



## MOBILE COMMUNICATION CULTURE OF CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS IN FINLAND

A Research Project Based on  
Qualitative Fieldwork 1997–  
2001

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## Background

- The Information Society Research Centre of Tampere University (INSOC) has studied the mobile culture of children and teenagers since the year 1997.
- From the beginning, the research has been carried out in cooperation with the device manufacturer Nokia Mobile Phones and the teleoperator Sonera Mobile Telephone Services.
- The main funding for the project comes from the National Technology Agency, TEKES.

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- The research group has produced three final reports and 15 interim reports.
- Consultation in financing companies.
- A book 'Kännyssä piilevät sanomat - Nuoret, väline ja viesti' (Eija-Liisa Kasesniemi and Pirjo Rautiainen) will come out in November. English version in 2002.

## Methods and Materials

- **Qualitative fieldwork:**
  - nearly 1000 children, teens and their parents from all areas of Finland have been interviewed. *Thematic interviews* of:
    - 13–18-year-olds and
    - 4–12-year-old children and their families.
  - *Observation journals* (mobile and media diaries) by teens.
  - *Photographs, picture collages, drawings.*
  - *SMS message bank* of some 7 800 messages.
- The interviews were conducted on the informants' free time and in their own environment.
- The goal of each interview is to gain an understanding of the interviewee's relationship to media.

## Aims of the Project

- The main aim of the project has been to conduct **basic research on a new communication culture**.
- The research has examined mobile communication as a means of networking in the information society.
- The research has observed mobile communication as a societal phenomenon that serves to sustain communication and consumption culture.
- Following the phenomenon since 1997 has enabled the researchers to keep track of changes and trends in mobile communication culture.

## 1997 to 2001: Main trends

- First, the interest centred on the device: showing off; mobile as status symbol; mentions of a need for mobile etiquette.
- Rise of content and personalisation among teenagers in particular: young people become forerunners; conscious abolishing of the official 'business image' of the device.
- A feature characteristic of the mobile phone: both standard equipment for every citizen and an individual expression of personal style and way of life.
- The 'technologisation' of children's everyday life: the most notable change has occurred among 10 to 12-year-olds.
- Mobile ownership of small children continues to evoke moral opposition. A common argument: 'A child that small doesn't need one'.

## Mobile Phone at Different Ages



## 'Ringing Square' (under 10 years)

- Mobile communication is directed to the family. Little independent communication by the child.  
*'I don't phone a lot. When I go to a friend's house, I don't usually take it with me, except when I have to for some reason.'* (Girl, 8)
- Problems may be caused by child-like communication behaviour, a difficult user interface, the responsibility of looking after the device.
- The mobile phone as a 'safety line': the opportunity for contact as the most important thing.

## 'I Want a Mobile' (10-12 years)

- The age of mobile fever.  
*'My favourite thing: my mobile, definitely' (Girl, 10)*
- The process of becoming independent begins: independent communication increases and the child begins to spend more time outside the home; the importance of friends increases.
- Interest to the device is awakened: phone models are discussed with friends.
- The mobile phone is also a game machine, an interest in personalising begins to develop.

## 'Wanna B with Me?' (13-15 years)

- Mobile communication concentrates on the construction and maintenance of the teen's social network.
- Affective communication is highlighted.  
*I haven't shown my feelings to you...you've been wonderful!!!! I love you...think I might have a chance with you sometime?' (text message: boy, 15 to girl, 15)*
- The characteristics of mobile communication most closely connected with youth culture: bomb calls, picture messages, personalising services.

## 'Private Line' (16-18 years)

- The importance of the mobile phone in defining personal space.

*'I get these SMSs from mom, like, where are you, have you got your woolly hat on you, love, your worried mom at home. That's a disgrace! Don't expect me to answer that! It's like they're in a totally different world sometimes (laughs).'* (Girl, 16)

- Diminishing of offline use.
- The mobile phone is a natural part of life:

*'Your mobile is like your shoes'* (Girl, 16)

## Within the Roles?

- No major differences exist between the sexes in mobile ownership within teenagers.
- The way mobiles are *used*, however, creates differences.
- Boys emphasize the technical functions of the devices, whereas for girls, the mobile is part of conversation culture.
- Boys use mobiles for recreation (e.g. games) and for other non-communicational purposes (e.g. varying the functions).
- Girls emphasize actual communication. In particular, girls are large-scale consumers of short message service, SMS.
- Girls: dyad communication emphasized.
- Boys: mobile phone enables collective action.

- In early 1998 the popularity of text messaging increased rapidly among teenagers.
- An inexpensive and socially convenient method of communication suitable for almost any situation at any time.
- The communication conventions of adolescents and their parents differ:

*'My mum is always going on about how the messages I send are too long. She thinks text messages should be short and concise.'* (Girl, 15)

- Informal tone of the messages, plenty of 'naughty' messages, SMS gossiping and chain messages in the material.

*Here's a lucky fish for you )-(((0).Send it to at least 5 people who deserve love and happiness,if you don't,you'll get bad luck!Happy holidays, Laura*

*Ain't got the muscles of Arnold Schwarzenegger Nor the body hair of Mel Gibson nor the looks of Brad Pitt... but I lick like Lassie!*

- The writing of the messages in itself is considered a fun pastime or an interactive game of a kind.

*QuackQuackQuackQuackQuackQuackQuackQuackQuackQuackQuack  
QuackQuackQuackQuackQuackQuackQuackQuackQuackQuackQuack  
QuackQuackQuackQuackQuackQuackQuackQuackQuackQuack*

- Creating of own language conventions: own words and sayings.
- Private/collective culture: couples and peer groups create their own culture.



## Taming Technology

- The mobile phone has become a part of teen popular culture. Services and devices are discussed, shown to others and compared.
- Adolescents have become large-scale consumers of services designed to personalise the device (logos, ringing tones).
- Personalising the mobile phone in order to humanise and seize control of technology: stickers, nail polish, covers etc.
- Personalizing is also an attempt to break earlier conventions with regard to technology—**high technology should not necessarily look like high technology.**

## Attitudes to Technological Development

- *It's pretty weird having a connection to anywhere in the world with the mobile in your hand. Or getting anywhere in the world in a few seconds with the screen of your computer.*
- *It's not all that amazing anymore, though. (Boys, 13, Southern Finland)*
- Though teenagers consider the development of technology unstoppable, they have different attitudes to it.

- Attitudes to the presence of communication technology in one's own life are generally positive, as the device inspires more contact with friends:
  - 'The mobile's often cheered me up, getting a text message and things like that. It has a positive effect. You'd feel a bit empty not being able to contact anyone.'* (Girl, 15, Western Finland)
- Mobile is seen as something humane and intimate, not as 'real' technology.
  - 'It's like a friend I carry in my pocket'* (Girl, 17)
- Rationally-oriented teens may criticise the new communication needs created by new technology.
  - 'When you have a mobile, it creates the need pretty easily. You send messages and call, but it's not necessarily anything you'd really have needed to do.'* (Boy, 16, Western Finland)

- Teens have stereotypical fears about machines starting to dominate people's lives. Especially girls are worried about the social consequences of the development:
  - *What do you think this world is developing into?*
  - *I think computers and things like that will rule everywhere. And once they all get messed up . . . everything's lost, just everything. (Girl, 14, Western Finland)*
- Boys in particular have a more device-centred perception of the development of technology and see the downside of the development mainly from an economic point of view:
  - 'Mobile phones wouldn't need to advance quite at this rate. I'll have to be getting a new mobile again soon because new models are appearing all the time. But really you end up spending all that money on nothing, as you have to be getting better ones all the time.'* (Boy, 13, Southern Finland)

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- Culturally prevalent ways of thinking (discourses) about the relationship between children and technology:
  - 1. Technology is the death of creativity and initiative in children.**
    - 'Where's the bread with the marmalade spread on it?' (child calling mother). (Mother, western Finland)*
  - 2. Stressing of irrevocable information society development, technological determinism:**
    - 'My child is an experienced mobile citizen.'* (Mother, western Finland)

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### 3. The development of technology will solve both global crises and minor problems of everyday life, technology hype, technology optimism:

*'In my opinion every smallest child should have a mobile the size of a watch to use ever since they're very very little. For emergencies.'* (Father, western Finland)

### 4. Technology as part of everyday life, the mobile phone is used merely as a practical communication device:

*'That's everyday life for you. Helps you get in touch with the kids more easily.'* (Mother, western Finland)

## Challenges for the Future

- No dramatic growth in bills or mobile usage as the supply of devices and services has increased and become more varied.
- A routinised usage culture may also affect use costs in the future.
- Is it possible for the age of mobile acquisition to fall further?
- Personal content production is interesting to the young. What demands do teens' own communication needs place for product development?

- How are multimediality and personal content production visible in the practices of everyday life?
- The effects of cultural fears and change resistance on the adoption of new products and applications?
- Teenagers appreciate humane technology. Will new technology increase interaction between people, or will the development concentrate on the interaction between the human and the device?

## Wireless Kids

- The aim of the pilot study is to analyse and compare cultural variation in the mobile communication of children and teenagers in various parts of the world.
- The study concentrates on the reception of new products and services and the usage cultures generated by young people in different countries.
- The study aims to explain the rising trends and innovations in mobile communication.
- Qualitative research is in a key position when mapping the cultural needs and wishes but also prejudices and fears considering mobile communication.

## Contact Information

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- [Scientific articles and publications](#) due out shortly:  
Kasesniemi, Eija-Liisa & Rautiainen, Pirjo (2001): Kännyssä piilevät sanomat -  
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Become Us. [in press]

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