

Mobile phone usage amongst French teenagers

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports an informal study that investigated the use of mobile phones among French Parisian teenagers. The focus is on the ways in which teenagers use their phones as part of their everyday life, and how they handle their personal data. The purpose is to gain from a designer point of view a deeper insight into the mobile phone use, something that will make possible better design of mobile technology for young people.

Author Keywords

Mobile phones, design, teenagers, France.

INTRODUCTION

The mobile phone is being adopted by younger and younger French teens every day. Where ten years ago, it was a large device used only by businessmen, today it is a small trendy accessory that has been adopted by many groups in society (Penetration over 70% in France in 2001). The combination of increasing portability, falling traffic charges, subsidized subscriptions and operator competition has meant that no sector of society is immune from the mobile phone culture. The arrival of pre-paid cards in which the user purchases a fixed amount of access beforehand – rather than the traditional system of paying for use after the fact – means that this penetration will increase.

Teenagers of today constitute the first generation growing up with mobile phones. Studies have shown that young people use mobile phones in ways that are radically different from adults, in that they focus on the expressive rather than the informative use (Ling 1999). Further, teenagers use their mobile phones for social purposes rather than for coordinating and making work more efficient. This trend shows the soon-to-be critical importance of digital personal and emotional content.

This paper reports an informal study that investigated the use of mobile phones among French Parisian teenagers. The

focus is on the ways in which teenagers use their phones as part of their everyday life, and how they handle their personal data. The purpose is to gain from a designer point of view a deeper insight into the mobile phone use, something that will make possible better design of mobile technology for young people. Looking at mobile phone use from the perspective of the teenagers themselves opens up the possibility to design phones with services, functionality, form, etc., adapted to the way teenagers actually use their mobile phones.

The study was carried out with 10 teenagers in Paris, France in April 2002. Teens were interviewed in places where they normally spend time e.g. home, school playground, mall, and sport club. In order to grasp a general feeling about everyday use of mobile phones among teenager, interviews were informal and toned like a friendly chat.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Four males and six females - aged 14-17, took part in the study. All teenagers are born into the upper middle class, and leaving in downtown Paris or bordering suburbia (less than 10km from Paris). Also they are all attending fulltime public or private schools in their district from 9th grade to 1st year university.

They were regular Internet users, with all using email, most using instant messaging, and about half using chat rooms. Having a mobile phone was a requirement for participating in the study. All have their own phones.

Name	Gender	Race	Age	School
Maxence	Male	Caucasian	15 ½	9th grade (Junior High)
David	Male	Afro-European	15 ½	9th grade (Junior High)
Antoine	Male	Caucasian	14 ½	9th grade (Junior High)
Anthony	Male	Caucasian	14	8th grade (Junior High)

				High)
Leslie	Female	Arab	15	10th grade (High School)
Vanessa	Female	Afro-European	16 ½	10th grade (High School)
Stephanie	Female	Caucasian	15 ½	10th grade (High School)
Marianne	Female	Caucasian	16 ½	11th grade (High School)
Eve	Female	Caucasian	14 ½	10th grade (High School)
Aurelie	Female	Caucasian	17	1 st year University

Procedure

In order to grasp a general feeling about everyday use among teenagers, the study took place in familiar settings. These places were as diverse as home, gym club, cafeteria, and school... The interview framework was set in advance and scheduled for one hour, but some questions were adapted to individuals during the session. Several types of data were collected: audio with minidisks, text with sketchbook and finally visual with digital pictures. Later the data collected was analyzed with user-centered design methods.

RESULTS

To summarize the basic findings, 6 out of ten own a Nokia mobile phone, and they spend between €15 to €40 per month. The proportion of subscription and pre-cards is equivalent, but teenagers tend to favour pre-paid cards when they have to pay their own bills. On average, girls receive and send 4 or 5 messages per day, and boys 3 or 4. The level of familiarity with the devices was quite high. The type of communication services they used was dependent upon who they were calling. Voice calls were used almost exclusively when making calls to family members. However, the predominant method of communication amongst peer groups was short text messaging mainly for cost reasons.

Many answers revealed that mobile phones were valued because they were seen to foster and preserve a sense of community. At functional and symbolic levels, the phone allowed them to demonstrate that they were part of a social network and their status within that network. The use of the phone to talk or to text message, for example, allowed them to demonstrate their involvement in a social network.

Both the physical appearance of the phone and the manner in which the phone was used held symbolic value that also supported the demonstration of social networks. Some of the teenagers interviewed placed importance on how their phones were viewed by others. Especially for male teens, the brand, size, model or colour of their mobile phones were seen as ways to demonstrate their belonging to a group or popularity for instance. It is important to mention that boys own more expensive devices (up to €600) than girls. From a phone feature point of view, only the phonebook, games and short text messaging were described as valuable. Text messaging was used, for example, to consolidate a community of peers and to differentiate themselves and their peers from others, such as adults.

One reason that teenagers use text messaging is to arrange times to chat and to adjust arrangements already made. For example, they sometimes text message a friend to see if it is a suitable time to phone them on a landline phone or to chat to them on the Internet. They also use text messaging to coordinate with both friends and family. This frequently occurs when they are in town and want to meet up with someone at a particular place. And, text messages were often used just to chat or gossip, with teenagers discussing such topics as what had happened on the previous evening, what they were up to the following weekend. When text messaging, the use of particular words and symbols was seen as meaningful as well. If some (particularly girls) have tried to write proper French in the beginning, ultimately they gave up e.g. too slow, char limit (160 characters), etc. Hence they learn and develop this new SMS-slang language. The accepted language was described as becoming part of the tacit knowledge "owned" by the community. Hence it provided a way of signifying community or group membership, and a way of marking outsiders.

Since usage patterns are radically different from adults – for example they start, foster and end a relationship via SMS – most understood clearly the "emotional" value of a text message. However, and at the time of the study, their handsets did not permit them to store more than 12 messages. The ways, in which they handle this dilemma, are diverse and contradictory. Out of 10 teens, three do not keep any messages. Four keep some for a given period and eventually delete them since new ones become more important. Three try to keep them as long as possible, and write them down on a (SMS) diary. All messages kept on the phone are either personal/emotional or utilitarian (pin code, address, etc.). Stephanie commented: "Some SMS are very important when you receive them. But after a while, when you have read them 4/5 times; they are not that interesting anymore so I delete them. It would be fun though to read them again in 2 years or so. Too bad! I have 4 SMS since November [5 months old] from a girlfriend that I will still keep for a while." Most felt the need of safekeeping them but they did not know any simple, effortless and viable solution.

In everyday life, all of them reported that it is in their nature to keep “everything”. By everything, they meant tangible objects like letters, cinema tickets, notes, photographs, etc. There is a clear cut in their approaches towards organising and sharing them. For half of them, they are in a big pile and they just remember where it is. Well almost. For the rest, it is all neatly filed in boxed, folders, etc. Finally, if they willingly share their phone and SMS, they are very protective with their personal tangible collection of items.

DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

These results reveal potential directions for design. The following highlights some of these areas in no particular order.

Demonstrating social networks

For teenagers, one motivation in using a mobile phone is to demonstrate their social networks. That is, to demonstrate associations with their peers and to define the social boundaries of their communities. Thus the focus is not simply on the communicative aspects of the mobile phone, but also on the phones suitability for demonstrating the phone users social status amongst others.

Allow Teenagers to adopt novel and imaginative forms of expression. They should be able to create small communities within which they can share both information and the methods used to interact with their phones.

The phone as a social/cultural item

The mobile phone, like other social/cultural artefacts, is bound in the historical context. The manner in which phones have come to be understood by teenagers is deeply connected with their social histories. Teenagers see objects as providing a means of expressing individual and group identities (e.g. branded clothes, shoes, jewels). Phones, in this sense, are similar to other cultural items teens see as important and meaningful.

Teenagers should be able to create meaningful associations with the ways they talk about, share and interact with others.

Acceptable social behaviours

Teenagers learn to use socially sanctioned methods when interacting with their mobile phones. These methods mediate the relationships they have with their peers. They learn that the ways in which they use their phones take on particular social meanings, signifying different aspects about their peer relationships.

Teenagers should be able to develop and change the ways they operate and communicate with their phones. The ways they interact with their phones should be visible to themselves and to members of their communities.

Making sense

The social context influences how teenagers make sense of what they do with their mobile phones. They make sense of what they do, not only through the mechanical operations of the phone, but also by seeing the actions and operations through the social context in which the activity takes place. The social context allows them to understand and explain what they do. This can, in turn, impact on how they subsequently interact with their phones.

Teenagers make sense of things in many different ways that often have little to do with the mechanical operations of the device. A design solution should make sense of in several different social contexts.

Personal information

Teenagers have a clear understanding of personal data in the tangible world, and a good grasp of it in the digital one. They comprehend already today the emotional importance of digital items (SMS, MMS), and are on the look out for solutions to safe keep them. However, several studies (Rautiainen, 2001; Koskinen, 1999) shows teenagers have different behaviours whether they are interacting via mobile phones or face-to-face. This occurrence could imply that they will want to store, manage, view and share digital personal data differently than tangible one.

The way in which personal information should be handled in the digital world has to perfectly match the nature of teenagers’ perceptions of mobile life. Digitalising metaphors from the “real world” is not acceptable.

The above suggestions provide an example of how ethnography data can be made suitable for design. However this should be seen as the result of a limited and personal interpretation of the data.

CONCLUSIONS

Mobile phones enhance and invigorate teenagers’ social learning skills and communication abilities. Teenagers’ lives revolve around mobile phones and a highly developed sub-culture exist that shapes the way they behave and interact. This has important implications for the design of future mobile technologies.

Mobile phones are not just used by teenagers for chatting or even text messaging – they have other evolved uses. For example, sharing mobile phones helps to consolidate friendships and relationships of trust; showing messages displayed to friends nearby forms topics of conversation and the phone can also be used to demonstrate rivalry and power e.g. to tease boyfriends/girlfriends by hanging up on calls.

The study also highlighted that mobile phones were used to initiate and stimulate conversations. Some interviews took place in public places, and their mobile phones were placed on the table and they watched and discussed as messages

arrived. Some of these messages were even forwarded immediately to their friends. They feel they have to receive and be in contact by phone everyday, otherwise they feel left out.

When interviewed on the types of messages received, it emerged that there is a code of conduct for using SMS or text messaging. Writing messages in capital letters or without punctuation marks was described as “horrible and difficult to read”.

Interestingly, the study showed that voice messaging did not have the same appeal as messages could not be shared so easily or seen. Although the voice call culture in France is very important and is the original function of phones, they were mainly used when messages were important or when the caller was trying to be assertive or authoritative. In general, they found more convenient and cheaper to use the landline phone.

One of the expected aspects of the findings was the need to store personal or special text messages from boyfriends/girlfriends or close friends. As most mobile phones have limited storage capacity, several teenagers interviewed suggested that mobile phone manufacturers

could develop memory cards to plug into phones, which could be stored in the form of diaries.

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