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More than a phone: emerging practices in mobile phone use amongst children

Conference Item

More than a Phone: Emerging Practices in Mobile Phone Use amongst Children

The first wave of mobile phone studies amongst youth focused mainly on communications, especially texting, and the implications of a personal phone both for parent-children relationships and peer awareness and negotiations. There were, in addition, other studies that framed the mobile as a symbolic object (e.g. in discussions of fashionability, of customisation) and in relation to the role it could play in gift-relationships. Studies with a slightly different emphasis followed once the mobile acquired more functionality, principally in the sub-literature on the reception to and subsequent use of the cameraphone.

Since its introduction the mobile has continued to acquire more accessories (e.g. the phone charms, the straps, the coverings) and functionality (e.g. the mobile as a video recorder, as an MP3 player, as an Internet platform and more recently as a device for accessing TV). Developments in relation to the Internet have also had implications for how the mobile phone is 'used' by youth. Perhaps some of the most striking are social networking sites like *My Space* (or national sites such as *Cyworld* in Korea) channels for video distribution like *YouTube* and sites for downloading music such as *iTunes* (as well as illegal alternatives).

This paper, based on recent British empirical research[1] using focus groups, interviews and dairies, examines the consequences of these developments for the way in which mobiles are used by children currently aged 11-16.

Images

As in the research on the cameraphone in other countries, this was often the children's first (digital) camera and it was mostly used for capturing spontaneous images from everyday lives such as a group of friends in the park, a new baby in the family, of

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[1] The new empirical data for this research builds on an earlier study by DWRC (Vincent 2004) that had previously examined this topic. For this new study DWRC invited children to participate from the same schools and locations as before. Three focus groups comprising 6-9 children were held in each of two secondary schools and 48 children, including some of the focus group attendees, kept a 24hour diary record of their communications activities. Six of the boys and six of the girls who had not participated in a focus group were interviewed for about one hour about their diary and about their mobile phone and other technologies. All the respondents were from the age groups 11-12, 13-14 and 15-16.

events such as fireworks show. If anything, there was a premium on elements of humour (as when a pet did something amusing). In contrast, those young people who also had digital cameras used them on more special occasions where the taking of pictures was anticipated, such as at parties or on holidays, the main reason being that the better quality of the images on dedicated devices.

If we turn to what youth actually do with images, as in other research, MMS is rare mainly because of the cost. A few had sent images, especially if it was part of a tariff package that allowed some free multimedia messages or if there was no free alternative like Bluetooth. Some had tried out the MMS service but were not impressed when they had to go to a website to retrieve pictures. The most common practice was still to show pictures that were still on the mobile to friends, then delete many, keeping the 'best' ones on the grounds of either quality or content. Some picture enthusiasts, such as Sandra in our study, collected images saving them on her computer, edited them and transferred them back to the mobile or, like Luke, transferred pictures taken with a digital camera onto the mobile. Transferring images to other people by Bluetooth (or Infrared) did occur but was less common than transferring music. People used the video facility for more action orientated images, but this was still less common than taking still images.

In addition to this picture taking and sharing outlined above we also have the more illicit use of the cameraphone at school, which may be rarer but was good material for stories retold by interviewees of what their peers sometimes dared to do in order to create a little 'event' in school life.

Charlotte: *In PE (Physical Education] we were doing this gymnastic thing. Someone was sitting on the bench and the teacher was turned to us. And she (the girl on the bench) goes "Wave" and we're all waving. And the teacher didn't even notice that she was taking pictures of us and videoing us from behind.*

The case of the cameraphone (and video on the camera) raises a number of other issues for schools. One of the subjects occasionally captured in a photograph or video was teachers themselves, caught unawares (as when one of the teachers, was caught dancing '*for no apparent reason*').

Apart from such illicit use there have also been some policy-related discussions of the implications of the photos that children take of each other, for example, in relation to cyberbullying (EC, 2006, Save the Children Finland, 2005). These discuss the incidence of potentially 'embarrassing pictures' for children. But this UK research shows that what counts as amusing pictures for some can count as embarrassing photos for others, although 'embarrassing' can take on a range of different meanings. Some young people were embarrassed because of how they looked in a photo quickly taken on the mobile's camera, with both boys and girls noting that this was more of a girl's reaction. In one of the focus groups, Sandra had been photographed while on the trampoline and had pleaded, to no avail, for her girlfriends to delete it. The initial discussion of this event was itself revealing:

Interviewer: *What counts as a funny photo…can you think of any examples from the past?*
Nina: *Something someone would be embarrassed by (laughs)*

(Focus group 2: 13-14yrs)

Then there were the 'annoying' photos, as when James described the practice of being tapped on the shoulder and his peers would take a picture to catch an unguarded expression – a milder version of happy slapping from James's perspective. To be fair, some of the participants said that they generally asked permission to photograph, they were aware that it was an issue. For others it is not an issue because either the other youth present often posed for pictures or if one was taking pictures of a group the others also did so. Or as in the above examples, young people tried to capture images when their peers' guard was down for fun, which the person being photographed might or might not appreciate. Sometimes when asked to delete a photo they did it straight away, sometimes resisting this request becomes a game, a form of teasing and sometimes they were simply not deleted.

Clara *It depends whether they're... they don't like having their photo taken or not. If they don't like having it taken, then I just say, oh, can I take a picture, and they're like, okay. And they'll just pose and you take a picture. But if they're really, like, shy, you do it when they're not looking, and then you go "surprise" and take a picture.*
Interviewer: *Yes, but whether they're shy or not, do they ever complain?*
Clara: *Yes, they say, give me your phone. I want to delete it. And I'm like, no, no, no.*
Interviewer: *So if they ask you to delete it, do you delete it?*
Clara: *No. You then send it to your friends.*

Apart from sending the images, they could obviously be posted on websites.

Nina: *This girl fell asleep and she had paint all over her face...and we all took photos...and shared them around and put them on Bebo...and she got very upset...*
Ruth: *And so we took them off.*
Nina: *When they get upset...then you delete them...but...(...) You keep going until they're upset*
(Focus Group 2: 13-14yrs)

Or
LH: *But these videos and pictures that have been posted...have there ever been any cases where has caused any embarrassment or...?*
Most people: *Yeah* (nodding)
Zach: *You can use it for bullying*
Bell: *Yeah, people that take really embarrassing pictures of someone like...if they pull a face or something...*
Zach: *Or if their trousers fall down, or something*
Bell: *Yeah, that's hilarious...but it's also really mean*
Zach: *But if you're having a laugh...but say like me, Dan and Will were in the changing rooms and I just got Dan's trousers and pulled them down and Will just took a photo real quick...and like we put in on the website...I'm sure Dan wouldn't take it as a laugh, really*
(Several others laugh)
(Focus Group 4: 15-16yrs)

One common subject was school fights, some of which had been posted on *YouTube*, including mentioning by name the school in question. And there were examples of staged events.

Luke (13): *They were in the drama studio and Justin, he was just sat on a chair…and someone came and happy-slapped him right round the face. But he knew they were going to do it. Like he practised… like fake happy-slapping. And they put in on YouTube. It's like still there.*
(Focus group 2: 13-14)

In fact, during the course of the interviewing an urgent communication was read out to all the classes about such practices since it was felt to be giving the school in question a bad name.

Music

One of more relatively recent additions to the mobile phone's functionality at the time of the research was the MP3 player, which for some had become a 'must have' when they upgraded. Unlike the distinction between the cameraphone and digital camera, the participants in this research did not differentiate the mobile's music quality from iPods or separate MP3 players. The superior storage of the latter was its greatest advantage. As in the case of cameras, the advantage of the mobile was that you always carried it around anyway. The mobile could also more easily be played aloud for collective consumption, as young people took turns to listen to each others' music when going home after school when travelling together on a coach to sports events.

Downloading ring tones had become less popular now that people could now create their own via the music function, transferring their favourite tunes to the mobile or recording them using the record function. Meanwhile, showing what music you had was in many ways equivalent to having a photo album.

But probably what counts as a new development was the degree and ease of sharing music. In the technology rich world of these youth there were alternative ways to do this (e.g. sending as attached file of digital music via the Internet). Hence some teenagers would take music from their own CD collection or from downloads (legitimately bought from sites like *iTunes* or illegally downloaded,) and send it on to friends. However, they could equally put music on the mobile, from whatever source, play it and transfer to by Bluetooth whenever those listening said '*Can I have that music*'. There was more spontaneity, even if to an extent pre-planned by virtue of putting music on the mobile, when one could transfer it there and then as a gift. The mobile phone as storage device enabled such ways of sharing to emerge.

Finally, as with the cameraphone, the MP3 function offered the prospect of illicit use as when Tim 'stretched' the school rules by listening with his friends at break times. Others most clearly broke the rules by listening during lessons:

Rosaline: S*ome of them have earphones they put it in their ear and listen to music*
Helen: *With Bluetooth headsets now…you can just listen to music.*

But you can get caught out.

Nina: *They have headphone with their phones and the music is really quiet. But the headphone can come out and it starts belting out this music in your pocket.*

Internet

Many of the participants in the research knew they had the option to access the Internet on their phone – in fact, some like Ruth and Sandra complained about the design of the buttons such that it was too easy to hit a button and go online by accident, with the financial cost that this entailed. Like adults, they could critically evaluate the technology's fitness-for-purpose, noting the small screen or, in some cases, that only parts of internet services were offered by some operators. In contrast, the home PC offered 'free' (for them) and convenient, easy-to-use access to the Internet, which they all thought they would continue to use for most purposes. That said, many had tried the Internet on their mobile or talked to others about it and it was quite clear that the chief barrier to use was cost.

Among the users of the Internet, most were occasional users. Carol had a certain amount of 'free' downloading as part of her contract and in general she thought that the access was cheaper than pre-pay. For her it was quite useful to be able to communicate online free from the surveillance of parents – one of the themes from the policy discussions that raise concerns about the Internet on the mobile (EC, 2006). Other examples of irregular use were once when the family had been lost while driving and the son Jed came to their aid by looking up Streetmap.co.uk. Several, such as Martin, had looked up sports scores (football and cricket) diving into the Internet quickly and getting out again as soon as possible to minimise cost.

Hence, during interviews and focus groups the question was posed as what they might do online if the price came down, especially if it moved towards the cost of texting, a level of cost they were used to. Although hypothetical, this generated much more interest in the Internet. Some thought they would quite like to simply spend a little more time doing what they already did (e.g. sport-related) without the pressure to get offline quickly. Others could think of some more occasions when it could be useful such as looking up things for homework on the way to school or checking train timetables if they just missed a train. But besides such instrumental users, for young people who had become used to doing more and more things on the mobile over time

Daisy: *Like you can get funny videos and funny pictures on Google and stuff and you could show your friends.*
(Focus Group 5: 11-12yrs)

Meanwhile some, like Luke, considered it might simply be quite '*cool*' to go online, including doing this illicitly during the lessons.

Luke: *Yeah, because if you were in class you could go on your Bebo…you could go on the Internet and do what you liked and no-one would stop you. Cos it's so small they wouldn't see it under the table.* Luke (13)

Conclusions

This brief snapshot of young people's experiences of the mobile in 2007 attempts to outline the new practices that are developing around the camera and video options, the new MP3 functionality and Internet access – and its potential if the cost were to be lower. At the same time is draws attention some of the more illicit behaviour and in the case of images the practices and interactions between peers which touch upon the contents of some current EC policy discussions.

Acknowledgements

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