



Consuming Talk: Youth Culture and the Mobile Phone

1. What is the study's background?

This study was the subject of a PhD thesis (2010) by Morgan O'Brien of the Department of Sociology, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, with funding from the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (now the Department of Children and Youth Affairs) under the National Children's Research Scholarship Programme.*

2. What is the study's purpose?

This study was undertaken to explore the role of the mobile phone in the everyday lives of young people. Specific attention was given to the use of the mobile phone in ordinary and routine contexts, which, it is argued, provide examples of the ways in which young people are active and creative participants in the construction of their everyday lives. The specific objectives were:

- » to provide a descriptive account of young people's use of the mobile phone, with specific reference to the context of everyday life;
- » to situate this use of the mobile phone within the context of youth cultural consumption;
- » to employ the example of young people's mobile phone use to address theoretical debates about youth cultural power and agency.

This briefing note summarises the method of research, key findings, conclusions and recommendations of the study. The full report is available from the Library, National University of Ireland, Maynooth.

3. How was the study undertaken?

Following a review of national and international literature, data collection was built around a two-stage research process:

- » *Stage 1 involved the administration of a questionnaire to First- and Transition-year students in 6 post-primary schools. This questionnaire addressed general usage patterns and opinions of the mobile phone.*
- » *Stage 2 comprised a series of focus groups carried out with Transition students. These discussions explored in depth young people's own experiences and opinions of mobile phone use, allowing for dynamic interaction among participants. The key data were derived from this qualitative component and analysed by examining and organising the data in relation to key issues and themes, which emerged both from the questionnaire results and within the focus group transcripts.*

Overall, the emphasis in this research was on privileging the 'voice' of participants and allowing young people a space to express their own views, opinions and experiences.

4. What are the key findings?

4.1 The mobile phone has a key role in the management and organisation of family life

The management and organisation of family relationships, and in particular parent-child relationships, are increasingly carried out via the mobile phone. The use of the mobile phone within family life demonstrates the liminal position of young people,

* The views expressed in this report are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

who occupy an ambiguous social position between dependence and independence. It emerged in this research that the mobile phone is a central component of contemporary family life, particularly in relation to organising routines and schedules, as well as being a means of providing a sense of safety and security.

The use of the mobile phone has significance in relation to issues within contemporary family life:

- » Young people make use of the mobile phone to coordinate everyday activities with parents (e.g. arranging schedules, negotiating curfews, etc).
- » It can provide a greater sense of security for both parents and children through the provision of constant availability, which can also allow young people greater freedom.
- » Young people often remain, to some degree, financially reliant on parents for their use of the mobile phone.
- » Parents can potentially make use of the mobile phone for the monitoring and surveillance of young people's activities.

4.2 Youth peer culture is mediated through the mobile phone

Use of the mobile phone by young people provides symbolic expression and material enactment of friendship and peer solidarity. The mobile phone provides a medium through which young people establish forms of social connection and perform identity. The data collected in this research showed clearly the central role of the mobile phone in the construction and maintenance of youth peer relationships, with personal privacy being an important concern.

The role of the mobile phone in youth peer culture emerges in a number of ways:

- » The primary use of the mobile phone by young people is for communicating privately with peers.
- » The use of text messages ('texting') is especially prominent in the mediation of peer interaction, e.g. to chat, flirt, etc.
- » The mobile phone, and texting in particular, is used for the coordination of everyday activities.
- » The mobile phone is also a medium for the expression of emotional and sociable interaction among young people.

4.3 Young people make use of the mobile phone to establish an independent identity

For young people, the mobile phone has significant symbolic power. In particular, this research found that young people view the mobile phone as emblematic of their maturity and independence, with the mobile phone reflecting their focal concerns with privacy and autonomy.

This symbolic aspect of the mobile phone emerges in a number of ways:

- » The mobile phone gives young people their own number and a personal and private means of contact, and allows them a greater degree of personal freedom.
- » The mobile phone allows young people to circumvent forms of adult control and authority (e.g. parents, teachers, etc).
- » Young people can personalise aspects of their mobile phone (e.g. ringtones).
- » The mobile phone is also seen by young people as part of assuming a greater deal of financial and personal responsibility.

5. What are the conclusions?

The study reached a number of overall conclusions in relation to the specific issue of mobile phone use and crucially with regards to the understanding and analysis of contemporary youth culture:

1. Young people's use of the mobile phone informs the management of adolescent autonomy

- » Young people occupy a liminal, often marginal, social position between dependence (e.g. on parents) and independence. The use of the mobile phone is a means through which young people manage and negotiate this position. In particular, their use of the mobile phone reflects their desire for autonomy and independence.
- » Through their use of the mobile phone, young people negotiate their social position and attempt to carve out an autonomous space within their everyday lives. It can provide them with a feeling of maturity, responsibility and independence by allowing them expanded amounts of personal freedom, privacy and control. While young people use the mobile phone to assert their autonomy, it is also a

means through which they remain dependent upon parents. Most young people remain, to some degree, financially dependent on parents for their mobile phone use. Equally, in the context of these domestic relationships, the mobile phone can enhance parental control and monitoring.

- » Corresponding to the general impulses of youth culture, the use of the mobile phone by young people is primarily focused on pursuing forms of freedom, maturity and privacy. In this context, there is a homological relationship between the mobile phone and youth. The mobile phone allows for privacy and autonomy of communication and action reflects the typical concerns and attitudes of youth culture, with the mobile phone emerging as a symbol of greater independence and responsibility.

2. The use of the mobile phone facilitates the emergence of multiple fluid forms of social connection and organisation

- » A key way in which young people express their sense of independence and autonomy is through the intensification of peer group interaction and culture. This context forms the primary focus of young people's social and cultural experience. The mobile phone plays a pivotal role in mediating these relationships, through its use as a means of sociable interaction and in the creation of emotional ties among young people.
- » Young people use the mobile phone in both the symbolic expression and material enactment of friendship and peer solidarity. This research maintains a strong focus on how young people make use of the mobile phone in constructing and engaging with their peer groups, with particular reference to the concept of neo-tribes. In particular, we highlight three aspects of neo-tribal formations: (1) the fluidity and immediacy of these groups and the resolution of individual identity into multiple personas; (2) the ritual processes that mark forms of identification and difference; and (3) the role of sociality and sociability in these groupings. Neo-tribes are evident in how young people make use of the mobile phone to occupy multiple peer

groups that are often loosely formed and built around an emotional solidarity and vitality. In this way, the mobile phone is a means through which young people manage and maintain a range of peer associations, allowing for the creation of ties built around emotional and sociable interaction rather than rational, ends-orientated associations.

3. Young people's use of the mobile phone demonstrates forms of cultural power, creativity and agency

- » Young people's role as consumers is viewed in ambiguous, and often uncertain, terms. On the one hand, consumption is seen as a site of manipulation, exploitation and control, while on the other, young people's practices of cultural consumption are argued to be a key locus for the formation of individual and collective identities. Young people's use of the mobile phone is indicative of these contradictions, ambiguities and inconsistencies.
- » In the case of the mobile phone, both producers and consumers have a significant role in establishing sets of social and cultural practices, values and meanings. While marketing establishes and prescribes ways of using, it is through consumption that the use of the mobile phone is invented and assembled. To a certain extent, this level of cultural power is undercut by the ability of the market to reappropriate and repackage these practices as commodified forms – witness the example of texting. However, this research emphasizes the importance of a closer examination of how young people make use of particular goods and commodities, and the significance of the meaning these practices have for young people themselves in the context of everyday life.
- » The use of the mobile phone is an example of how young people are actively involved in the making of culture. The mobile phone is a means through which forms of youth lifestyle and status are expressed, and a means through which individual and group identities are enacted. However, while young people can be seen as active rather than passive, we need to be wary of an over-celebratory analysis of their consumer power. This research

comprises an attempt to address the ways in which the extents and limits of this power are rendered visible through young people's appropriation of the mobile phone. Young people make use of the mobile phone in ways that are consistent with their social and cultural preferences, which affords them a sense of agency and control in their everyday lives.

- » While this affords them a degree of cultural power, which forms an important part of youth cultural life, this power needs to be situated in relation to broader structures of society. Through their use of the mobile phone, young people display forms of cultural creativity and agency. The extent to which these practices offer a means to challenge dominant forms of power and control that are imposed on young people is limited. Rather than offering a means of engaged political resistance, young people's practices of cultural consumption can be seen as forms of resilience within, rather than resistance against, forms of power and control. They are part of the residue of everyday life, which emerge within but cannot be contained by the dominant social order.

6. What are the recommendations?

This section presents the recommendations emerging from the study.

1. Research practitioners

Include young people as active research participants:

This study followed recent developments in child and youth studies by privileging the role of young people as active research participants – focusing on doing research *with* young people rather than *on* or *about* them. It is important that research focuses on the meaning young people themselves give to their experiences and affords them a significant role in shaping how their lives are analysed and understood.

2. Future research

Continued research on the role of media in young people's everyday lives:

Given the rapid pace of technological change, there is a requirement for commensurate research into the evolving social uses of various media formats and hardware. The rapid pace of this technological development and change means that the present research constitutes a 'snapshot' that captures aspects of this emergent mobile phone culture. With the increasing sophistication and integration of communication and media forms, a continuing and sustained engagement with this phenomenon is needed.

3. Youth studies

An emphasis on understanding the ordinary everyday activities of young people:

While the present research takes the mobile phone as its starting point, it is more interested in understanding cultural processes and practices. While the emphasis within much youth cultural research is on 'spectacular' activities and behaviour, it is important that research addresses the often ordinary character of young people's cultural practices. The leisure time of participants in this research can be characterised more as part of ordinary and habitual ways of living, rather than as spectacular and transgressive. Equally, young people's cultural activity and leisure should not be viewed as external to or disconnected from other aspects of their everyday lives. Rather, these everyday practices need to be located in relation to young people's position within the broader social structure.

7. What are the benefits of the study?

This research adds to the growing international literature on the social and cultural role of the mobile phone; in particular, it addresses the relative dearth of material dedicated to exploring the role of the mobile phone in the Irish context. Through examining the role of the mobile phone in young people's everyday lives, this research also contributes to the development of our understanding of contemporary youth culture. In addressing the mobile phone as a cultural object, a commodity, the aim of this research has been to explore the extent to which its use is a means through which young people's cultural values are enacted and expressed.

This study conceptually aligns youth and consumption, and raises the question of young people's level of power and agency within the context of consumer culture. The research characterises this relationship as animated by ambiguities, inconsistencies and contradictions, where young people are seen as simultaneously active and passive, as both agents of their own consumer behaviour and manipulated subjects of commodification. The research suggests an analytical model that draws on a range of concepts and theories, and contends that while young people are never completely 'free' as consumers, neither are they merely the passive subjects of manipulation.



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