

The Impact of Technology Development on Youth Consumption Culture: An Empirical Investigation of French Teenage' Use of Mobile Phone Device

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Abstract

The importance of the symbolic properties of goods has been explored among adult consumers, but there have been less attention given to the symbolic consumption of young people. This study explores the subject of symbolic consumption with specific reference to mobile phone devices in the teenage market. Thirty-two young people were interviewed and age and sex variations are considered among four age ranges: middle school (14-15), high school (16-18), university (19-22) and higher education/first job (23-25). The results suggest that mobile use is closely bound to the adolescent's self-concept. Therefore the social, the entertainment, the self-construction, the consumption skills and the self-creation dimensions linked to teen's use of the cell phone devices disappear or appear with the age. The findings of this study illustrate this consumption practises and provides evidence about the symbolic dimension emerging in the use of mobile phone devices among different periods of life.

1. Introduction

Since the last decade, the progress of information and communication technologies (ICT) has increased thanks to two revolutions: Internet and mobile telephony. Adolescents today are growing up knowing that communication is mediated by technology. Therefore, mobile phones become almost universally available across most of the age ranges and

the rates of adoption of mobile phone devices such as WAP (*Wireless Application Protocol*), SMS (*Short Message Service*) and MMS (*Multimedia Message Service*) have increased drastically. However, the perception of mobile phone has changed because it is taking on a new meaning especially for teenagers who feel comfortable with non verbal ways of communication. Indeed, the cell phone has superseded its utility as a medium solely for voice telephony; it is increasingly perceived as a multi-purpose device for teenagers. It could be used for adding logos or stickers, changing interface, playing games, Internet...etc. Thus, teenagers develop consumption competency, social skills and various usages through the mobile phone devices and their consumption learning is mostly made by using media within their leisure activities. Therefore, media and technological leisure equipments are an integral part of the families' everyday lives that's why modern-day adolescents are competent or vulnerable users of media, depending on their age, sex, family, social background and other influences on their daily lives [41]. Some researchers have gone further, suggesting that children and young adolescents are more competent than adults in their dealings with media and digital technology [29, 40]. Here again, such arguments are also widely accepted by practitioners: media producers are increasingly inclined to argue that the young target is a demanding, media-wise audience that is difficult to persuade and to satisfy [4]. By the way, teenagers seem to be most of time more "competent" than adults in the use of new media within their

leisure activities. They chose their hobby according to two objectives: the funny use and the expression dimension [32]. They are more than 50% interested in making their own videos on computer, 48% are interested in creating their own interactive photos albums and 43% prefer composing musical compilations via Internet and play on their mobile phones (Credoc, 2003)¹. Since, mobile phone devices including games and interactive services are tending to be more strictly developed towards young people; we are going to focus on the mobile services and the interactive teens' behaviour. Within empirical research for France Telecom in 2004², we carried out a qualitative survey through in-depth interviews of 32 young French people aged 14-25 classified according to four age ranges: middle school, high school, university and higher education/first job. We tried to balance our sample with equivalence in male and female interviewees in order to detect any difference in their mobile phone use. Otherwise, we supposed that the use of mobile phone device is different among the young and the older adolescents in our age range (14-25), because the symbolic dimension linked to the mobile phone' use disappear or appear with age leaving place to other dimensions in each group. The paper develops this idea in two sections: at first, we focus on the consumption symbolism of young people into the use of technological products and the construction of the competent adolescent in the high technological environment. The second section presents the findings of our empirical research which lead us to understand and manage the impact of symbolic and the consumption competency of mobile phones in the market place and

learn more about the ways which young people use their cellular phone.

2. Theoretical Background

As described in several of the traditional account of childhood the concept of "the competent child/adolescent" summarizes a contemporary representation of childhood. It makes sense to view the competent child as a key concept or maybe even a label of discourse. The concept of competent child/adolescent is at the same time used in more theoretical representations of the child in the Nordic countries and internationally. The notion of the competent child/adolescent is not a precise concept but rather a container concept, which seems to collect a number of more or less connected characteristics of current childhood. The notion of the competent child may be seen as a rupture with, and in direct opposition to, an antecedent representation of the child. Therefore, the characteristics of the competent child/adolescent are: that children and adolescents are seen as social actors participating in the formation of their social reality instead of merely objects of adult socialization and that children and adolescents are seen as a social beings rather than becomings, this means that children and adolescents are seen as competent rather than not yet fully competent in the adult skills they are about to acquire. However, children and young adolescents are not only consumers but producers as well since they are free to create an individual product such as mobile phone by combining several elements. Jean Baudrillard [2] argues that the consumer society is also the society of learning to consume, of social training in consumption. That is to say, there is a new and specific mode of socialization related to the emergence of new productive forces and the monopoly restructuring of a high-productivity economic system. Martens et al [27] highlight the extent to which children and adolescents have been excluded in the discourse about

¹ Centre de Recherche pour l'Etude et l'Observation des Conditions de Vie. Web site :

http://www.afjv.com/press0311/031114_art.htm

² La Ville, I (de), Batat, W., Dumbra, S. (2004), "The use of mobile phone by French young people aged 14-25", *Research report for France Télécom Mobigames Service*.

consumption. It is clear that tensions exist in locating them within the market place and some feel there is no place for them in this commercial space [43]. Underlying much of this appears to be a perspective of the adolescent as a not-yet competent, not-yet completed social actor who is at risk [7]. Within the dominating thinking, the young consumer was considered an incomplete “becoming”, on his way to being a valid member of the organism and consequently not seen as competent in his “own choice”. Equally problematic is the oppositional construct of the empowered adolescent. This knowing, choosing, active adolescent can resist the lure of the marketing world and affirm their individual choice [6]. According to Langer, young adolescent' consumption is active, creative and mediated by a process of socially and culturally structured self indication in which products on offer become meaningful objects [20]. In addition, young people use products and brands as materials with which to cultivate and preserve their identities. Goods are part of what Douglas and Isherwood [10] call a “live information system”, and their meaning is grounded in their social context. For young people, these symbols are especially pertinent as they are often in stages of uncertainty, gathering material possession as a way of establishing their identity and getting much-needed prestige [3]. The use of goods as symbols for communicating with other consumers is related to the use of goods in the development of self-identity. Individual can then use the symbolic content of chosen consumption objects to reflect their affiliation or connection to a particular social group [14]. Furthermore, the symbolic consumption is taking on a greater role in distinguishing the pre-adult form the adult [33]. Indeed, young people tend to have a strong desire to communicate their maturity to their peers through their consumption. Gathering

material possessions is a way of establishing their identity.

Peter S. Alexander [1] explores how teenagers define and re-define the identity of the mobile as a dynamic social technology. He feels that if we limit our view to the mobile phone's present utility we may be ignoring some of the most powerful aspects of it. He notes that because teens may not be as comfortable with more verbal ways of communicating affiliations and interests, the symbolic identity of fashion and style becomes even more important as a catalyst for social interaction within teen subculture. Many social researchers have looked at the importance of fashion in teenage life. Not only can fashion make a statement to others about identity, it can also help teenagers to understand their own identity. The mobile acts on many levels, as a fashion statement, as a communicator, as a badge of identity and as a decoder. Indeed, teenagers use mobile phones in an almost semi-disposable way like a piece of clothing or fashion accessory. Jean Baudrillard [2] notes that all goods have meanings that are generated within the system of signs and symbols which engage the attention of the consumer. Consumption is never a process of a purchaser trying to satisfy a basic pre-given human need in response to biology. Baudrillard sees the consumer as always actively creating a sense of identity, both individually and collectively. Similarly, Peter S. Alexander argues that the physical design and presence of the mobile has alternate meanings that go beyond its utility such as status, social connection and even popularity. It is possible that teen mobile owners view their devices as extensions of themselves and their personalities. Therefore, mobile phones meet no biological need.

3. Methodology

The research aimed to discover how teenagers and young people aged 14-25 years old use the symbolic properties of the mobile phone, and to develop an understanding of why they use their cellular phone in this way. Since teenagers' interest in practising interactive and social activities grows gradually from the early adolescence to the young adulthood and they use their cell phone radically different from adult users we will question: how competent are adolescents in using mobile phone devices and what is the symbolic meaning associated with their consumption of mobile phone through different periods of life? And how does the symbolic dimension evolve through these age ranges? France Telecom has identified the need of understanding the meaning and the symbolic consumption of the mobile phone and its services in a social context. Indeed, it is clear that marketing to young people is big business [30]. Some authors argue that marketing is shaping adolescent's consumption through an endless tirade of advertising and marketing activities [38, 24]. Yet others claim that adolescents create their own meanings in relation to objects, as opposed to having these imposed by global capital.

Given the exploratory nature of the research questions, a qualitative study was conducted through in depth interviews of 32 young French people aged 14 to 25 years old classified according to four age ranges: middle school, high school, university and higher education\first job. Mobile phones are a socially consumed product category, with strong social norms affecting individual behaviour. A number of authors advice that in research situations where are a variety of personal tastes, it is preferable to use individual interviews for data collection [31, 11]. Therefore, the individual interview was chosen as the data collection tool. The sample consisted of teenagers and the selection criteria for

participation in the study were age and gender. However, various studies [42] show that gender differences plays a significant role in the consumer socialization and identity formation in relation to media consumption. Indeed, girls get less pocket money from their parents than boys and spend their money on clothes while boys spend money on media equipment, and video games. The study included four age groups: Middle school (aged 14-15), high school (aged 16-18), university (aged 19-22) and higher education\first job (aged 23-25).

Young teenagers aged 14-15, in transition from childhood to adolescence, are known to be insecure about their appearance and identity but they are more knowledgeable than their parents in the use of technological products especially mobile phone services. Teenagers aged 16-18 have been the early adopters of mobiles. New third generation mobile phones are being used by teenagers in creative ways for example, for adding images to their personal websites, or for creating short video clips. Evidence suggests that such mobile devices are now an almost indispensable tool in the creation and maintenance of young people's social networks [23]. Older adolescents aged 19-22 are often students, they don't live with their parents and they become responsible. So they have to manage their time and their budget which can be a scholarship given by their university. Young adult aged 23-25 have additional concerns related to leaving school and the responsibilities of entering the adult world. The second selection criteria used in this study was the gender because there is some limited evidence that boys and girls differ in the way in which they use the mobile phone device. Given these differences, it was thought that there might be significant differences between the groups in terms of how they consumed mobile phone symbols.

A topic guide was used, developed from the literature review and covering the main themes. During each interview the interviewer adopted an active listening approach reacting and responding to the particular issues raised. The interview guide was divided in two parts, with two different approaches. During the first part, our objective was to obtain an in-depth knowledge about mobile phone and its different uses. Actually, regarding its uses, we kept in mind the importance of questioning our interviewees about the functional usage as well as the entertainment and social ones. In the second part, projective techniques were used in an attempt to prompt the participant into injecting their feeling into the situation [36]. For data analysis a systematic coding via content analysis was used [31]. This scheme was expanded as the analysis progressed, with emergent concepts coded and included [8].

4. Findings

The research aimed to discover how teenagers and young people develop skills within the symbolic use of mobile phone devices. The author found that the use of mobile phone is bound to their self-concept, and is used both as a means of self-expression and as a way of socialising themselves. In addition, the use of mobile phone changes according to the fourth age ranges. There are a number of aspects to this, each of which will be looked at in turn below. This research found that young people symbolically use mobile phone devices in many different ways. The level of importance attached to the symbolic qualities of mobile phones by each adolescent varied, which affected how they consumed mobile phone devices and developed consumption competences. The popularity of the mobile phone among teenagers may be seen in the light of central trends in modernity: reflexivity, makeability and individualization of youth

cultures [44]. Young people create their identities by means of factors such as language, clothes and symbols [15]. We present here the ownership of mobile phone usages with respect to gender and age criteria. According to our data, we find out that more boys than girls have a mobile phone. However, the first mobile phone is offered by parents to their children at an early age (9-10 for boys and 12-13 for girls). *"It was my father who bought me my first mobile phone...I was 9 years old"* (Jean, 14). Hence, teenagers represent the digital generation who is immersed in a very high tech context. Through this survey, we gain insight into this technology's role in young people's lives [40], among others, argues that today's young people are very fluent in digital media and they use their mobile phone in different ways from adults. Cadéac and Lauru [4] have a very optimistic view of what they call *the Mobile Phone Generation*. According to their nomination, the characteristic for the young generation's use of the mobile phone devices is that they are active and competent persons whom make choices which make them attractive as consumers. This point of view is very much in accordance with the theories about the competent child of today. This exploratory research suggests that for these adolescents and young people there was difference among the four age ranges in terms of their use of mobile phone devices.

Mobile phone as a functional device

The use of mobile phone has a functional aim for both students aged 19-22 and young adults aged 23-25. They often use it to call or to send SMS because it allows them a speedy response by avoiding a phone communication and not to disturb the others when they are working. However, they prefer calling rather than sending messages *"I don't like to send SMS; I prefer calling up because it's more*

polite than a simple SMS which has a rather functional side" (Romain, 25). In contrast, young adolescents aged 14-15 and older adolescents aged 16-18 prefer sending SMS instead of calling. For them, it is the best way to communicate with their peers *"I send many SMS because I don't need to talk on the phone if I 'm in a bad mood and I can ignore the text message instead of hanging up"* (Thomas, 14). Indeed, mobiles can be used to resist surveillance [16] for example, when using caller ID; they choose whom they will answer to *"If some one rings and you know who it is, if you don't want to speak to them I just don't answer"* (Mustapha, 14). For some younger (14-18) respondents, the mobile was a useful device to block out unwanted intrusion. The use of SMS by French young people aged 14-18 is one important realization of a form of mobile communication culture. The function of teen's messages is mostly communication for the sake of keeping in touch, and the messages are used to organized day-to-day life. Though messages are limited to 160 characters, they are quite economical [23]. The teens feel that accessibility is an important aspect of their social life. To be available to friends and to know what one's peer are going is central that's why both girls and boys from all groups are convinced of the utility and the practical dimension of the mobile phone device.

Mobile phone as a funny device

The entertainment dimension of the mobile phone appears in the use of the young teenagers aged 14-15 and older teenagers aged 16-18. Thus, the funny meaning of the cell phone is not defined in the same way by the schoolchildren (14-15) and high school students (16-18). Hence, for boys aged 14-15, the playful dimension emerges in the use of games downloaded or provided by carriers on their mobile. They spend a lot of time playing on their mobile phone and they download logos, ringtones and stickers *"I spend 4 to 6 hours*

a week playing games on my mobile phone, I also download logos, ringtones and other games which I find amusing, it's so funny!" (Mustapha, 14). Girls aged 14-15 are not interested in mobile phone games, they prefer communicating with their friends *"Games on mobile phone are used to kill time; I don't often play on mobile games I prefer calling instead of playing"* (Anne, 15). In contrast, older teens aged 16-18 years old use their cell phone for its entertainment dimension which emerges in the use of SMS instead of mobile games. Thus, they like sending jokes by SMS to their friends, they find that amusing *"I like sending jokes by SMS to my friends, it makes them laugh"* (Adeline, 17). Otherwise, students (19-22) and young adults (23-25) consider that playing on mobile phone is neither funny nor playful; it's only used to kill time when they are waiting for some one or when they are in the bus. Hence, the entertainment dimension linked to the use of mobile phone games disappears with age by leaving place to other forms of entertainment, communication and the social dimension.

Mobile phone as a social device in the youth subculture

The flexibility and social contact allowed by technology mean that it has become harnessed as part of many a teen's identity project. Young teenagers both girls and boys aged 14-15 use mobile phone to reassure their parents and talk to their friends, they make a large use of games and they amuse themselves beeping each other. For older adolescents both girls and boys aged 16-18, mobile phone is a symbol of independence, of belongingness and self-identity. For students aged 19-22 mobile phone is an essential means of communication, since they don't usually have a land line phone. It is a link among friends and family. Finally, for the young people aged 23-25, the use of mobile phone is merely functional, it is a link

among friends, family, partners and workmates. By the way, for older adolescents aged 16-18, the mobile phone device is often seen as part of the self and is commonly referred to as an extension of a limb *"My mobile phone is a part of me, I can't live without it"* (Abdou, 18). In this sense it may be useful to think of the mobile as an internal reference point in the sense used in Giddens [15] account of the evolution of the reflexive project of the self. The mobile is becoming imbedded within society and is indeed becoming part of the culture of late modern societies. The mobile phone seems to be used as a personal style concept among teenagers, a special color, design and brand may be chosen to personify the mobile phone, as well as a special logo or ringing sound *"My mobile phone looks alike me, you can not find the same because it's unique"* (Martin,17). With the mobile teenagers can position themselves by being easily accessible, flexible, communicative, informed and up to date. Thus the mobile phone symbolizes a lifestyle and the dynamic youth ideal in modernity.

Mobile phone as a means of creation

For young teens aged 14-15, the mobile phones have also various technical facilities including the ability to download ringtones (hit pop music), logos, pictures and games, mobiles are available in various brands, designs and colors. The newest ones, WAP (Wireless Application Protocol) phones, access the Internet and e-mail and iTV. Hence, teen users are not only consumers but producers as well since they are free to create an individual phone by combining the above elements. Here mobile phone devices are actually used as a part of the process of creating environment in both public and private spaces. Indeed, there are constant references to this environment being used to create moods, emotion and fun by using the text messaging *"In class, we have a*

small game, we beep the one that are paying attention to the teacher, to annoy them" (Thomas, 14). Coupled with WAP it makes the mobile playful and powerful communicator both through voice and text enables information to be obtained while mobile or stationary.

Mobile phone as a tool for consumption learning

Teenagers and young people are aware of the price and the services offered by the carriers and they are conscious of their expenses *"I can't get downloading games on my mobile, then through my card I download games from another mobile. I think it's very expensive to download games the ideal price would be 5 euros per game"* (Jean, 14). To understand the background to teen's adoption of the mobile, we must also consider the economic issues of mobile phone ownership. The pre-paid card system has greatly fostered mobile telephony use among young teens aged 14-15 and older teenagers aged 16-18. It eliminates an oft-cited concern of parents that the teens will abuse their telephone privileges and run up unexpectedly large bills that parents will have to pay. Often, but not always, the teens themselves are responsible for buying their own pre-paid cards *"I don't use the Wap, because it is very expensive I don't like this service and I prefer to use Internet through my pc ,it's my parents who pay the Internet access"* (Jordan, 18). The marginal economic situation of the teens means that they must be frugal in their telephone use *"If I were carrier I would proposed less expensive prices for teens aged 14-18 because we are always afraid of having a big invoice to pay "* (Anne, 15).

5. Discussion

The findings of this study illustrate the specific consumption of mobile phone devices and provide evidence about the symbolic dimension emerging in the use of mobile phone devices among adolescents and young adults aged 14-25. Therefore, the social, the self-construction, the consumption skills and the self-creation dimensions linked to teen's use of the cell phone devices disappear or appear with the age by leaving place to other dimensions. One interesting point shows that the mobile phone consumption by young adolescents aged 14-15 is linked to the social and the entertainment dimension. Indeed, this generation is born in a very high technological landscape and these adolescents associate other media in the use of their mobile to have fun. However, there are gender differences when comparing boys and girls use of mobile phone devices. Although the mobile is used for its functional dimension by sending SMS rather than calling up, boys aged 14-15 use their cell phone for playing games, beeping and even sending jokes to their peer. In addition, boys develop various techniques that allow them to download games without spending money, because they must be careful with their mobile phone consumption. Therefore, it seems the 14-15 years old target is not an "Eldorado" for carriers. It is a difficult target to reach due to the massive commercial offers that these teens are exposed to. In contrast, girls aged 14-15 use mobile phones for calling their friends, and they are not interested in mobile games. Regarding the young people aged 16-25; the mobile phone is merely a communication device. Hence, the entertainment dimension linked to the use of mobile phone disappears with the age by leaving place to communication and the social dimension. However, we believe that the use of ethnography studies, long term observational studies could enable us to understand better the relationship

between the adolescent and mobile phone. Also another possibility to expand this study is expanding the age period, because studies have shown that these young people of 8 to 12 years old, have been another great buying machine of today's society.

As children and young people are increasingly considered as consumers. The concept of tweens was originally introduced in the marketing research literature, based on the interest to address them as a new segment. This parallel to the concept of teenagers can thus be seen in the concept of "tweens" today. According to Martin Lindstrom [22], the term tweens covers children in pre-adolescence 8 until the age of 14. Siegle, Coffey and Linvingston [39] state that in marketing research we generally target tweens as the group between 8-12 years old, but there are also some call the 7-14 year olds or 10-16 year olds tweens. Siegel et al., believe that it would be relevant to operate with the age group 8-12 and then possibly distinguish between younger and older tweens that is the 8-10 and the 11-12. Due to the fact that they are very young and in a period of searching for identity they are influenced by friends, family and media and no doubt there is an increasing impact from and interaction with the mobile phone devices. Coming back to the discussion about consumption competency of young consumers versus vulnerability tweens are both competent and vulnerable; it depends of the situation and of the context. In answering the question of competent adolescent we have to ask what we mean by consumption competency or consumption *in*competency. If competency is about children being able to recall and relate to the marketing activities around them then there is some evidence that they have acquired these skills [26]. According to Buckingham [4] we have in one hand, a construction of the competent child/adolescent, the child/ adolescent as vulnerable innocent, as media victim; and

on the other hand, the celebration of the competent child/adolescent, the child/adolescent as sophisticated, media literate autonomous. For Buckingham, there is a danger that we buy into "adultist", rationalistic, normative conception of competence that is not simply unrealistic, but also limits what we mean by competence and who is able to get access to it. Before we leap to construct children/ adolescent as already competent, we need to be careful that we do not merely seek to redefine children or adolescent as adults.

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