Chapter 10
Mobile Communication and Children

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ABSTRACT

The shift from mobile phones to smartphones, which integrate mobile communication, social media, and geo-locative services, expands the scope of mobile communication and opens up new opportunities for young people, as well as new risks. However, research on the adoption and use of smartphones among young people is still sparse. Therefore, the consequences of smartphone use on children’s communicative cultures and relational practices remain yet to be explored. Drawing on the consistent literature on children and mobile communication and on the findings of preliminary research on younger users’ domestication of smart mobile devices, the present chapter discusses the implications of mobile media use amongst young people in the light of the changes associated with smartphones and the mobile Internet.

INTRODUCTION

Since the widespread adoption of mobile phones in the second half of the Nineties, childhood and adolescence have been central categories within mobile communication research: some of the earliest and seminal work in the field focused on mobile phone use amongst teenagers, teens’ mobile communicative practices and the meanings of mobile communication in the transition between childhood to adulthood (Green & Haddon, 2009). These studies - predominantly conducted in Europe, though significant contributions came also from the Asia-Pacific and the U.S. - pointed to an intimate connection between mobiles and young people: this group of users arguably played a key role in pioneering specific communicative practices such as texting, and thoroughly incorporated mobile technologies in their everyday lives. Indeed, certain aspects of mobile cultures were strongly associated with youth and their distinctive cultures of communication globally (Goggin, 2006; Caron & Caronia, 2007; Castells, Fernandez-Ardevol, Sey & Qiu, 2007; Green & Haddon, 2009; Goggin, 2013).

More recently, while the mobile phone has acquired the status of a taken for granted condition of our social ecology (Ling, 2012) - with the

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majority of children and adolescents in developed and, increasingly, developing countries growing up with mobile phones (Ling & Bertel, 2013) – scholars have turned their attention to smartphones, or “the mobile as an online, networked media device” (Hjorth, Burgess & Richardson, 2012, p. 1) which integrates mobile communication, social media and geo-locative services. This convergence expands the scope of mobile communication and opens up new opportunities for young people. Preliminary research has started to examine emerging practices and analyse changes in practices and meanings of mobile communication. However, the consequences of smartphones’ use on young people’s communicative cultures and relational practices remain yet to be explored and identified, for a number of reasons. On the one hand, research on children’s adoption and use of smartphones is still sparse and at an earlier stage compared to the rich body of empirical studies on young people and mobiles, which has predominantly focused on texting and voice calls. On the other hand, the mobile internet is currently being domesticated (Silverstone, Hirsch & Morley, 1992; Haddon, 2004) and it is not completely taken for granted, at least among the youngest: habits and meanings, expectations and norms, are currently being negotiated. The question whether and to what extent the anywhere, anytime opportunity to access the internet is altering the meaning of, or adding new meanings to mobile phones cannot yet be fully answered, while being a key issue on the research agenda.

The present chapter aims to provide a brief overview of the literature on children and mobile communication, and discuss the implications of mobile media use amongst young people in the light of the changes associated with smartphones and the mobile internet, drawing on the findings of preliminary research on younger users’ domestication of smart mobile devices.

MOBILE COMMUNICATION AND CHILDREN

Earlier and notable contributions provided a review of the numerous studies on youth and mobile communications (Ling & Haddon, 2008; Green & Haddon, 2009; Ling & Bertel, 2013). Drawing on this body of writing, continuing themes in the field from the late Nineties can be identified in the following: the investigation of particular communicative practices, such as texting; the analysis of the social functions of mobile phones, in terms of micro- and hyper-coordination; and the understanding of its social consequences, namely connectivity and social cohesion, emancipation, social exclusion, the disturbance of the public sphere, the extension of one’s personal sense of safety. Moreover, while the majority of the studies focused on how mobile communication fitted into teenagers’ peers relations, the issue of parent-child interactions in relation to this technology also attracted a good deal of attention.

In a seminal study of Norwegian teenagers, Ling and Yttri (2002) analysed the adoption of mobile telephony among Norwegian teens and concluded that mobile communication yielded new forms of interaction and coordination, called micro- and hyper-coordination. The concept of micro-coordination points to the role of mobile phones in facilitating the coordination of face to face encounters: indeed, mobile communication allows for a more flexible, fluid and personalised planning of if, where and when to meet (Ling & Haddon, 2008). In this sense, the mobile phone “is both a substitute for and a supplement to time as a basis of coordination” (Ling, 2004, p. 80). This augmented temporal and spatial flexibility in social arrangements is particularly common among teens and is deemed to have altered the nature of teenage meetings: indeed, the mobile phone is also used to “anticipate and to summarize physical encounters” (Ling & Haddon, 2008, p. 145).