

‘THAT’S MODERN LIFE FOR YOU’

MOBILE COMMUNICATION IN THE EVERYDAY LIFE OF CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS IN FINLAND

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Abstract: The mobile communication of children and teenagers has spread rapidly. For their generation, mobile communication has become a fixed and stable part of life. Children and teenagers use mobile terminals differently to adults, and gender and age differences create different use. Mobile communication is often connected with cross-media surfing: e.g. Internet, e-mail and IRC-channels. The University of Tampere has studied the mobile communication of under 18-year-olds since 1997. The cultural research conducted is based on qualitative methods.

Keywords: mobile communication, children, teenagers, information society, qualitative research

1. INTRODUCTION

For young people in Finland, the mobile phone has become a natural, fixed and stable part of daily life, life management and maintenance of social relationships. A large proportion of Finnish teens have years of use experience with the mobile phone. During the last few years, a general mobile literacy has developed: the young consider the mastering of the technological and communicative skills of mobile communication as something that has come to be required of the citizens of the information society. The phenomenon can be viewed in connection with a larger norm of mastering technology. The attitude to the device itself has changed: the status symbol of the early years has transformed into a tool for organising everyday life, a standard accessory of all citizens and an expression of personal style and way of life.

The extent of the Finnish mobile phone phenomenon has attracted wide international attention. The mobile phone use of Finnish teenagers in particular has been an object of interest. The expansion of mobile phone use to younger age groups began in 1997 as new, inexpensive mobile terminals entered the market and mobile operators introduced more competitive prices for their services. The number of SMS messages sent during the first two months of 1998 was sevenfold greater than the preceding year. The same period saw the number of existing GSM subscriptions double (KOPOMAA 2000: 56). Teens have been quick to adopt the mobile phone into their lives. The penetration level of mobile phones in Finland is one of the highest in the world, and young people are no exception to this. In 2000, 85% of Finnish households possessed at least one mobile subscription (Ministry of Transport and

Communications, 2000). According to one estimate, conducted by Pori School of Technology and Economics, 60% of children aged 9 to 12 own a mobile phone. Among 13- to 16-year-olds, the figure is close to 90%. The phenomenon is by no means exclusively urban: regional differences in the distribution of mobile phones are relatively small. Also socioeconomically, the phenomenon encompasses the whole of Finland.

As a new phenomenon in culture and society, the mobile communication of children in particular raises a variety of questions concerning areas such as the suitable age of acquiring a mobile handset, child rearing, use of mobile phones in schools and the child's relationship to the device, to mention but a few. In 2000, mobile phones were commonly acquired for children aged 10 to 12. According to City of Helsinki Urban Facts, every third 10-year-old in the Helsinki area owns a personal mobile phone (Kvartti 2000/4).

In the years 2000 and 2001 more families enrolled for the research than the research group was able to include in the sample. The families who contacted the group felt the question on the mobile communication of children concerned their everyday lives, and several parents reported seeing an announcement of the research and immediately thinking: 'This is for us'. The parents related that the mobile communication of children had recently become a common topic of conversation in the family, and the pros and cons of purchasing a mobile phone for a child had been under thorough consideration.

The Information Society Research Centre (INSOC) at the University of Tampere has been mapping the mobile communication of children and teenagers since 1997. In 1998, the study became a part of the Finnish National Technology Agency's (Tekes) technology programme Telecommunications – Creating a Global Village. The study is carried out in co-operation with Nokia Mobile Phones, Sonera Mobile Operations and Tekes. The research is divided into two thematic entities: the mobile communication of adolescents (13 to 18 years of age) and children (under 13 years of age). Since 2000, the researchers have applied media ethnographic research methodology. Media ethnography observes the use of media in a sociocultural context (see MORLEY 1986; SILVERSTONE 1994). The main emphasis is on observation and qualitative thematic interviews of children, teenagers and parents. The interviews focus on the presence of mobile communication in the daily lives of children and teenagers: purchase of the mobile phone, its use and significance in life. Teachers and other people working with teenagers have also been interviewed. In all, nearly 1000 interviews have been conducted throughout Finland. Teens themselves have observed their communication environment in media diaries they have written for the study. The material also contains pictures taken in various youth events, children's drawings of 'fantasy mobiles', field journals by researchers and a text message archive, which in autumn 2001 comprised nearly 8000 messages.

2. THE MULTIMEDIA GENERATION

You could say my mobile communication day starts in the evening as I set my phone's alarm to wake me at seven o'clock, usually. In the morning I wake up and turn off the alarm and check if I've got any messages. In school the sound is off. Sometimes I may have got some messages or calls from my parents or somewhere. I check them. And call them back. In the afternoon I have the sound on. That's when I get most of my calls and messages. For instance, someone may ask where I am at some point: if a friend's down-town, they may ask I could see them. Then if mom, dad or my sister need to talk to me they call and things like that. (17-year-old boy)

In the quotation, a 17-year-old boy speaks of his mobile day: the mobile phone's role as a natural part of everyday life is evident in the citation. Some amount of 'mobile hype' was still clearly present a few years ago, when the mobile phone was still the number one topic of conversation and functioned as an indication of status for teens. Some teenagers carried the mobile phone visibly, attached to their waist with belt clips, and comparing the different makes and models was common. Since then, the novelty has worn off, and today the talk is on content: text messages, logos and ringing tones. At the same time, 'Web talk' has, to an extent, replaced 'mobile talk': the young talk about interesting Web pages and compare home pages.

In the lives of young people, the use of the mobile phone is linked to the use of other ICTs. Teenagers often move fluently between the different new media when communicating or looking for information. It should be noted that new media is not really new for today's adolescents (DROTNER 2000). For the newest generations, the mobile phones and the Internet have always been there, and young users rarely rate media based on long they have or have not been available. Instead, teens are skilled at choosing the appropriate media for the time and the place and base their choice on the length, significance and the level of privacy of the message.

The concept of new media can thus be considered generational. The division between new and old media also depends on the context and may in some cases be a somewhat artificial construction (see SUORANTA-YLÄ-KOTOLA, 2000: 159–160).

The research material would indicate that the young exhibit hardly any ideological opposition to mobile phones. As the proliferation of mobile ownership among teenagers has continued, principled opposition on the part of the parents, too, seems to have decreased. Teenagers with no mobile phone of their own usually utilise the mobile phones of their friends and parents and thus acquire a general mobile literacy. An aspect of technology determinism is visible in the teens' thinking: many subscribe to a view according to which the new generation must keep up with the developments in technology.

R: How do you feel about the general development in technology?

I: I suppose it's a bad thing if you have to get a new stereo every five years just because it's outdated. Well, not a stereo, but a computer. But you

can't help it, it just keeps on going forward. You have to keep up really if you want to make it in this world. There's people of course, older people, they don't have the need for them, they don't have a computer, just an old TV, and that's enough. They don't need it. They live in a different world, they don't live in the information society or where everything has to be shiny and as technological and expensive as possible. (Boy, 18)

Technology determinism and technology fears – perhaps more for girls than for boys (see OKSMAN 1999) – are in most cases directed to computers and their development. Though a girl may have years of use experience with computers, she may retain the impression that she has still not mastered the use of computers. Conversely, mobile communication devices are seen as a technology that is very humane and easily approachable. In the minds of teenagers, mobile phones are seen as everyday objects that even appear to possess certain human characteristics: they are, after all, the gadgets that enable the continuous online presence of the owners' social network.

3. CHARACTERISTICS OF TEEN MOBILE COMMUNICATION

The mobile communication of teenagers has a number of special features that distinguishes it from the mobile phone use of adults. Activities such as extensive use of text messaging, bomb calls¹ and mobile games are essential ingredients in the mobile culture of adolescents (see KASESNIEMI–RAUTIAINEN, 2002). Personalising the mobile phone through ordering ringing tones and altering the appearance of the phone is also typical of teenagers. It should be remembered, however, that teenagers are by no means a homogeneous group in their communication habits. Different lifestyles and ways of life shape mobile use, as do different life stages. As the young person gets older, communication patterns begin to differentiate, and the process of becoming independent also effects a number of changes in communication (OKSMAN–RAUTIAINEN 2002, 2003).

The mobile phone functions as versatile communication device as well as a useful object of everyday life, such as an alarm clock and a calendar. Primarily, teenagers use the mobile phone to organise their everyday lives and to maintain social relationships. 'It's made it easier to deal with a lot of things, obviously. When you have to get in touch with a friend, for example, and you've got no idea where they are. So it's an important device in that sense' (Boy, 16). The most common subjects in the teenagers' communication with their family are agreeing on rides to leisure activities and home coming times. Care for others is another central theme in the inside communication of families: 'I get these SMSs especially from mom, like, "Where are

¹ Bomb calls are signal calls, where the caller hangs up before the recipient has time to answer.

you? Have you got your woolly hat on you? Love, your worried mom at home” (Girl, 16). For teens, the single most important thing in mobile communication remains the construction and maintenance of their social networks. Communication for this purpose utilises the entire spectrum of affective communication: ‘My boyfriend sends me text messages pretty often. Not poems or anything, but romantic stuff’ (Girl, 15).

4. SAFETY LINE

The interviewed parents had usually begun to consider purchasing a mobile phone for their child at the age where the child’s living environment starts to broaden outside the home: the child begins school and the significance of hobbies and friends increases. Parents interested in new technologies are more likely to purchase a mobile phone for a child, and, having bought a mobile phone for their child, the parents may perceive themselves as pioneers in the development of technology. The child’s precociousness is often given as a reason for purchasing a mobile phone for a child: ‘a mature child’ can be trusted with the responsibility of carrying the device and looking after it.

Parents may consider it their duty to raise their children to become ‘mobile citizens’. Mastering the use of the mobile phone and other ICTs is believed to prevent social exclusion and to guarantee future status as a full-fledged member of the information society.

Hmm, let’s say that in my opinion it’s good that the child learns the use of computers, as computers are used pretty much everywhere, and it’s taught in school, too, and you can get all sorts of information from there if you want, and know how to get it. (Mother)

In the daily lives of the families, the mobile phone constitutes a ‘safety line’ between the child and the parents. Parent–child mobile communication is not very significant in quantity; it is the opportunity for contact that is valued. The parents emphasised the safety aspect in the use and purchase of the phone. Guaranteeing the child’s safety was considered the most important reason for acquiring a mobile phone for the child:

That’s modern life for you. I suppose it’s being able to reach the children more easily. And avoiding those situations when you’re sick with worry cause nobody’s answering at home, and my husband calling me at work, asking do I know where they are, and both of us being far away. So you tended to think about things like that a lot. So perhaps that’ll ease up now, the dreadful worry about where the children are when we’re away from home. (Mother)

Most parents feel the need to maintain contact with their child, especially when face-to-face interaction is impossible. The opportunity for contact afforded by the mobile phone reinforces a sense of security: every family member carrying a mobile phone with them creates an awareness that in every situation the others are only a phone call away. The mobile phone was seen as a small investment in the child's safety.

I'm willing to put some money in that: if the mobile's lost, you can always get a new one, but if you lose your child there's no way to get them back. So you can't really measure it in money. (Mother)

After the purchase decision, the mobile communication between children and their parents is seen in a very positive light. According to researchers Timo Kopomaa and Pasi Mäenpää, who have studied the mobile communication of Finns, the mobile phone is generally associated with efficiency in the use of time and organisation of social relationships. The mobile phone has made it easier to arrange matters related to both work and leisure (KOPOMAA 2000: 123–124; MÄENPÄÄ 2000: 143–145). New family situations such as divorce, stepfamilies and single parenthood pose demands for the organising of everyday life. The mobile phone is used to facilitate the balancing of work and family: the connection to the child remains intact even when the parents are away from the home. The use of the mobile phone is the most active when the child is home alone after school. Calls made by children to parents typically deal with everyday matters: 'Can I take some ice-cream, mom? Can I go out to play?'

A question posed in some of the interviews on how, generally speaking, the parents perceived the relationship between the mobile phone and child rearing prompted a powerful defence reaction. The parents emphasised that they were not 'mobile parents' nor had they purchased the child's mobile phone to legitimate their own absence. In other families, parents associated 'mobile parenting' with skills in organising everyday life and caring for children, 'Mobile mum, I suppose that's me, then (laughs)' (Mother).

5. THE USE OPTIMISM OF PARENTS

According to a prevalent cultural view, children are very interested in new technology and become skilful users in a short time. This was reflected in the manner in which some of the parents talked about their child's relationship to technology: it was common for parents to exaggerate the ease with which their children had learned to use computers and the mobile phone:

It only took a couple of days for a child that small [2.5 years] to understand what it's about. I'm going to be calling nursery school soon, when I have trouble with the computer, to ask if he could lend me a hand with it ...

The new generation is going to surpass us in this. (Mother of a 6-year-old boy)

Based on the research material, it can be concluded that the common view concerning the unproblematic relationship children have with technology may even lead to parents not teaching their children the basics in the use of new technologies. As this kind of use optimism may make parents overly confident about the technology skills of their children, most of the responsibility of mastering the functions of the device is left to the child. An active interest in technology is frequently rewarded with positive attention, especially in the case of boys.

The boy is interested in technology and tinkering with things in general, computer games and the like. A chip off the old block, I suppose. But he does have some friends that I couldn't imagine with a mobile, they're not interested in anything like that, so perhaps they wouldn't really need a one, then. (Father of a 6-year-old boy)

Parents frequently idealise their children's natural and unprejudiced attitude to technology and may give an overly optimistic picture of their skills in using the device. Yet, some parents also criticised the untimely admission of technology into the lives of children. In the opinion of those opposed to the mobile communication of small children, an early introduction to the wonders of technology is likely to cut childhood too short. Many have stated that children should be allowed to live the life of a child, and technology carries them to the world of adults before their time. One of the mothers interviewed voiced her concern like this: 'We should allow our children to live in the world of a child, not ram all this knowledge and information down their throats.'

6. CHILDREN'S RELATIONSHIP TO MOBILE COMMUNICATION

Children frequently describe the mobile purchase as an event with an element of surprise in it: "It was a bit surprising really, dad just came in and said: 'Here's a mobile for you'" (9-year-old girl). Unlike teenagers, children rarely initiate the purchase of the mobile phone. In the world of a child, the position of mobile communication is not as central as it is with teenagers.

In the interviews, children are notably more direct in speaking about their problems in learning the use of the devices than their parents are.

I tried things out a lot. (Laughs.) And I still don't know how everything is used. But I've tried. I kept browsing these things, and it took me a long time to learn to use text messages and everything. I just tried things out started to realise things like, 'Oh, this person's calling, now how do I answer it.' Things like that. (11-year-old girl)

Some of the children are very interested in the mobile phone as a device. For under 10-year-olds, the most interesting feature is frequently the worm game. Some of the children in this age group are hardly interested in the mobile phone at all, and their attitude towards the mobile phone is rather indifferent. After the initial excitement, the child may, for instance, forget to take the phone along when going to a friend's house: Pokemon cards would not be as easily forgotten. Mobile communication in itself is too abstract for children this young, and they see the mobile phone more as a game machine. The relationship of children and teenagers to mobile communication and to the mobile phone as a device becomes differentiated with age and according to personal preferences (OKSMAN–RAUTIAINEN 2002, 2003).

Though mobile phones are currently owned by children under 10-years of age, the mobile communication of children remains very private in nature: parents often instruct children not to show off the phone or to use it visibly in school or other public places. The mobile communication of under 10-year-olds is usually directed to the family: its primary function is to serve as a line between the child and the parents.

After acquiring a mobile phone for their child, parents frequently expect the child to adopt the communication skills and habits of adults. The communication of children does, however, incorporate a number of characteristics that also apply to their use of the mobile phone. The non-verbal aspect of communication is highlighted: children commonly use facial expressions, gestures, body postures and movement to express themselves (see for example WOOD 1976). The time perspective of children is shorter than that of adults, and children usually require immediate feedback for their communication. In addition, the unaffected style of communication characteristic of children may sometimes appear puzzling to adults.

He can call about the most curious things, on the spur of the moment, things that he finds important. Like finding his keys. (Mother of a 9-year-old boy)

The child's independent interest for mobile communication usually emerges in their pre-teen years, between the ages of 10 and 12. Mobile phones are discussed with friends in much the same way as fashion and popular culture. Empty text messages as a means of teasing people and various types of bomb call games are examples of pre-teen communication culture. An 11-year-old girl describes the communication culture of her age group:

We send messages like, what are you doing now, how are things? Things that are completely brainless. You can send a message like does your foot hurt, is your toe sore? Or one that says 'Brilliant' and then the rest of the screen is just exclamation marks. Then you get one back asking what was that about. I also ask my friends about who they fancy and things like that. I send quite a lot of messages with boys from my class as well.

7. CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS AS RESEARCH SUBJECTS

The use of qualitative methods has given the researchers momentary admission to the everyday lives of children, teenagers and their parents. The different ages of the informants require different approaches, and interviewing children, there are many aspects to be considered that may not seem relevant when talking to adults and teenagers.

It is worth noticing that establishing a contact to the child and gaining their trust may take a substantial amount of time. Before the actual interview, the researcher will contact the parents by phone, and they will agree on the time of the interview and discuss other arrangements. It is also important to be in direct contact with the child before the interview: this provides an opportunity to explain to the child what will take place during the interview. For example, one of the children interviewed kept asking the researcher about when the interview would be starting, even though the discussion had been going on for quite a while – perhaps expecting a TV camera to appear to record the situation. It is worth noting that children may understand the concept ‘interview’ in a variety of different ways: adults should beware of assuming that the children automatically know what is meant by the term.

Afterwards the father, Otso, told me that before we met, Ville had been preoccupied about what I was going to ask him and whether he would be able to answer my questions. As the interview went on, Ville realised that the questions weren’t that difficult after all. As the interview went on, he actually became quite chatty. (A field journal by a researcher)

After the interview, the father revealed that his 9-year-old son had been very nervous about meeting the researcher and had worried about whether he would be able to answer the questions ‘right’, perhaps associating the situation with being asked questions at school. After the researcher’s visit, the boy stated that the interview had been ‘all nice and easy’. Establishing a direct contact to the child before the interview situation, for example through a telephone conversation, makes the situation less intimidating for the child. Special attention should also be paid to the duration of the interviews: children tire more quickly and their concentration span is shorter.

As mobile communication is an important part of teenagers’ private territory and independent area of life, the research setting requires special consideration in their case. In their book on the thematic interview, HIRSJÄRVI and HURME (1982: 61) conclude that the home is often the most ideal place for conducting an interview. Most teenagers, however, indicate a preference to meet the researcher in public places such as a café or in a library. In fact, it is extremely rare for teens to suggest holding the interview at home or on school premises. In the locations preferred by teens, the research situation is very relaxed: the space between the home and school is experienced as neutral territory, where young people can talk about their life relatively freely. In general, the atmosphere and quality of teen interviews conducted

outside the home are generally better. The contact to the teen is more immediate, as there are no familiar adults present. An environment that is too familiar and controlled by adults may place limitations for discussion on areas of life hidden from adults.

Conversely, families have been interviewed at home and the aim has been to talk to parents and their children separately. The child is interviewed in his or her bedroom, which makes it easier to discuss the media devices they have in there. Observing the objects in the child's room also gives a more general idea of things that are important for the child.

The intertwining of family communication to the whole of family life is best revealed to the researcher in a familiar everyday environment. Observing the use of the device may indicate usability problems that may not emerge in interviews. Conducting the interviews of families with small children in a home environment also makes sense for practical reasons: it enables the parents to attend to everyday routines while the interview is in process. Furthermore, the interviews of children naturally require permission from parents, which makes home interviews sensible also with regard to research ethics. Unlike teenagers, children appear more at ease in the familiar environment of home.

8. CONCLUSION

The mobile phone has various meanings in the everyday life of children and teenagers. For teens and 'pre-teens' the mobile phone has become an important and natural part of everyday life and the mobile phone functions both as a device in organising everyday life as well as a means to construct social networks and to define one's own personal space in relation to others.

When studying children's relationship to the mobile phone, it should be taken into account that children are not little adults or small teenagers, but have their own styles of communication as well as needs and ways of thinking particular to them. So far, research on the information society and technology have highlighted macro-level dimensions: issues related to the economy and globalisation have gained the most attention. Empirical knowledge highlighting the point of view of families with children remains relatively scarce. As the immediate environment of children is technologising, the need for information on the interaction between the child and the surrounding technological world becomes increasingly prominent. Cultural beliefs, such as the technological use optimism subscribed to by many parents, are not enough to describe the variety of meanings and roles technology has in the lifeworld of a child.

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