and the Internet as part of an attempt to be less mobile phone-centric in our analysis (Haddon, 2005).

The paper now explores this question of looking for diversity and how to evaluate it in relation to three areas within the mobile phone literature. Many of the points discussed will probably be familiar to more established researchers, but at a conference attracting newer entrants into the field, it is worth providing some reminders. The three areas are gender, age and cross-cultural differences.
- Gender. If there is one where usually expect to find some comments on differences in experience, even if only noted in passing, it is gender. We

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[3] Given that this is a quantitative analysis, these differences were in terms such measures as frequency of calls, duration of calls etc. In the light of the comments about statistics on games, this may miss the more qualitative measures of communications. Nevertheless, the findings are, arguably, still interesting if only because they are surprising.

almost expect to find gendered patterns of use given numerous studies of the rest of social life and, as noted above, there are well established frameworks for thinking about gender.

- Age. This will become more salient since there is likely to be an increasing research on pre-adolescents given the falling age of mobile phone acquisition.
- Cross-cultural diversity[4]. This becomes significant as we have increasingly globalised research in this field.

Gender differences

If we start with a focus on adoption, in relation to a range of technologies (home computers, Internet, mobile) males were earlier adopters but in successive waves, females caught up, at least in terms of access to the technologies (Brynin, 2006). In fact, various writers have drawn upon the theme, well established in feminist writings, of different male and female orientations to technology in order to explain the particular adoption histories that ultimately resulted in convergence (at least in terms of adoption). This pattern has been explained in terms of males being earlier adopters because of their interest in technology as such (Henin and Lobet-Maris 2003; Lobet-Maris 2003, Singh, 2001 on the Internet). However, shortly afterwards women catch up when the artefact is seen less as a technology and more as a tool. The same analysis can be applied to understanding not just males and females, but patterns within male and female children. Up to a point, this seems very plausible to explain this particular pattern and, indeed, I myself have drawn upon his approach (Haddon, 2004).

In fact, there is a whole set of supplementary evidence from the first wave of mobile phone studies relating to interests, attitudes practices, etc that has also stressed different gender orientations to the mobile phone specifically related to its representation as technology (or not). In a Norwegian study asking what youth valued in a mobile boys were more likely to mention technical features, while girls referred to functions such as ringtones (Skog 2002). More generally, other studies have argued that girls are more interested in the interactive side of mobile communications, seeing the potential for social networking (Skog 2002) as well as the aesthetic dimensions (Oksman and Rautiainen 2003). Girls' practices such as decorating their phones, in particular noted as 'Technocute' also underline the effort to downplay the technology dimension (Hjorth and Kim, 2004). This has been characterised as performing gender when appropriating the object, detaching some technological connotations.

It may well be early adoption was influenced by the technical appeal to males which explain away the pattern of statistical differences at that time. But by definition most people are not early adopters, including most males, or, of interest here, most boys. If, hypothetically, we look at later adoption amongst boys especially, a subset of boys, maybe even a majority, may ultimately have adopted mobile phones for reasons other then their technical appeal, for reasons that are not so dissimilar from girls (e.g. peer pressure when all their mates have them). Alternatively, when we look

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[4] Haddon, 2004b considered this issue in relation to mobiles more general, but this paper focuses more specifically on what might expect in relation to children

at diversity within boys there may be gender specific practices at work, but ones in addition to arguments about the appeal of technology[5]. Either way, looking at diversity within males and females, either in project design, or analysis of the data collected, at least raises extra questions and the possibility of a more complex picture in addition to looking for differences between boys and girls[6].

What becomes potentially interesting in more recent developments in young people's experience of mobile phones is the practices besides voice and text communications. Over the past few years the mobile phone literature has already started to pick up use of the cameraphone (e.g. Okabe, 2004; Scifo, 2005)), but it appears that there is a growing amount of posting pictures on the Internet on social networking sites like *Bebo*, friends downloading those same pictures or sending them from phone to phone by means of the Bluetooth and Infrared functions[7]. The same is becoming true of videoclips taken on the mobile. Meanwhile both videoclips and music, now that the mobile is also an MP3 player, are being downloaded these from websites like *YouTube* and *LiveWire* and in some cases these are used as ringtones (meaning that downloading them appears to have gone a little out of fashion). All this takes a certain skill, indeed, to use a very loaded word in this context, what at one stage we might have called 'technical skills'. Now it may be that more systematic studies will find that boys do this more than girls, or perceive it in a different way, or take different pleasures from it, in line with the arguments about technological orientation outlined above. Or it may be that for the girls involved in these practices, this is not perceived as being 'technical'. But at least we can start to imagine a research agenda that explores the gender and technology theme in relation to this whole new set of practices, or whether, ultimately, we decide that this dimension now merits less consideration.

Age differences

Within a few years of the mobile phone first becoming a mass market we have seen a wealth of studies on teenage use (to some extent paralleled in Internet studies, but because of texting in particular these young mobile users have often be examined as pioneers). However, the age of adoption and use of both ICTs is now getting lower, into the pre-teens. While we are starting to see studies of even very young children's use of such technologies (e.g. 0-6 year olds in Marsh et al, 2005), this paper will focus on the children just a little young than their teens, for example, the ones who are in the English school system in primary school, aged 7-11. As the mobile reaches these groups research will inevitably follow, and this is already starting to happen (e.g. Geser. 2006).

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[5] There is a precedent for this in relation to early home computers. In the 1980s various commentators, in the media and academia, reflected on the technological appeal of home computers to explain boys' greater interest in and adoption of this ICT at the time. However, the history of gaming reveal how they are gender specific reasons generating more male interest in games (i.e. the history of the arcades and the culture this created). Given that 90% of home computer use at this time was for gaming, this is arguably the more significant factor that generated boys' interest in those early machines. This is not to say that one would find equivalent processes at work when looking at mobile phone adoption, or any other aspect of mobile phone usage.

[6] More recent examples of looking at the 'exceptional girls' operating in what are perceived as male domains are studies of more contemporary girl gamers (Schott and Horell, 2000) and women and online gaming (Taylor, 2003).

[7] These observations reflect current research in the UK being undertaken by the author.

If we look at the 'teenage mobile phone' literature, the greatest differences implied between teenagers/adolescents and young children would be in parent-child relations and peer relations (e.g. Ling, 2004, 2006). In the case of parent-child relations, that literature points to how the degree of independence is different, including economic independence, with (especially older) teenagers experiencing less supervision and regulation of their ICT use (e.g. as regards what they can watch on TV or access over the Internet). Meanwhile, our attention is drawn to the different balance of orientation to peers vs. family, where in the teenage years peers start to pay a larger role in children's lives compared to when they were younger (Ling, 2004). This is all very plausible and various research suggests that these processes are indeed at work in relation to other ICTs (e.g. parents supervising younger children's use of the Internet more, Eurobarometer, 2006)

One small-scale UK survey conducted in 2004 found that 45% of 10- and 11-year-olds at primary school had mobiles, a figure itself in line with National Opinion Poll findings at that time (Davie, Panting and Charlton, 2004). Although one must always be a little careful about young children's claims, when they might either be bragging or at least interpreting the situation to paint a certain picture, 80% claimed that they had initiated the acquisition of the phone, 19% claimed to have bought it themselves, a further 55% claimed to have shared the buying costs, 50% said they paid for top-up cards themselves (presumably from pocket money) and 19% said they shared this cost with parents. These figures seem a little high in the light of teenage surveys. But if the figures were even half those claimed this would still be impressive because it shows the extent of a serious interest in mobiles spreading down to these pre-teens, rather than mobiles simply being issued to them by parents concerned that children can keep in touch when out of the home.

This UK survey also suggests that the process of parents getting children to appreciate the value of money and budgeting through the financing of mobiles, which had previous being described as part of the process of children gaining more autonomy as teenagers, is actually also taking place at an earlier age. Finally, there were other parallels with older children. Chatting was the most popular use of the mobile. While the majority of calls were in one way or another to family members (47% specifically to parents), which is in keeping with claims about younger children's family orientation, 33% were nevertheless to friends. The existing literature suggests that pre-teens spend less time out of the home than teenagers, and indeed 38% of calls were from home, reminding us that the mobile is a 'personal' phone, not just a portable one. That said, the remaining calls were from outside the home, indicating a certain amount of mobility.

One piece of research only provides a limited amount of evidence, but its role in this paper is as a case study to think about potential implications until we amass further material. It raises the question that, even if these younger children are on balance behaving in a slightly different way from teenagers, might the difference turn out to be less than we think, as derived from the discussions of teenagers and the mobile phone? To what extent do some interactions negotiating independence described in that literature occur with the younger group as well? To what extent are this group mobile outside of the home? To what extent are they peer-oriented? In fact, to borrow another element from the discussion of teens, to what extent are they influenced by

fashion? In other words, when we assess diversity between different aged groups of children, we have a set of arguments against which to evaluate the significance of the differences that we find.

A second observation is that there are, of course, differences within the teenage group itself. One obvious one relates to age differences even among teenagers - for example, in one UK study, not surprisingly 49% of older teenagers compared to 24% of younger ones had organised a date by text (Mobile Life, 2006). But perhaps it is more interesting to explore other forms of diversity within the teenager group in the same way as advocated for gender. We might take a lesson from one French study of teenagers' use of telephony that produced a typology of relationships and patterns of phone use. This included teens who actually socialized little with their peers (Martin and de Singly 2000). Hence, although it may be true that teenagers are more orientated to peers than pre-teens, once again we might get a richer picture through exploring heterogeneity.

Cross-cultural differences

To make a link to the last section, how children experience mobiles, more specifically how their use is seen and regulated by others, might well vary culturally[8]. The literature on the social construction of childhood (and parenthood) in different cultures would sensitise us to possible variation in what children of different ages are expected to be capable of, what they need to be shielded from, when different rites of passage occur (e.g. when they can have their own ICTs, such as mobiles) and these may all be changing over time. If we look even within Europe, recent research on parents' attitudes towards Internet 'risks' faced by their children shows quite substantial variation (Eurobarometer, 2006). This in turn reflects different media coverage in different countries, different degrees of awareness raising by NGOs and Government, etc – which are currently being investigated by the *EU Kids Online* project[9].

In fact, policy interest in this area is starting to have consequences for the study of children and mobile phones. For example, there have been EC discussions of the risks of the mobile Internet, as children can in principle go online from their phones, with even less scope for parental supervision (EC, 2006). And we find discussions of and research into children cyberbullying' either by Internet or mobile phone (Campbell, 2005; Smith et al, 2006). Perceptions of this risk by parents may well turn out to be another facet that varies cross-culturally.

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[8] As a caveat, there are other factors affecting young people's experience of ICTs which are not so much cultural but reflect what is supplied in different countries. To take a Korean example, the home-page system *Cyworld* arguably encouraged more use of camera phone, as people posted pictures from everyday life and to some extent encouraged the use of the mobile for checking up on what was happening on this online world. This occurred some years earlier than the processes in the UK noted earlier in this paper (Haddon and Kim, forthcoming). Meanwhile, the availability of the Japanese iMODE offered youth email rather than facing the constraints, but also creativity, of SMS. In other words, different youth have varied experiences because of the different services and technological possibilities open to them.

[9] This is the current EC sponsored project led by Sonia Livingstone and Leslie Haddon. It is an 18-country study that aims to chart the availability of European research on children's experience of the Internet, explain the factors shaping research and develop the methodological approaches to make systematic cross-cultural comparisons. See http://www.eukidsonline.net

Where children are, in terms of location and mobility, has ramifications for mobile phone use. There is a Western literature describing the withdrawal of children from public spaces, their participation in organised and supervised activities (that requires many children to be chauffeured by parents) and a 'Bedroom Culture' where peers meet in homes (Bovill and Livingstone, 2001). But clearly this applies more to some parts of the world than others with studies in various Asian countries indicating that this Bedroom Culture does not exist, partly because of the size and nature of homes (Lim, 2005 on China; Yoon, 2003 on Korea; Ito, 2005, on Japan). In fact, Japanese mobile phone studies discuss the occupancy of public spaces by youth. One might anticipate that this variation in home vs. public spaces, might have some bearing upon young people's patterns of communication, but so to would a variety of other factors. If the degree of ferrying children around to activities (or picking them up from school) differs in countries, this would presumably have some bearing upon the communications between children and parents to organise logistics. Moreover, if concerns about the risks of public space vary by culture, which they may well do if we have already seen how perceptions of Internet risks vary, this may have a further bearing upon the requirement for children to keep parents informed of their location[10].

A second factor to consider is the regulation of children's mobile phone use, already discussed in terms the heavy regulation of mobile phones in Japanese public spaces such as the transport system. This has ramifications for mobile use. Since voice calls are prohibited many Japanese youth resort to using solely text in those circumstances (Ito, 2005). So one avenue would be to explore whether variations in rules about calling, or if not formal regulation at least expectations about appropriate behaviour in different settings, vary across countries in such a way that this has a bearing on the use of phone by children. In addition, we can now start to look to other functions of the phone, like the camera that is becoming commonplace. We already see some variation in public spaces where photos may not be taken, and currently some of the concerns about cyberbullying especially are leading certain agencies to lobby for children to be more sensitive about the photos they take (e.g. asking permission) (Save the Children, Finland). Whether or not photo etiquettes emerge, the very fact that there are calls for them means that we need to consider variation in this aspect of children's mobile phone use.

The next step is to examine parental regulation if only because we know that this varies between countries in relation to other ICTs. For example, the degree to which parents try to control children's television watching has been shown to differ even between European countries (Pasquier, 2001). We already have studies showing some European variation in parents' rules about their children's Internet use[11] and

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[10] In the UK, a study by Williams and Williams (2005) noted the negotiation whereby if children agreed to keep their phone switched on and keep parents informed about their plans they could often negotiate staying out later. Might the extent to which this occurs vary cross-culturally if the risks of stopping out are perceived differently?

[11] For example, 62% of UK parents said that they had such rules, compared to 35% for Poland and 14% for Portugal (EU Kids Online analysis of Eurobarometer, 2006). One must always be a little wary in interpreting such figures absolutely, since children's understandings of whether there are rules have been found to be systematically different from parent's understandings. Nevertheless, it looks as if some striking cross-cultural variation exists.

now we see it in relation to the mobile[12]. Of course, one would also have to ask whether what aspects of life the rules relate to vary by country and one might also want to ask about the extent to which children evade, resist or accept these rules also differs by country.

Looking beyond the issue of rules, in the UK, for example, we have recently had several studies on cyberbullying as NGOs try to raise awareness of the phenomenon, and part of that campaign is addressed to parents: what should they be talking to their children about, as regards appropriate and inappropriate ways to use the mobile phone? But it is not clear that you have such campaigns across countries. Or to take another issue, it is possible that parental concerns about mobile (online) gaming, and such matters as children's loss of sleep, may (come to) vary by country because the degree to which these behaviours occur may itself be different in different country.

Lastly we might want to revisit the discussions of peer vs. family orientation, but this time not so much in relation to the age of children but in relation to cross-cultural variation. For example, in study discussing the domestication of ICTs in the home, one Chinese researcher not that China's one-child policy may well have had the consequence of making peer-to-peer relations tighter in the absence of siblings (Lim, 2005). Meanwhile, one Japanese commentator has talked about the public discussions concerning the lack of social communication between Japanese parents and their children (Matsuda, 2005). In contrast, some Korean research has emphasised how much the mobile is still used for communication between parents and their children (Yoon, 2003). So if some of the earlier examples highlight variation even within Europe, we can speculate that it might be worth exploring differences within other regions such as Asia.

Conclusion

By covering three dimensions – gender, age and cross-cultural diversity - some question and some frameworks for thinking about diversity have been highlighted. Working backwards, in the case of cross-cultural analysis we have clues about where it might be worthwhile to look. In the case of age, the issue is more of our expectations – in some senses, might we find less variation than the teenage mobile literature might suggest? In the case of gender too, the question is not so much one of will gender patterns exist but rather how should we contextualise and hence evaluate differences and proceed with further analysis.

The secondary aim has been to show how looking at other ICTs can provide new perspectives. For example, in relation to gender, other studies were drawn upon to reflect on the usefulness of contextualising gender differences in children in relation to gender differences at later points in the life course. Looking across technologies could lead to new questions – for example, gender differences between fixed line and mobile. Meanwhile, those non-mobile studies were used as part of the argument for looking at diversity amongst males and amongst females, which could even lead us to ask whether some gender differences were so great or whether we should look for different gendering processes at work. In the case of age, we saw the diversity

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[12] For example, 20% of UK parents said that they had rules, compared to 14% for Poland and 9% for Portugal (EU Kids Online analysis of Eurobarometer, 2006).

amongst teenagers that had been revealed in research on basic telephony. And in the case of cross-cultural differences, the variation in parental regulation found in relation to other ICTs sensitises us to the fact that we might consider this looking for such variation in relation to the mobile phone.

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