



Intergenerational relations and the power of the cell phone: Perspectives on young people's phone usage in sub-Saharan Africa



Gina Porter ^{*}, Kate Hampshire, Albert Abane, Alister Munthali, Elsbeth Robson, Andisiwe Bango, Ariane de Lannoy, Nwabisa Gunguluza, Augustine Tanle, Samuel Owusu, James Milner

Durham University, UK
 University of Cape Coast, Ghana
 University of Malawi, Malawi
 University of Hull, UK
 Walter Sisulu University, South Africa
 University of Cape Town, South Africa

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 15 March 2015
 Received in revised form 31 May 2015
 Accepted 2 June 2015
 Available online 10 June 2015

Keywords:

Mobile phones
 Generation
 Young people
 Ghana
 Malawi
 South Africa

ABSTRACT

Cell phones present new forms of sociality and new possibilities of encounter for young people across the globe. Nowhere is this more evident than in sub-Saharan Africa where the scale of usage, even among the very poor, is remarkable. In this paper we reflect on the inter-generational encounters which are embedded in young people's cell phone interactions, and consider the wider societal implications, not least the potential for associated shifts in the generational balance of power. An intriguing feature of this changing generational nexus is that while many young people's phone-based interactions, from their mid-teens onwards, are shifting away from the older generation towards friendship networks in their own age cohort, at the same time they are repositioning themselves – or becoming repositioned – as family information hubs, as a consequence of their phone expertise. The paper draws on mixed-methods research with young people aged c. 9–25 years and in-depth interviews with older age-groups in 24 sites (ranging from high density poor urban to remote rural) across Ghana, Malawi and South Africa.

© 2015 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Cell phones present new forms of sociality and new possibilities of encounter for young people across the globe: nowhere is this more evident than in sub-Saharan Africa, where fixed telephone lines (land lines) are few and mostly restricted to privileged elders (Porter et al., 2012). The scale of cell phone usage among young people in sub-Saharan Africa today is remarkable. Primary school pupils in remote rural locations report calling their peers to consult on homework problems on a daily basis; secret assignations facilitated by pre-meeting calls are a common feature of boy–girl relationships; access to material needs – from school fees to uniform or new shoes – is regularly enabled through ‘call-me’ to better-resourced family members; if they have access to a smart phone, young people join Facebook and other social networking sites with alacrity. Meanwhile, parents, grandparents, teachers, and others of an older generation in their communities look on

at this enthusiastic consumption of technology, sometimes with fascination, even anticipation, but often mixed with palpable unease and apprehension, especially where girls are concerned (Porter et al., 2012).

Mobility-focused field research in 2006–9 in 24 diverse sites across sub-Saharan Africa first alerted us to possible emerging intergenerational tensions associated with young people's cell phone usage (Porter et al., 2010, 2012). Returning to these sites in 2012, we found that cell phone ownership and usage among this group had expanded massively, even in the most remote rural areas, while in urban areas the smart phone with associated internet and regular access to social network sites is now an essential accoutrement of ‘cool youth’, often from their early teens. In this paper we reflect further on the inter-generational encounters (particularly those that take place within the family context) which are, increasingly, embedded in cell phone interactions, and consider their wider societal implications, not least the potential for associated shifts in the generational balance of power. Where necessary, we draw attention to important age, gender and site-specific features, but (given space limitations) only insofar as these are vital to understanding the wider picture.

^{*} Corresponding author at: Department of Anthropology, Durham University, South Road, Durham DH1 3LE, UK.

E-mail address: r.e.porter@durham.ac.uk (G. Porter).

This study can be located within the growing interest among social scientists in the transforming relationships between younger and older members of contemporary society across the globe, North and South (Hopkins and Paine, 2007; Vanderbeck and Worth, 2015). However, widespread concerns around generational inequalities, clashes and collisions have long been evident in African contexts. In classic anthropological studies they revolved round generational conflict over land and resources (e.g. Fortes, 1984; Meillassoux, 1981), while more recent work by anthropologists and geographers emphasises the impacts of migration, urbanisation and HIV in deepening youth frustrations with the generational bargain (Christiansen et al., 2006; Evans, 2014; Ngwane, 2003; Whyte et al., 2008; Young and Ansell, 2003). Now the diffusion of cell phones appears to be bringing a significant new factor to bear in this generational nexus and requires careful scrutiny. For the most part, recent discussions have focused on the cell phone's emerging role in influencing social relations and social navigation among youth, and especially in the specific context of negotiating intimate, sexualised relations in Africa, albeit these may have wider generational impact (Archambault, 2013; Stark, 2013).

Emerging findings (outside Africa) suggest significant generational differences in phone practice which have potential relevance to African contexts. An early study by Pain et al. (2005), for instance, emphasises the different ways that young people and their parents in the UK may use mobile phones in managing and negotiating safety, raising questions as to whether phones are technologies of surveillance or empowerment. In Jamaica, youth's 'natural expertise' is contrasted with many elders' comparatively limited technical facility (Horst and Miller, 2006: 59), while in the UK, it has been observed that such factors as changes in health, capability and/or social circumstances may erode the capacity of the over-50s to use cell phones (Hardill and Olphert, 2012). Hardill and Olphert (2012) distinguish three different type of older user (most of whom will, additionally, have access to a landline): pervasive (part of everyday life), episodic (may not keep the phone constantly switched on) and fossilised (virtual cessation, often linked to declining health and limited movement beyond the home). Kneidinger (2014), focusing on generational differences in internet usage in Austria and Germany, suggests that while many older people use social network sites (from phone or PC) and feel their relations with young people have consequently intensified, youth mostly do not observe any intensification. She notes a contrast between youth, who have older Facebook 'friends', but whose social network site interactions appear to be focused on same-age people, and older people's contacts (albeit much more diverse in age), which are largely comprised of passive observation (reading youth posts, etc.). Turkle (2011) is particularly critical of our growing digital dependency in the Global North, associating the intensive use of mobile technologies with a decline in genuine human connections, including across generations. It is useful to bear these findings in mind in reviewing the evidence from sub-Saharan Africa which follows.

2. Background

2.1. Methods and context

Our original child mobility study in 2006–10 [www.dur.ac.uk/child.mobility/] focused principally on the physical mobility of 9–18 year-olds, in Ghana, Malawi and South Africa, but included questions about the virtual mobility afforded by mobile phones. In each country we worked in eight locations: poor, high density urban; peri-urban; rural with services; and remote rural (with few or no services), in two agro-ecological zones. The current

interdisciplinary study covers the same 24 sites, but with an extended age group, c. 9–25¹ years, in order to capture changing phone usage and its impact as our initial cohort move into their 20s. We have followed the same mixed-methods approach, this time with c. 50–80 qualitative interviews per site and c. 1500 questionnaire surveys per country² (1000 aged c. 9–18 years inclusive, to match our 2007/8 survey, 500 aged 19–25 years). The 2013/14 survey delves more deeply into phone usage, including questions about family and generational linkages. The qualitative component with young people incorporates thematic story-based interviews; call-register interviews to cover contact lists and recent phone-based interactions (such as calls, texts, chat on social network sites); also focus groups and essays written by school pupils. Some life histories were conducted with youth in their late 20s to mid/late 30s, while interviews with parents and focus group discussions with older men and women provided information for those over 40. This approach has allowed us to obtain in-depth ethnographic information for each site, but also to undertake extensive comparative studies across sites.

To set the scene regarding the rapidity of recent phone adoption, Table 1 compares phone ownership and usage of c. 9–18 year olds with our earlier study. These figures reflect national wealth differentials: fairly low adoption to date in Malawi, middle-level adoption in Ghana, and high adoption in South Africa. Both ownership and use, unsurprisingly, are more heavily concentrated in urban areas in all countries, in both survey periods.

2.2. Generational variations in phone ownership and usage: issues of style and substance

Our questionnaire survey was administered only to those aged 25 years and under, but field observation and qualitative research with older people indicates that phone ownership and use has expanded across all age groups. However, adoption in those over 40 years does not appear to match the scale or, in particular, the style of youth, as encapsulated in the statement of a 17-year-old senior high school boy in urban Ghana: *young people use flashy phones... the older generation don't mind having old phone or that with limited facilities. They only need phones to make and receive calls. Internet and camera and video facilities are not their priority. But these are the real functions we the going generation needs. In fact, imagine that I am using Nokia 3310, which most elderly still use; my friends will laugh at me till I change!*

Differences in generational usage were demonstrated widely across our research sites. Essentially, many young people of both genders can be characterised (and often see themselves) as 'experts'; they may learn initially how to use a phone from older people but quickly overtake their elders in skills and knowledge; they become info-mediaries:

My mum is not that conversant with the phone... I am the one that even makes her calls for her (rural Ghana, girl 16y).

I always make calls for grandmother because she can't read or write... and when the person answers the phone... I give [to] my grandmother (rural South Africa, girl 11y).

By contrast, their elders are often passive, episodic users, whose only recourse to the cell phone – especially if they are illiterate, as many are – is for voice calls (mirroring Hardill and Olphert's, 2012 UK observations). In urban and rural sites alike, both elders and young people widely reported that older people regularly ask young people to make calls for them, to save numbers, and

¹ A few children aged under nine years who were able to respond to the questionnaire and keen to do so were included in the survey.

² With quota sampling to achieve a balance across gender and age groups.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5073667>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5073667>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)