

Youth and Mobiles: The British Case and Further Questions

(Spanish title)

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This article examines youth and mobile telephones in the UK. To provide some context it first examines

- The history of the mobile telephony market and current levels of usage
- Official statistics on the current adoption of mobile phones by young people
- British media coverage of youth and mobiles and a specific journal aimed at the youth market.

Turning to empirical studies, the article goes on to report on

- Quantitative data on youth and mobiles based on an on-going BTexact Technologies¹-funded longitudinal household panel study
- Qualitative studies of youth and mobiles
- The particular issue of the mobiles and the gift-relationship

Finally, the article considers further areas of research that might be developed and some of the issues involved, covering

- Variation amongst youth within nations
- Approaches to understanding national differences
- The domestication of the mobile phone collectively by youth
- Some of the consequences of generations of current youth growing older and new generations of youth appearing.

Contexts

Mobile Telephony in the UK

A recent study for EURESCOM showed that compared to many other European countries the UK was not among the leaders in terms of market penetration (these were the Scandinavian countries, Italy and the Netherlands) but Britain was in the next grouping, alongside countries like Germany and France (Mante-Meijer and Haddon, 2001).

That research also showed that looking at the overall history of European markets, this situation arose not because the UK was late to develop the technology: the first analogue system was relatively old and the UK were fairly early to adopt GSM compared to some other countries. So although the mobile phone is considered a 'successful' product and remarked upon in the British media, the interest and take up has not been so strong as in the lead countries.

In the latest survey by the UK telecoms regulator (covering the population aged 15 years old or more) conducted in August 2001, 73% of people claimed to personally own or use a mobile phone and this is rising at a rate of about 3% a quarter at this moment in time (Ofel, 2001). MORI, the bureau who carried out the survey, have collected data going back to January 99 – when the figure stood at 27%. We can therefore appreciate the magnitude of the increase over the last two years, which contained some periods when the figures leapt up more dramatically (e.g. January 2000, presumably because of people getting mobiles as Christmas presents, and August 2000). Given that an additional 6% of people say that there is a mobile in their home that they do not use, Ofel concludes that 79% of UK homes have this technology. Over three quarters of mobile owners (77%) use pre-payment cards

¹ www.btexact.com

rather than taking out a subscription - as in other countries, the arrival of this payment option boosted the market.

Youth and Mobile Phones: Official Statistics

In the UK the term 'youth' is almost interchangeable with teenager, i.e. below 20, even if 18 is the main turning point when people's legal status changes to that of adult. Once into their 20s, people are more likely to be considered as (young) adults.

Among most national surveys of the population which look at technologies such as the mobile phone the youngest people in these samples tend to be aged 15 or 16 years old and so data are not available on the younger 'youth'. In addition, the numbers involved are often too small to just consider the 15-19 year old category. Hence the age group used by Ofcom is 15-24 years old. In other words, we simply do not have official data that specifically match what people would call 'youth'.

However, if we use 15-24 year olds as a proxy, this is one of age groups among whom the mobile is most popular (88% have a mobile). To put that figure in perspective, 87% of 25-34 year olds and 88% of 35-44 year olds also have mobiles. Hence, the technology is not so outstandingly concentrated in that younger group. Nowadays mobile phone technology has spread more broadly among the population (and recently more of the 55+ group has adopted mobiles, as in many other European countries (Mante-Meijer and Haddon, 2001).

Media, youth and mobiles

There has been some TV coverage of youth and mobiles, mainly as news items, although in general this technology does not receive anywhere near as much attention as the Internet. The first type of report was focused on the adoption figures, and emphasised a new phenomenon was happening: this generation of youth had a different technology compared to youth of the past, or to put it another way, a different experience from when current adults were young. A second, and later, type of media coverage dealt with concerns about health issues, what the long term (radiation) effects of using mobiles might be. This has been a theme that has been raised more generally, but the potential danger for younger users was also singled out. A third form of coverage has looked at bullying using SMS messages, but that is in a context where bullying in general amongst children has developed a higher profile as an issue in recent years. Specifically as regards SMS, one World Service programme decided it was newsworthy to ask about the implications for language and literacy of youth using this new style of language.

The other media development is a magazine specifically aimed at young people with mobiles (*Mobile M8*) - reflecting the fact that the size of the population of the UK is large enough to support such specialised media. Hence, we have a journal that is helping to support (or determine) what is fashionable or 'cool' in relation to mobiles, what are the latest brands, who (e.g. in terms of celebrities) is using what, while evaluating the ringing tones, the logos, the phone covers, etc. and explaining the language of texting and emoticons such as 'smilies'.

Empirical studies

Quantitative studies

BTEExact Technologies has several questions on mobile telephony in its current longitudinal study. The panel was first interviewed at the end of 1998 (referred to as the first wave), a second interview (the second wave) took place at the start of 2000 and a third in 2001 (see Anderson & Tracey, 2001)². The results from these questions can provide more details compared to the official statistics, especially casting some insight on younger teens and demonstrating processes of change.

The over-16 year olds were themselves interviewed. Looking only at the 16-19 year olds (inclusive) 18% had mobiles when first interviewed³. By the time of the second wave this had risen to 75% in 2000 (and we can anticipate that the figure will be even higher in the third wave). Hence this was the time period where we can identify clearly dramatic change in terms of adoption by youth. In that second wave, 63% of those with a mobile phone had pre-payment cards so this means of payment was dominant - although some youth did clearly have subscriptions.

When asked the most important reason why they had acquired a mobile half cited 'safety'. In the light of the qualitative research discussed below there are questions about how to interpret this figure. Those qualitative findings show that while youth sometimes accept parents concerns over being in public spaces, there is also an element of using parental concern about the safety of their children to justify young people gaining access to a mobile phone. Both of these aspects can inform the answer to this question. Over a quarter of the youth with access to mobiles in wave 2 of the BTEExact survey (28%) said that the most important reason for having one was that it made it easier to talk to a friend – which would fit in more with the qualitative findings about the importance of patterns of sociability amongst peers at this age

If we look at their answers about usage, very few 16-19 year olds used the phone just for emergencies – they usually said that they made a least some calls per week. So even if 'safety' figured in the motive or justification for adoption, it would seem that the phone was subsequently used for other purposes⁴. That said, there is one figure that goes against any stereotype of youth using their mobiles all the time: a quarter claimed to make only 1-5 calls per week. Admittedly, nearly three-quarters (43%) said they made over 16 per week, but the general implication is that there is some variation in usage amongst youth.

In some of the qualitative studies (not just in the UK) we find examples of young people preferring to use the mobile rather than the fixed phone because it provided a sense of privacy, because these young people could escape the monitoring of parents. But actually, the BTEExact data show that when asked if using the mobile phone had replaced using the traditional phone the majority (60%) claimed that it had made

² As part of the process of refining the survey, some questions appeared in wave one which did not appear in wave two and vice versa.

³ Meaning that the number was so small that it was no longer worth continuing with more detailed statistical analysis.

⁴ Of course, one possibility is that youth make periodic calls to parents to assure the latter of their safety – but that would not fit with the main gist of the qualitative studies.

hardly any impact. While, over a quarter (27%) said that the mobile had somewhat replaced the fixed line for them, and a small minority said that it had completely replaced using the home phone, this implies that while there is some displacement of one communication medium by another it might be more limited than suggested by the examples in qualitative studies.

Turning finally to the younger teens, the BTexact survey asked parents questions about the children in the home who were under 16 years. In parallel to the older teens, in the first wave 6% of this age group had mobiles and by the time of the second wave in 2000 this had risen to 24%. So an increase by fourfold is just a little higher than for older teens, but starting from a much lower baseline in 1998. Clearly only a minority of the younger group had phones, but, judging from the experience of other countries such as those in Scandinavia, we might expect this to grow (Ling and Helmersen, 2000; Rautianinen, and Kasesniemi, 2000).

In the first wave of the BTexact survey, parents were asked ‘from your point of view which were the reasons for them (children under 16) getting a mobile phone⁵?’ While 70% mentioned emergencies, a majority mentioned that it was because of their children’s need or desire to be in touch with their friends (58%). This is interesting for a number of reasons.

First, while safety was clearly very important it was not the single one and only overriding consideration even amongst parents of younger teens. This is important because other research has emphasised the degree to which parents have concerns about public space in Britain – e.g. the vast majority of children are now driven to school because of this fear and we have seen the emergence of what has been called a ‘bedroom culture’ partly because of parents’ desire keep children in safe places where they can be monitored (including other people’s homes) (Borvill and Livingstone, 2001).

Second, given that qualitative studies suggest that that some parents are involved in acquiring the mobiles, or at a minimum allowing their children to get them, it would appear that many parents also appreciate and maybe willing to support their children’s sociability.

Third, studies of the traditional phone have noted some tension, and even conflict, between parents and children over phone use. This can be found in British and French qualitative studies, (Haddon, 1994; Martin and de Singly, 2000) and in quantitative studies (Haddon, 1998). For example, nearly two-thirds (65%) of British 14-17 year olds received complaints about the cost of the phone calls they made⁶. Now in answer to the above BTexact questions there were some optional answers that could have connected with these and other tensions over the phone. One optional answer as to why children had acquired a mobile was that ‘it stops them using the phone at home’ (which may imply that it stops them blocking the phone, i.e. stops incoming calls and stops other people using it - which was the another complaint in the earlier study). Yet another optional answer was they acquired the mobile because

⁵ Since the numbers involved for the under-16s was greater than for the 16-19 year olds we could continue with a little more detailed analysis.

⁶ Which was higher than in other countries involved in this 5-country survey: the figure was 42% in France and Spain, 49% in Italy 49% and 53% in Germany.

‘they nagged a lot’. In fact, only a minority of parents mentioned either of these ‘negative’ rationales for acquisition (15% and 19% respectively).

Finally, there was a question asking who paid the costs of mobile telephony. Other qualitative studies have noted how getting children to pay is not only a way of resolving tensions over phone costs but also it is step towards encouraging children to be independent and make their own choices about finance (Ling and Helmersen, 2000). In both the first and second wave, 41% of the children paid the whole bill and just over a third paid some of the bill (34%). Hence, even for younger teens, that financial independence is becoming important, and this has not changed with the expansion of this market for younger users.

Qualitative studies

The qualitative studies that have been conducted paint a picture that is not so dissimilar from the findings of studies in other European countries. For example, parents monitor mobile usage and costs. Teenagers sometimes allow parents to monitor their whereabouts in order to gain possession of a mobile phone in first place. Indeed, sometimes they accept parental concerns about their safety in public spaces as being legitimate (Green, 2001). On the other hand, youth can gain some privacy by using the mobile, sometimes talking to friends even in the home rather than using the fixed phone line. So in certain senses they collaborate with parental monitoring while in others they resist it, sometimes developing ‘parent management strategies’ such as excuses like ‘the battery ran out’ when they make themselves uncontactable by their parents (Green, 2001).

Although the example above shows how the mobile can be viewed as a ‘digital leash’ (Ling, 1997), qualitative research in part taking the parents’ perspective argues how allowing their children to have mobiles can also be a means by which parents can help their children to establish independence. It allows young people a discrete space, even if an electronic one, and allows parents and children, for example, to check in with each other when youth are exploring new spaces (Nafus and Tracey, forthcoming). In this sense, while the mobile may be a new technology it is used within the more traditional process of allowing youth to develop as persons.

Apart from relations with parents discussed above, and relations with peers discussed below, it is worth adding that there are also institutional constraints on youth’s use of the mobile - for example mobiles are banned in some schools⁷ and confiscated if found not just because of the ringing in class but also because they might be stolen (Green, 2001). Of course, in practice youth sometimes resist these controls as well, for example, by making calls on their mobiles in the ‘private’ spaces within schools (one girl informant in this study reported that when she went into the toilets she found a whole group of girls talking on the phone).

Amongst peers, communication by mobile phone are used to monitor the ‘highly dynamic shifts in peer relationships’ since it is important to know peers’ location, to know what they doing, and to know who they are with (Green, 2001). Peers also shape fashion and influence usage as they look at each others brands and check the

⁷ Here one might expect to find some national differences - the researcher in this study notes that other banned objects in some British schools include leather jackets, trainers and walkmans.

operators they have joined, consider the aesthetics of other people's mobiles and how they use them (e.g. names in the phone book). These were all ways of demonstrating 'street cred'⁸ (Taylor and Harper, 2001a).

Other studies indicate that over and above considering 'usage, both mobile phones as consumer goods and text messages can be topics of conversation in their own right as young people comment on the look of phone or the 'cuteness' of a message they recently received. Some youth have claimed that gossip has been enhanced through texting. And sometimes when they did not receive messages young people felt excluded and rejected – that something was wrong (these examples are all from Taylor and Harper, 2001b).

As in other countries, it has been noted that nature of text messaging not only helps to consolidate peer relationship amongst youth, but also helps to differentiate them from adults (Taylor and Harper, 2001a). However, even amongst youth there are also various rules about SMS, or maybe it is better to say perceptions of some youth about what is the right and wrong way to go about things. For example, take language. Even though texting often does not use standard English⁹, there are examples of some youth objecting to the overuse of capital letters or the lack of any punctuation that can make messages difficult to read¹⁰. And then there are understandings about when it is inappropriate to use texting as opposed to using other means of communication, including face-to-face : for example, how it is not right to end a relationship, to 'dump' someone, through sending a text message (Taylor and Harper, 2001b).

More practically, in accordance with the micro-coordination role as noted in Norwegian studies (Ling and Yttri, forthcoming), SMS is used to adjust arrangements already made as well as arrange for times to chat (Eldridge and Grinter, 2001).

The gift-relation and mobile phones

A number of European studies have commented on the role of mobile and SMS messages in terms of the 'gift' relationship between youth (e.g. in the UK, Nafus and Tracey, forthcoming; in Norway, Johnsen, 2001). Derived from an anthropological tradition, this sees gift-giving, gift-receiving and reciprocating as an activity for cementing the social relationships between people. This section provides a number of examples of this, which would probably be familiar in other countries, from a British qualitative study. The study looked at how youth rituals of exchange - both as regards the mobile phone as an object and SMS - can provide a way of 'demonstrating and testing out the trust that exists in their relationships' (Taylor and Harper, 2001b).

Looking first at the mobile phone itself, the very act of leaving it around on the table so that friends can pick it up and explore its features can represent an expression of trust in others. Then there is the practice of allowing others to use one's phone to make calls. This can happen if the credit on one person's prepayment card is used up,

⁸ Street credibility.

⁹ Partly because it is a code, partly to fit in with the constraints of how many characters can fit in a message.

¹⁰ The abbreviations and shorthands could also make it difficult to understand the intent of messages, especially if humour or sarcasm was involved (Eldridge and Grinter, 2001)

in which case he or she can he borrow the phone from other peers. The way in which mobile network charges are organised means that it is sometimes cheaper to use a friend's mobile because they are on the same network as the person being called. In fact, sometimes youth talk of feeling obliged to make their phone available to friends, otherwise they would be thought less of. Later, the person borrowing the phone is obliged to reciprocate either in kind or by another means (buying credit for the friend's phone, buying a meal).

If we turn to actual messages, we have the practice of one person receiving a message and sharing it with a friend, to reinforce that friendship – showing it to them or sending it on to the other person's mobile. This can happen even when the people concerned are talking to each other at the same table, as they go through the ritual of saying when they are sending or have received that message. Of course not all messages are shared and not all messages are shared with everyone. Some are so transitory that they lose their meaning quickly, when seen out of context. Some are too personal or risky to show others (although sharing personal messages can create added intimacy). But some are capable of being made more 'public', like jokes.

The youth in this study also talked about the obligation to reciprocate – when they sent messages sent they expected an answer, often straight away (in contrast to the argument that because text involves asynchronic messaging people can answer when it suits them). So we have example of people phoning up and ask 'what's wrong' when they did not get a reply to their text message, asking why they were being ignored. As the researchers put it the recipient of the message was 'obliged to meet the challenge of the donor' (including when messages arrived in the early hours of the morning when they were asleep in some of the examples given!).

In general, this research notes how gifts can be a means of organising memories, they 'make feelings concrete' and hence they become important to the receiver. In the case of SMS we can see this in examples of youth wanting to keep many of the messages that were salient to them and complaining that the mobile phone's memory was sometimes insufficient. They could transfer them, but in doing so they lost something, what people have said in its original form as it arrived on the mobile. The researchers note how messages can bear the hallmark of a crafted gift, with a history attached to them.

But some messaging is also a 'duty'. Over and above reciprocating to messages received, some message gifts are expected. For example, one boyfriend talked of feeling obliged to text his girlfriend 'goodnight' when going to bed and 'good morning' when waking up, almost as a ceremony because it showed commitment in the relationship. His peers could empathise when he pointed out the negative consequences - i.e. his girlfriend would not be at all happy - if he failed to follow this ritual.

Lastly, which the processes of gift-giving can enhance solidarity they can also create rivalry and differences in status between the participants – for example, if peers do not reciprocate or do not reciprocate enough and they are perceived as being indebted. For example, replying over the Internet to a text message (e.g. using free on-line facilities to send a message to a mobile) can be considered 'cheap' response compared to paying to send that message from mobile to mobile.

Further questions

Differentiating youth

Before considering questions about national differences in youth's experience of mobile phones we might consider the variation within countries - otherwise we run the risk of stereotyping in general terms like 'teenagers do x' or national ones like 'British teenagers do x'. To provide a historical context, back in 1970s in British sociology there was a discussion as to whether a new 'youth culture' now existed reflecting a newfound affluence and new orientations amongst youth - but even at that time differences amongst youth were always to be found.

Certainly we might check for differences in terms of standard-social demographics (gender, class¹¹, race, income, education, employment status, etc). In terms of access, in general gender appears to be declining in importance, and certainly in the BT sample there was not statistical difference amongst teenage boys and girls. But some qualitative studies are suggesting that we consider other dimensions such as usage patterns and styles of use (Ling, 1998). Obviously age is a factor, given some of the differences noted in the BT data between 16-19 year olds and those who are younger.

In addition, we might also need to consider other differences in circumstances that lead to a different experience of ICTs such as mobile telephony. For example, in one French study of youth and fixed phone use, variation in young peoples' sociability with their peers, their closeness to their families and the degree to which they were trying to be independent of those families, and the degree of parental monitoring and control all served to produce different patterns of phone use. (Martin and de Singly, 2000). We might expect to find that some of these same variables also have a bearing upon mobile phone use (and we already saw earlier in the BT data that there was some variation in the number of calls made).

National differences

After acknowledging national variation, one next step on the road to understanding any differences between the experience of mobile telephony in different countries would be to ask whether there was anything in the wider national social contexts that might be relevant.

Hence, the reason for earlier observations about the British media context in this article. For example, if magazines specifically directed at youth with mobiles exist in some countries and not in other, does this in itself help to consolidate some of the practices around phone use and as well as influencing issues of taste and what is fashionable? To take another media example, in recent years cases of children been abducted and killed have had a high visibility in British media. This has probably contributed to some of the fears noted in the earlier discussion of 'bedroom culture' as parents prefer to keep their children out of public spaces. But maybe that publicity has also contributed to the level of concern specifically about 'safety' that has been one justification for youth acquiring mobiles.

¹¹ For the general population, the official Ofcom data shows differences by class and employment status, for example.

The economic dimension is another consideration. Anecdotally, when one of the authors was recently in Netherlands, several new operators were entering the market offering better deals than in the UK to gain market share quickly. The cheaper costs of mobile telephony at that moment in time may have helped the expansion of the market in general and, as part of that, the spread amongst youth.

One Norwegian study recently commented on debates about the minimum age for having access to a mobile phone (Ling and Helmersen, 2000). After spreading amongst the teenage population, the new phenomenon in the late 1990s was mobile acquisition by pre-teens. This created some unease, as shown by parents interviewed about the issue of the age at which it was appropriate to have a mobile. In fact, even some contemporary teenagers were commenting that nowadays children were receiving mobile phones when they were too young, given that they themselves had only acquired a mobile when they were first in teens. This raises another possible factor shaping national variation – if differences emerge in the different national contexts concerning perceptions of the correct age to be allowed access to certain ICTs, like the mobile phone.

In other words, before looking for ‘cultural differences’ in the sense that young people in different nations are somehow different, there are a number of things to check concerning the contexts in which youth operate.

Youth collectively domesticating the mobile phone

Traditionally the framework of ‘domestication’ has focussed mainly upon at the relationship between household members in order to understand the processes by which technologies find a place in the home, in the routines of daily life and gain symbolic meaning (Silverstone et al, 1992; Silverstone and Haddon, 1996). Early British studies on domestication tended to focus on the processes at work specifically in the home, while acknowledging the existence of the rest of social life. But it was always clear that homes and households are only part of the equation.

So in this context we might ask how mobile phones were ‘domesticated’ in social networks of young people. For example, what were the processes by which ICTs acquired meaning within such groups (over and above the marketing by firms)? What factors, for example, led (and currently lead) mobiles or particular brands of mobile phone to become fashionable (or not), what forms of negotiation have taken place and continue to take place within social networks and how have collective practices emerged? Are there rules about use and if so how are the policed? What type of subsequent career do mobiles have within a group context? So in general, this line of approach would want to investigate how consumption is shaped by the collective network.

Generational change

Finally, if we consider the current youth being studied in some of the research cited above, mobile telephony took on a role for them partly because it arrived at a particular stage in their life course – they were the first youth generation to acquire and experiment with this novel technology. This raises the question of whether the

mobile will have particular meanings for them in later life. And what happens to the use of the mobile by this current cohort or generation of youth as its members grow older and some of the factors relating to their particular status as adolescents no longer apply? As their circumstances change, what elements of their practices do they keep and what ones alter (e.g. thinking about SMS and gift calls, for example)?

Furthermore, what will be the differences in the consumption of future generations of youth when voice mobile telephony and SMS have the status of being more established? In other words, what difference does it make to grow up with a technology (just as generations grew up with television as taken-for-granted as opposed to the generations who experienced its first arrival)? But of course, part of that answer will be complicated by the fact that the mobile, including its technology, functionality and symbolism, is itself evolving.

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